

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

WHY THE TIMIDITY?

THE ANSWER to the question in the title of Bruce Catton's article, "Is America Hospitable to Writers?" (SR Sept. 7) seems to be no. The author in his revelations pictures conditions exceedingly difficult for a writer today. Why, then, does he conclude his essay by the assertion that "the American writer today operates in a fairly hospitable environment?" Why the happy ending? Why the timidity? Why does Mr. Catton feel it necessary to be gentle with the age we live in?

THOMAS H. UZZELL.

Stillwater, Okla.

MR. FAITH McNULTY

I HAVE JUST read Sam Boal's captivating review of "The World of John McNulty" (SR Sept. 14) and am reminded of an experience I had with McNulty a few years ago when, as managing editor of the *Ford Times*, I was in New York visiting author's agents in the hope of finding a writer who could do us a short piece on South County, Rhode Island, in a hurry.

In the office of Harold Ober Associates, Anne Louise Davis suggested Faith McNulty, who is John McNulty's wife (now his widow). Miss Davis suggested that I telephone Mrs. McNulty at five that afternoon, when she would return to her home after her day at *The New Yorker* office. This I did, and a man with a fine, unmistakably Irish voice answered the phone.

"May I speak with Mrs. McNulty, please?" I asked.

"This is Mrs. McNulty."

"I want to speak to Faith McNulty," I said.

"This is Faith McNulty," said the man. "I hear you want a piece for the *Ford Times* on Rhode Island. Is that right?"

"Yes."

"Is it true that you will pay \$250?"

"Yes, I would like to ask Faith McNulty if she will do the story for us."

"This is Faith McNulty, and I have just written the piece. Do you want it?"

"I don't know. I haven't read it."

"I'll read it to you over the phone."

"No. Send it to me."

"Do you want the piece, or don't you want the piece?"

"I have an idea I do, Mrs. McNulty," I said. "But if you read it over the phone, I will be buying a voice, not a manuscript."

"Very well. I shall now read the piece."

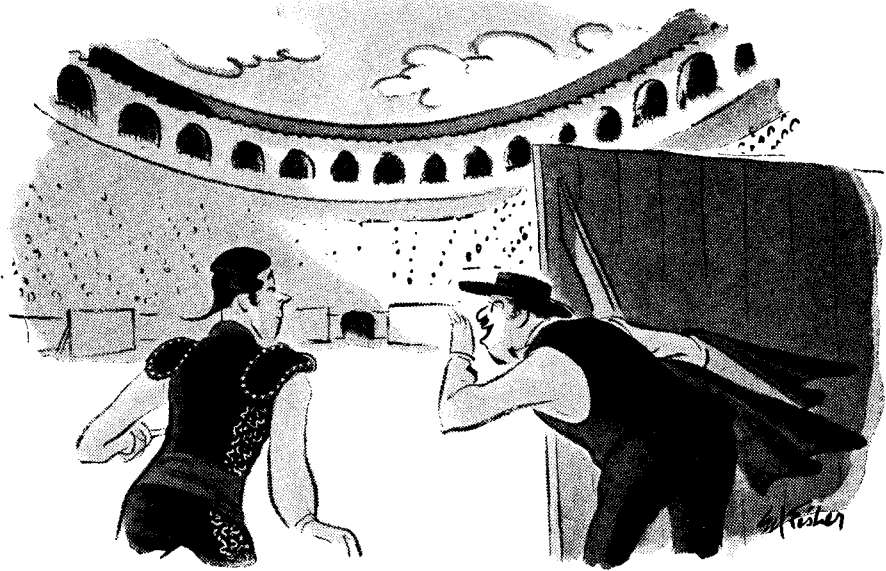
There was then the sound of "Mrs. McNulty" shooing children away from the phone at the McNulty end, and then the voice reading the Rhode Island story. At the conclusion of the reading, "Faith McNulty" said:

"Well, how did you like it?"

"It sounds swell. But I don't know how it will read."

"Do you want it, or don't you?"

"Yes. I want it, Mrs. McNulty."



"Psst!—Pepe—everything's been fixed—the bull's on' tranquilizers."

"For \$250?"

