

BROADWAY, OUR LITERARY SIGNPOST

By Kenneth Andrews

A PERSON who sees nothing in Mr. Galsworthy's "Loyalties" but an exciting melodrama well told, who is unable to accept with proper reverence the awesome allegory of "R. U. R.", who despite the huzzahs of his betters finds nothing in "The World We Live In" but a nursery fable putting on insufferably pretentious airs, may eventually come to the point where he must search his soul and ask himself each night, after doing his Coué, if he is unable to appreciate the finer things.

Then comes a play like "Rain" to revive in him the assurance and big-otry which are essential in a critic. This play reminds one that art, on the stage or anywhere else, vaunteth not itself and is not puffed up. It reminds one that if a play is created with sincerity and faithfulness to life it cannot fail to make some more or less worth while comment on human nature, and that the broader aspects of any drama must be implied and not megaphoned from the footlights. In short it refreshes one's conviction that the truest art is unself-conscious. If a person insists on going to the theatre to be improved, rather than to be entertained, it is the play which, within the limits of sound dramaturgy, truly reflects life that will serve him.

When you compare "Rain" with "The World We Live In", for instance, you realize indeed that illusion is the soul of drama. A play, no matter how profound its purpose, must create be-

lief before it can stir the emotions; and until it does this it must fail in its purpose. In "The World We Live In" we are told repeatedly that we are in the presence of colossal allegory. The meaning of life and death, so announces a loquacious character, will be explained by the incidents on the stage. But we don't believe him. We believe only what we see, and we see some actors in fantastic costumes enacting the most obvious sort of bed-time story. There is little, really, to stir the imagination despite the floridly imaginative theme of the playwright. The very scheme of the drama enforces detachment on the spectator; he may be impressed but he is not stirred. His emotions are cold because nothing on the stage occurs to rouse his sympathy or hatred. The play is as impersonal as a commencement dance by the senior girls of a fresh water college. Only as spectacle has it theatrical value, and with "The Music Box" and "The Follies" in town, New York has expensive tastes in spectacle.

The episode of the ants is designed, and doubtless accepted by many, as a terrific indictment of war. But what does this indictment of war consist of? What is it that actually comes over the footlights? We see twenty or thirty supers in uniforms vaguely suggesting those worn by the recent enemies of civilization. These young men march across the stage, around behind the backdrop, and across the stage again — and again and again.

Then, after quite a realistic suggestion of booming guns, and after the marchers have been heaped up in the centre of the stage, we are told that the war has taken place between two blades of grass. It is of course a delightfully sardonic and bitter conception, and it is impressive, but it does not excite in the theatre. The episode does not dramatize that conception, it merely states it. The very stylization of those marching armies tends to shatter illusion. If New York wants an indictment of war it is not necessary to go to Czecho-Slovakia for it. Let someone revive Gilbert Emery's play, "The Hero", which eked out a short and uneventful life last season.

In "Rain", the play which John Colton and Clemence Randolph fashioned from a short story by Somerset Maugham, we have, first of all, excellent theatre. It is a play which reads fairly well, but gains enormous force when it is projected in the playhouse. The same exigencies of production which tend to blur a conception like "The World We Live In" here are made to serve instead of hamper. The play is built with the moment-by-moment stage effect in mind. To establish a sense of reality, to arouse heated partizanship is the intention of the dramatists. They succeed splendidly. Seeing their play is an unforgettably vivid emotional experience. There is perhaps no special purpose behind it, no resounding thesis; but after seeing it one despises the professional uplifter a little more bitterly and also, it may be, has a little fairer understanding of him. "Rain" is, without much doubt, the most thoroughly excellent play which New York has seen, or is likely to see, this season. It stands as an almost cruel rebuke to those fevered ones who seek by dis-

tortion and sterilization to make of the theatre something it can never be. "Rain" is modern in every sense. There is nothing old-fashioned about it, but it sums up in itself much of the wisdom which modern drama has inherited naturally and logically from the past. It is not in opposition to but in harmony with that slow evolution toward a better art form which began when the first play was written.

