

The Theater

Henry Hewes

Thought Games

TEN YEARS AGO when British playwright Harold Pinter first came to this country with his wonderful play *The Caretaker*, he was asked which playwright he most admired. His reply was, "Samuel Beckett. But not so much his plays as his novels."

Now several impressive plays of his own later, Pinter has departed from Pinteresque (a word he loathes) to attempt a couple of very short works in a style that, although it is not a copy of Beckett, emanates the quality of Beckett's novels.

Called *Silence* and *Landscape*, they are currently being presented by the Repertory Theater of Lincoln Center in its intimate thrust-stage playhouse, The Forum. This is an important and appropriate service for this company to render, particularly if, as the distinguished critic Richard Watts reports, they "come off better" here than in the original London production he saw last summer.

However, on the basis of this per-

formance and a perusal of the texts, Pinter's experiment seems desperately lacking in dramatic excitement. In *Silence*, two men and a woman sit in front of a background that suggests hills and open country. Pinter deliberately tells us little about them. One, Rumsey, owns horses and other animals, and seems quite contented with the walks he takes with his girl, Ellen, who dresses to please him and listens to him talk. He enjoys the natural environment around him and the comfort of feeling unnecessary in it. Happily he tells us, "There is no one to tell me what is expected or not expected of me. There is nothing required of me."

The second man, Bates, is desperately unhappy. He lives in a rooming house where his landlady asks him, "Are you nothing but a childish old man, suffocating himself?" He apparently has the same girl as Rumsey, but he takes her to pubs or to his room for more aggressive companionship.

The woman, Ellen, is sad about getting old and being unmarried, but she drifts passively between the two men.

The silent impersonality of her life vaguely troubles her. She says, "After my work each day, I walk back through people, but I don't notice them. . . . I'm quite wide awake to the world around me. But not to the people."

One suspects that in this play Pinter is concerned with how people move from the more fully engaged prime of life into the silence of old age. But as directed by Peter Gill, Robert Symonds as Rumsey, Barbara Tarbuck as Ellen, and, to a lesser extent, James Patterson as Bates are much too glib. What drama there is to *Silence* probably depends upon the actors' seeking to relate their dialogue to remembered sensory experience so that the silences in the script detonate as emotional explosions.

The second play, *Landscape*, has a bit more story to it. An old man named Duff and his wife, Beth, seem to be the caretakers of an empty house. While Duff rambles on in commonplaces about his trivial and somewhat insensitive life, Beth speaks her private reminiscences about the day the late master of the house made love to her on the beach.

Here, Mildred Natwick as Beth beautifully realizes the performance style these plays require. Yet, the counterpoint makes little dramatic progress. It is the distilled essence of a play, and, like Beckett, Pinter may have lost interest in creating theatrical journeys and is now satisfied merely to present final destinations.

Another British playwright, Stanley Eveling, has manipulated the isolated dialogue of two people with great theatricality in *Dear Janet Rosenberg*, *Dear Mr. Kooning*, currently at the Gramercy Arts Theater. The play is set neatly in motion when a nineteen-year-old girl, Janet Rosenberg, writes a fan letter to a fifty-year-old author, Alec Kooning. The flattered author replies with a short and very correct note. Then the mischief begins. Janet takes the liberty of writing him back again, this time at greater length and with information about herself that unconsciously reveals her sexual permissiveness and her enthusiasm for his deeper qualities that might make her willing to submit to him as a lover, whatever his lack of youth and handsome appearance might be.

The temptation appears to drive Mr. Kooning and the play into a kind of schizophrenia. At this point in his life, Mr. Kooning has wisely reconciled himself to celibacy, but Janet's letter awakens his other repressed self. He fights down his impulse to folly and tears up a letter to her that would have let her know his need for deepening their relationship. Very wise. Very