"Yes. To whom shall I have the check drawn?"

"John McNulty. And I'd like to get it soon. I have been playing the horses."

"Mrs. McNulty," I said, "from now on, why don't you bet on editors instead of horses?"

"Horses," said the impersonator of his wife, "are more reliable."

I never met John McNulty, except through this phone call. The Rhode Island piece was duly published, and I can still hear the voice of its author. I have always regretted that I had to decline his invitation to "come on over here and have a drink."

EDMUND WARE SMITH,
Managing Editor,
Ford Times.

Damariscotta, Me.

SR SELF-DEFEATING

Is *SR* (Sept. 14) justified in deploring the conditions (bad schools, low pay for teachers, conformity, "beat generation") which inspire nearly all of its copy? If these conditions did not exist, *SR* would have no more to offer than the book and record reviews. Were the choice of topics for this issue atypical, I would not complain, but every *SR* that I chance to read seems to contain the same remarks about the American scene. It is not the truth of these remarks that I question. I only wonder whether it is worthwhile to repeat them so often to your audience.

ELIHU RICHTER.

Paterson, N.J.

BARGAINING TEACHERS

THE FAILURE to pass the Federal Aid to Education bill is just another example of society's refusal to foot the just bill. Unlike doctors and lawyers, teachers do

not set their own salaries or working conditions. As professionals they are closer to the needs of professional musicians, actors, and engineers. And more and more teachers are feeling that advantages which head in the direction of making teaching more effective and attractive will have to be won over some kind of bargaining table.

ISRAEL KUGLER,
Vice President for the Colleges,
Local 2—New York Teachers Guild,
American Federation of Teachers,
AFL-CIO.

Long Island City, N. Y.

IMPOSSIBLE WAR

You MIGHT care to reprint this:

I hear that Sir Hiram Maxim is dead. That news recalls to mind my only personal impression of the man to whom we owe the deadliest of all deadly machines which are now destroying the populations of Europe.

It was more than thirty years ago and we stood around Maxim as he explained the mechanism of his gun and demonstrated its marvellous qualities. I still see the mild and childlike air, so often marking the man of genius, the modest yet self-satisfied smile, with which he deftly and affectionately manipulated his beautiful toy. As we looked on, one of us asked reflectively: "But will not this make war very terrible?" "No," replied Maxim confidently. "It will make war impossible."

So it is the dreamers, the children of genius, who for thousands of years have been whispering into the ears of Mankind that insidious delusion: *Si vis pacem para bellum*.
—HAVELOCK ELLIS, in "Impressions and Comments."

ROBERT ARMSTRONG ANDREWS.
Edisto Island, S. C.



The Cool Generation

West Side Story" is not so much a musical as a ballet-opera. It uses dance-acting and rhythm to such an extent that the words and singing seem almost incidental. In it choreographer-director Jerome Robbins establishes from the beginning a vocabulary of dance gesture and movement so that we soon tend to be unaware of the shifts from naturalness to stylization. And his talented cast of hard-working performers achieves some remarkably precise results with a portrayal of two teen-age gangs on New York's immigrant-jammed West Side.

The plot of the musical is inspired by "Romeo and Juliet." Romeo is Tony, a young man who has outgrown the adolescent gang he used to lead. Juliet is Maria, a lovely young Puerto Rican. Mercutio is Riff, the leader of Tony's old gang "The Jets," and Tybalt is Maria's brother, Bernardo, leader of the outfit called "The Sharks." Faced with the problem of wedding Italian legend and modern violence (the same task Arthur Miller attempted in "A View from the Bridge") writer Arthur Laurents has wisely chosen not to follow Shakespeare's plot slavishly, though even as it is the parallels sometimes seem more arbitrary than intriguing. Rather he concentrates on expressing the realities of an alarming contemporary situation.

As an observer Mr. Laurents has managed admirably. He puts an amazing amount of teen-age jargon on-stage without forcing it. And, more importantly, he penetrates the problem of juvenile delinquency in a way that should give all of us pause. From the beginning he faces the hard fact that today's teen-ager, who alternates between purposeless violence and sullen detachment, cannot really be explained by use of specific phrases like "insufficient housing" and "broken homes." Rather, he implies that adults' sins of omission on the highest level of national and international policy create the vacuum which these teenagers feel obliged to fill with cool and fierce bravado. Someone asks, "Do you know the difference between being a stool-pigeon and cooperating with the law?" Let's all answer that one satisfactorily if we want our children to be law-abiding.

