

Theater

Heaven Is Murky

BY HENRY HEWES

BUFFALO, N.Y.—The most demanding experimental theater piece I have seen, in a year when I have seen many, is currently hiding out in a converted Buffalo warehouse. The work is an adaptation of Samuel Beckett's 1958 novel, *The Unnamable*, and it is performed by the Performance Research Unit of the American Contemporary Theatre, Inc.

The audience enters to find a playing area surrounded on four sides by a few rows of seats. In the center of the playing area stands a huge, black drum, and on the floor sit symmetrically patterned troughs of footlights aimed at the audience. Slowly the house lights fade to total blackness. Then a very dim light comes up within the drum, which has begun to rotate. Through a window in one sector of the drum we barely discern a seated human figure, who speaks meditatively. When the window turns closest to us, the words are strong and distinct. When the window is 180 degrees from us, we must strain to hear sentence remainders.

The speaker's words are Beckett's, carefully selected by Joseph H. Dunn and Irja Koljonen, who also directed and designed the piece. The adapters apparently interpret the novel as a Taoistic journey from the chaos of the external world toward an inner radiance, a oneness with something so absolute that it cannot be named or described. The rotating soliloquy has a hypnotic effect. The speaker recognizes that to free oneself from the notions of time and of progress and from the need to try to escape from oneself is as impossible as it is necessary. He says, "The best would be not to begin. But I have to begin. That is to say, I have to go on."

Go on the speaker does, wrestling with dilemmas and distracting external elements to reach a point where he achieves clarification by "opening an eye on the within, having, of course, previously exposed it to the without, in order to benefit by the contrast." Peripheral actors, lights, and sounds bombard us in a way that illustrates unspoken sections of the novel. For those unfamiliar with *The Unnamable*, these elements, though sometimes



Speaker in a turning drum soliloquizes in Beckett's "The Unnamable."

imaginative and vivid, frequently emerge as murky and unbearably harassing to ear and eye. We are, we assume, being ruthlessly exposed to the without so that we may later appreciate the within.

We are as reluctant to continue as the speaker himself, who, after his success at "opening an eye on the within," humorously comments, "Having won, shall I be left in peace? It doesn't look like it. I seem to be going on talking." And it soon becomes apparent that being left in peace is not in the cards for us, either. Beckett's purgatorial path must be followed through a marathon of existential considerations and protracted periods of unendurable mixtures of noise. Noise is necessary in order to find the silence where he is. As the speaker concludes, "In the silence you don't know, you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on."

Whatever complaints we may have about going on through our nearly three-hour ordeal in the darkness, the manifestations that occur must be acknowledged as theatrical art. The lights and the sound seem controlled by some master surgeon who knows exactly what he is doing. Characters from the novel move counter to the rotation of the drum, illuminated only by small flashlights they carry in their hands, revealing just enough to suggest a softly defined, transitory presence. Most effective of these is a disembod-

ied face that mechanically alternates between exaggeratedly hideous expressions of joy and of suffering. Also most memorable is a huge, clay jar in which the speaker imagines himself stuck, limbless and speechless. The jar, which is festooned with Chinese lanterns, moves slowly around the circumference of the playing area, a striking and beautiful image despite the fact that the speaker never identifies the jar.

Here is the crux of the matter. The adapters of *The Unnamable* have created with integrity an experience that is rich and meaningful to them as artists. But without a little more exposition to help the theatergoer know where he is, exasperation and boredom arise to break the circuit of audience involvement.

Two things should be quickly added to this criticism. First of all, Beckett was sufficiently impressed with the script of the adaptation to permit Mr. Dunn and Miss Koljonen to produce it, and he would, I suspect, be greatly pleased that it has been carried out, not only with such skill and imagination, but with an absoluteness of scope that matches his own.

Second, and equally important for the future of the American Contemporary Theatre, Inc., this production demonstrates the company's ability to invent and control fascinating theatrical devices that can be used with other more namable material. □

Films

A Patrolman for All Seasons

BY ARTHUR KNIGHT

In a curious way the tough cop seems to be replacing the private eye, or even the sympathetic gangster, as a contemporary hero. The police have never been terribly popular on the screen before. Occasionally there has been a goodhearted patrolman (who invariably gets killed in the line of duty); but for every one of these, there must have been half a dozen or so patterned along the lines of the Sterling Hayden character in *The Godfather*—brutal, ruthless, and on the take. It wasn't too long ago when, in *Bonnie and Clyde*, audiences burst into cheers as Warren Beatty humiliated a southern sheriff and booed loudly as the cops set up their ambush. Nor were the ticket buyers precisely on the side of law and order in films like *Cool Hand Luke*, *The Wild Bunch*, or *Easy Rider*. Only in recent years—since *Bullitt*, in fact—has the man with the badge begun to emerge in heroic proportions. And even here, it must be admitted, in films like *Madigan*, *Dirty Harry*, and *The French Connection*, his status as hero is at best equivocal.