The authors, quite shamelessly, take advantage of modern mechanical ingenuity to create with paint and canvas and light a literal, credible spot on the island of Pago Pago. They even allow real water to fall, and after a time even the simple minded cease to wonder how they do it. Even those who have never endured a rainy season in the tropics sense, after a time, something of what that incessant pattering does to human nerves. The fetid miasma of that tropical outpost seeps through the theatre. The fretful, perverse emotions which lead Sadie Thompson to her dark hour are comprehensible. Even the frenzy which causes the Reverend Alfred Davidson to persecute her so mercilessly is understood. The mystery, the passion, the cruelty and melancholy of the tropics are woven into the fibre of the story.

That atmosphere is a necessary element of the play. Without it the story might seem oversensationalized and even incoherent. But the production, as it stands, is a rare fusion of ingenious staging, intelligent direction and acting. It gains the sharp poignancy it has because the illusion is so faithfully created and sustained. It is indeed an answer to the faddists.

The story itself is rooted deeply in truth. This Dr. Davidson, we are sure, is not overdrawn. At any rate his mental processes are made clear

with an almost Freudian precision. He is a sex starved ascetic. The hounding of sinners, for him, partakes of a sensual orgy. It is his escape. With relish he tells of his success in driving a trader to ruin—a trader whose crime was that he drank and amused himself with native women. His torture of Sadie Thompson is carried out with savage eagerness. By the subtlest means the dramatists imply that the exaltation which he believes is religious is not unrelated to sex. That is tragically true to life, as anyone knows who has had much contact with belligerent evangelists. Thus when Davidson stands quivering at midnight outside the door of the woman he has redeemed, and when he finally goes inside, there is no stretch of plausibility. A moment of magnificent drama has developed faultlessly out of the very heart of the theme.

The end of the play, also, seems a masterly piece of work. It is brought about by the same deft balancing of the inevitabilities. We know, when the final curtain falls, that Davidson at least was not a hypocrite. Cruel he may have been, but at least he paid in full when he failed to live up to his harsh convictions. We almost forgive him. And his act of expiation is turned to splendid account by the dramatists. It saves Sadie Thompson from destruction. In the night, after the shock and disillusionment of Davidson's act, her world had crashed. Defiantly, hysterically she had put on her tawdry finery and become again the public woman she had been at the beginning. But when she learns that the missionary lies out on the sand, a suicide, something enters into her. It is pity, and that is a new emotion for her. You can believe, in the end, that for once an evangelist really did succeed in saving a soul.

Grace George's production of Paul Géraldy's "Aimer" makes a curious impression. During the first act and for most of the second you think you are being rather unnecessarily bored. Then Helene, quite unexpectedly, confesses to Henri that after all she loves him more than she does her husband. This sudden crumbling of the defenses which she has so loyally and confidently built up is strangely startling. It is like a shaft of warm sunlight in a darkened room. From that point on the play is engrossing. More than that, when the second act ends, you realize that you have not been bored at all, but have been growing intimately acquainted with three people whose destiny has suddenly become a matter of supreme interest. And the play itself, more curiously still, grows finer as perspective on it lengthens. One enjoys it three days after seeing it better than he does in the theatre. This is because, in a sense, it is not a play at all, but a penetrating study of three souls. What they do is not important, and for that matter they do practically nothing but talk. But through their talk the playwright contrives to reveal what lies very deep in their hearts. He manages to externalize what is really of the spirit. It is a drama of thought, not of deed.

Which is to say that it is an achievement almost without parallel in contemporary drama. It may not be fantastic to hazard that it is some such type of drama as this which will eventually develop from the present experiments in expressionism. "Aimer", from one point of view, is expressionism. But it is not a distortion of life, it conforms to the demands of effective drama, it is coherent, persuasive, and has an honesty that is almost naïve. But one may not entirely agree with the author. He takes the posi-

THE DRAMA SHELF

"East of Suez" by W. Somerset Maugham (Doran). Proving that East is East and West is West. The book is more enjoyable than the current production of the play, because it is the play Maugham wrote.

"Loyalties" by John Galsworthy (Scribner). In the long list of his plays "Loyalties" is second only to "Justice".

