

# Of Plays and Novels

***The Plebeians Rehearse the Uprising***, by Günter Grass, translated from the German by Ralph Manheim (Harcourt, Brace & World. 122 pp. Hardbound, \$4.50. Paperback, \$1.95), ***Beatrice Cenci***, by Alberto Moravia, translated from the Italian by Angus Davidson (Farrar, Straus & Giroux. 187 pp. \$4.50), and ***A Raisin in the Sun and The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window***, by Lorraine Hansberry (Signet. 318 pp. Paperback, 75¢), concern variously the paradoxical position of Bertolt Brecht in modern Germany, a repellent sixteenth-century Italian crime, and contemporary American social problems. Brooks Atkinson was for long drama critic of *The New York Times*.

By BROOKS ATKINSON

AS ORIGINALLY planned, the following comments were to be confined to plays by novelists. Since the play by one of the novelists (Saul Bellow) has not yet leaped fully armed from the press, two plays by Lorraine Hansberry were substituted; and that has made all the difference. For *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window* and *A Raisin in the Sun* preserve in book form the pithy talents of a genuine playwright. They make Günter Grass's *The Plebeians Rehearse the Uprising* and Alberto Mo-

ravia's *Beatrice Cenci* seem like school-room exercises that have a certain formal felicity but lack the energy of theater. Just about anything can be acted, especially if Peter Brook is interested and available; and the plays by Mr. Grass and Mr. Moravia can be put on the stage. But the theater will have to supply the undercurrents of life that the dialogue does not tap. It is difficult for a reader to find in these plays anything beyond the cool and tidy composition of practiced novelists.

In the case of *The Plebeians Rehearse the Uprising* the flatness of the total impression is surprising. Mr. Grass has not only a piquant theme but also enough intellectual agility to appreciate its ramifications. He is writing about the irony—the tragic irony—of Bertolt Brecht's situation during the rising of the masses in East Berlin in 1953. According to Mr. Grass's play, Brecht was rehearsing his version of Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* at the moment when the proletarian workers were revolting—not against the upper classes, as in Shakespeare's play, but against a proletarian government. After having made a career out of advocating the freedom of the masses, Brecht in the end took the side of the oppressors in order to defend his privileged position as a writer and the security of his state-supported theater.

Mr. Grass describes his play as "a German tragedy," which, course, it is. But the central idea is also maliciously entertaining. Having turned full circle, the revolution has now developed a rul-

ing class with a vested interest in the discipline of the masses, and Brecht sides with the rulers. Shakespeare did not have to face this problem. He had always been on the side of order. In a long and sardonic preface Mr. Grass says that in *Coriolanus* Shakespeare was warning King James and the nobles about the rise of the artisans and the common people. I doubt that Shakespeare wrote plays for political reasons. He was frequently concerned with topical situations, but, as I read him, he was primarily interested in writing plays that would suit his fellow actors and attract audiences. Although his sympathies were broad and deep, he was never one of the Englishmen who could give advice to the government or concern themselves with policies.

Mr. Grass's preface, which consists of an address he gave in Berlin on the quatercentenary of Shakespeare's birth, is so trenchant and knowing that his play comes as an anticlimax; it seems to say in a clumsy way what he has just said brilliantly. While *The Boss* (Brecht) is rehearsing his version of *Coriolanus* and discussing with his subordinates the changes that have to be made in Shakespeare's text, some masons and plasterers burst into the theater and ask him to support their rebellion. Since he has the reputation of being a spokesman for the masses they ask him to write their manifesto. The Boss appreciates the dramatic spectacle of a rebellion; he sees it in terms of the theater and the current rehearsal. But one political revolution has been enough for him. He equivocates long enough to avoid involvement in a situation that might jeopardize his position.

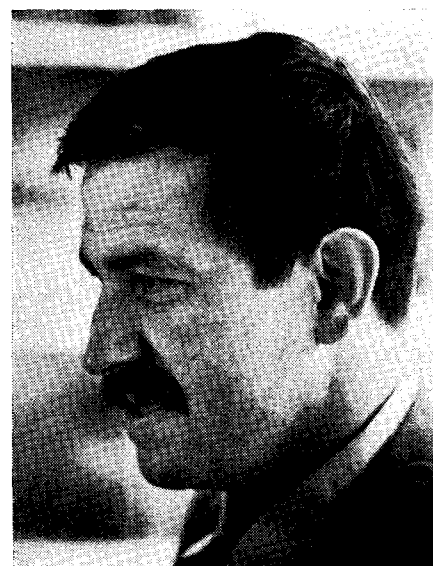
Although Ralph Manheim's English translation seems wholly satisfactory we have to consider that it may not do full justice to the original. Something may have been lost, as something is always



Alberto Moravia—a curious impulse.



Lorraine Hansberry—an illumination.



Günter Grass—a surprising impression.

lost in translations of Brecht's idiomatic verse into English.

Since Alberto Moravia has written a whole shelffull of original stories and novels and at least one book of original essays (*Man as an End*), it is difficult to understand the impulse that led him to write a play about Beatrice Cenci, her primitive father, and a few other repellent Italians of the sixteenth century. It is dull—the one thing that no one is likely to say about Mr. Moravia's other works. He has reduced the twelve characters that Shelley dramatized in the nineteenth century to six. He also writes in prose. His characters talk like commuters en route from office to home—without fire or distinction, without imagination. Angus Davidson's translation is readable, but again we have to keep that inevitable reservation in the back of our mind; perhaps something has been lost in the transition from Italian to English.

