

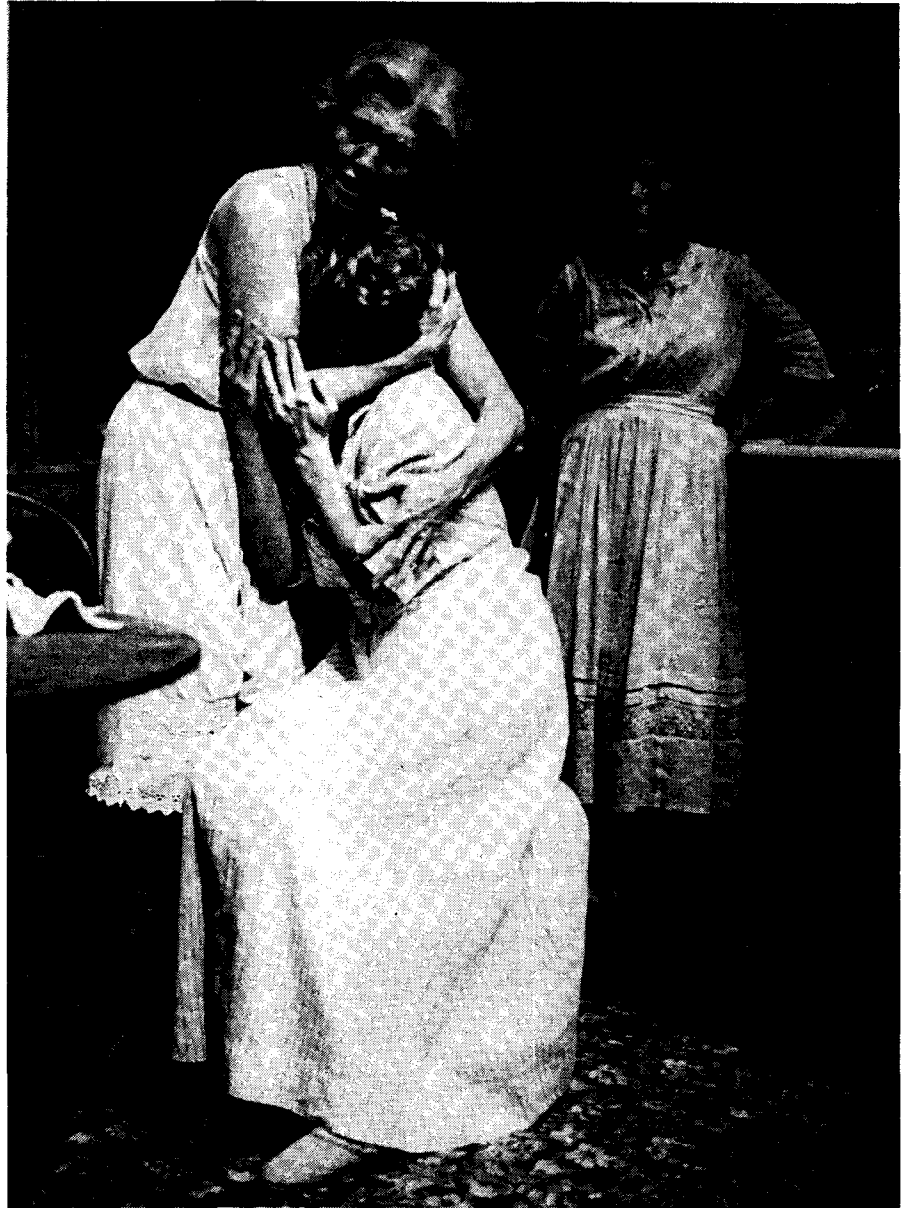
ARE AMERICAN playwrights awake? It's a fair question to ask many of them—and I mean many of the most serious. They seem not to know of a fundamental change in all the arts during the last few decades. A lot of playwrights in other countries are aware of this shift, but not a lot of ours.

