

The Theater

Henry Hewes

The Submissive Society

WHEN JULES IRVING and Herbert Blau came to the Repertory Theater of Lincoln Center four years ago, it was their announced intention to produce plays that would have great relevance to contemporary issues. Our biggest disappointment in the productions that ensued was their apparent retreat from such a policy. Therefore, it is particularly gratifying that the Repertory Theater's latest production, *In the Matter of J. Robert Oppenheimer*, grapples in a most stimulating and objective way with some of the most pertinent questions that today's citizens should be asking.

Heinar Kipphardt's play is a partially fictionalized selection of highlights from the 1954 Government inquiry in which J. Robert Oppenheimer, a developer of the atom bomb who had been cleared as a security risk in previous hearings, was again subjected to the humiliating ordeal of defending his right to have access to top secret H-bomb data for the remaining few weeks of his contract as a member of the Atomic Energy Commission. Since the Government could not erase his knowledge of data already acquired, the new information he might have learned in those weeks could hardly have made much difference. Why, then, didn't the AEC simply let Oppenheimer's contract lapse? And why didn't Oppenheimer simply resign and spare himself the pain of the inquiry?

The entire action takes place in the forestage area, which designer Peter Wexler has transformed into a split-level hearing chamber, which captures the dreariness of such rooms without being dreary.

We are immediately comfortable with this setting, and are therefore prepared to expect not the usual courtroom drama with its suspense, its surprises, and its clever legal ploys. We even suspect that the playwright wants us to resist our natural impulse to regard some characters as villains and other as heroes.

Joseph Wiseman's portrayal of Oppenheimer is splendid in that it gives us the aristocratic aloofness of the professorial mind. When he calmly explains that he did not order the bomb to be dropped on Hiroshima, but merely gave his opinion on the relative "suitability" of several proposed targets in terms of which would be most damaged, we ask ourselves if such a distinction is any more valid here than it is with a chemical company that manufactures napalm but

does not itself order it to be used in Vietnam. As someone says later in the proceedings, we are becoming a society of experts, in which each group of experts does its job and hands over the result to another group. Economic and political pressures all operate to encourage this compartmentalization which can be dehumanizing and dangerous. Isn't there some better way to deal with the complexities of our time? And if there is, would it be possible to change the economic and political pressures?

The play does not answer these questions directly. But it does suggest that the AEC was somewhat superficially interested in maintaining public confidence in a time when McCarthy was capitalizing on irrational fears about Communists in government departments. On the other hand, by representing Oppenheimer as a man who rather enjoyed exploring the more important guilt he and other scientists shared for their part in the construction and use of horrible new weapons, the play tries to represent him less as a martyr than as a gifted but naïve scholar. Furthermore, Mr. Wiseman's perfect portrait does this and is so full of humanity and delight that it forbids our pity.

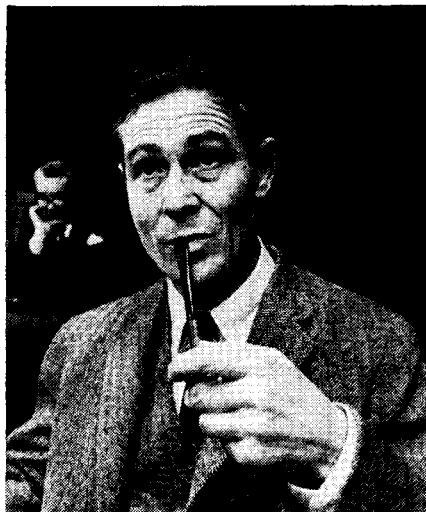
But Oppenheimer is ultimately sympathetic because he is, after all, the victim of a cruel humiliation not for his real sins but for such possibly admirable actions as not getting a leftist friend in trouble, or voicing his opposition to the development of the H-bomb. The scientist on the examining triumvirate, warmly played by Eduard Franz, speaks to the audience directly to ask if the pur-

poses of these humiliations may not be to produce more submissiveness. The more scientists control nature, the more the state must control scientists.

