

THEATER

Campbell's Soup Plays

by Martin Gottfried

ANDY WARHOL'S Campbell's soup cans said something about this time of ours. They said that criticism is no longer necessary. His silk screens didn't distort the cans to comment on the pervasive influence of advertising. They didn't have to. The cans themselves said it all. Warhol assumed we were aware of basic taste and sense. He could present the thing and let it criticize itself. All things could. I think nowadays they do.

Timbuktu! is a new Broadway version of the 1953 musical *Kismet*, which was, in turn, a new version of (a) an old play by Edward Knoblock with (b) "new" melodies culled from the music of Aleksandr Borodin. In its own day, *Kismet* was a gross affair, actually subtitled *A Musical Arabian Night*. It had wazirs and caliphs and Omar Khayyam and Alfred Drake and "Stranger in Paradise."

Timbuktu! is an all-black adaptation

of *Kismet*. Need more really be said? Speaking in terms of Warhol's soup cans, I don't see how words can say as much about the production as it says about itself. All-black versions of anything are commercial these days on Broadway. *Timbuktu!* has tried to justify its blackness by resetting the *Kismet* story, caliphs, wazirs, and all, in western Africa. Borodin's music, which is vaguely Eastern in its Russian exoticism, has been provided with occasional drumbeats. Otherwise, this show is not black. It is not musical theater. It is a parade of costumes by Geoffrey Holder.

These costumes are bizarre at best and grotesque at worst, drawn from a palette apparently shared with the Castro Convertible people. Half the company is on foot-high platform shoes. As the show's choreographer-director, Holder has the performers march to and fro, exhibiting his costumes, too burdened by the bulk and

weight of their dress to be either directed or choreographed. There are many men flexing greased, body-builder muscles. They are nude except for sequined jockstraps. They are all Holder has allowed to distract from his costumes. Eartha Kitt has top billing but a small part, which she plays as a self-parodied sex kitten. The curtain calls seem her major assignment. After elaborate curtsies, she flings an enormous wrap into the orchestra pit. I think comment would be superfluous.

Thrillers come to us from the same era as *Kismet*. Aiming to update the genre, Ira Levin (*Rosemary's Baby*, *The Boys from Brazil*) has doubled the tricks, as if more equals different. The proposition of his play, *Deathtrap*, is that we are watching a thriller as it is being written. The main character writes mysteries. He comes across a play that seems a surefire success and, not having had one of his own lately, is tempted to steal it at the expense of its author's life. His wife is appalled, even more so when the young man is strangled in the living room. And that's only the first 15 minutes.

I'm not sure whether thrillers are obsolete. I'd guess good ones would still be enjoyable, but Broadway hasn't been producing them regularly since the days of *Witness for the Prosecution* and *Dial "M" for Murder*. Was *Wait Until Dark* the last? *Sleuth*? *Deathtrap* seems to remember a lot of them, but then *Deathtrap* is about the writing of mysteries as much as it is one. Satire is never far from its mind. The trouble is that it's never sure whether to concentrate on satire or on thrills, or even whether laughter and fright are theatrically compatible. John Wood, the play's main actor and a marvelous one, plays the lead as if the part were a lot more challenging than it is. But hamburgers do not improve with cream sauce. The first act of this play is funny and exciting. The second act, however, is repetitious, boring, and finally silly. Is *Deathtrap* worth it or not? Is it passé or contemporary? Now *there's* the mystery; but it is a solvable one. Once more, the thing speaks for itself. *Deathtrap* is what it is: ingenuity running out of steam.

Timbuktu! and *Deathtrap* are representative of a Broadway that has grown ever more conservative. The businessmen are in charge. Why else would we



"Just a few questions, if you don't mind."

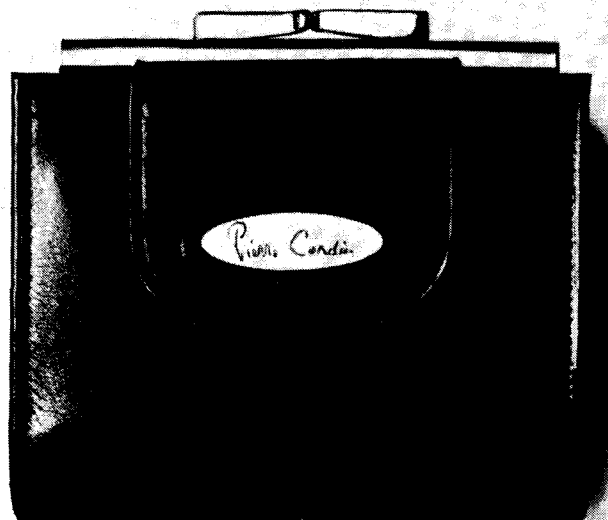
have still another revival of *Hello, Dolly!*, the second since the show's 1964 opening (and it ran till 1970)? *Hello, Dolly!* is a wonderful example of the Broadway musical. Its script enjoys an original sense of humor. Using bright caricature, it bridges the gap between a musical's heightened level of reality and a drama's naturalism. The directing and choreography are models of style, and the show never stops dancing. The music is catchy, and the settings are striking (though a touch seedy in this revival). Carol Channing's marvelous original performance has become part of Broadway lore, and here she is, doing it again.