The change is in the artist's relation to truth. For about 150 years, until the middle of this century, the basic drive of art was to be more and more truthful. From romanticism to surrealism, progressive artists saw themselves as breakers of shackles and bringers of light. Not today. Few progressive artists now think of themselves in anything like those terms. Truth, at least in the aspects that inspired realists and naturalists and the others, comes to us now through the social sciences and the informational barrage of the media. In the pop phrase, the artist can't keep up with the headlines. So he has turned, very fruitfully in numerous instances, to other powers in art: to explorations of consciousness, to validations of reality, to rummaging in the mysteries of the artistic process itself. To put it too simply, Brecht is followed by Beckett.

But this change, which has nothing to do with vogue or novelty, has not yet registered notably with American playwrights, even the ones who might be expected to be most responsive, the ones not focused on Broadway. Numbers of these last still have their minds fixed back several decades, still rush in breathlessly to *Tell All*. Last season Off-Broadway, Marsha Norman's *Getting Out* told us about a woman ex-convict at the depth of a 1930s Warner Bros. weepie; Michael Weller's *Loose Ends*, about young people in the 1970s, had all the penetration of a TV special.

The line stretches on. Prominent in the new Off-Broadway season is *Ladyhouse Blues*, by Kevin O'Morrison, a play that has been cosseted by grants, conference workshops, and previous productions, including an earlier one Off-Broadway. And what has all this huffery and puffery brought us? One more kitchen-sink opus. If it had been written in 1919, the year in which it is set, it might have been revived as a modestly rewarding example of early American naturalism. Today it's dramatically, socially, psychologically comatose.

Worse, it's still one more remembering of Mama. Just after World War I, a coun-



Jo Henderson, Laurie Kennedy, and Christine Estabrook in O'Morrison's kitchen-sink opus.

trywoman is living in a St. Louis apartment surrounded by four daughters—three resident, one visiting. The title refers to the postman's name for buildings from which all the men have gone off to war. No drama is made out of this fact, but then no drama is really made of anything. It's all just a recital of "realities."

Each character symbolizes a social fact, with an invisible sign around her neck. One daughter has been married to a German, one is going to marry a Greek, so we know that the attack on ethnic prejudice has begun. One daugh-

ter is socially mobile upward, one is in the labor movement. And the mother is the 19th-century figure against whom they are all measured. In her stubborn, brave way she is supposed to exemplify old virtues; but she comes out shortsighted, selfish. (Her son dies in the navy and, out of pride, she refuses the insurance, though she badly needs it.)

Absolutely nothing is intended in this play except to show us what these people were, and that simply is not enough. In style even more than in subject, it's very old ground to trudge over again. The act-

ing and direction match the play, jigsawing along close to the profile of prosaic representation. The mother, Jo Henderson, is predictable. It's one of those programmed parts—suffering, staunch, humorous—in which the performer merely has to do nothing egregiously wrong in order to wow the imperceptive.

Still, the acting is better than the writing. O'Morrison wants to tell the truth, but he is so inept that it comes out false. As happens so often with such writers, his sincerity is corrupted by bad dramaturgy. The long opening expository scene, in which two of the daughters mostly tell each other things they already know so that we can learn them, reeks of the typewriter. Time after time, a character bursts in with news, then—in stale imitation of the Nurse in *Romeo and Juliet*—delays reporting it to build suspense. Devices like these mar the play's tiny ambition to be veristic.

Despite the critical heralding and hailing, any importance of *Ladyhouse Blues* is not in the play itself but in the fact that it is a clear instance of the disconnection between our playwrights and contemporary aesthetic sensibility. Of course this isn't true of every American playwright: Sam Shepard, still our pre-eminent talent, is one who has shown, with differing success, from *La Turista* to *Buried Child*, the reach of transformative imagination. And, of course, not every playwright who moves past realism is successful: I can't find much of interest in the mellifluous meanderings

sive way that a good writer is identified in America is by his refusal to sell out: Honesty is not the best but the sole policy. Other virtues are nice but sort of secondary. And the way that the artist proves his honesty—by contrast with Broadway and Hollywood writers—is by not tampering with facts. So what we get, in great measure, are fact-fastened, Rip van Winkle plays, instead of imaginative plays that make demands on us.