"From Morn to Midnight" by Georg Kaiser (Brentano). An exhilarating drama. Perhaps the best example of the expressionistic form that is available in English.

"The National Anthem" by J. Hartley Mannes (Doran). Dr. Mannes's sermon on the evils of jazz.

"The Waltz of the Dogs" by Leonid Andreyev (Macmillan). This author's posthumous play of unrequited love. It is a bitter, powerful drama, to be read when you find yourself getting too cheerful.

"Florence Nightingale" by Edith Gittings Reid (Macmillan). Not a

particularly successful attempt; it is more biography than drama.

"Goat Alley" by Ernest Howard Culbertson (Stewart Kidd). A tremendous tragedy of negro life, a truly important play.

"Krindlesyke" by Wilfrid Gibson (Macmillan). A sombre and moving play about simple people, but touched with the bleak beauty which marks this poet's work.

"Hassan" by James Elroy Flecker (Knopf). A colorful and richly imaginative story of Bagdad and vicinity.

"Michal" by Alice Carter Cook (Four Seas). Rather a sonorous drama of Biblical times.

"Six Short Plays" by Wilbur S. Tupper (Four Seas). Within the range of amateurs, worth the attention of the entertainment committee.

"Do's and Don't's for the Playwright" by Fanny Cannon (Denison). For the use of the writers of plays for amateurs, if there are any who admit it.

tion that the bonds of habit and intimacy and long association are stronger than those of love, or rather that they comprise true love. So when Helene comes to the point of leaving her husband for his rival she is unable to do it. Henri cannot share her memories. The two of them are therefore strangers and must always remain so. One might argue that that is an arbitrary and false emphasis on the story. Do those million little chains of intimacy have anything to do with love? Probably not. In Helene's case it may have been the finality of her step which she shrank from. This marriage of hers, like a few thousand others, may have been kept intact, not by love, but by the dread of change. Her refusal to leave is logical enough, but G raldy is writing a play about love; and one ques-

tions whether she loved either Henri or her husband.

Unfortunately "Aimer" convinced us that inertia is a stronger force than love or almost anything else. We were reminded of the case of Jesse Pomeroy, the unfortunate who at the age of thirteen was sentenced to solitary confinement for life. He is now an old man of seventy. After forty or fifty years of exertion on the part of the Salvation Army the law makers of Massachusetts were persuaded that the sentence was rather a severe one, so Pomeroy was granted the boon of working with the other prisoners. He refused this clemency saying that he wanted his freedom or nothing. He said that since he had been forbidden to work during his lifetime he could not begin at the age of seventy. It seemed a plausible stand, but it may

be that, when it came to the point, he had an overpowering dread of leaving the little room where, all his life, he had eaten and slept and suffered.

"Aimer", you see, is thought provoking. Anyone who is thinking of getting married should see it.

"Merton of the Movies" from the joint typewriter of the Messrs. Connelly and Kaufman is a sheer delight. The tale in stage form is infinitely more amusing than it was when Harry Leon Wilson first thought of it and set it down in a book. "The Last Warning" is the last word in mystery plays. Mayor Hylan, after seeing it, issued a ukase forbidding persons with high blood pressure to see it. "The 49ers", despite what its authors have said about it, is excellent burlesque and provides an extremely pleasurable evening. John Barrymore's magnificent "Hamlet" was of course the outstanding event of the month. The production is a thing of rich beauty, too

rich perhaps, since the gorgeous colors and stage pictures tend to make the production more a pageant than a tragedy. Any actor but Barrymore would have been quite swamped, but nothing could entirely swamp his superb performance.

"The Music Box Revue" is undoubtedly the most sumptuous show in town, but Irving Berlin's score is a sort of musical delicatessen — it reminds you simultaneously of practically all the pungent tunes which have been popular during the last fifteen years. "The Romantic Age" is quite a charming little fantasy by A. A. Milne. Helen Menken's performance in "Seventh Heaven" makes the play worth seeing. "Six Characters in Search of an Author" is about two acts too long. "Springtime of Youth" is built along rather old-fashioned lines but has a pleasant flavor. "The Fool" is a version of the Christ's return to earth written in the manner of a Sunday supplement sob writer.