Can this be real? The same show with the same star, 15 years after the fact? What has happened to time? Are we trying to restore the past? In the past couple of seasons, Broadway has had Zero Mostel repeat his *Fiddler on the Roof*; Yul Brynner, his *The King and I*; Richard Kiley, his *Man of La Mancha*; and now Channing, her *Dolly*. If this is not an attempt at time freezing, the rejection of the present, and a defiance of age, it certainly does reflect on Broadway and its fears. One gets the feeling that rather than do new works, which is its mandate, New York's commercial theater would just as soon fill up auditoriums with sure bets. If those bets include every single production that ever succeeded, with every original star, so be it. Broadway is becoming a theatrical wax museum on America's Main Street.

Sam Shepard is a playwright who sees America's Main Street in one of Warhol's frames. To Shepard, the country has come to seem a picture of itself. His *Curse of the Starving Class* is a sort of photo-realist *The Cherry Orchard*. It is about the children of the Broadway people—the Broadway people who make these shows and go to them. The children are starving (food, or the lack of it, is the play's running metaphor). They are starving for roots. In Shepard's play, a pair of adolescents are fighting their parents' wish to sell the old homestead. For all their alienation, their new and strange ways of thinking and talking, the children see this home as a metaphysical one; it represents basic values. But it is being sold anyway to make way for commercial housing developments.

Is the Broadway theater also being sold out by cheap capitalizers? Shepard's play is being done Off-Broadway, for the sake of art. *Hello, Dolly!*, *Deathtrap*, and *Timbuktu!* are being done on Broadway, for the fast-food theater trade. Are they theater or Campbell's soup cans? ●

