

'The Hostage' and 'Virginia Woolf'

by KENNETH PAUL SHOREY

THE HOSTAGE was presented for the first time by Joan Littlewood and the Theatre Workshop at the Theatre Royal, London, England, on October 14, 1958.

SYNOPSIS. A young Cockney soldier is kidnapped and held as a hostage in a Dublin boarding-house, in reprisal for an I. R. A. man whom the British propose to execute in Belfast in the morning for having killed a policeman. The boarding-house becomes a sort of music hall, peopled by I. R. A. men, religious eccentrics, prostitutes, and pervers, during the course of the action, a number of songs are sung—including "There's No Place on Earth Like the World," the "theme" of the play:

"There's no place on earth like the world.
There's no place wherever you be,
There's no place on earth like the world,
That's straight up and take it from me."

During a police raid, the hostage is accidentally shot. He returns to life, and sings to the audience:

"The bells of hell
Go ting-a-ling-a-ling
For you but not for me.
Oh death where is thy
Sting-a-ling-a-ling
Or grave thy victory?"

BRENOAN Behan—of Borstal, Walton, and Mountjoy prisons—former smuggler and terrorist for the Irish Republican Army, was a self-professed genius. While still in his teens, he was apprehended in the act of preparing to blow up a battleship; three years later, he was sentenced to fourteen years for the attempted murder of a carload of police. Today, his fame has spread around the world as the author of *The Quare Fellow* and *The Hostage*. Though he will write no more, his principal claim to fame rests safely on *The Hostage*, which is certain to survive even in spite of Brian Moore.¹

1. See Brian Moore, "The Quare-fellow Scapafellowed," *Book Week*, June 21, 1964: "The

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Indeed, *The Hostage*, according to Britain's Canon Roy McKay "has a religious value for any thinking Christian"; and, quoting him, *Sunday Times* drama critic Harold Hobson went even further: "I should say that no intelligent person could see [this play] without being entertained, moved, and illumined by the sense it communicates of the generosity and magnanimity of humanity . . .," he said. "The splendour of *The Hostage* is due to its charity, a quality straight out of Christian morality."² The week following the appearance of these remarks, the *Times* published Behan's reply:

. . . I was glad that Canon McKay considers that *The Hostage* among the four plays he mentions has 'a religious value for any thinking Christian.'

The *Catholic Herald* and *The Tablet* recognize my work as that of a Catholic. Which I am, though a bad one. I could not write as I do if I were not some kind of a one.

In my own country I have been accused of blasphemy. So, of course, has the great Christian, Sean O'Casey. . . .³

The January, 1961, issue of *The Sign* here at home listed *The Hostage* as "Completely Objectionable." A month earlier, in an article entitled "The Crisis on Broadway," *The Sign's* critic, Jerry Cotter, had this to say:

"Brendan Behan . . . imported his special brand of blasphemy, vulgarity, and smut for the 'edification' of American audiences in *The Hostage*, a well-publicized offering set in a Dublin brothel. On the credit side it proved that Behan is a playwright of considerable promise, but he seems to revel in gutter talk, frankly irreligious outlook, and a childish effort to shock by constant allusion to perversion, irreligion and a rather incredible lack of taste. He cannot blame the press for calling him a crude boor. He is that."

Hostage does not deserve to survive. *The Quare Fellow* is different. The subject is capital punishment. . . .

2. Harold Hobson, "Too Much Humility," *The Sunday Times*, January 3, 1960.
3. *The Sunday Times*, January 10, 1960.

WHEN Theatre Workshop presented the play at the *Théâtre des Nations* in Paris the crowds went berserk with cheering. There were such frantic demonstrations that the actors had to forego many of their curtain calls: the stage manager had exhausted himself pulling the ropes. A jury of the best theatre critics in Europe acclaimed it a triumph, and *The Hostage* eventually moved into the West End where, with a slightly different cast, it enjoyed a long, successful run.

In the autumn of 1960, the Theatre Workshop company brought the play to Broadway. James Lovell, formerly the company's stage manager, predicted to me that it would either revolutionize the American critics' concept of "theatre," or close after three performances. It did neither. The critics—most of them—accepted it as a piece of "good fun" even though a trifle rude, but attached no special importance to it. The play was subsequently taken on a tour of North America, and later revived off-Broadway (and then toured again), this time by an entirely different company under the direction of Mr. Pery Bruskin.

Now the secret of *The Hostage* is the secret of Theatre Workshop, and it is impossible to evaluate Brendan Behan's work properly without first coming to terms with the highly unorthodox manner of its composition. The play is the creation of Joan Littlewood, in collaboration with Behan, in collaboration with the actors of the Theatre Workshop company as it was in the autumn of 1958. It is highly doubtful that Brendan Behan by himself ever put pen to paper for the third act of the playing script, or for long stretches of acts I and II:

"... the wholesale introduction of music-hall techniques, direct addresses to the audience, songs with self-conscious cues to the accompanist in the orchestra pit, even a bit of dialogue ribbing the author ('That is, if the bleeding thing has an author'), savours at times of ... self-indulgence. ..."⁴

It is, in fact, a neo-Elizabethan play. One must not attempt to compare *The Hostage* with any of the plays of Yeats, or O'Casey, or Lady Gregory. (Similarly, Shakespeare ought not to be treated as though he were some sort of renaissance Christopher Fry.

4. John Russell Taylor, *The Angry Theatre: New British Drama*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1962), p. 105.

To make such an attempt is roughly analogous to putting the horse in the cart and pushing him.)

