

The Half-World Of American Drama

MARYA MANNES

IN A SEASON distinguished largely by British imports, three of the four plays written by America's most talented playwrights have been failures, two disastrously so. Only one brought the stage to brilliant life, and it is not news that this was Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, that it marked the subtle but significant shift from off-Broadway to Broadway, and that it is the study of a man and wife who need each other to destroy each other. For three hours—in the same room and with only one other couple as foil and victim—the air at the Billy Rose Theatre quivers and crackles with a tension that catches the breath and batters the emotions as a college professor and his drunken wife play games of mortal combat.

Young Albee's earlier plays, notably *The Zoo Story* and *The American Dream*, gave ample notice of his particular talents: a sharp perception of human diversity, a strong sense of emotional focus, an uncanny power of dialogue that can range, as it does in *Who's Afraid*, from savage humor to terrible sadness. There is nothing sloppy or vague about Albee; his aim devastates.

Yet his short or earlier works could not, by their very nature, give evidence of the staying power a long play demands, or of the constant shifts in rhythm, mood, and object without which a marathon of talk cannot hold an audience. And although Uta Hagen and Arthur Hill give magnificent performances as the tortured and torturing pair, a reading of Albee's script shows that life leaps just as violently out of the printed words as it does from their mouths and motions. The hellish sauna—scalding, freezing, scourging—is all there.

What is also there is a certain vision of the human condition which Albee shares with his established elders, Tennessee Williams, William Inge, Lillian Hellman, and, for that

matter, with his contemporary Arthur Kopit, author of last year's long-running *Oh Dad, Poor Dad, etc.* It is a vision in which contempt for woman is only slightly greater than contempt for man, in which one destroys the other, and in which their common frustrations preclude either hope or heroism.

It is essential to the subject of *Who's Afraid* that a man like George and a woman like Martha be locked in hopelessness, for they both share the cause and burden of his impotence and her despair. What might otherwise be an overpreoccupation with this sexual core is given broader range by Albee's compassionate intuition into the complexities of marital interdependence. And those who find the play sordid or revolting miss precisely this point: somewhere in all this carnage there is love. Or if not love, then its close cousin, need.

It could be said of Lillian Hellman's recent short-lived savagery, *My Mother, My Father and Me*, that satire and love are by nature incompatible, and certainly her often funny and always brutal scatter shots at what she understandably hates in our society left little room for compassion. Of all the despicable people on the stage, from son-eating mother to phony-liberal, gutless son, only the grandmother had human vestment, and I credit the radiance of Lili Darvas with making this single apparition of gentle wisdom believable and even touching.

BUT "love" in the other plays never transcends sexuality; again, a diminution of the relationship between man and woman that betrays a special distortion of the nature of both. In *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Any More*, Williams's protagonist, Flora Goforth, was a vulgar and boring old bag, his young man Chris a pallid symbol of nothing, and the other characters who

intermittently occupied the terraces of an Italian villa on the Divina Costiera were either promising sketches, like Flora's handsome young secretary, or literary shadows. In a foreword, Williams hoped that we would find it possible to pity this "dying female clown, even while her absurd pretensions and her panicky last effort to hide from her final destruction make you laugh at her." But Flora is neither pitiable nor—though she triggers off snickers—laughable. She is just one more of those vehicles of an often subtly disguised contempt which have been proffered as women, for some time now, in the American theatre. Only a "pure," asexual woman, like Hannah in *Night of the Iguana*, is given stature and worth. The rest, driven by trivial or insatiable lusts, are—like Flora—grotesque.

There were those critics who felt that *Milk Train* was a clear parable and that Chris—godlike young poet-messenger of death—was Christ. If this is so, Mr. Williams's conception of the Saviour is scarcely exalted. I found the young visitor in *Milk Train* no more than a body beautiful, with neither seed nor sense. The sad thing about this play by our most talented playwright is, in fact, the almost total absence of ideas. There were, inevitably, flashes of Williams's theatrical brilliance, of his playful and penetrating invention and fluid talk, but no intellectual content to give them support and direction. Over it all, moreover, was a sort of film of obscenity which Flora Goforth spread not only on the gamy memoirs she dictated throughout the play but which also covered everything about her with the iridescent sheen of decay, a patina that in Williams's gifted hand has often managed to pass for beauty. Blood is drawn in *Who's Afraid* because blood was there. Williams's characters may cut each other, but they cannot bleed.