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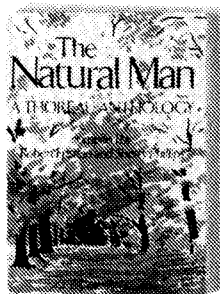
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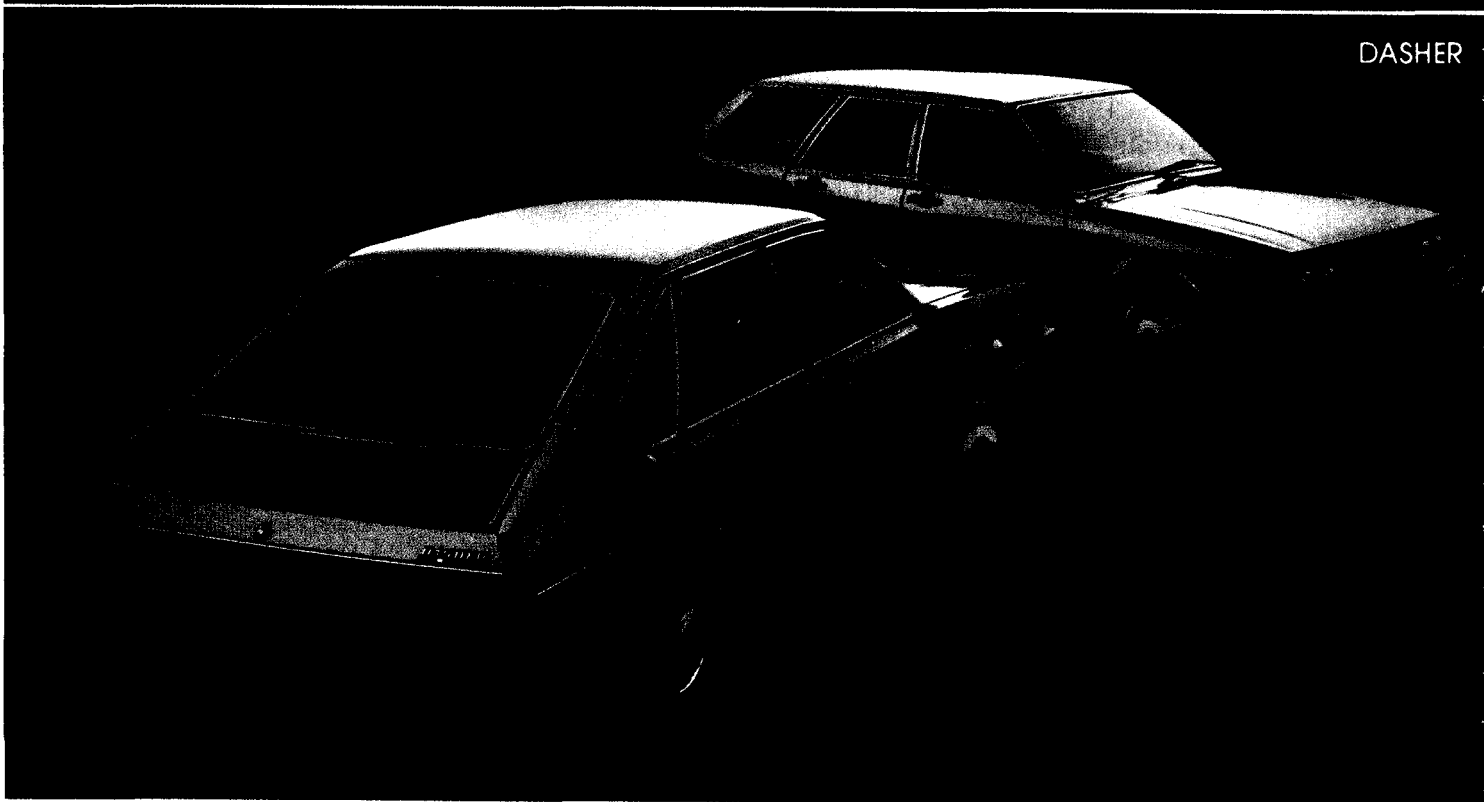
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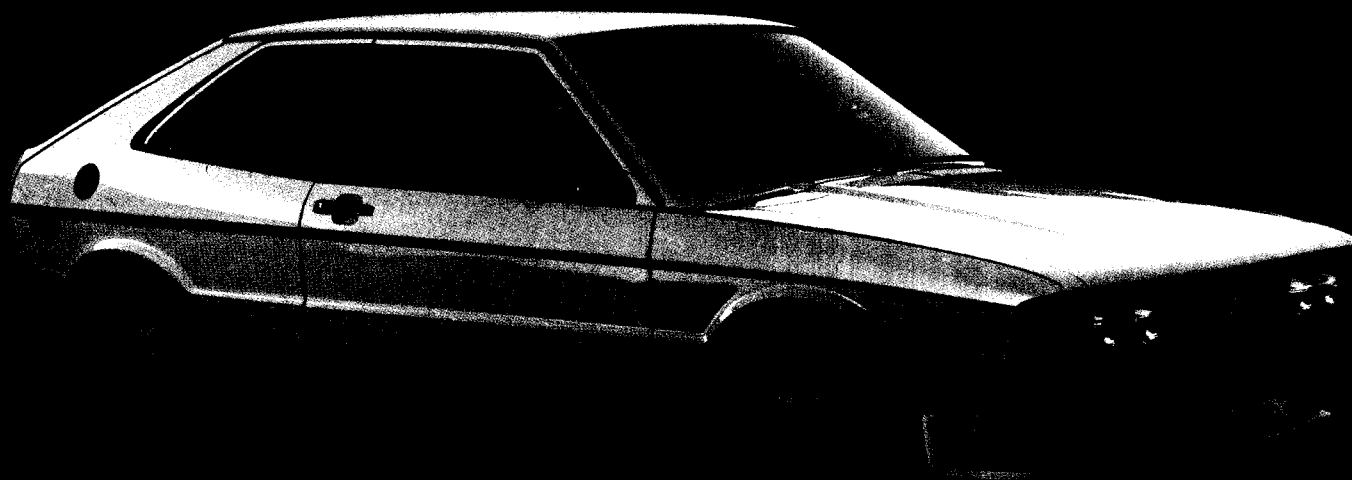
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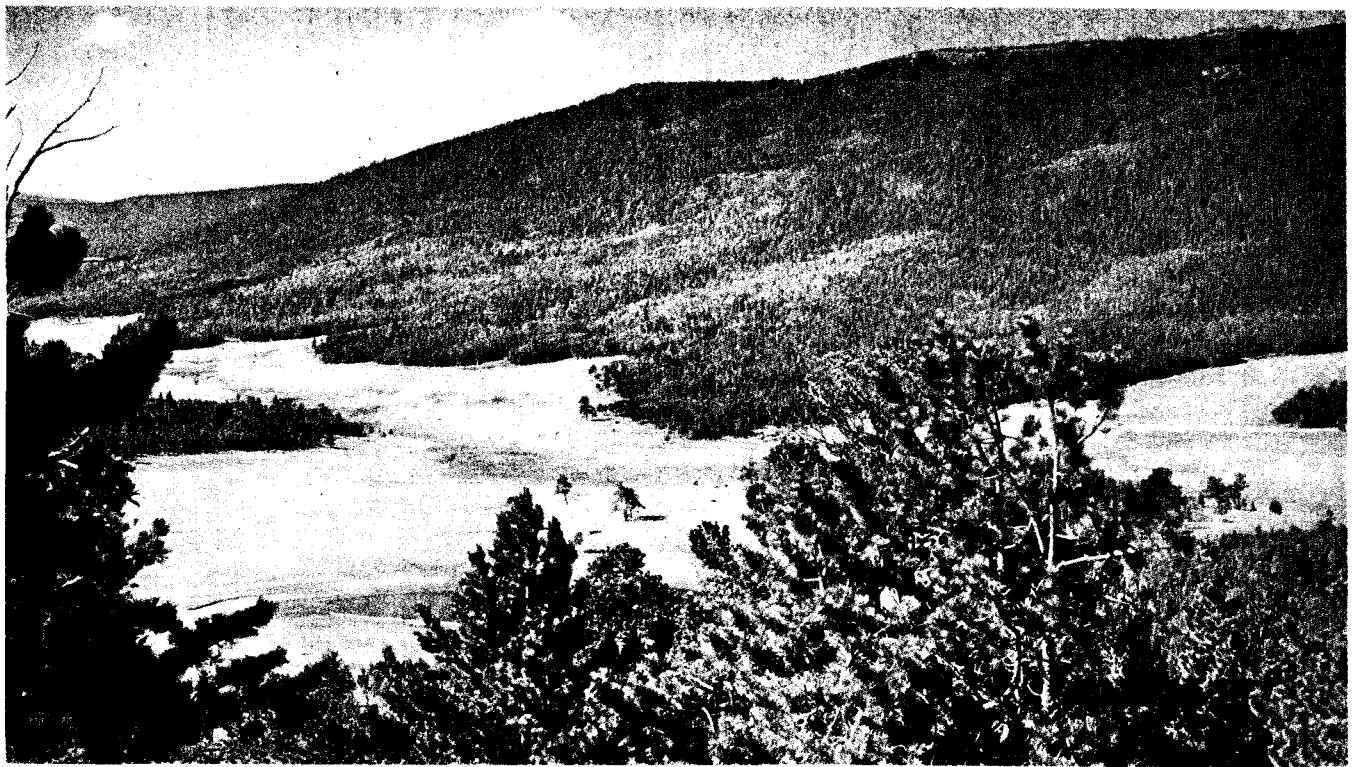
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VISHNU AS DOUBLE AGENT

