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Letter from New York

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Notes & Comment

A Letter from New York: The Current Theatrical Season

Europe and Asia mingle with America in the current American theatrical season.

One of the interesting but short-lived plays was *The Daughter of Silence* by the Australian novelist, Morris West, whose earlier novel, *THE DEVIL'S ADVOCATE*, had been on the best-seller list in a previous season. Encouraged, doubtless, by the success of that earlier book, his publishers issued his new novel at the same time that it opened as a play on Broadway. This simultaneous publication in two media had the desired result of intensive publicity; but it also had the less fortunate effect of tending to confuse the issues. Some critics were inclined to praise the play because they liked the book, or to praise the book because they were impressed by the play.

Such an ambiguous situation drew a sharp protest from Father Harold Gardiner, S.J., literary editor of the Jesuit weekly, *America*. He felt that critics were thus unfairly put under pressure to praise the book. He himself found fault with the novel as being too "slick" and too much of a cliché. As things have turned out, *The Daughter of Silence* has had some success as a book, but no success at all as a play: which was a pity, because, despite the tedious induction and the too facile resolution, the sensational courtroom scene was worth watching. The acting, moreover, was excellent, particularly by Emlyn Williams (as Ascolini) and Fred-eric Tozere (as the prosecutor).

Another Australian on Broadway is Cyril Ritchard whose versatility is amazing. Born in Sydney, he began to sing in musical revues in Australia and New York, finally achieving recognition as an actor in London. Back in New York after a second sojourn

in Australia, he has become a director and singer at the Metropolitan Opera, and an actor and director on Broadway. He directed *The Barber of Seville*, *Tales of Hoffman* and *La Perichole* this season, as well as the current New York production of Shaw's *Misalliance*. In previous seasons he participated as director and actor in *The Pleasure of His Company* and others plays. The current play in which he appears in the title role is *Romulus*, advertised as "Gore Vidal's New Comedy", but which is really adapted from the work of the European play-wright, Friedrich Duerrenmatt. Vidal's adaptation had its premiere at New Haven on 16 December 1961 and opened in New York in January 1962. The drama toys with ideas without coming to grips with them, but some of the ideas thus tossed at the audience are quite interesting. Romulus in the play is the last of the Roman Emperors, who presides over the fall of the Roman Empire in his own fashion. He spends his imperial hours raising chickens and conferring consular rank on his best laying hens. It transpires as the play progresses, that he has deliberately sought to become emperor in order to destroy the empire which, to him, has become an evil thing. The invasion by the Goths, therefore, is a welcome event; but his rejoicing is sobered by the realization that the barbaric Goths have conceived a respect for the empire and an awe of the emperor's majesty.

Playing opposite Ritchard as the empress in this curious play is one of the theatre's most distinguished figures—Catherine Nesbitt, who appeared in her first play in London in 1910, joined Lady Gregory and the Abbey Theatre in Dublin, and has since been appearing in both London and New York. One of her best roles was that of Julia in T. S. Eliot's *The Cocktail Party*.

INDIA ON BROADWAY

If Australia is prominent on Broadway in an indirect way, India and the Middle East are more directly prominent: the Middle East through a dramatization (deplorable in some respects) of one aspect of the life of the legendary Lawrence of Arabia; India and Pakistan, through E. M. Forster's novel, *A Passage to India*, adapted to the stage by Santha Rama Rau, the Indian woman novelist. Both in London and in New York, the role of Dr. Aziz has been played by a hitherto unknown Pakistani actor whose performance in this play has earned his promotion to stardom. ("Also starring Zia Mohyeddin" is the Broadway formula for this situation.) Though well acted, the play will probably enjoy a short life on Broadway. Lack in the color of such imaginative projections of Asia as *The King and I*, this play also lacks the breath of Forster's novel. Who but Shakespeare can capture for the limited stage the tremendous proportions of a story whose horizons are unlimited?

BRITISH IMPORTATIONS

Many of the current plays on Broadway are imported from Europe. Some of these importations are merely trivial, like *A Shot In The Dark*, or *Write Me a Murder*. Others, like those of Bernard Shaw, are well known. Shaw is a current favorite. No less than five of his brain-children were playing in New York during the 1961-62 season: *Misalliance*, *Androcles and the Lion*, *The Dark Lady of the Sonnets*, the Old Vic's *Saint Joan*, and *Pygmalion* in the guise of *My Fair Lady*.

Of the British importations, four play are noteworthy: namely, *The Caretaker*, *The Aspern Papers*, *The Complaisant Lover*, and *A Man for All Seasons*.