Perhaps the play's wisest character is John Lansdale, the security officer who overruled his staff to permit Oppenheimer to continue to work on the atomic bomb, despite his past sympathy for the Communist experiment. Actor Stephen Elliott plays him beautifully, with a cheerfulness that makes him immune to petty attack. When the prosecutor attempts to draw him out by saying "I fail to understand you," Lansdale looks him straight in the eye and replies: "That's just too bad." This firm and devastating statement of his position draws instant applause from the audience. Lansdale also punctures an argument that compares Oppenheimer's duty to report what may have been an attempt by friends to get him to share atomic information with the Russians with the obligation of a bank manager to inform his board about a conversation with safecrackers who mentioned the possibility of robbing his bank. Lansdale admits that he might have been concerned at the time, but that he wouldn't have been twelve years later when no bank had been robbed. And on a more positive level, there is his statement that the way to achieve maximum security and loyalty is to love the best ideas and the best way of life.

There are impressive performances by Charles Cioffi as a stupidly conceited security expert; Herbert Berghof as Edward Teller, the intense developer of the H-bomb; and Stefan Schnabel and Tony van Bridge as two more balanced and jovial physicists. Philip Bosco's portrayal of the chief prosecutor is forceful even if he seems to enjoy a little too much the theatricality of being malicious and suffering for it enroute to his eventual victory.

Gordon Davidson, who staged the American premiere of the play last June at Los Angeles's Mark Taper Forum [THE THEATER, July 6, 1968], has also directed it here, using the same designer and two essential actors from that production, Mr. Wiseman and Mr. Franz. As in Los Angeles, he has seen to it that the play's seriousness is balanced with frequent amusing touches. The production at the Beaumont submits a little more readily to giving the audience what it wants than did the one in Los Angeles, which means that some could interpret the play as being simply a condemnation of the injustice done to Oppenheimer. However, the stimulating unresolved complexities of the play are still abundant enough to make this the kind of challenging contemporary exploration that our resident theaters should be attempting much more than they have been doing.



Joseph Wiseman plays J. Robert Oppenheimer—"a perfect portrait."

Lower Taxes

Continued from page 35

economists are now convinced this more or less automatic growth in federal income places a "fiscal drag" on the economy, and slows future growth.

But deciding that taxes should be cut is only the first step. The federal government now taxes personal incomes, corporate profits, the manufacture and sale of a wide variety of goods, and the provision of various services. The Administration and Congress must decide *which* of these taxes are to be reduced, and by *how much*—a decision for which, unfortunately, there is not very much experience to serve as a guide.

A large body of opinion, both in Congress and among the public, holds that the sole purpose of a tax system is, or should be, the raising of revenue. In this view, choosing one form of tax reduction over another in terms of accomplishing some social or economic purpose would be unjustified, unwise, and close to wicked. The fact, however, is that when federal taxes, at \$186 billion in the current fiscal year, are the equivalent of roughly one-fourth of the total national income, any change in the tax structure will have social and economic effects, intended or not.

THE point is that unless serious attention is paid to the way in which the future fiscal dividend is allocated, the result may be extremely wasteful and very likely harmful. This opens up all kinds of questions that must be answered by fiscal authorities and legislators when a comprehensive tax reduction program is prepared and enacted.

The largest source of tax revenues, as everyone is especially aware at this time of year, is the personal income tax. After a half-century of adjusting and patching, this system has evolved into a monstrous machine that removes a rapidly increasing share of each added dollar of income from those in the middle-income brackets, but leaves some in the highest-income brackets relatively untaxed. The chance to reduce total income taxes would seem to be a natural opportunity to make this structure more equitable.

This, however, is much more easily said than done. Once the subject comes up in Congress, there will be proposals for equal across-the-board percentage-point rate reductions, as well as for every conceivable combination of rate revisions to give the greatest relief to the lower-middle-or upper-bracket taxpayers. All of these proposals, of course, will be supported by irrefutable evidence, which will be totally demolished by their opponents. One popular step already being widely advocated, for ex-

ample, would be a massive increase in the personal exemption, from the present \$600 per dependent to \$2,000 or more. This would obviously substantially reduce or even eliminate taxes for millions of taxpayers, but is strongly opposed by some tax experts for the very reason that it would remove many citizens from the tax rolls and presumably reduce their interest in fiscally responsible government.

At present, the Government is virtually a "50-50 partner" in every large business enterprise, sharing equally with the stockholders in total pretax profits.

