

# The Theater

Henry Hewes

## The Great White Myth

WASHINGTON, D.C.

NO RESIDENT THEATER in America turns out more flawlessly executed productions of large plays than Arena Stage. Thus, its decision to attempt a production of Arthur Kopit's *Indians*, a ritualistic play which calls for the fullest and most imaginative theatrical realization, is a happy one.

Under Gene Frankel's disciplined direction, and with the colorful designs of Kurt Lundell and Marjorie Slaiman, the proceedings are theatrically splendid. The play begins with the entrance of Buffalo Bill, who brings with him all the excitement of a Wild West show, its garish lights and its exaggerated whoop-it-up horsemanship. But he confesses that he has fallen on hard times and is now reduced to playing twice a day in ghost towns. This suggests that the play is to be the tragedy of a legendary hero reduced to the ignominious fate of being obliged forever to impersonate his mythical self for future generations who will no longer care about the reality behind the myth.

However, if it is the playwright's primary intention to explore the tragic-farce of American mythmaking and its consequences, the play in its present state of development fights a losing battle against the audience's predisposition to interpret the events presented as simply an accusation of the guilty whites for their persecution of the noble Indians.

A good portion of the proceedings is devoted to arguments between the Indians and a government commission. In one of these, Sitting Bull tells the commission that he recognizes that the Indians must try to live like white men, and boldly demands that the government which made it impossible for the Indians to live proudly in their own way now provide them with the wherewithal to live proudly in exactly the same way the white men do. Not only is this moving, but it also raises the question of how the white power structure has dealt with other minorities.

But *Indians* is more for ensemble performing than it is for analysis. In the most demanding role of Buffalo Bill, Stacy Keach somehow sustains full energy through a welter of scenes that require him simultaneously to exercise his delusions and to be bewildered by their falsity. Provided with a marvelously flexible "horse" specially devised by Jim Knox, he is incredibly vivid in his Wild West antics. And in his ultimate, pathetic attempt to justify his life by showing the audience some handmade trinkets to prove that the surviving Indians can support themselves by their industrious craftsmanship, Keach is shatteringly helpless.

Manu Tupou as Sitting Bull, Richard Bauer as Chief Joseph, and Barry Primus as Carlisle-educated John Grass all have fine moments. And Kopit has written one broadly funny scene in the White House which permits Barton Heyman to be quite droll as Wild Bill Hickok carrying fiction into reality with the rape of the dumbfounded actress playing the Indian maiden he is supposedly rescuing from violation by the Pawnees.

*Indians* may be somewhat incoherent, but its success here indicates that large audiences enjoy atoning their guilt for Indian persecution while at the same time they are entertained by a Wild West extravaganza.

WALTHAM, MASS.

THERE IS NO universally agreed upon way in which to measure the health of a university's performing arts department, but the job done at Brandeis over the past three years would seem exceptionally resourceful. An impressive demonstration that the feared domination of drama students by a resident professional company may not be inevitable is provided here by two productions running concurrently.

In the small Laurie Theater, a cast consisting mainly of mature professionals is supporting two graduate students, Rod Loomis and Dale Vivirito, in *Edward II*, a new play by another graduate student, Harry C. Timm. Meanwhile, in the larger Spingold Theater, a cast composed almost entirely of students is performing *Home Monster*, a new play by another student, Stan Thomas. And although *Edward II* emerges as a very respectable attempt to envision a fourteenth-century story through modern eyes, it is outshone by *Home Monster*, which is just about the best student play I can remember ever having seen presented at a university.

*Home Monster* begins with a TV interview of what appears to be the typical American suburban family. With the greatest assurance and ease, the twenty-four-year-old playwright lets his characters put their feet into it naturally and without malice. Whereas Edward Albee's *Everything In The Garden* showed us suburbanites led into prostitution and murder for economic reasons, *Home Monster* conjures up sexual vices and homicides that seem to be inspired by the boredom of suburbia and by the impersonal jumble of mass media and technology.

During the day, parents Enrique and Justine are typical commuter and mother-wife-lover respectively. But in the evenings, they become sexual fetishists with whips and chains and torture instruments. The pair accept these practices without guilt because they keep an otherwise empty relationship exciting. Their fifteen-year-old twins are called Adolphus and Camus, and we soon learn that these two are stealing and killing in order to put together a Frankenstein monster in their room. The offspring are not vicious, nor even unkind. Rather they are children whose ideas of right and wrong are self-indulgent, and who have acquired much too much knowledge without wisdom. As someone in the play remarks, "Children these days know the secrets of the universe before they register to vote."

