



Birdlime and Bobby Socks

THE ASSASSINATION of President John F. Kennedy is to most of us a sacred tragedy. A man who had come to symbolize a youthful, fresh, and idealistic approach to politics was cruelly erased from an era in which he was the most hopeful figure. Yet at the same time as we keep the memory of that moment uncontaminated, we can also look more dispassionately at the American political scene and regard the assassination simply as a historical fact, one sentence in a continuing story of self-serving political intrigue. And just as Brecht was able to write in comic terms about the tragedy of Nazi Germany in *Arturo Ui*, Barbara Garson in *MacBird* has made highly amusing the foibles that can be found in the supposed Kennedy-Johnson feud.

To do so, Mrs. Garson has made a number of far-fetched assumptions that are historically unsupported by evidence and which unfairly exaggerate derogatory aspects of the public figures she satirizes. Does this mean that she is abusing the spirit of free speech? Perhaps, but legally she is in the clear. Our laws are based on the theory that whenever elected or appointed public servants are so attacked, the truth will out and be sufficient protection.

The play begins with a tongue-in-cheek prologue ("Oh, for a fireless muse") patterned after the one in *Henry V*. In it, we are asked to ignore our intuitions and *not* to note the similarities MacBird and the Ken O'Dunc family may have to Macbeth and the Duncan clan in Shakespeare's play. Then we meet the witches, who are not supernatural but simply such contemporary agitators as a student demonstrator, a Black Muslim, and a labor leftist. But now comes a scene which has no counterpart in Macbeth that shows the Ken O'Duncs plotting the establishment of a political dynasty in which John will be succeeded by Bobby, and Bobby by Ted, and Ted by "princes yet unborn." Furthermore, John prophesies that a sweet haze he calls "The Pox Americana" will descend o'er the earth. A hint of hypocrisy in all this is inferred by John's reproof of Bobby for having warned him against making MacBird his vice presidential candidate just when John needed Bobby's "manly immorality." And later it is pointed out that John was able to use confidence and style to get away with attacking "that rebel isle," denying he did it, and then announcing "T was I." Here it becomes clear that Mrs. Garson's target is not so much our late Presi-

dent but the American public's naïve and irrational trust in its leadership.

Bobby is treated more harshly as he is shown ruthlessly exploiting John's "psychosexual index," and, because he is the real second-in-command, snubbing MacBird. MacBird is represented as a coarse, vain, and vindictive country boy assisted by a clever, self-effacing wife who does the dirty work for her husband's political advancement. The play suggests that this pair is involved in the assassination only to the point of inviting the President to their home state where he will be exposed to the fury of his foes. But a more damning fabrication, which parallels Macbeth's explanation of why he killed Duncan's blood-smeared grooms, is MacBird's pious defense of the quick murder of Ken O'Dunc's supposed assassin.

Now the new President, MacBird, asks the Earl of Warren to investigate. When the Earl takes the request seriously by spouting, "Oh cursed spite that ever I was born to set things right" (*Hamlet*, Act 1, Scene 5), MacBird reminds him that he misunderstands his mission, which is simply "to bury doubt." This is vicious but hilarious satire.

Even more vicious, however, is the play's treatment of the Egg of Head, who is represented as not speaking out against the new administration in order to modify "the devil's deeds" from within. In a parody of the "to be or not to be" speech, he paints his fear of quitting the club and being left looking in from outside" that outsidersness, that unfamiliar land from which few travelers ever get back in." Later it is announced that the Egg of Head, who had reached the point of breaking with the Administration, has died of a heart attack, but adds that a poison dart was found near the body.

The play continues to poke fun at MacBird when, at a press conference, a reporter asks about the rebel groups in Viet Land and MacBird replies, "What rebel groups? Where is this Viet Land?" When one of his Cabinet members replies that it's "a little land we're trying to subdue," MacBird snorts, "What crap is this 'we're trying to subdue'?"

And we see how MacBird's "Smooth Society" project can be simultaneously benevolent and insidious. "For each," he says, "a house, a car . . . a private psychoanalyst . . . This land will be a garden carefully pruned. We'll lop off any branch that looks too tall, that seems to grow too lofty or too fast."

Probably the most effective scene in

the play is the one in which the three witches perform a minstrel show for MacBird. In it, Mr. Interlocutor asks what they are going to call MacBird's first grandchild, and Mr. Bones replies, "Dey gwine to call it Early Bird." Here MacBird protests, "Now *that's* bad taste." Thus the play makes fun of itself and of those who have criticized the whole notion of treating current political figures so irresponsibly.

In the end, as in *Macbeth*, we see the dynasty of Ken O'Dunc triumph as MacBird dies from a heart attack during his duel with young Bobby, who, just as sanctimoniously as did his predecessor, vows to carry on The Smooth Society.

Under Roy Levine's vigorous direction, the performances on the Village Gate's two-level thrust stage are excellent. As MacBird, Stacy Keach has caught with amazing precision the barbed inflections and the portentous emphases that are characteristic of the President's style of public speaking. Beyond this, his acting makes what might in lesser hands seem thin caricature into a devastating study of amusingly absurd self-delusion. William Devane's portrait of Bobby with the tousled hair is perfect and frighteningly facile as he switches into a Boston accent only on public occasions. In the more restrained role of John, Paul Hecht manages to suggest both a godlike image and a shrewd ability to calculate and control. John Pleshette plays the comparative weakness of Ted without overdoing it. And Cleavon Little stands out as the Muslim witch. While some of the others are less adept in their portrayals, it is a feat for a cast to sustain this touchy parody over a whole evening with the degree of vitality and fascination it does. We may be disturbed by *MacBird's* irresponsibility, but we are almost never bored by its wild antics.