SUGAR BABIES IS SPURIOUS nostalgia. Does anyone really miss burlesque? A few of the stripteasers were exciting, a few of the comics were wonderful, but it's hard to generate a genuine pang about it all. In these permissive days, all that one can feel about burlesque is lost innocence, and innocence is exactly what it wasn't aiming at. However, there is now a steady market for nostalgia, true or forced, and this show is a plastic-wrapped package of it.

It isn't really a revival, it's a sporadically amusing requiem. The show has no strippers (a tacit admission that burlesque is out-of-date), just fan and belly dancers. Most of the gags hang in limbo between wit and history, neither fresh nor old enough to be endearing—not even “Meet me 'round the corner in a half an hour,” with a bump and drum-beat on each accent.

Besides, there never was an Ann Miller in burlesque. Her dance numbers, impressive only because she is of a certain age, are out of orthodox musical comedy. And Mickey Rooney, though he



Ann Miller and Mickey Rooney, cashing in on the current market for nostalgia.

of John Guare (*Landscape of the Body, Bosoms and Neglect*) or the pretentious trickery of Arthur Kopit (*Wings*). And, most certainly, none of this is to decree that there can never be another good realistic play, one that says something enlightening about its facts. But the majority of serious new American plays strive only for honesty, are trapped in it.

That's a dangerous phrase, perhaps, but it's an apt one for our culture, which still envisions the artist's life as centrally a battle between principle and commercialism. The prime, often exclu-

knows the mechanics and is very smooth, has dead eyes. He's a skilled technician without a dram of warmth.

Standards apply in burlesque, just as elsewhere. When I see a Hamlet, I can't help measuring it against Gielgud's. When I see the old courtroom sketch—the lubricious judge and the luscious witness—I measure it against Bobby Clark and Gypsy Rose Lee. Even the unlucky ones who never saw *Star and Garter* (1942) may feel that Rooney and Miller are more fabricative than funny.

—Stanley Kauffmann

MAN FINDS \$3,000 IN HIS ATTIC.

MINNEAPOLIS (Special) ...

A local man made an unexpected and profitable discovery during a recent move. He dusted off one of his father's old coins, took a pretty plate his wife bought in 1971 for \$25, some old stamps, and his son's comic books and tried to sell them. After asking a lot of questions and writing a lot of letters he ended up with \$3,000 in his pocket.

Because he had a hard time getting information on collectibles of all kinds, he decided to start a society for collectors that would make it easier for people to learn how to spot a good bargain and make a profit. Right now, he is offering non-members the opportunity to share the same fact-packed collecting kit that has helped many people find a small fortune in their homes. The kit, including the best selling book “Profitable Collecting,” is loaded with ideas on how to tell the value of many of your household items, both old and new, as well as what to look for when investing in collectibles.

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I HAD PUT OFF seeing *Apocalypse Now* (United Artists) in the hope that the passage of time would permit a calmer view of the film preceded by such prolonged and agitated publicity. A certain distaste for self-appointed epics also encouraged delay. My belated report now is that, for two-thirds of the way, *Apocalypse Now* is really an extraordinary movie. Like the Vietnam War itself, it gets out of control toward the end.

As everyone knows, Francis Coppola's inspiration was *Heart of Darkness*. In Conrad's novella the seaman Marlow voyages up the Congo in quest of Kurtz, mysterious and damned, a company agent driven mad by living too long in the midst of the incomprehensible. In Coppola's rewrite Captain Willard of the Special Forces voyages up a river in Vietnam in quest of Colonel Walter Kurtz, mysterious and damned, a Special Forces officer driven mad by living too long in the midst of the incomprehensible. For each Kurtz "the savagery, the utter savagery, had closed around him"; for each the wilderness had wrought "a terrible vengeance for the fantastic invasion." Each had made himself the local god and held the power of life and death over the natives.

