



Life . . . Family Plan

THEATER 1967 has inaugurated both the new season and its "Festival of American Plays" most appropriately with a revival of three short plays written circa 1931 by Thornton Wilder. For of all our living playwrights, Wilder is the one who has pounced most agilely from decade to decade, and whose work seems least dated.

Of the three playlets currently on view at the Cherry Lane Theater, *The Long Christmas Dinner* is the most impressive. Indeed, it remarkably foreshadows Samuel Beckett's *Happy Days* as it constructs for us a devastating tintype of a "happy" American family cautiously tasting the pain and blessings of living. By kaleidoscoping three generations of existence into a perpetual Christmas dinner, it turns each jovial slicing of the inexhaustible turkey into an unkind cut. Each proffered "sliver of white meat" simultaneously symbolizes the height of terrestrial contentment and the limited degree of ecstasy American families choose to experience.

Yet, unlike the absurdists, Wilder does not attack this way of life. Rather he

looks with wonder and awe at the will- ingness of a family's members to fulfil obligations, to forgive one another over and over again, to love, to mourn, and to die quietly. All these things he reports with simplicity, with humor, and with precision. And director Michael Kahn has staged the revival freshly, with the assistance of Ed Wittstein's poetic setting, a simple black gauze enclosure which permits the characters to appear and disappear gradually rather than abruptly.

Because the performers must fit all three plays, they are not all ideally cast. But they compensate for this by their skill and teamwork. John Beal gives us the cultivated obtuseness of the head of household. Paula Trueman catches the humor and the pathos of the elderly mother who takes disproportionate pride in the trivial details of her ancestry. Lelora Dana demonstrates the patience a wife must exercise both with her mother-in-law and with her son's wife, who later on shunts her from the head of the table to the side seat once occupied by the woman whose role she now assumes.

Marian Hailey is breathlessly impulsive as the young wife. James Noble and Michael Lipton make staunch family figures. And perhaps best of all is the irony brought to the play by Bette Henritze, as the remote second cousin once removed, who comes to take over the old house that the rest of the family gradually deserts. Like the last act of *Our Town*, this leaves us with a warning to enjoy our lives more fully.

Yet Wilder also seems to find virtue in our self-limiting acceptance of the family institution. The latter attitude has frequently been misinterpreted as sentimentalism. But those who have had the privilege of seeing the playwright perform the role of the stage manager in *Our Town* are aware that among modern playwrights Wilder is unique in his unflagging curiosity and the width of culture he surveys and brings into universal focus.

The second play on this bill, *Queens of France*, is a nicely constructed dramatic exercise, in which we are shown three stages of the human capacity for vanity and delusion. First, we watch a raffish New Orleans lawyer tempt a woman with the surprising information that she is a descendant of the lost heir to the French throne. Then, with a second "descendant" we see how the planted notion can become pervasive enough for her to take on airs, despise her commoner husband, and pay the lawyer money to underwrite an investigation of her claim to regality. Finally, we see a third "Queen" as the lawyer informs her that unless she can find a lost document, her claim cannot be substantiated. As played by Bette Henritze, this third woman reveals both the terror of "deposition" and the enrichment a patently false notion has brought to her otherwise humdrum existence.

The concluding play, *The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden*, emerges as an amusing and touching period piece. Again Wilder presents us with simultaneous satire and affection for the intra-family banalities, and particularly those of the very proper mother, played with conviction by Paula Trueman. However, the understated inner frustration of the father, nicely expressed in John Beal's performance, balances the confection. Furthermore, the technique of a stage manager who narrates and sets the stage, not with illusionistic painted scenery, but with a few plain chairs, demonstrates how seven years before *Our Town* Wilder was already challenging our theatrical conventions.

Do these plays now seem less cheerful than they did originally? Very probably. For we are living in a more despairing world. That so much of their content can be made effective to audiences with our concerns is proof of their remarkable universality.

—HENRY HEWES.



"He welded himself into it this morning, and now he's decided that it is all quite symbolic of the dilemma of mid-twentieth-century man."

THE PITTSBURGH PLAYHOUSE PRESENTS THEATER OF EXCITEMENT

A PROFESSIONAL RESIDENT COMPANY



ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

1966-67 SEASON OPENS OCTOBER 7

Craft Theater

A MAN'S A MAN Brecht (Adapted by Eric Bentley)
October 7 to November 13

A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM Shakespeare
November 25 to January 8
(No performances Dec. 22, 23, 24, 25)

THREE SISTERS Chekhov
January 20 to February 26

ST. JOAN OF THE STOCKYARDS Brecht
March 10 to April 16

OH WHAT A LOVELY WAR Littlewood
April 28 to June 4

Hamlet Theater

STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE Williams
October 21 to December 4

THE ENTERTAINER Osborne
December 16 to February 5

HAPPY DAYS Beckett
February 17 to March 26

ORIGINAL PLAY
April 7 to May 14

PELLEAS AND MELISANDE Maeterlinck
May 26 to July 2

MEMBERS OF THE COMPANY

Hugh Alexander
Steven Aaron
Robert Benson
Alan Bleviss
Richard Bright
Roscoe Lee Brown
Carolee Campbell
Ronald Colby
John Costopolos
Lou Criss
Thayer David
Jim Dine
Michael Dress
Charles Durning