Kalki

by Gore Vidal

Random House, 288 pp., \$10

Reviewed by John Simon

UNTIL NOW, Gore Vidal's fiction has mostly been wickedly clever. With his latest novel, *Kalki*, Vidal ascends into a new category: diabolically clever. I say "diabolically" rather than the more innocuous "devilishly" because what has increased is not the cleverness but the nastiness. *Kalki* is a hybrid: part social satire; part slick entertainment (in the Graham Greeneian sense); and part doomsday comedy in the manner of, say, Stanley Kubrick's cinematic black comedy, *Dr. Strangelove*.

Some of Vidal's diabolism manifests itself right away, in the plot's construction. For *Kalki* is a thriller, and by an ancient and honored custom, reviewers are not allowed to give away the main twist in a thriller's plot. What comes to their aid, however, is that the twist tends to be a single fact near the end of the book, one that the critique can easily sidestep. Here, however, the presumably unbetrayable twist comes much earlier and permeates and affects everything before and after it, just about tying a reviewer's hands before he can properly begin.

Still, if I tell you that in *Kalki* the world does come to an end, I am not committing an unpardonable crime. For such is Vidal's cleverness that the suspense continues beyond Armageddon and hinges on such fascinating posers as "Will anyone survive?" and "If so, who?" and, above all, "Can a new race arise, and if so, what will it be like?" With such tricks still up his sleeve, Vidal can go on flaunting his mastery of suspense within suspense. And about his eschatology—or is it dysteleology?—I shall keep strictly mum.

Continued on page 32



Gil Epper