There was blood galore in *Natural Affection*: bad blood, running or clotted, between a man and woman chained in lust, between the woman's delinquent son and her lover, between a middle-aged latent homosexual and the nitwit child-wife who loathes him, between nearly everything that took place and natural affection. The stage squirmed like a

heat mirage with hate and hopelessness, and it was a measure of Inge's remaining theatrical skill and ear for talk that the first act compelled you to listen and even to feel. It was also a tribute to Kim Stanley as Sue Barber, a fleshy lingerie buyer, that she could emerge from repeated clinches on a tumbled bed with a shabby stud as a woman to pity. Her success (as a buyer) and his failure (as a bartender, now Cadillac dealer); his success (as a lover) and her failure (as a mother): these seesaws rocked them savagely back and forth and into each other's arms. It was not, nor was it meant to be, edifying; neither was the twisted, ugly, love-starved boy Sue Barker bore and exiled till too late.

But what tolerance and involvement existed vanished during the course of the second half of the play: an exhibition of unchecked sensationalism almost more absurd than disgusting. Yet the erosion of a gifted playwright is neither absurd nor disgusting, only pitiable. In *Natural Affection* Inge seems to have sloughed off all restraint and splattered the stage with the entrails of his own demons. A screen should be set between such private torments and the public appetite. That it was not suggests an exploitation of the patient in the doubtful name of drama.

IF THERE IS, as I suspect, a common bond between these very different plays—the one success, the three failures—what is it? Again, I believe one of its elements is a preoccupation with violent sexual drives to the virtual exclusion of other forms of love between man and woman. In denying to a large degree that these other forms have importance, woman is made alternately devourer and devoured, a Venus fly-catcher (wholly explicit in Kopit's *Oh Dad, Poor Dad*) that traps, and is trapped with, her prey. Albee gives his Martha spirit and intelligence, but bludgeons both with drink. Williams gives his Flora spirit (she will not bow to her own death until her last great terror) but no mind, stripping her finally to her naked, sick, and corrupted body, Inge leaves his Sue in the end with nothing but sexual need.

Each of these playwrights seems to display a special affinity with, and knowledge of, the vulnerabilities of

women. Their female characters almost always seem more real, more accurate than their males. But this is an artful deception, because there are no complete people in any of these plays. They are half men, half women, creatures of a very special, very enclosed world that in small details can uncannily resemble the real one. For these writers—all of them—have an equally uncanny ear for the true sound and cadence of speech. Flora Goforth talks like an old café-society hag with a fifty-year leech, Sue Barker's speech belongs to a lingerie buyer in a big Midwestern store, Martha's is the dialect of a destroyed intelligence. The acquisitive accents of Lillian Hellman's monstrous Jewish wife ring in every Fifth Avenue bus. Bernie Slovenk, Inge's car salesman-lover, does indeed conjure up a slick salesroom, and Albee's George—in syntax at least—could be found in any small liberal-arts faculty. In such delineations, these American playwrights borrow the unsparing eye and ear of the professional gossip, from whom nothing—in no crevice or disguise—escapes exposure. They are maliciously accurate, unerringly specific. They know how to get under the skin.

These skills are great assets to the theatre. On the debit side, I would say, was a self-indulgence in which their talents, given too much license, run away with their craft. In *Milk Train*, the idea of a woman like Flora Goforth dictating her vulgar chronicle into microphones stuck in every room of the villa so that her flow (and her secretary's shorthand) need never be suspended is fresh and funny. But it is not fresh and funny for two and a half hours, whatever the brassy versatility of an actress like Hermione Baddeley. It is a gimmick that trails into trivia. Williams has, moreover, not stopped himself from rummaging into the old trunk of costumes that clothed so many previous and reminiscent characters, whether lusting beldame or questioning youth.

Of Inge's indulgence, let it only be said that the broth was black enough without drunkenness, indecent exposure, attempted rape, murder, and necrophilia. There was plenty to work on without these.

The particular indulgence of Lillian Hellman in her late last play

was in her proliferation of targets. In one short evening (and with far too large a cast) she turned her guns on Jews, Negroes, white liberals, psychiatrists, beatniks, nursing homes, folk singers, and, of course, mother-loves-son and wife-loathes-husband, an amply reciprocal condition. You can't show that Everything's No Damn Good and come up with anything good. What is more, the disciplines of craft that have so distinguished her previous work—the spareness and structural clarity of plays like *The Little Foxes* and *The Children's Hour*—were totally absent here: the play was all over the place.

Of all these playwrights—in their recent manifestations at least—Albee is the most disciplined. Although his dialogue in *Who's Afraid* is torrential, it defies editing: every word, every repetition counts. The bombardment of hate is part of the game, the excess not excessive. He has kept within the nature of his intent almost to the end. I say almost because I felt the only false note of the play to be the final exorcism of Martha: a device which is as theatrical as it is painful, but which for the first time during the hypnotic tension engendered makes the listener conscious of the stage. In this, I believe, Albee has indulged himself.