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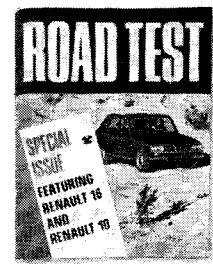
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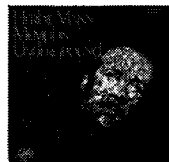
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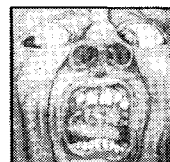
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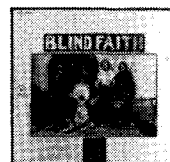
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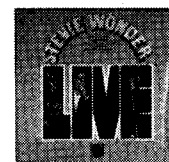
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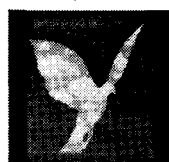
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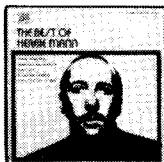
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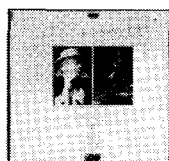
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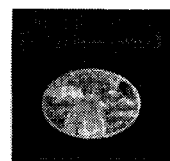
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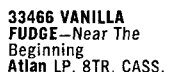
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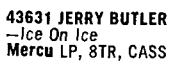
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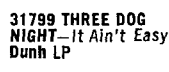
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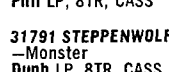
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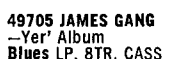
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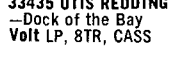
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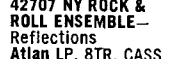
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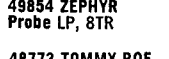
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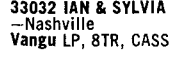
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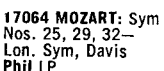
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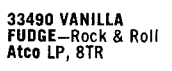
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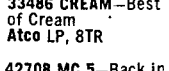
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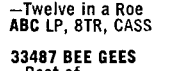
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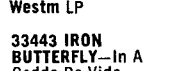
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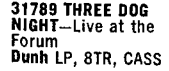
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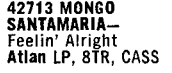
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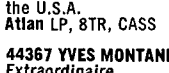
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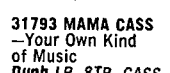
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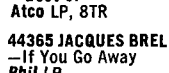
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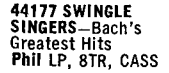
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correct. But Janet does not let the matter drop. She writes him again on the pretense of obtaining an out-of-print copy of one of his books. Two days later comes another letter from her thanking Mr. Kooning for the autographed copies of all his books and an enormous bunch of roses. This staggers the author, for he does not recall having sent them. Apparently she is pursuing him. Fearfully but frenziedly he responds, only to discover that the desired relationship is comical and undignified, and that it simply makes him feel older and sadder.

By this time the play has become quite strange. We are not quite sure whether its events are really happening or whether they are wish-fulfillments and anxiety dreams. And ultimately there is the implication that the whole business is merely a play Janet is writing. That play has two endings, one tragic, one happy. Thereby Mr. Eveling seems to be saying that happiness can be achieved by not deepening our experiences beyond our capabilities.

Catherine Burns, who received an Academy Award nomination for her performance as the shy raped girl in *Last Summer*, here excels as a more calculating and predatory young lady. Opposite her, Kevin O'Connor is somewhat miscast as the aging, overweight author, but nevertheless achieves some splendid moments. He is best when he strikes out at the gnawing dissatisfactions of his career, saying, "*That's for the girls that lay down in every direction and never a one for me, that's for their laughs and their giggles and their stupid little sneering faces, that's for all of it, humiliation, torture, defeat, loneliness, pain, sickness, all of it, all of it.*"

The play has been sensitively directed by Max Stafford-Clark and beautifully lit by Jules Fisher. It is followed by a shorter afterpiece called *Jakey Fat Boy*, featuring Mr. O'Connor as an impotent slob, and Penelope Allen as a pliant call girl who is asked to inflict suggestive vocal abuse on her client in lieu of sexual intercourse. It is amusing when she discovers that the most provocative thing she can say is that she has met Kenneth Tynan (the literary adviser to *Oh! Calcutta!*), but the sketch seems thin in comparison with the dazzlingly rich *Dear Janet Rosenberg*, *Dear Mr. Kooning*.