A second and even more essential unanswered question is hinted at when the Jets decide that the grow-

ing proportion of Puerto Ricans in the block demands an all-out attempt to destroy them before they become too powerful. Later, when the rival gang leaders agree to have a war council, their terse summation "no jazz before then" is a capsule Cold War. And the discussion of weapons they will use in their forthcoming rumble is as ridiculous and at the same time terrifying as are most disarmament conferences. For when the rumble does start each side produces more destructive weapons than it agreed on so as not to be caught short.

The character of teen-age gangs is brilliantly expressed in two numbers. "Cool" paints in song, dance, and dialogue the juveniles' necessity to hide their emotions and feelings behind an artificially relaxed appearance. It is a recognition of the sad adult truth that the emotional and insistent sincere person tends to lose all arguments, and that we live in a time when ignorance and insensitivity come close to being the prerequisites of success.

Then, in Act II, comes a number which brings out the best in composer Leonard Bernstein, lyricist Stephen Sondheim, and choreographer Robbins. We are treated to a sarcastic impromptu dramatizing the absurd rigmarole that ensues when juvenile delinquents are brought into custody. The notions that playgrounds "keep deprived kids off the foul streets" or that they are psychologically "distoibed," or victims of "a social disease," or marijuana-puffing fiends are devastatingly mocked. And the final line of the song, which sounds like, "Officer Krupke, f--k you!" is audaciously appropriate. Just as shocking but less sensational is the first-act curtain, which comes down on a stage whose only remaining occupants are the two dead victims of a meaningless switch-blade battle.

The Puerto Rican situation is a touchy one to present and "West Side Story" does it without direct sermonizing. True, it does not emphasize the utter squalor in which many Puerto Rican immigrants live. But "America," sung and danced with tough-minded efficacy by Chita Rivera, nicely describes the Puerto Rican's attitude towards his plight. While the show refrains from prettifying the situation, it does gain sympathy for the Puerto Ricans by showing the cops to be more viciously prejudiced

than their gang-enemies, the Jets. And if the show fails rather badly when it tries to show a non-prejudiced utopia "somewhere" it leaves a telling reminder for us at the final curtain, when we see the two gangs temporarily allied against the law enforcement officers.

Mr. Robbins's contribution easily outdistances those of his nearest collaborators. Mr. Bernstein is an able and intelligent craftsman. But when his music is sad it seems tired, and when it is gay it seems nervous. "Tonight" starts out as a haunting melody in the tradition of Kurt Weill's "The Hills of Ixipu," but loses distinction when it becomes more complicated. "I Feel Pretty" is a consciously cute number whose final phrase is reminiscent of "I'm in Love with a Wonderful Guy." What this young composer needs is to relax and give himself more deeply and quietly to his work. Mr. Sondheim's lyrics only occasionally rise above adequacy. And Mr. Laurents, the dramatist, is often guilty of making the action too pat and explicit. When a girl must face a lover who has just killed her brother the moment requires awe. Instead, Mr. Laurents fills it with logical statements about what has happened and an estimate about the future.

THE performances serve the show well. You will not forget the new faces and disciplined physiques at work in "West Side Story." Chita Rivera and Lee Becker are particularly memorable, and in the two leading roles Larry Kent and Carol Lawrence make love-at-first-sight credible. Olive Smith's settings are most impressive when they are stylized, but one is slightly bothered when a stylized fire escape is brought into the same scene as a realistic store or bedroom. However, the setting under the West Side Highway is a beauty.

While "West Side Story" is something less than a great or even a terribly moving piece of work, it is worthwhile for its exciting use of dance vocabulary and the intelligence it applies to its vital subject matter. If the show falls short of being all that it should be, it is still the best treatment of the juvenile-delinquency problem in our theatre to date. And technically it is a step forward for the use of dance on our musical stage.

—HENRY HEWES.

