

# THEATER

Stanley Kauffmann

## New Wave in Old Britain

**C**loud 9 is the first play by the English writer Caryl Churchill to be produced in the U.S., and flawed though it is, it adds to our understanding of why some current British playwrights, a lot of them under 45, are among the most important in the world today. Their importance is not just for their work but for the confidence they restore in the act and art of playwriting, a confidence that not many American playwrights inspire.

Anger has prevailed in most good British playwriting since the phrase Angry Young Man was launched in 1956, but these latter-day writers are not knotted up in bilious personal frustrations, like John Osborne; they wrestle with the largest possible questions of society and politics and spirit. Very often these radical probings of subject matter are expressed in radically untraditional dramatic structure. Churchill's play is a strong example.

*Cloud 9* is in two acts, widely separated in time and place. Act One, set in an unspecified colony in Africa in 1880, deals with the British colonials: Daddy, who is the governor, Mummy, their nine-year-old son Edward, their two-year-old daughter Vicky, Mummy's mother, their nanny, their loyal black servant, and two other English people, a lone explorer and an attractive widow neighbor. The first act is Somerset Maugham savaged three ways. First, conventional pukka/Victorian attitudes are stretched to ludicrous extremes. In the opening, which is written in rhyme, Daddy says: "I am a father to the natives here/And father to my family so dear." Mummy says: "I am a man's creation as you see/And what men want is what I want to be." The servant adds: "What white men want is what I want to be."

These domestic-political attitudes are laid out in a kind of music-hall presentation, with some music. Then—the second attack—these attitudes are stripped to the truths under them in a style that's like a series of sketches. We see that: Daddy is bedding the widow; Mummy is chasing the loner; the loner has already had little Edward who loved it and wants more, but meanwhile the loner is meeting the black servant in the barn; the nanny lusts for Mummy but is forced by Daddy into marriage with the loner in order to coat two problems with respectability. Meanwhile, a native uprising is squashed bloodily offstage, and the act ends with

### Act One is Somerset Maugham savaged in the style of Jean Genet.

the servant raising a gun to shoot Daddy in the back. Little Edward, who loathes Daddy, sees the gun raised and says nothing; he merely covers his ears with his hands.

The third attack is in the casting. Mummy is played by a man, the black servant by a white man blacked up, the boy by a young woman, the little girl by a dummy, the nanny and the widow by one woman. This technique, reminiscent of Jean Genet, further barbecues the platitudes and fakeries by blatantly impersonating the characters rather than acting them seriously.

A bit of condensation would have helped Act One; we fairly soon get the idea that petticoats are being overflounced so that the satire will be sharper when they are flipped up. But

Act One is retrospectively reinforced by Act Two, set in London 1980. A number of places are called for in the published script; Lawrence Miller's unit setting—a few rows of park benches on a raked stage—encompasses them all imaginatively and makes a good seedy contrast to the vaudeville-drop feeling of Act One. Though Act Two is a century later, Churchill says that "for the characters it is only 25 years later." This device allows the calendar to jump ahead drastically while allowing characters *and* actors to connect with the past. For instance, Jeffrey Jones, who has been airily funny as Daddy in Act One urging his young Edward to be manly, now plays a 34-year-old Edward who is gay. Veronica Castang, one of the most satisfyingly versatile actresses in our theater, who was Daddy's prim and frustrated mother-in-law, is now a young London lesbian divorcée.

Act Two begins with a monologue by another gay (played by Zeljko Ivanek, who was Mummy in Act One), in which he details a homosexual pickup and act in a train compartment during a six-minute trip. What's especially significant about the monologue is its tone, its assumption of our understanding, as if he were telling us about finishing the *Times* crossword in six minutes. This gay, like every other character in Act Two, is acted, not cartooned. Everything has moved closer to reality.

The story winds through sexual weavings and unweavings of some modern Londoners, including Edward, his sister, her husband, the gay man, the gay woman. One particularly poignant monologue comes from Edward's mother, an elderly widow called Betty (which was Mummy's name in Act One), telling us how lovely she finds



In the off-Broadway production of *Cloud 9*, American actors prove they deserve better American playwrights: They give us small-stroke acting built on deep feeling. From left: Zeljko Ivanek, Veronica Castang, Nicholas Surovy, and E. Katherine Kerr.

solitary sex after a life of conjugal sexual numbness. One intrusive sequence brings in the ghost of the lesbian's brother, a British soldier just killed in Belfast, who tells us that what he chiefly misses is sex; his appearance seems engineered. And there a few relevant appearances by characters from Act One to do underscoring that is superfluous.

The two acts, each of which could almost stand alone, combine into a comedy-drama about the beginnings of escape from past cruelties into present quandaries. Men and women are at least attaining a sense of what liberation can be (says Churchill). Sexual freedoms grow, not only in practice but in acceptance; political oppressions have a harder time posing as unassailable truths. And all this change leaves Britain where? (Not just Britain, or the play would not bite us as it does.) Is that what all the struggle and upheaval have been about, just so that people can screw whom they like more freely? Is liberation nothing but an emptiness to be

filled with uninhibited sexual activity?

Only in this society, Churchill hints in Act One and says candidly in Act Two. What's needed is a new society in which freedom is not a vacuum to be filled with gonad satisfaction.