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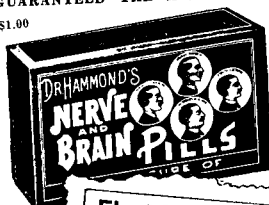
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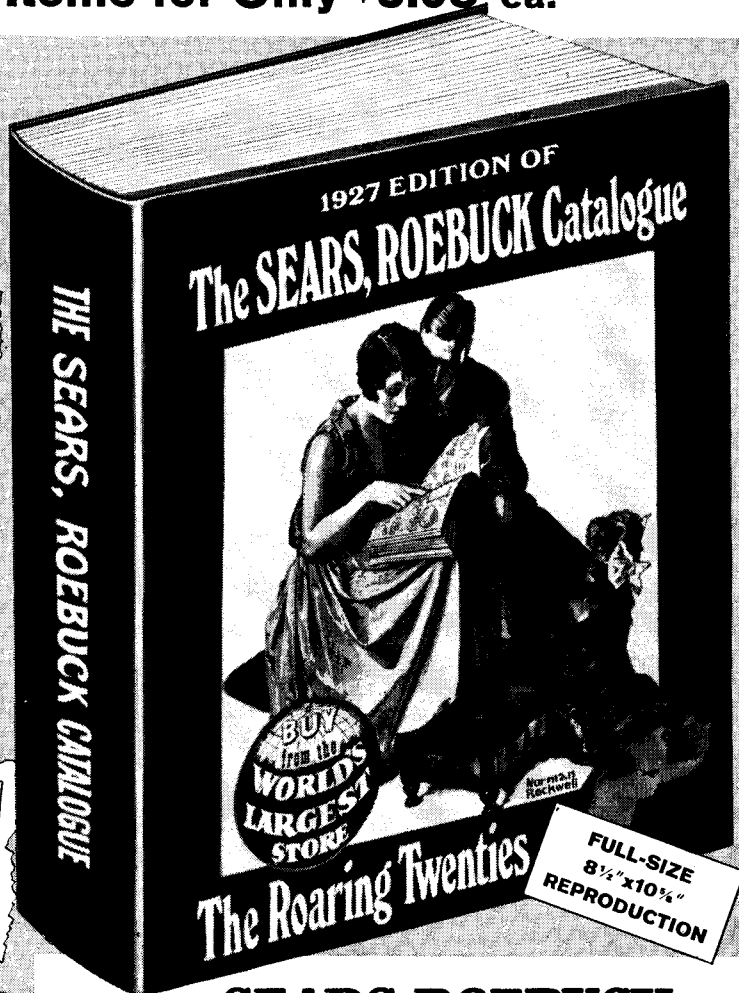
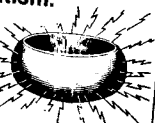


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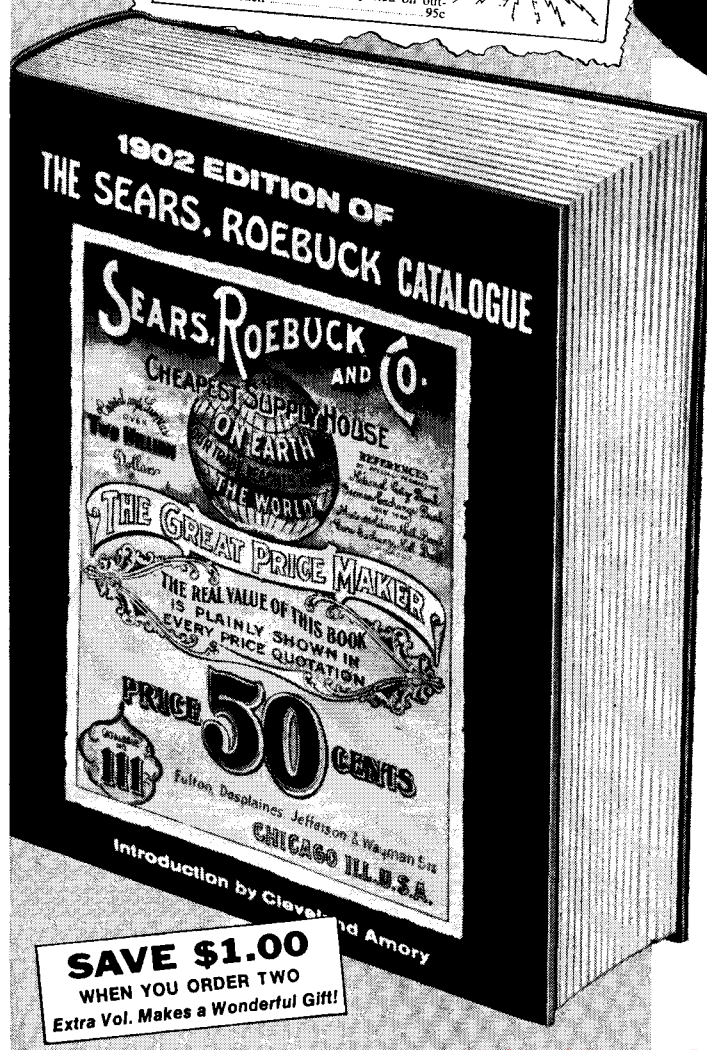
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You'll see.