THE BEST off-Broadway play so far this season is Lanford Wilson's *The Rimers of Eldritch*, currently at the Cherry Lane Theater. The play, which began at the Café La Mama, is a beautifully constructed effort to present a complex portrait of the good and evil in a small midwestern community. Under Michael Kahn's sensitive direction, a large cast act and re-enact segments of disparate conversations that slowly lead to a killing on the one hand and a sexual consummation on the other. Thus the playwright seems to be saying that small-town social attitudes tend to pervert natural sexual expression with both tragic and comic consequences. The cast is superb, and to say that Susan Tyrrell's very funny portrait of a contemporary country copulative and Betty Henritze's crystal-thin-voiced old woman are most memorable is not to slight the completely disciplined yet relaxed performances of all.

—HENRY HEWES.

LITERARY HORIZONS

The Thirties—Thirty Years Later

IN *The New Republic* for April 22, 1936, Malcolm Cowley, reviewing *John Reed: The Making of a Revolutionary*, wrote: "I confess to having been mildly perturbed when I heard two years ago that Granville Hicks was writing a life of John Reed." After explaining the reasons for his perturbation, Cowley said: "I now want to apologize to Hicks for these doubts which I never expressed. His book leaves them with only the faintest shadow of justification."

Now it is my turn to confess and apologize. I wasn't altogether happy when I heard last fall that Henry Dan Piper of Southern Illinois University was publishing a selection of pieces that Cowley had written in the Thirties. I had read the pieces as they appeared, with great eagerness and usually with marked appreciation though sometimes with sharp disagreement; but I didn't look forward to rereading them thirty years later. In those three decades I had changed and Cowley had changed and the world had changed, and I thought that the pieces would be dated if not dead. In a sense they *are* dated, and that is why the book serves the purpose for which Professor Piper edited it—to give young people some idea of what the Thirties were like. But almost nothing seems merely old stuff, and the best of the pieces are alive today. They are so alive that the title of the volume, *Think Back on Us . . .* (Southern Illinois University Press, \$10), a phrase that comes from one of Cowley's poems, is too elegiac for the kind of book that has emerged.

After his years of expatriation, described in *Exile's Return*, Cowley became book editor of *The New Republic*, succeeding Edmund Wilson. In 1934, as he explains in his epilogue, the senior editors asked him to do less editing and more writing, and he began turning out a weekly page. The epilogue describes the process of composition, and, having

seen Cowley in the throes, I can testify that he doesn't exaggerate the intensity of his struggles.

A few of the pieces deal directly and vigorously with the Depression itself—reports on farm conditions, the flight of the Bonus Army, and the like—but more try to show the effect of the Depression on writers and writing. Cowley had announced his support of the Communist Party as early as 1932; he was, however, and remained simply a fellow-traveler. Although in a general way Cowley followed the Party line, he felt free to quarrel with some of those who set themselves up as Party spokesmen. He was one of the organizers of the first American Writers' Congress in 1935, which made no secret of its Communist affiliations, and at the congress he read a moderately militant but sensible paper on "What the Revolutionary Movement Can Do for a Writer." He was active in the League of American Writers, which grew out of the congress, and he was also active, following the Soviet-Nazi Pact of 1939, in the struggle to take the League away from the Communists.

Not long after the pact and my consequent departure from the Communist Party, I wrote (for *SR*, as it happens) an article about the literary life of the Thirties, calling it "The Fighting Decade." By and large, Cowley was less bellicose than many of his contemporaries, myself included; but, as this book shows, he could manage a knockout punch when he felt it was deserved. The first piece in the volume smites the "Angry Professors"—Irving Babbitt, Paul Elmer More, and the other advocates of a peculiar brand of Humanism, which was just on the verge of a comfortable vogue when the Depression struck. Cowley mauls Paul Engle's nationalism and H. L. Mencken's racism, and he runs a steam roller over poor Mabel Dodge Luhan.

Piper has divided the book into two

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- 36 "Miracle of the Rose," by Jean Genet
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- 40 Last Word on Architecture, by Wayne Andrews

parts, "The Social Record" and "The Literary Record," arranging each chronologically. The second part reminds us how many books of high literary importance appeared in the decade. Cowley reviewed three books by Hemingway, and said something cogent about each. He twice attacked the problem of Thomas Wolfe, brilliantly defining Wolfe's faults and virtues. He was less incisive, it seems to me, on Dos Passos; and it is surprising, in view of his later eminence as an interpreter of Faulkner, that he did not review *Light in August*, *Absalom, Absalom!*, *The Unvanquished*, or *The Wild Palms*. He did try to make sense out of *Pylon*, and he wrote enthusiastically about *The Hamlet*, though in a way that suggested a misunderstanding of some of the earlier works. He also wrote well about many books from across the Atlantic.

Cowley called himself a Marxist in these years, but insisted on defining the term for himself. (So did every other self-styled Marxist, which made for controversy and sometimes for wholesale mud-slinging.) Cowley accepted the Marxist thesis of the centrality of the class struggle in history, and often applied the idea in his criticism. Although he was rarely dogmatic about it, he did believe that an author was strengthened by association with revolutionary forces, and he illustrated this theory in discussions of the work of Baudelaire, Mann, and Yeats, among others.

The quality in the reviewing Cowley was doing then that sometimes bothers