The New Centurions seems designed to end all that. The movie makes no bones about its message: Its heroes are policemen, and they are heroic. They are also human, fallible, and susceptible to pressures. At one point Stirling Silliphant's script attempts to draw a parallel between these men in blue and the centurions of ancient Rome, who sought to hold back the invading hordes of barbarians. Wisely, he doesn't pursue the image, but what he finds on the streets of Los Angeles—based on LAPD Sgt. Joseph Wambaugh's vast and rambling novel—is a sobering reminder that our civilization has produced its own hordes of barbarians and that only a very thin, blue line of predominantly dedicated men separates them from us.

It is all too easy, and not a little cynical, to recall the corruption uncovered within the ranks from New York to California, not to mention the repeated charges (and instances) of police bru-

talities. But what Wambaugh contended in his novel, and reaffirmed in his own decision to remain with the department despite two best sellers, is that some men grow as attached to police-work as others might to carpentry, shipbuilding, or—well, movie reviewing. There is something about the job that fulfills an inner need, and retirement from the force, Wambaugh maintains, removes the daily risk of death as well as the sense of identity that is the main motivation for living.

The New Centurions attempts to underscore this by singling out several rookie cops, freshly graduated from the Los Angeles Police Academy, as they meet their seasoned prowler-car partners for the first time. One rookie (Stacy Keach) is studying law and needs a job that will pay enough to see him through law school. Another (Scott Wilson) is recently out of the Marine Corps and wants the kind of work that can utilize the skills he learned in Vietnam. Inevitably, as in the old wartime movies, there is the team's black and the team's Chicano. The first time out, Keach gets shot in the belly during a liquor-store holdup. Wilson, trigger-happy, kills an innocent man in the ensuing chase. The Chicano (Erik Estrada) uses his night stick to smash a car to bits in an agony of frustration, then declares that he feels the better for having done it.

After his recovery, however, Keach has the good fortune to team up with Sergeant Kilvinsky (George C. Scott), a grizzled, knowledgeable, humane man, and it is largely through their eyes that we see the streets of the city. They pick up some cruising prostitutes, get them drunk, then set them down again too sodden to ply their wares. Keach moves over to the vice squad and, in an oddly truncated sequence, reluctantly sets about entrapping an alleged homosexual. He is also forced to become involved in domestic crises—including one of his own when he discovers that he prefers police work to the law, much to his rabbit wife's displeasure. But he really goes to pieces after Kilvinsky, retired from the force and unable to handle inactivity, commits suicide.

If only the film had stuck to these two points of view, Keach's and Scott's, it might have been both powerful and memorable. Unfortunately, the effect is diluted by mixing in a multitude of

subplots and subcharacters, until the picture becomes episodic and piece-y, not unlike television's *Adam-12*. The writing of the lines is splendid, with a good ear for the vernacular. "People is getting so Goddamn weird anymore," exclaims a Negro prostitute on her way to the paddy wagon. Richard Fleischer's direction reprises the excitement generated by his *Boston Strangler*, where actual locations are made to seem more than merely corroborative. But George C. Scott is such a vibrant, tingling presence on the screen that killing him off with still a good half-hour of screen time to go has to be one of the more disastrous decisions of this movie year. And the climactic car chase, complete with screeching tires and electronic organ, doesn't quite take his place. Perhaps if George C. Scott had lived, *The New Centurions* might have effectively erased the old cop image. Once he leaves the scene, not only does Stacy Keach fall apart—so does the movie.

It doesn't take nearly as long for *The Public Eye* to go to pieces, amiable and attractive though it be. Adapted by Peter Shaffer from his own one-act play, the screenplay attempts to expand his original concept to feature-length dimensions simply by adding what is essentially travelogue footage. While I bow to no one in my affection for London, there is a tremendous difference between using its distinctive locales as, say, Alfred Hitchcock did in *Frenzy*, where parks, clubs, hotels, and the environs of Covent Garden added organically to his story, and turning the city into so much cotton batting to pad out a woefully thin little tale.

In Shaffer's play, a rather dull young husband begins to suspect that his younger wife is being unfaithful to him when she fails to turn up at mealtime or arrives late for social engagements inappropriately garbed. He hires a private detective to keep a watchful eye on the girl, then discovers not only that she is not unfaithful but that she is such a paragon the detective has himself fallen in love with her. Mia Farrow is engagingly doelike as the wife. Michael Jayston is a bit too stuffy as the husband to make one believe that he could ever have married her in the first place. And Topol, as the amorous detective, plays so broadly that one might think he was still doing Tevya. It's a curious and disappointing film to come from Sir Carol Reed. □