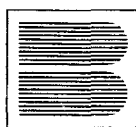
Does this, as many charge, lead to inefficiency and worse, as managements play fast and loose with the "50-cent dollars" the system creates? Should there be a series of graduated corporate tax-rate brackets, instead of the two now existing? Should profits distributed as dividends be taxed less heavily than those retained by the corporation, as is the case in some countries? Should the corporate income tax itself be replaced, in whole or in part, by some form of "value-added" tax or national sales tax? A fiscal dividend would provide a chance to answer these questions with-

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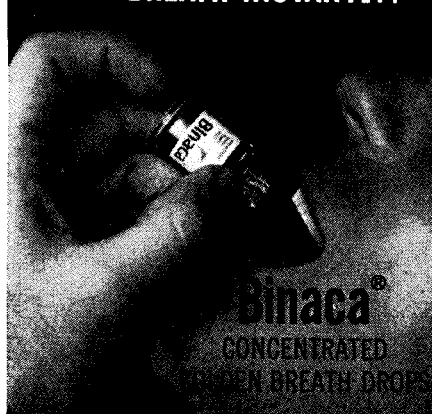
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out the country's inability to afford the revenue loss biasing the answers.

Social security payroll taxes now hit many low-income taxpayers harder than the income tax itself; and the prospect is that this tax rate will go still higher in the future. Has the time come to take the bold step of abandoning this regressive tax and pay social security and Medicare benefits out of general Treasury revenues? For many lower-bracket taxpayers, the result would be a lower total tax bill. And what of the "wartime emergency" excise taxes that have hung on for a generation? Should they get high-priority in any tax reduction program? Or, should the tax reduction question be sidestepped altogether by turning any dividend over to the states? But on what basis?

All of these questions and more must be answered at some point, and should be high on the nation's agenda. They will remain academic and hypothetical, however, if the hoped for fiscal dividend, for reasons difficult to foresee at this time, does not materialize after all.

WIT TWISTER #104

By ARTHUR SWAN

The object of the game is to complete the poem by thinking of one word whose letters, when rearranged, will yield the appropriate word for each series of blanks. Each dash within a blank corresponds to a letter of the word.

The heads of great _ _ _ _ _

_ _ _ arrive in town

To meet and fix the prices of their wares.

In costly _ _ _ _ _ they attempt to drown

Their _ _ _ _ _ guilts and leaden-colored cares.

(Answer on page 78)

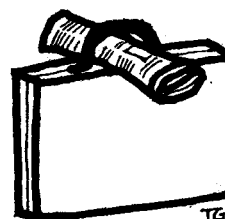
Can Taxes Do More?

Continued from page 32

at a deficit during this period. So the total effect was a considerable increase in expenditures—more in the private sector and not less in government—which was the way it was meant to be for the sake of stimulating greater economic growth.

By 1966, however, excess demand began to be reflected in pressure on prices and interest rates. So the Government started a period of tax increases. The Tax Adjustment Act of March 1966 restored excise tax rates on automobiles and telephone service, thus reversing the trend set the previous June. In November 1966, the investment tax credit was suspended (then restored four months later when the rate of economic expansion seemed to have slowed). Then, in June 1968, there came a 10 per cent surcharge on income taxes paid by individuals and corporations. In addition, excise tax rates on automobiles and telephone service were kept unchanged and extended until 1970. Again, keep in mind that these tax-rate changes—both upward and downward—were more a reaction to prevailing economic conditions than an expression of the revenue needs of government.

Earlier, we posed a number of questions relating to our current tax system that were premised on a simple assumption—namely, that taxes exist solely to provide revenue for government. What we have attempted to demonstrate is that taxes may have started out that way, but the size of government today precludes the treatment of tax revenue as little more than pocket money. An upward or downward movement of a few percentage points in income tax rates involves the flow of billions of dollars to or from the public. Business activity can be encouraged or discouraged by the effects of taxes; the economy can be stimulated or cooled off; personal standards of living can be effectively increased or decreased; available resources can be reallocated or redistributed. The very size of the tax take makes it immune to simplistic rationalization. And what this means in terms of possible tax reform is that the task is enormously complicated by the sheer number of possible courses of action that exist, with the risk of frightful mistakes ever present.



TQ