TAKEN as a whole, the American contribution to theatre this season, success or failure, could indicate a point of no return for a certain view of life and a certain way of playwrighting that has dominated our stage to the detriment, I believe, of its development as a potent form of communication and illumination. For these plays give us a half-world in which the men and women are, in a sense, interchangeable, in which, except for physical need, there is no basic reality to their relationship, and in which they are locked in the maximum-security prison of their one common sex, from which no escape is possible.

It is a world in which there is horror but little hope, ruin but no redemption, compulsion but no release, disease but no cure. By and large the human being is the victim, bereft of will; the acted upon but not the acting. There are then, inevitably, no heroes.

There are, moreover, few real

ideas or illuminations. After seeing this kind of play we know ourselves no better than we did, although I have been told that an astonishing number of couples see in Albee's Martha and George other couples if not themselves: American marriage is apparently more of a death struggle than one had thought. But except for Lillian Hellman's head-on attacks on the more blatant ignominies of our society, there has been no attempt in these plays to stir the deep layers of thought with bold and broad insights and observations. Our emotions have been harrowed but our minds unfertilized. It was a matter of considerable irony that, to me at least, the only time this season that drama came to grips with a major theme was when CBS-TV's *The Defenders* dealt superbly with the attempted expulsion of a respected schoolteacher on charges of unfitness solely because of the fact that he was an atheist.

There is, though, a smell of change in the wind. A fifth American playwright presented on Broadway this season, Jack Richardson, hinted of it in a palpable flop called *Lorenzo*. Like Albee, Richardson has given off-Broadway evidence of a strong talent in *The Prodigal*, a highly distinguished play based on the Orestes legend. He has ideas, he writes with style and eloquence, he is erudite, poetic, and wryly witty. And if the disciplines which gave *The Prodigal* such welcome spareness and containment faltered fatally in *Lorenzo*, he shows firm and serious commitments to humanity. The fact that he aims high and addresses the intelligence rather than the viscera gives him a long-term strength that should make this short-term failure an asset rather than a setback. Richardson is surely too perceptive not to realize that *Lorenzo* did not work as theatre. If he has found out why, his next play should be worth waiting for.

So, indeed, should Edward Albee's. A talent as strong as his can afford the pursuit of larger, more universal themes. For they are what our theatre needs, even if producers, long and understandably beguiled by the box-office benefits of sex, sadism, and sickness, shy away from them. The audiences, I predict, will not.

BOOKS



The Blight

DANIEL PATRICK MOYNIHAN

THE GREAT HUNGER, by Cecil Woodham-Smith. Harper & Row. \$6.95.

This is a history that was to be seen coming. A decade ago Mrs. Woodham-Smith published *The Reason Why*, her stunning account of the charge of the Light Brigade, tracing that astounding slaughter back through the invincibly complacent careers of the great earls and lords responsible, and there she came upon the Irish famine. Even as events loomed in the Crimea, she lingered in Connaught recounting with horror and fascination events it is still all but impossible to accept.

Mrs. Woodham-Smith is a Fitzgerald of the great Norman-Irish clan, *ipsis Hibernis Hiberniores*. Re-reading her earlier book, one feels the author seized by that awful moment in history, and unable to move on until she found release in the thought that the suffering of the Irish was in time avenged. George Charles Bingham, third Earl of Lucan, suzerain of Castlebar in Mayo, "the Great Exterminator," did not, as he put it, "intend to breed paupers to pay priests." He simply tore down their huts and drove away those forty thousand-odd of his starving tenants who had not already been eaten by rats, and he defended himself in the House of Lords for doing so, even as he was later to insist on the correctness of his actions at Balaclava. "From the

bottom of his heart," Mrs. Woodham-Smith wrote, "he despised them, swarming . . . ignorant, shiftless, and Roman Catholics into the bargain. It is doubtful if he considered the Irish as human beings at all." But, she averred, the matter was not ended there, even if the landlords did not know it. Her chapter in that earlier book concludes:

"As the 'coffin ships' made their slow voyage across the Atlantic . . . they bore with them a cargo of hatred. In that new world which had been called into being to redress the balance of the old there was to grow up a population among whom animosity to England was a creed, whose burning resentment could never be appeased, who, possessing the long memory of Ireland, could never forget. The Irish famine was to be paid for by England at a terrible price; out of it was born Irish America."

MRS. WOODHAM-SMITH now returns to Ireland in the year 1845, then, "as it had been for nearly seven hundred years, a source of grave anxiety to England." After seven centuries of repeated conquest and unrelenting oppression, "an Irish nation still existed, separate, numerous and hostile." In fact, incredibly numerous. Until about the time of the American Revolution the population of Ireland had been inconsiderable—it had dropped to