But the most interesting character is Byron Swath, a TV commentator, whom the boys butcher to usurp his heart, head, and genitals for their monster. Once reassembled as a mechanical man, he finds he does not resent the transformation and he falls in love with a vacuum cleaner. Near the end, when a small cocktail party is given to show off the boys' invention, his melancholy reaction to the human beings nicely makes the author's point. He asks, "Who are all those people? Their blood streams must be plastic, their dreams all out of glossy magazines, their voices marshmallow, congealing Jell-O words flavoring the air. I miss my vacuum cleaner."

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**BILTMORE THEATRE 261 WEST 47 ST., 582-5340**

An essay review of Richard Burgin's "Conversations with Jorge Luis Borges" (Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 144 pp., \$3.95.)

# Literary Gold in South America

By Selden Rodman

**B**elatedly we are discovering not only that major poets and novelists exist in South America but that they seem to be the most inspired anywhere. Richard Burgin's *Conversations with Jorge Luis Borges* provides as good an introduction as any to this exciting new world, but since the Argentinian, whose stories and essays already belong to the ages, maintains a splendid isolation from his contemporaries, perhaps a word first about other burgeoning reputations is in order.

To my knowledge, the only living poet who is admired wherever poetry is read is Pablo Neruda of Chile. But until the triumph of his reading in New York three years ago Neruda was available to us mainly by way of anthologies. Now half a dozen books of his poems have been issued in English and, especially in the versions of Ben Bellit and Alastair Reid, very little is lost in the transition. The same cannot be said for the work of Nicanor Parra, Chile's other internationally influential poet; however, this may be because Parra's "cool" idiom is less susceptible to translation than Neruda's political rhetoric and rich romanticism.

Outstanding poets in the other South American countries are virtually unknown except to those who understand Spanish and Portuguese, or to readers of such scholarly anthologies as the excellent one put out by *TriQuarterly* at Northwestern this year. *Poemas Humanos*, containing the later poems of César Vallejo of Peru, whose reputation in the Spanish-speaking world rivals Neruda's, was published in the United States last year, but this is poetry of an almost inarticulate private anguish that will never be popular, and nothing was done to make its Englishing agreeable to the ear. Important poets like Rafael Pineda of Venezuela, or Carlos Drummond de Andrade and João Cabral de Melo Neto in Brazil,

have yet to appear in book form in English.

The novel, naturally, has fared better. João Guimarães Rosa, also of Brazil, is now known and thoroughly appreciated for his stories, as well as his major novel, *The Devil to Pay in the Backlands*. The more popular Brazilian social-realist, Jorge Amado, has been read in English since World War II; and this too is true of Peru's Ciro Alegria and Ecuador's Jorge Icaza, who write with similar indignation about the oppressed Indians in their countries. Mario Vargas Llosa, Peru's angry young man, has had two novels published in America, *The Time of the Hero* and *The Green House*, and both of these Walpurgisnachts of urban dislocation have received critical acclaim.

The two most talked-about novelists in Latin America today, however, are Julio Cortázar of Argentina and Gabriel García Márquez of Colombia. Three titles by Cortázar—*End of the Game* and *Other Stories*, *Hopscotch*, and *The Witness*—have already been published in the States, and a second volume of short stories, *Cronopios and Famas*, will be issued later this month. But García Márquez still waits to be savored. To be sure, his short stories, *No One Writes to the Colonel*, were released in translation last year. But when this writer's best novel, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, is brought out here next December, it is certain to confirm the verdict of those who are hailing the emergence of a comic genius of Chaucerian-Rabelaisian proportions. Though García Márquez lives in Barcelona, his preoccupation with rural Colombia is total. Cortázar also lives abroad (Paris) but his is the familiar detachment of the exile. He is a wordsmith, obsessed with inventing a style and a language to evoke his alienation.

Jorge Luis Borges loses little or nothing in translation. This is in part because he is concerned to make his metaphysical tales of circular time and multiple identity believable, partly be-



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SELDEN RODMAN is the author of *The Caribbean*, *The Peru Traveler*, and a forthcoming book to be entitled *South America of the Poets*.