Marshall Effron
Marc Estrin
Alicia Finkel
Catherine Gabrielson
Rhoda Gemignani
William Hansen
Barton Heyman
James Kennedy
E. Allen Kent
Leo Kerz
Kenneth Kitch
Clifton James
Ming Cho Lee
Robert La Vigne

Winifred Mann
Alan Manson
Gretchen Oehler
William Pappas
Estelle Parsons
Joseph Raposo
Jane Reisman
Janice Rule
Baker Salisbury
Ronald Satlof
David Sell
Harvey Solin
Palmer Whitted
Stephen Wyman

THE PLAYHOUSE

Craft Ave. at Hamlet St., Pittsburgh, Pa. 15213

Please send me _____ subscriptions for the
'66-'67 season @ \$25 each. Enclosed is my check
(money order) in the amount of \$_____.

name _____

address _____

city _____ state _____ zip _____

For further information and group rates, write or
phone The Playhouse, 621-4445.

SAVE 24% BY SUBSCRIBING NOW!

ONLY \$25 FOR ALL TEN PLAYS (Tax included). Purchase
coupon books good for ten admissions. Use one ticket at a time or
as many as you wish. Exchange coupons for tickets at box office.

From Nature to Art

LAST SUMMER I lived on a small Cape Cod marsh. From my sun-deck I looked out on a glistening carpet of wild cranberries and a hillside of pines, among them a dead one leaning perilously. It was the dead tree that seemed most alive to me, its naked, knotted branches insistent against the sky. The more I observed it, the more I found myself thinking of the romantic, early-nineteenth-century German painter, Caspar David Friedrich. His trees, often denuded of leaves and silhouetted against a winter landscape, were infused with the same linear energy. I have no doubt I saw the dead pine more intensely because I saw it through the eyes of Caspar David Friedrich.

It has long been a truism that art grows from nature, but it is equally true that art transforms nature, at least for the viewer. To be sure, our vision of natural objects is heightened only by those painters who uncover hidden secrets or reassess familiar traits. Take Van Gogh. When this artist humanized and yet demonized his cypress trees, he guaranteed that never again would they act merely as static punctuations in a landscape. Or take Turner. Since he, Whistler, Monet, and a host of other painters experimented with atmospheric effects, fogs have become shrouded in

poetic mystery. For the real fogs that inconvenience us, we now substitute eloquent paraphrases—or could it be that the painted versions have become our real ones?

Not that Man improves on nature; it is rather that he helps edit our visual and psychological reactions so that we accept more fully what he chooses to emphasize. And that may explain why nature's confirmed imitators rarely add to our understanding. We have already experienced first-hand everything they have to say before they say it.

Going a step farther, if art deepens our delight in nature, it can also diminish it. Who doubts the impact of a dazzling sunset; yet since this phenomenon became a favorite theme for hack painters, it has been so oversentimentalized as to seem little more than a trite stereotype. Even in travelogues the symbol is identified with banal finales. Today it requires considerable effort to observe a luminous setting sun purely in terms of itself. We tend to complain, "It looks too much like a picture-postcard," or should we add, "It looks too much like a painting."

From my little sun deck I also began to wonder why the simple act of gazing down diagonally on a straggly marsh became such a pleasant experience. I

questioned whether it was the surrounding enclosure of pines that made the open marsh more welcome, and whether the vagaries of light playing on birds, sand, cranberries, and water increased my interest. These days we are constantly told that paintings filled with light and space are particularly rewarding. Are we to believe, then, that the sheer existence of these intangible elements lends added excitement to works of art?

There is no argument that at times space can suggest a special kind of freedom. But, curiously, it can also be terrifying if it is too vast for human control. In daily life we unconsciously search for varied spatial experiences, for the freedom of unhampered dimensions, for the protection of circumscribed limits, and for all the intervals in between. The same variety we seek in life we pursue in art, but in art it is never real space, it is painted space that confronts us.

When the Germans demanded more *Lebensraum* they were asking for extended physical boundaries and for extended power. Space can at once represent the most subtle aspects of personal freedom and the most vulgar symbols of group authority. A glance at Hollywood films from the Thirties reveals how closely space was related to affluence. The proverbial American millionaire was always pictured in a grotesquely outsized mansion where pretentious scale became more a liability than a liberation. In art, too, space reassures us only when related to human understanding. Paintings of outer space are either incoherent or overly-visionary.

Artists manipulate space to emphasize movement, which, after all, is just another manifestation of freedom. Unshackled motion is as kinesthetically agreeable as it is psychologically sustaining. To circulate freely from one area to another encourages improvisation both in life and in art, but in art one does not move, one merely senses motion.

Even more than space, light evokes motion and actually is motion. Sometimes staccato, sometimes languid, sometimes speeding faster than eyes can grasp, light itself moves and makes everything it touches seem to move. The artist who grapples with luminosity is up against an idea as evasive as space. Distance is something we can cope with (it has limits), but space and light are abstract conceptions that we feel more than we see. They are life-giving elements, especially light which Man repeatedly connects with physical well-being. And yet too much light can be devastating. I remember June nights near the Arctic Circle when the sun became a relentless burden, when darkness would have come as a welcome release. For it is never bright light alone that invigorates



"We don't belong in Southeast Asia, and we don't belong in Europe, we don't belong in Latin America, and I'm still not sure we belong in the Northwest Territory."