

ing Verdi inherited from Bellini and Donizetti and to the palpitating dramatic expression he invented. Caballé cannot, of course, create such an infuriated Elena as Callas was: But she is superbly qualified to go even beyond her predecessor in glorifying the older order of vocal challenge. Her exquisitely defined version of "*Arrigo! ah parli a un core*" in the next to the last scene aroused a storm of applause that was only quieted when the singer gestured for it to stop and let the opera continue. This was an echo of the success Caballé had enjoyed a week or so before in Carnegie Hall for her finesse in seldom-heard arias of Handel and Vivaldi as well as Bellini and Donizetti. It was a reminder, too, that in works which cross stylistic lines, as *Vespri* does, it is better for an impresario to cast for strength to one side or the other rather than compromise both. In this instance of the operatic bargain, the choice of Caballé purchases beauty of line and phraseology, rare at any time, at the price of dramatic credibility. It will have to do until the next Callas comes along.

The other principals had less virtuosity to dispense but a variety of alternative values. Best balanced among them was the effort of Milnes as Monforte, governor of the occupying French. As if being governor were not difficulty enough, he has to cope with the problem that the head of the insurgent Sicilians, Arrigo, is his son by a secret affair with a woman who had cursed him with her dying breath. The thankless task thrust upon Nicolai Gedda of playing Arrigo to a "father" years his junior was further complicated by insufficiencies of vocal range and power. Justino Díaz did not bring excitement to the incitement of the other rebel, Procida, but he sang the music powerfully.

As a totality, the dark scenic scheme of Svoboda could be described as perfect for *Fidelio*, which takes place in a prison. It is also perfect for the one scene in *Vespri* that is also in a prison: But the other requirements were less well served. The clear artistic purpose of the long flight of stairs by which it is dominated is to intensify the conflict of Elena's love for Arrigo with her devotion to the rebel cause he abandons under the pressure of his newly found father. The spatial arrangement also makes impressive use of the side and rear spaces of the Metropolitan stage for crowd movement. But when the action calls for Procida to enter from a beach, and he merely appears at the top of the staircase to declaim the

famous aria "*O tu Palermo*," the production scheme is begging the issue rather than responding to it. Dexter's action was constantly alive, forthright, and, best of all, disrespectful of operatic convention. Arm thrusts and body lunges were suppressed, and strong postures and expressive repose substituted for them. Jan Skalicky's good-looking costumes were mostly in the tonality of the dark surroundings, with a well-devised burst of color for the wedding, which touches off the massacre of the French by the Sicilians.

Perhaps the most enduring outcome of this risky venture is the contribution of Levine to its musical success. The performance of the overture was, as has been his wont, physically forceful and a shade brutal aesthetically. But as the performance progressed, welcome variations in accent and emphasis began to accumulate. In the final scenes, the adjustment of the orchestra to Caballé's finely spun sound and the implementation of Verdi's subtle contrasts of indecision and excitement compel the creation of a new timetable for Levine's emergence to musical maturity . . . like now? □

## WIT TWISTER NO. 17

Edited 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. Answers on page 58.*

Sleek and fat, the — — — — — stood  
In the — — — — — of the wood,  
Celebrating with a squeal  
His most — — — — — insect meal.

Contributed by Shirley A. Nelson, Medford, Oregon

ANSWER TO MIDDLETON  
DOUBLE-CROSTIC NO. 44

(ANDREW) DOWDY:

## MOVIES ARE BETTER THAN EVER

And so we went to . . . the flicks, using them as the speediest available antidote to the toxic effects of uninterrupted higher education. However . . . corny, the movies provided a ready sense of community, a shared mythology no more arcane than bone-deep memories on which we had grown up.

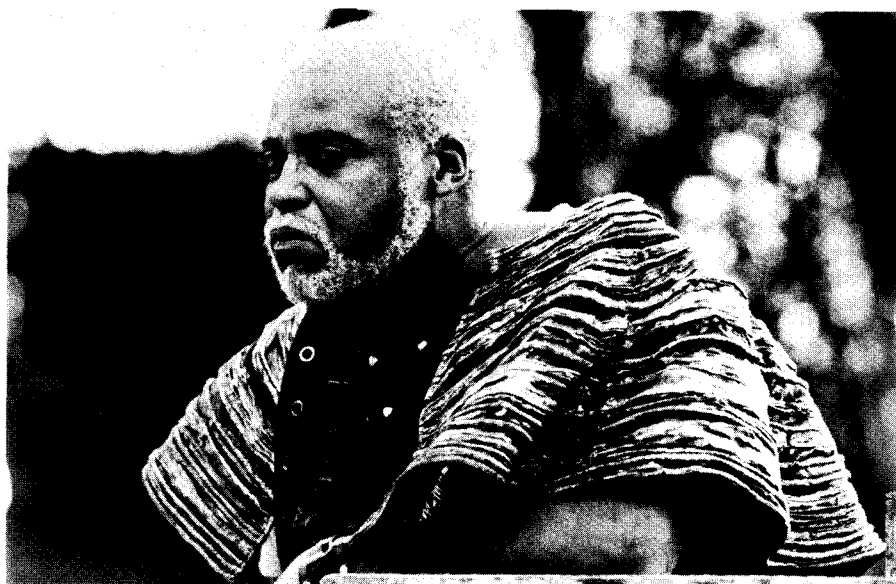
**Henry Fonda Maureen O'Hara**  
**Ben Johnson and Clint Howard**  
in the repeat of the Emmy Award  
winning telecast of  
**THE RED PONY**