In *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window* Miss Hansberry developed a theme of less magnitude than Brecht's dilemma or the abominations of the Cenci family. The play failed when it was produced in 1964; after 101 performances it died on the night of the day, January 12, 1965, when Miss Hansberry died of cancer at the age of thirty-four. Since the play is overcrowded with miseries and neuroses and since some of the transitions are awkward, its failure can perhaps be explained in technical terms. But Miss Hansberry was a genuine dramatist with a good mind, a solid knowledge of life, and high ethical principles. Her characters leap out of the pages of this paperback book. The dialogue has resonance. The story has momentum. In comparison with those by Mr. Grass and Mr. Moravia, Miss Hansberry's two works remind us that even a prose play is a form of poetry. Good drama is not literal. It illuminates whole segments of life by the excess of its interior vitality and the breadth of its allusions.

The failure of *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window* illustrates Broadway's most disheartening paradox. Imperfect, overblown little comedies and uninspired musical comedies with no vestige of talent run forever. But a serious play in which a playwright tries to make a serious statement must be perfect—although the vast boredom of audiences can strangle even the best of thoughtful dramas. Miss Hansberry's first play, *A Raisin in the Sun*, ran for 530 performances, was chosen by the Drama Critics Circle as the best play of the 1958-59 season, and became a motion picture. If Broadway were a rational place, a playwright who had brought that much talent, originality, and vitality to the theater would be permitted to say something else without having to fight for survival. She would be permitted to feel that she was still among friends. Ten-

nessee Williams, the most gifted writer in the American theater, is in the same cruel situation today. Backers and paying audiences have lost interest in him.

When the management of *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window* first posted the closing notice, hundreds of Broadway people and public-spirited members of the audience made a desperate attempt to save it. Although Broadway is a cynical street, it has abundant resources of good will, enthusiasm, generosity, and physical and nervous energy when something draws on them. Hard work and free donations kept the play

going from one performance to another like a prolonged improvisation. In this paperback edition Robert Nemiroff's affectionate though humorous account of the quixotic campaign, "The 101 'Final' Performances of *Sidney Brustein*," is superb. It retains the mercurial sense of devotion and adventure that frequently transforms Broadway into a powerful social-service workshop.

Although *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window* failed at the box office, it lives in Miss Hansberry's vigorous prose. Even in print it is theater. The plays by Günter Grass and Alberto Moravia are fiction.

## War Has No Regard for Reason

*The Captain, by Jan de Hartog (Atheneum. 434 pp. \$5.95), finds neither skepticism nor idealism sufficient for coping with the irrationalities of battle. Allen R. Dodd, Jr., a former foreign correspondent, is the author of "The Job Hunter."*

By ALLEN R. DODD, JR.

THE HUMP and the siege of Malta, the Aleutians and that frozen circle of hell known as the Murmansk run—these were some of the special corners of World War II. They had their own language, their own ways of dying, and they produced their own literature.

The Murmansk run—the lend-lease route that curved through the edge of the Arctic Circle to Russia—has been sailed by several fictional ships: a cruiser in Alistair MacLean's *HMS Ulysses*, a frigate in Nicholas Monsarrat's *The Cruel Sea*, and now a Dutch ocean-going tug in Jan de Hartog's new book, *The Captain*.

In this latest work the author returns to a theme he explored some fifteen years ago in *The Distant Shore*. The hero of that earlier book, a young tugboat skipper, hugs the illusion that a man can run the risk of death in wartime without running an equivalent risk of killing. No such immunity exists; he rams a U-boat with his tug and becomes the executioner of thirty-three men.

Martinus Harinxma, the hero of *The Captain*, meets the war with a practiced skepticism, which also proves a poor shield against the irrational luck of battle. When he is offered command of the tug *Isabel Kwel* he accepts reluctantly and for purely personal reasons. This acceptance, however, sets off a chain of events. Harinxma is drawn into becom-

ing the Captain, the father-image blended of courage, competence, and comradeship. Then the *Isabel Kwel* is assigned to the Murmansk convoys. Finally, she acquires a naval liaison officer, a lad who comes equipped with a full charge of fighting idealism.

This boy's slogans shatter against the realities of smashed ships and frozen corpses. He flings himself between the guns and the smallest morsel of life aboard, a kitten. This seems an act of hysteria—the lad's young widow thinks it was cowardice—but it emerges as the only rational deed in the massive waste of a disastrous battle. Huddled in a lifeboat after his tug goes down, the Captain copies it, using his own body to shield a young Nazi survivor. The convoy has been wrecked and so have the legends of comradeship and higher strategy. Only the act of mercy retains any meaning.

Having made this point effectively, de Hartog pounds it home in an editorial last chapter, which some readers may find superfluous. To fight or to refuse, Harinxma says in a letter to his son, is any man's choice. But no man should don a uniform without knowing that he is signing a pact with violence. To start along a road without asking where it leads is "lethal innocence."