This political base links Churchill with her playwriting "group," who otherwise vary widely in temperament and art. Some of the outstanding names, few of them well-known in this country, are Howard Brenton, David Hare, Edward Bond, Barrie Keeffe, and Bill Morrison. (Pam Gems is also a "member" but in my view a lesser one on the basis of *Piaf* and an earlier play seen here.) Besides their true talents, they share anger. Auden wrote of Yeats: "Mad Ireland hurt you into poetry," then went on to say that Ireland hasn't changed because "poetry makes nothing happen." Mad Britain has hurt these writers into drama, which they hope *will* make things happen—they are all in some degree Marxist—but in any event they have all written some good plays. It's no more necessary to be

Marxist to appreciate them than it is to be Catholic in order to value Bernanos and Mauriac. What is relevant is that these dramatists' rootedness in a culture, a culture that infuriates them, has moved them to levels of playwriting that almost no contemporary U.S. playwrights can approach. That's not an argument for Marxism; it's a truth about these particular talented Marxists.

In the current production at the off-Broadway Theatre de Lys, American actors show again that they deserve better American playwrights. Especially notable besides Jones and Castang are Concetta Tomei as the boy Edward and the grown Edward's sister, and E. Katherine Kerr as the nanny and the saucy widow in Act One, the middle-aged widow in Act Two. They give us small-stroke acting built on deep feeling. The director, Tommy Tune, has a fitting name for a dancer and a director of musicals, which is how he started; we're just going to have to get used to it as the name of a dextrous and sensitive director of plays. ■

Walter Terry

## Major "Minors"

**T**here is a tendency among balletomanes (and critics too) to assume that major new works will be produced and trend-settings made by the world's "super" ballet troupes. If America's two most famous companies, the New York City Ballet and the American Ballet Theatre, are performing side-by-side at Lincoln Center, is there any reason to go to Houston, Texas? If a comparatively small group of dancers comes to Broadway from Australia, should one attend its performances with the same degree of anticipation as for royal and national companies from London and Copenhagen, Moscow and Leningrad? The answer is a resounding "Yes!"

The 12-year-old **Houston Ballet** surprised and enchanted New York audiences when it made its debut there earlier this year at the Brooklyn Academy of Music on the distinguished *Ballet America* series. The hit was the full-length *Papillon*, a romantic fairytale comedy choreographed in 1979 by Ronald Hynd and based upon the 1860 ballet by Marie Taglioni (the supreme romantic ballerina of earlier decades) to music of Jacques Offenbach. Such was the smashing success of Houston's *Papillon* that Harvey Lichtenstein, director of the Brooklyn Academy of Music, has invited the Houston Ballet to play a solid week of *Papillon* at BAM next March. And following Brooklyn, the magical butterflies of this ballet are scheduled to fly to Paris when the Houston Ballet departs for a European tour.

Last June at their home theater, Jones Hall, the Houstonians topped their *Papillon* success with a new full-length ballet, *Peer Gynt*, with book by

Henrik Ibsen (who didn't know he was writing a ballet when he embarked upon his play more than a century ago) and music by another great Norwegian, Edvard Grieg. *Peer Gynt* is, obviously, far more substantial stuff than *Papillon*, as it traces the life of a charming ne'er-do-well, following him from lusty youth through near-madness, to retribution and forgiveness.

Choreography is by Ben Stevenson, artistic director of the Houston Ballet, who also prepared the book for the ballet. John Lanchbery, whose arranging credits include *Papillon*, Sir Frederick Ashton's *La Fille Mal*

**Houston? Sydney?  
Purveyors of high-grade  
ballet? You bet!**

*Gardée*, and the movie *The Turning Point*, has created the *Peer Gynt* score from Grieg's two suites composed as incidental music for the play and other pieces by the composer. The glorious sets by Peter Farmer—of woodland cottages, a wedding scene, an insane asylum, pyramids along the Nile, a storm at sea, and forest paths (and the costumes for both humans and trolls)—and the lighting by John B. Read are further pluses.

Stevenson, mirroring today's trend toward dramatic ballets, has done a seamless job of weaving the arts of the actor and the dancer together in *Peer Gynt*. There is a delicious duet for the boy Peer and his mother, Aase, as he teases her, exasperates her, and embraces her, promising her a crown

she knows she'll never own. A pas de deux with another man's bride whom Peer has abducted vibrates with testiness, outright anger, and harsh rejection. Wild sexuality characterizes his dance with a troll princess, and mature desire, his attempted seduction of Anitra. Tenderness suffuses his dancing with Solveig—from the romantic urgency of their youthful meetings to the sweet and soothing touches of old age.

*Peer Gynt* produces its moments of dark mystery in the Hall of the Mountain King (to the appropriate Grieg music!) and terror when Peer is presented with his monster, half-troll child by the king's daughter. At the wedding there is a fabulously acrobatic dance (split jumps, double air-turns, dizzying spins) by three lads on a banquet table, and there is a spine-tingling solo of physical virtuosity and emotional poignancy by a madwoman. As for Anitra and her Arab bodyguards, she gives us a pseudo-Oriental equivalent of, say, Princess Aurora's Rose Adagio in *The Sleeping Beauty*.

But most important of all is that the Houston Ballet's *Peer Gynt*, lavishly staged and superbly danced, represents a splendid example of the kind of ballet that prevailed at ballet's beginnings and that is returning in force today. In such ballets, the story is of prime concern—an aesthetic that contrasts sharply with Balanchine's complete dismissal of plot in favor of musically inspired abstract movement. *Peer Gynt* will be seen again in September when the Houston Ballet tours Texas, in October when the troupe travels along the West Coast and, if plans materialize, throughout Scandinavia in 1983.