The Caretaker is an unusual play with only three characters, all mentally abnormal in varying degrees. Written by Harold Pinter, the play is about a contemptible good-for-nothing tramp (Donald Pleasance) who is verminous, malodorous, waspish, selfish, devious, a braggart and a liar. He is given shelter in a cluttered room by a kindly man whose hospitality he repeatedly abuses until finally, goaded beyond endurance, his benefactor turns him out into the cold. The tramp, with all his contemptible sordiness, manages to elicit our sympathy. The point of the play seems to be that, stripped of every attractive quality, a man is still a man and, in his human needs, deserves pity and sympathy. In this sense, this play differs from the nihilistic plays which present life as a meaningless jumble and man as a valueless accident. The popularity of *The Caretaker* speaks highly of the New York audience. At the end of February the play, after 166 performances, moved to another theatre for a few more weeks.

The Aspern Papers has been hailed by the critics as "distinguished" and "urbane": which of course was to be expected of the collaboration that produced it. Based on a novel by Henry James and adapted to the stage by Michael Redgrave (who also played the principal role in London, where it enjoyed a run of ten months) it is staged by Margaret Webster. In the American production (which opened at New Haven on 13 January and in New York in mid-February 1962) Redgrave's part is taken by Maurice Evans. This has not helped the play. Maurice Evans is an accomplished Shakespearean actor whose rendition of Richard II is still remembered by many—including this writer. He should stick to Shakespeare. Cast in this play as the go-getting, unscrupulous, unfeeling, selfish American journalist, he gives the impression of a stately elephant trying to do the twist!

Redgrave himself was busy this season in another British play, Graham Greene's *The Complaisant Lover*, which opened at New Haven on 11 October 1961 and then moved to New York where it

closed after a few weeks. Its poor success on Broadway may have been due in large measure to the false billing that its American promoters had resorted to. Greene's play is an intellectual sort that should have appealed to an intellectual audience. Anxious, however, to draw a wider audience, its promoters in New York advertised it as "a sex comedy". Which of course it was, if by a "sex" play is meant any treatment of marriage and divorce. By this definition, *Hamlet* is a "sex play" and Jane Austen's novels "sexy". But this is a perversion of the term, and the ambiguous billing kept the prudent away while it attracted the wrong crowd for the wrong reason. The result: a short Broadway run.

What the promoters and critics missed (or perhaps ignored) was the significance of the title: *The Complaisant Lover*. "Lover" in this case has an unusual meaning. It does not apply to the conventional "lover" (i.e. the interloper), nor to the adulterous wife, but rather to the injured but patient husband, whose genuine love is mistaken for indifference. His regard for the sacredness of marriage makes it impossible for him to agree to a divorce—even for adultery. Michael Redgrave's acting of the scene where the trusting husband learns of his wife's infidelity was a memorable moment.

A MAN FOR ALL SEASONS

The most brilliant production on Broadway today is an English play with an English cast about an English Saint who served in his day as Lord Chancellor of England. Written by Robert Bolt, the play was an immediate success from the time it opened on Broadway in November 1961. Feature articles have been published about it in the magazines. One theatrical journal describes this play as "an extraordinarily stirring urgent drama about Sir Thomas More and Henry VIII, with a brilliant turn by England's Paul Scofield. It is, without quibble, the best play of the season."

Several aspects of this play are noteworthy. It is an intellectual play—yet it draws the crowds. It is an austere play, with no love appeal, no sentimentality, no histrionic pyrotechnics, and no spectacle. Only one set is used throughout, with a few stage properties brought in and out under the audience's eyes by a factotum who keeps talking to the audience as he does so.

This factotum is himself a notable feature of the play. He is "the common man", whose role changes with the scenes: servant, boatman, traitor, gaoler, executioner. He has all the petty vices of the common man, including venality and cowardice. He is, he claims, a very important person, for "the sixteenth century is the century of the common man—like all the centuries." He is, in effect,

a foil for St. Thomas More, who is a very uncommon man—A Man for All Seasons.

A good deal of the play's austerity comes from the fact that the role of More is deliberately underplayed. Paul Scofield, in a quiet, almost casual way, manages to convey an impression of massive integrity and sincerity. Someone has said, quite justly, that Scofield seems like a reincarnation of Thomas More.

Finally, the things which More suffers—poverty, humiliation, imprisonment, death—are things which are unpleasant at all times, but more so in the present age. There is nothing attractive about being poor or being put to death. The things, moreover, for which he endures these sufferings are the kind of values which one would have thought unpopular today: the sanctity of marriage, the impossibility of divorce, the necessity of a regime of law, integrity in office, the sacredness of conscience, the Primacy of the Pope. And yet—intellectual, austere, sophisticated, religious—the play draws crowds who applaud at the end in an unusual manner... many people stand to give the ovation. One man told me, "I did not expect to see anything like this on Broadway." Another said, "I was applauding Thomas More." Is the play popular merely because it is well written and well acted? Or is there a soul-hunger for some half-forgotten ideal, a secret longing for spiritual strength, to which the play is attuned?