In significant and damaging ways, however, Coppola deviates from Conrad. Marlow is despatched to bring his Kurtz home; Willard to "terminate"—i.e., murder—his Kurtz. Marlow is a hopeful young captain on his first command, recording the damnation of Kurtz and, in his absorption, peeping "over the edge" into the potentiality for evil, the heart of darkness, within every man. Living through Kurtz's "extremity" became, Marlow tells us, "the culminating point of my experience." Willard, on the other hand, ought long since to have peeped over the edge. He has already "terminated" half a dozen people in the course of professional duty; and, especially as played with exhausted passivity by Martin Sheen, seems a burned-out case. The moral balance of the ultimate confrontation is thus displaced.

It is further displaced by the incidents of the voyage. Marlow encounters squalid white men engaged in squalid efforts to exploit wretched natives; but



Sheen, in camouflage paint; Raimondi, a less-than-elegant Don.

this is greed rather than depravity, and nothing happens to Marlow to diminish the shock of Kurtz. Willard, however, encounters genuine depravity at every stage along the river, most notably in the character of Lieutenant Colonel Kilgore, the war lover, brilliantly acted by Robert Duvall, who slaughters Vietnamese to the strains of Wagner in battle scenes of a wild and evil beauty. Marlon Brando rumbling away as Colonel Kurtz is almost an anticlimax.

Coppola's vignettes of war are stunning. Peter Arnett, who spent years in Vietnam for the Associated Press, tells me that they are far more authentic than the equivalent scenes in *The Deer Hunter*. But, with Willard's arrival at Kurtz's post, the film changes from epic to gothic, and to literary, pretentious gothic at that. In the midst of dangling corpses and severed heads, we see Kurtz's library (Eliot's poetry; *The Golden Bough*; Jessie L. Weston's *From Ritual to Romance*). The colonel solemnly reads aloud from "The Hollow Men," omitting, however, what must have been the unnerving epigraph: "Mistah Kurtz—he dead." Nor is it clear that Kurtz, with all his highbrow tastes, can possibly reveal anything to Willard about himself that Willard's own life should not have told him long since.

For all the defects in narrative logic, *Apocalypse Now* remains a powerful phantasmagoria of the abominable and witless war. On his way up the river, Willard stumbles into a skirmish, with black soldiers firing wildly at unseen foes. "Who's commanding officer here?" he asks. "Ain't you?" comes the reply out

of the night. It is war careening out of control, and it is not irrelevant that Coppola should have picked on the murder of one American officer by another as the central symbolic episode of the film; for to a considerable extent America destroyed itself in Vietnam.

Coppola himself, I believe, has noted a certain operatic quality about *Apocalypse Now*, an orchestration of themes and a bold heightening of effects. In *Don Giovanni* (Gaumont-New Yorker) Joseph Losey makes a valiant attempt to capture opera for the movies. *Don Giovanni* has not been kindly treated by the

critics. I agree with most of the objections. Yet I have not for months seen a movie I would so readily have seen again the next night.

True, Losey, by doing away with the proscenium arch and "opening up" the drama, loses the protection of operatic convention. True, Ruggero Raimondi lacks charm and elegance as the Don. The subtitles remind one of the old English-language librettos in which each phrase was clawed from the original—"do not tempt the constancy of my sensitive heart," and "perfidious," which comes up at least once every five minutes. With all the expense, why did Losey not seek out someone—Richard Wilbur, for example—whose English could do justice to Mozart? Answer: The subtitlist is also named Losey.

Yet for all this I enjoyed the movie. The convention point is surely overdone. Why does it strain credulity more when people sing Mozart in a Palladian villa than when Gene Kelly sings and dances in the rain? And the singing in *Don Giovanni* is exquisite throughout. So is Gerry Fisher's cinematography—the Don killing the commendatore in a shadowed courtyard, or the three maskers going through the marshes in a boat at twilight. Losey deserves credit for not simply filming an opera, as Bergman did so well in *The Magic Flute*, but trying instead to convert opera into film. I agree with Lorin Maazel, who conducted: "Anyone who watches this film without fighting everything he sees—Why the cauldron? Why the gondolas?—will have an extraordinary experience."

—Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.