**Fri. March 22, NBC-TV**  
Consult local listings for  
time and channel.



**Bell System Family Theatre**





James Earl Jones in *King Lear*—A major step toward a living relationship between the theater and television, which is the *de facto* national theater of the land.

## Theater on the Tube

by Stephen Koch

"Theater in America" is a new Public Broadcasting System series, funded by Exxon, which transforms into television various productions from regional theaters across the country. It's an adventure one welcomes enthusiastically, less for the touching good deed of its regional egalitarianism than because it is a major step toward establishing a living relationship between the theater and that electronic tube, which is the *de facto* national theater of the land. One hopes that, eventually, major new theater production will hold out for its television deal and that, above all, new people will create for television new works of the stature found in days of yore only on the stage and in films. That point has not yet been reached, but the people responsible for "Theater in America" are to be much congratulated, especially Jac Venza, who has been television's and theater's Knight of Faith these many years.

Do not regret having missed some of these works on the stage. Television sometimes vastly improves a work. Maxim Gorky's *Enemies*, for example (produced on stage last year at Lincoln Center)—a three-act exploration of a crisis between pre-revolutionary Russian

factory workers and the lords of their manor—has been changed from the stupefying thing it was at Lincoln Center into something positively interesting. This—thought I, sitting in the first-night audience at Lincoln Center—this is what the great theatrical innovators have wasted a half-century of inspired genius railing against. But no: The camera has given *Enemies* texture, rhythm, air—saved it.

"Theater in America" has also come up with a minor discovery, the forgotten *June Moon* by George S. Kaufman and ("shut up, I explained") Ring Lardner, Jr., about the fortunes (circa 1929) of a country hick coming to New York to make it as a songwriter. It's a delicious period piece, bristling with a period humor for which your reviewer confesses to being a sucker: what in 1929 was called "sophisticated smartercracking." I am a shameless Dorothy Parker fan, and somehow the spirit of the lady who thought she might as well live presides over all, deadpan, eyebrow arched. The cast is as snappy as the script (no regional theater this): Estelle Parsons, Jack Cassidy, Tom Fitzsimmons, Kevin McCarthy, and, in an excellent acting debut, Stephen Sondheim as the single competent in a world of musical incompetents, and the chief smartercracker.

ADRIAN HALL'S *Feasting With Panthers* is the single new work of the series, produced originally with great éclat at Hall's Trinity Square Theater in Providence. It

purports to dramatize the imagining, remembering mind of Oscar Wilde as he served his term at Reading Gaol, its script derived largely from Wilde's letters, especially the amazing long letter to Lord Alfred Douglas called *De Profundis*. As television, the production is strong, flamboyant, streaked with brilliant moments. But it lacks coherence: The imagining mind—certainly Wilde's—is more coherent than life, not less. I quarrel with the script: By glossing over his relation with Douglas, Hall substitutes for a solemnly powerful reality a weak, scattered fiction that reduces its subject. Being transformed into the nineteenth century's most famous sinner was central to Wilde's humiliation: Hall leaves Wilde a symbol and does nothing to rescue him from that. In consequence, an extraordinary mind becomes almost silly. "The poor are kinder than we are," wails Hall's Oscar, delivering as almost slobbering sentimentality what was really a singularly profound and intelligent encounter with class humiliation and oppression among his fellow prisoners at Reading.

I have not yet seen the *Antigone* or the *King Lear* with James Earl Jones. And nobody can like everything in such a series. Your reviewer could live a long time (like forever) without *In Fashion*, an effort to turn Feydeau's *Tailleur pour dames* into a musical. As for Leonard Bernstein's *Mass*, I have already expressed in these pages my views and will not numb the reader with repetition, except to note that in a misplaced act of love and/or ambition, the Yale students who perform it for television have made it better than it was at the Kennedy Cen-



Gorky's *Enemies*—"The camera has given it texture, rhythm, air—saved it."