AMERICAN PLAYS

Of the new American plays not imported from abroad, the most interesting is *Gideon*, a dramatization of the biblical narrative in the Book of Judges. Staged by Tyrone Guthrie, the play sparkles with the acting of two splendid actors, Frederic March as God, and the Canadian, Douglas Campbell, as Gideon. The author, Paddy Chayefsky, is a Jewish-American from the Bronx who is interested in Jewish theology and Jewish folklore. His first play on Broadway, *The Tenth Man*, had a New York synagogue for setting and the exorcism of the "dybbuk" as the central action. In *Gideon*, Chayefsky makes a brave attempt to reinterpret for the theatre the theological and sociological issues implicit in the biblical narrative. The attempt is dramatically interesting, although the theology is somewhat confused. On one point the stage presentation horders on the offensive: the love of God for man is presented in terms which strongly suggest a form of sexual aberration. It was probably this play which occasioned a widely publicized protest made in the New York Times by the drama critic, Howard Taubman against what he called the attempt to "smuggle" the theme of sexual perversion into plays which ostensibly are concerned with other themes.

Meanwhile, a light-hearted comedy about marriage and divorce continues to draw heavy patronage. It is called *Mary, Mary*, written by Jean Kerr, well known in her own right, and the wife of Walter Kerr, former professor of drama at the Catholic University of America and now the drama critic of *The Herald Tribune*, whose column is perhaps the best currently published on the theatre.

The best known of contemporary American playwrights is, of course, Tennessee Williams, whose new play—*The Night of the Iguana*—opened last December amid a loud and prolonged burst of publicity. The play has one potent attraction: the star is Bette Davis. Williams started his career as playwright with *The Glass Menagerie*, which seemed to hold out much promise of greater plays to come. That promise has not been fulfilled. His subsequent plays have been theatrically successful because they are dramatically alive: but they exhibit an obsessive preoccupation with violence and sexual perversion. Rape, castration, drug addiction, nymphomania, frigidity, homosexuality, cannibalism—these are among the themes explored in his dramas which are as popular (it seems) in Brazil as in the United States, and which are now being shown to millions through the films. Oddly enough the titles often contain a suggestion of springtime freshness quite alien to the matter of the plays themselves. When his *Sweet Bird of Youth* opened in New York in March, 1959, one critic (John Chapman) wrote of it as follows: "Tennessee Williams is a gifted, extraordinarily original, and dirty-minded dramatist who has been losing hope for the human race."

Another play which has been losing hope for the human race is one that on the surface seems to assert the positive and warm values of human existence. It is called *A Gift of Time*, by Garson Kanin, with two well-known stars in the cast: Henry Fonda and Olivia de Havilland. Based on Lael Tucker Wertebaker's book about the death of her husband, the play tries to dramatize the last days of a man who is dying of cancer. It is intractable matter for the stage, and even the best acting cannot save an essentially undramatic play. To watch a man die through two acts and ten scenes is painfully harrowing. And the end—death by suicide—is immoral. Seen in this light, the "gift of time" is an essentially barren gift; life is hopeless, and suffering meaningless.

JOB AND AESCHYLUS

Hebrew wisdom and Greek tragedy were represented on the New York stage by Aeschylus, Sophocles and the Book of Job.

Job was dramatized in a large Methodist church on Park Avenue. It consisted simply of dramatic and choral reading, very

much as the Passion is read in Catholic churches on Good Friday, but with three notable exceptions: first, the Book of Job was recited, not chanted; second, the reading was a stage presentation and not part of a liturgical service; and third, the great moments in the narrative were heightened by choral repetition, dramatic lighting, and organ accompaniment. Moments of doubt were portrayed by whispered repetition ("When a man dies, shall he live again?"), and moments of vision were emphasized by triumphant outbursts ("I know that my Redeemer liveth").

Greek tragedy was brought to New York during September and October 1961 by The Greek Tragedy Company of Athens, who presented the *Electra* of Sophocles and the *Choephoroi* and *Eumenides* of Aeschylus. The plays were in modern Greek, with English translation available through earphones. The critics were unanimous in their praise of the plays, and crowds filled the New York City Center for the performances.

OFF BROADWAY

In the theatrical world of New York, it is said that anything can happen "off Broadway". This "off-Broadway" region is divided in various ways. One division is qualitative: the eminently respectable, the less respectable, and the in-between. Another division is geographical: "in the Village" and outside. By "The Village" is meant Greenwich Village, which comprises (roughly) that part of Manhattan Island south of Fourteenth Street, north of Houston, and west of Broadway.

