
THEATRE

Abide With Me. . . .

By Nigel Dennis

THEY COME pouring out of the past—those juicy, gruesome, and despondent messages: “Call no man happy till he dies. . . .”; “We’ll no more to the woods, the laurel trees are cut”; “What profit hath a man of all his labour. . . .?”; “As the crackling of thorns under a pot”; “A continual dropping in a very rainy day. . . .”; “All our righteousnesses are as filthy rags; and we all do fade as a leaf.” To these well-deserved excitements of human desperation are added, often, their authors’ immense satisfaction at the gross hopelessness of it all: the sound of the grinding is low, and lower still are fallen the daughters of musick—yet their authors are by far the lowest of the lot, continually dropping in the rainy day and divided on only one question—whether to call on the Lord for help or urge Him to let loose His firebolts and whirlwinds as quickly as possible. Let it be said frankly that the latter course was always the more honest and congenial: it was far more in tune with the baffled indignation and misanthropy that had led up to it, and there can be no doubt that if all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags they should be hygienically incinerated—smoked out, utterly destroyed, consumed, laid waste, trodden, made as dust and ashes, and other similar expungencies.

The ancients who looked for extinction with such voracity had, of course, only the Lord of Hosts to call on in the matter: when He remained supine and dilatory the human race just staggered on in their filthy rags, breeding successive generations of vipers. It can be seen that as century upon century passed with the world still showing no sign of being consumed, disappointment in the Lord’s powers increased to a point where people ceased to believe in Him at all. From time to time small groups of the elect climbed mountains hopefully and waited for the flood-waters to consume the valleys: this inverted optimism is still practised by people who have not yet come to terms with scientific progress. But those of us who have, distrust absolutely the superstition of a punitive

deity and wait confidently for science to succeed where He, after millenniums of heartfelt invitation and boundless opportunity, failed entirely to make a final dent. The world is still too much with us, but we shall soon enjoy a long-postponed revenge.

This point of view has always had its critics. There have always been authors who have thought that the call for human extinction was unjustified and even escapist. These authors have drawn our attention repeatedly to the extreme pleasure that may be obtained from remaining alive: there is love and courage mixed in with the filthy rags, they say; there is the way of a man with a maid; while every spring brings daffodils, every death a hope of Eternal Life (God forbid!) to come. What’s more, in recent years, when the promise of extinction at last shows signs of being fulfilled, those critics have shown an indignation that is exactly proportionate to the danger. The closer we come to annihilation, the more these people feel that every author should make it his duty to be immensely encouraging about what is going to happen. In respect to the theatre, for example, they have no objection to the dramatist spending two and a half acts digging and filling a deep grave, but they are extremely angry if the curtain falls without a daffodil rising slowly from the completed mound. To be fair to these people, they do not demand a King Alfred of daffodils—any weird little thing of greenery and petals will do, so long as it indicates the opposite of what has led up to it. This pale flower is called “a note of hope” and the author who fails to provide it is a blackleg indeed.

This was not always the case. The pronounced hopelessness of the human situation was essential to the best tragedy—or, as the stage-direction put it, “*Exeunt, with a dead march.*” The lesson taught by the great tragedians was never “What next?”; it was always “Too late!” Thus, Fortinbras thought that Hamlet would have made a good king, but

he expressed no hope in the matter until Hamlet was a corpse—and even at that juncture expressed it only in order to intensify rather than reduce the painful sufferings of the audience. The good Albany, hearing the dying Lear cry “Never, never, never, never!” showed no indignation: he not only confirmed the multiple negative but showed its entire necessity:

*The weight of this sad time we must obey;
Speak what we feel, not what we ought to
say. . . .*

Nor did this note of doom disappear when men became entirely rational. “The child is not dead, but sleepeth!” cries the dreamer when little Hedvig, that early victim of rational integrity, breathes her last; the retort: “Rubbish!” follows immediately. Similarly, there may be those whose response to the axe-blows in *The Cherry Orchard* is one of elation at the thought of what vivid bungalows may now replace Nature’s fruity efforts; yet the axe is used simply because the rest is silence.

One thing, of course, is pleasing about the demand for a note of hope nowadays. It shows that the brotherhood of man is more extensive than was suspected—that the social realist, far from being a grim, rebellious intellectual in glasses, is just as wet as the kindly aunt who totters weekly to Boots saying: “I want a novel with a happy end, please!” This alliance is a touching one and reflects credit on our national homogeneity; but we may still object that there is something thoughtless and shallow about the man who, scorning drawing-room comedy and hungry for the raw meat of truth, rejects any reality that is too indicative of the world in which he lives. The catharsis of tragedy is not supplied by hope: it is, on the contrary, the extreme of hopelessness in tragedy that is pleasing and satisfying, answering as it does to emotions that we feel very passionately ourselves. When we have indulged them to the full, as part of our ration, we can go to the theatre next door and watch the tumblers and clowns turning these same miseries into farce: hope, if we have any, does not come to us out of the blackness of tragedy but out of the stature of the tragic and the spirited quality of the comedic. Hope, intruded deliberately and explicitly, is apt to seem what indeed it is—an apology to the effete thrown in as an afterthought, or a mere gesture of good nature which frees the tragedian from his grim mission and invites his audience to grant him sympathetic absolution for having expressed his hopelessness so clearly.