Has Monogamy Failed?

"There is no question that sex-role and parental-role rigidities are in the process of diminishing, and new dimensions of flexibility are making their appearance in marriage and the family."

by HERBERT A. OTTO

Never before in the history of Western civilization has the institution of marriage been under the searching scrutiny it is today. Never before have so many people questioned the cultural and theological heritage of monogamy—and set out in search of alternatives. The American family of the 1970s is entering an unprecedented era of change and transition, with a massive reappraisal of the family and its functioning in the offing.

The U.S. statistic of one divorce per every four marriages is all too familiar. Other figures are even more disquieting. For example, a recent government study revealed that one-third of all first-born children in the United States from 1964 through 1966 were conceived out of wedlock, thereby forcing many hasty marriages that might not have occurred otherwise. Some marriage specialists estimate that anywhere from 40 to 60 per cent of all marriages are at any given time "subclinical." The couples involved could materially benefit from the help of a marriage counselor, but they never reach a clinic. Divorce is still the most widely accepted means of coping with a marriage beset by problems. Relatively few couples having marital difficulties are aware of available marriage counseling services or utilize them. Divorce today is very much a part of the social fabric, and some sociologists refer to a "di-

vorice culture." It is safe to say that most men, women, and children in this country have been touched by the divorce experience—either in their own families, or among friends and close acquaintances.

The other day a good friend, senior executive of a large company and in his early forties, dropped by for a visit. He told me he had been thinking of divorce after sixteen years of marriage. The couple have a boy, twelve, and two girls, one of whom is ten, the other eight. "We've grown apart over the years, and we have nothing in common left anymore other than the children. There are at least twenty years of enjoying life still ahead of me. I was worried about the children until we discussed it with them. So many of their schoolmates have had divorced parents or parents who had remarried, they are accustomed to the idea. It's part of life. Of course, if the older ones need help, I want them to see a good psychiatrist while we go through with this. My wife is still a good-looking woman, younger than I, and probably will remarry. I'm not thinking of it now, but I'll probably remarry someday." This situation illustrates an attitude and the climate of the times. Divorce has become as much an institution as marriage.

Paradoxically, the high divorce rate can be viewed as both a symptom of the failure of monogamy and an indication of its success. A large majority of men and women remarry within four years after their divorce. As Dr. Bernard Steinzor points out in his latest book, *When Parents Divorce*, "divorce has become an expression of the increasing personal freedom afforded

the average citizen." It is a fact that the average citizen continues to pursue personal freedom within the framework of marriage. Serial monogamy or progressive monogamy is today so widespread that it has arrived as an alternative structure. According to one analyst, we are close to the day when 85 per cent of all men and women reaching the age of sixty-five will have been remarried at least once. I am reminded of a cartoon that appeared in *The New Yorker* some time ago: A young couple is shown leaving what is identified by a sign as the home of a justice of the peace. The bride, dressed in the latest mod fashion, turns brightly to her young man and says, "Darling! Our first marriage!"

The full-scale emergence of serial monogamy has been accompanied by an explosive upswing of experimentation with other alternative structures. Begun by the under-thirty generation and hippie tribal families, the 1960s have seen the growth of a new commune movement. This movement has started to attract significant segments of the older, established population. For example, I recently conducted a weekend marathon in Chicago—under the auspices of the Oasis Center—that was open to the public. Seven out of thirty-six participants were members of communes. Three of the seven were successful professional men in their mid-forties. Another participant, a college professor in his early thirties, mentioned that he had been a member of a commune composed of several psychiatrists, an engineer, a teacher, and a chemist. When I visited New York following the Chicago weekend, a senior editor of a large publishing

HERBERT A. OTTO, a Fellow of the American Association of Marriage Counselors, is editor of *The American Family: In Search for a Future*, scheduled for summer publication. His latest book is *More Joy in Your Marriage*.