Among the typical productions in "The Village" are those of two theatre groups. One specializes in "The Theatre of the Absurd", which includes Beckett's *Endgame* in its repertory. The other calls itself "The Living Theatre", which includes Brecht's *In the Jungle of Cities* in its current productions. The growing interest in Brecht is illustrated by the success of a production by another company called *Brecht on Brecht*. It is not a play but an anthology of readings from his works. It was planned as an anniversary tribute to Brecht with only two performances. But the demand for tickets has been so great that the two days have lengthened into months.

A revival of Ibsen's *Ghosts*, also advertised for a limited performance, has been a great success and will probably be still playing through the spring and the summer. The acting is excellent, with Leueen McGrath as Mrs. Alving. The surroundings are "crummy": a rickety hall, with a rough stage in the center, is the humble setting of this distinguished production.

Other productions off-Broadway include revivals of Eugene O'Neill and Sean O'Casey, dramatizations of three short stories by Chekhov, two plays by William Saroyan, and three new plays by Thornton Wilder.

One play which attracted the critics' favorable notice was called *Who'll Save the Plowboy?* by a young and promising playwright. Considerably less promising is the product of an equally young brain, called *O Dad, Poor Dad, Mommy's Hung You Up in the Closet and I'm Feeling so Sad*. The title may be allowed to speak for itself.

THE MUSICALS

In a recent visit to New York, President Kennedy went to see a musical satire called *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*. The play itself seems to have succeeded. By mid-February, tickets were sold out until the following October. Meanwhile *Camelot* and *The Sound of Music* are in their second or third season. There are other musicals, some of them interesting, others of varying degrees of vulgarity. The best musicals of course are the operas, which are almost always sold out.

This season marks the closing of two veteran musical plays: *The Threepenny Opera* after ten years and *My Fair Lady* after seven. Litigation forced the *Lady* to end its seemingly perpetual engagement. The managers of the Mark Hellinger Theatre, where *My Fair Lady* had been playing, announced the opening of another musical in March (Richard Rodgers' *No Strings*). The *Lady's* producer, Herman Levin, protested this announcement, claiming that under the contract the play could not be evicted without a formal notice of eviction after two consecutive weeks in which the gross weekly receipts fell below \$26,000. The theater managers, for their part, claimed that the recent attempts to attract an audience by offering two tickets for the price of one ("two-fers" in Broadway vocabulary) were a violation of the contract. The courts decided in favor of the managers, ordering the play to vacate the theatre at the end of February. The Mark Hellinger's victory was pyrrhic. It succeeded in evicting the *Lady*, but its proposed new occupant had in the meantime found another theatre, leaving the Hellinger untenanted. The last performance at the Hellinger was marked by a little ceremony, quite affecting to all, especially the ushers who had lived with the play for seven years. Thus, after 311 weeks and 2,474 performances, *My Fair Lady* went to another theatre for a twelve-week engagement. The filming rights to the play had previously been sold for some six million dollars.

SHAKESPEARE, USA

But with all this theatrical variety, Shakespeare remains America's favorite playwright. The proof of this is the number of Shakespearean productions and the large crowds that attend them. Among the major theatrical events are the great Shakespeare Festivals held in Connecticut and New York every summer, and the yearly visit of the "Old Vic" of London. Among the minor productions are those of the university theatres and of the New York playhouses "off Broadway". But Shakespeare is a large subject and best left for another occasion.

MIGUEL A. BERNAD

Zóbel at the Tate

The point is of course in some ways fatuous, but the embarrassing thing about Fernando Zóbel is that he is a painter with an ambiguous artistic "nationality". Not that national boundaries have ever really stood for much in the world of art, nor that one cannot in view of this say, "For 'embarrassing', read 'disturbing', or 'interesting'". Zóbel is in fact interesting, sometimes disturbing, and—as was well demonstrated in the recent (January-February) exhibit of Modern Spanish Painting at the Tate Gallery in London—able to create a curious ambivalence between being internationally understood and retaining "national" characteristics.

"National" is kept between inverted commas because it is one thing to make the above observations of Zóbel's art when Zóbel's paintings are viewed in isolation, and quite another when they are seen in the context of a collection specifically identified as Spanish.¹ I felt that the three Zóbel frames—which I personally liked very much—were, in the particular setting, a trifle anachronistic (perhaps the word should really be "dislocated" but I do not think it necessary to decide whether the heterogeneity is a matter of time or space). This, needless to say, is not derogation: the point is that there is an undeniable difference

¹ Even if Zóbel has been exhibited as a representative Philippine artist in the QANTAS-sponsored group-show that toured the international capitals from London to Canberra last year, he has, as a Spanish citizen, every right to seek a place alongside Saura, Tapies, Cuixart, and Tharrats. Any quarrel about the nationality of his art on the score of his citizenship would be as pointless and tiresome as a dispute about whether James Whistler were British or American.