TWO WEST END revivals can help us to evaluate the current position of hope. The first is Mr. R. C. Sherriff’s *The Long Sunset*, a

most amiable play in which Roman landowners, long settled in Britain, see the last of their protecting legions return to Rome and must adjust themselves to the prospect of annihilation by invading barbarians. What, in truth, such Romans did in 5th-century Britain, nobody knows; but Mr. Sherriff, whose play conceals considerable scholarship, assumes that these fading Romans were not unlike certain counterparts in Gaul—Roman aristocrats turned gentleman-farmers and prepared to make a deal with one gang of barbarians in order to keep out worse gangs. The Romans of Gaul teamed up with the Goths to keep out the Vandals; Mr. Sherriff’s British Romans team up with the Cornish barbarian, Arthur, to keep out the Saxons. And so, there we see our Roman selves, our togas properly adapted to the British climate, shyly parleying on the stage with the rough, red-bearded hero. We have culture but are helpless; Arthur has no culture but has Excalibur hanging from his belt. Moreover, on a small altar, a small candle burns before a small crucifix.

Mr. Sherriff, it will be seen, has moved with the times. When the last curtain fell in *Journey’s End*, everything fell with it; when the last curtain falls in *The Long Sunset*, everything is due to rise again. For this reason, we enjoy his play—and find its hopefulness completely hopeless. What is Shalott to us but Guildford—and what is Guildford worth? What are swords and red beards to us; what are small candles of faith? Most hopeless of all is the fact that we are being referred back to our national infancy, cradle of days to come when we would be strong, lusty, and successful. The contrast between Arthur’s success-story and our own is so striking that far from inspiring us with daffodils, it fills us with sour grapes. *The Long Sunset* is one of those plays that will be revived, one predicts, again and again. One is sorry to feel that one will not be there to see it.

THE RECENT REVIVAL of *Heartbreak House* was welcomed very warmly because the play, apart from its other virtues, ends almost simultaneously in a rain of bombs and a note of hope, the possibility of the latter, apparently, doing much to excuse the probability of the former, and the conjunction of the two suiting exactly the contemporary taste for impure combinations. Everybody knows that *Heartbreak House* was Shaw’s “Fantasia in the Russian Manner on English Themes”; what is perhaps not quite so obvious is Shaw’s clear determination to obliterate absolutely Chekhov’s ghastly delicacies of tragi-comedy. The joys of *Heartbreak House* are the joys of infamous parody and absurd mimicry, and the most engaging thing about it

is not the author's exposure of his decadent characters but his extraordinary affection for them. There is no moment in the play when we imagine for an instant that these creatures are in any way responsible for the bombs that are to fall upon them—"one might as well try to explain the Crimean War by the failings of the Pickwick Club," says the American critic, William Irvine. The fiddling that is going on while Rome is burning is being done entirely by the author: the "Fantasia" is a music of his own wits, and the arrival of the bombs serves only to bring to an end a conversation that has produced as many inconclusive suggestions as the author can invent. There was no need to provide a note of hope in a play as friendly and forgiving as this; the good nature of all the characters expresses a cheerful optimism that could hardly be carried further without becoming naif. Yet Shaw inserted two such notes. The first comes when Captain Shotover indicates that he knows the answer to our troubles; begged to provide it, he says, "Learn—*navigation!*" The second comes in the dark of the final curtain, with a flute playing bravely "Keep the home fires burning." What possible sustenance can be drawn from such irrelevancies? What is navigation—assuming it is not the brilliant seamanship that has kept Boss Mangan afloat? And where sweet singers from Homer to Newman have failed to improve our prospects, can we trust to Ivor Novello?

"Lead kindly light, amid the encircling gloom"—it is all very well, but the social realist should not oblige his dramatists to head torch-light processions of rationalists, nor to emit at the end of plays muted injunctions to nautical symbolism. The very essence of tragedy is doom

and downfall, and we are surely not so childish as to believe that if we conclude our plays on a note of hope, we shall better our chances of survival outside the auditorium? Or is it simply that since we have become rationalists we find it superstitious to believe in doom and logical to believe in hope? Certainly, another recent revival, that of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, showed that most of the critics were too infirm and secentary to march the long distance that separated them from classical tragedy. They were at pains to point out how very different the times were to-day—how little we believed in omens and curses, what progress our minds and institutions had made in the last few thousand years, and how well-equipped we were to master the providential problems that had worried Aeschylus. Domesticated realists to a man, they showed that though their power of fantasy could rise easily to simple, immediate catastrophes, such as train accidents and burst pipes, any fate that was ancient, stylised, impersonal, and inescapable put too much strain on the homely imagination.

The reason for this rejection of tragedy is simply that we take pride in feeling things prosaically and like our drama to be a mixture of the mundane and the mawkish. We allow hope to slip in as a highlight—which is why so many of our plays read like the hoarding which Gissing took note of in *In the Year of Jubilee*:

"Somebody's 'Blue'; somebody's 'Soap'; somebody's 'High-class Jams'; and behold, inserted between the Soap and the Jam—'God so loved the world, that He gave his only-begotten Son, that whoso believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.'"

R. S. Thomas

The Visitors

Three angels came to me—
But what did they say?
I have neither the time
Nor the skill to tell you.
For if I began now
And covered many pages,
The long silence would come
Before you had learned half
Of what the first angel said,
Bending over me like a tree,
Leafy hand on my shoulder,

Whisper, as of the buds' swarm,
Teasing the strict ear.

And that was only the white angel;
There were still the two dark ones,
Invisible now, who spoke slowly,
Patient of the hand's translation,
If the fingers were not busy
With their unending report
Of what the first angel said
Between the hiving of the buds
And the mind's tasteless honey.