No, *The Hostage* is much more easily appraised when it is compared with an Elizabethan or Jacobean comedy. It is a confusing play for our contemporary critics for the very reason that it is a Workshop success; it is not an orthodox play. Brendan Behan himself, may have chosen to masquerade about the country as though he were Ireland's answer to Dylan Thomas, but he cannot be credited with actually having written a piece of dramatic literature. The original manuscript for *The Hostage* does not exist



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Brendan Behan

(1924-1964)

—no more than the manuscripts of Shakespeare's plays exist—except in the prompt-books and in the imaginations of the actors who improvised the action in his presence.⁵

But let us hold it up to the light of the Elizabethans and examine its markings as

5. In the Italian and French traditions the dramatic characters are committed to the situation; they are given narrative boundaries in which to develop themselves, but are not given explicit instructions. See Edward Gordon Craig, "Shakespeare's Collaborators" in *The Theatre Advancing* (Boston: Little, Brown, & Company, 1919), pp. 114-123. Also, "Real Acting: or, Can the Actor Create?" *The Mask*, Volume 9, 1923.

they show through in performance: 1) Elizabethan playwrights catered to varying levels of appreciation in their audiences; 2) Theirs was, what might be termed, a "presentational" form of theatre. (The concept of a stage whereon the conventional attempts at "illusion" are set aside in favor of a more fundamental kind of reality is not Brechtian; it is Shakespearean.) 3) The very essence of the Elizabethan theatre lay in its robust, athletic, extrovert, "presentational" qualities; 4) Shakespeare and his Elizabethan friends evolved during the course of a single generation the supreme expression and dynamic of total "theatre": a theatre containing all the psychological "truth" demanded by Stanislavski, all the externalized, objective elements demanded by Meyerhold and Piscator and Brecht and Ghéon, all the transcendental impulses of Gordon Craig and Antonin Artaud, and much more beside.

These seem to be the hallmarks of the Elizabethan drama. They are present in *The Hostage*. The "business" in a Behan production of actors wandering out into the audience to watch and criticize their own performances corresponds very closely to the improrptu critics in Jonson's play: Mirth, Tattle, Expectation, and Censure. Both plays are packed with allusions to contemporary life, and in both cases we may be perfectly sure not *all* the allusions heard by the audience in the playhouse found their way into print. Both develop their own styles of bawdry and knockabout, and both eschew any overt attempts to have us psychoanalyze the characters during performance. In both plays, the "play" ends when the stage performance ends: the "fun" does not survive in the texts.

"UNTIL you get bawdry, you won't get lyricism," Miss Littlewood has said.⁶ *The Hostage* was merely the bawdy step on the way toward fulfillment of the prophecy. Certainly there is a sense in which Behan somewhat reminds us of Chaucer, or of Peele, or Marston, Brome, Heywood, or even of the anonymous authors of the Miracles and pageants of the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries when life—

6. Joan Littlewood, "Theatre Workshop: A British People's Theatre," a brochure printed by Pioneer Theatres Ltd., London, 1957.

particularly Christian social life— was much more unified; when sexual references, swear words, prayers, and devotions were unashamedly mixed in daily conversation, even as they are in Behan's Dublin today.

While I do not believe, with Canon McKay, that *The Hostage* should be considered a deeply religious play, I find it the most theatrically praiseworthy of the four dramas under discussion in this essay series. The contradictions among the critics, and the misunderstandings have arisen primarily because there has been an annoying tendency to evaluate the play on the basis of its script alone, considered as a thing unto itself, as a piece of Irish Literature or as something quite separate from the live production on the stage. And this is almost always fatal: even Edmund Burke said so, in his "Hints for an Essay on the Drama."⁷

On paper, the expressions of Behan's characters seem vile and vicious; but during performance—and especially during a whirlwind Workshop performance—the miscellaneous people surrounding the hostage emerge generally as purely innocuous Irish souls, caught up in the coils of their own mortality.⁸ The characters are neither noble nor patient, nor are they endowed with any peculiar sense of Christian self-sacrifice; but on the stage they spring suddenly into life, transforming the theatre into a gymnasium for society's derelicts.

EARLY in her career, around the time when she first read Ronald Watkins' brilliant book *On Producing Shakespeare*, Joan Littlewood realized in a very special way that the compelling dynamic of the Elizabethan theatre — its central idea — had been lost. She resolved to rediscover and to reinstate it by applying Watkins' suggestions, a few at a time, to *playwrights other than Shakespeare*. For thirteen years she worked to prepare not only her actors but her audiences for something like *The Hostage*; and when it finally did appear she had exciting proof at last to show the world that a contemporary dramatist can *wright* like Shakes-

7. *Works* (Bohn edition) Volume 10.

8. Genuine blasphemy, T. S. Eliot assures us in his Introduction to Baudelaire's *Intimate Journals* (1930), "genuine in spirit and not purely verbal, is the product of partial belief, and is as impossible to the complete atheist as to the perfect Christian. It is a way of affirming belief."

peare after all: not in iambic pentameter, no, but in an entirely extrovert, improvisational manner.

Whatever reservations one may have with regard to the vulgar indelicacies of *The Hostage*, its production dealt Londoners accustomed to the psychoanalytic frenzies of most modern drama a spectacular artistic blow: it made possible the chaotic, free-wheeling subsequent stagings of plays by Jonson and Marston—two authors (among many) generally held by contemporary critics to be commercially extinct in this age of chronic introspection and etiolated, bookish dramatics; and it went a long way toward rendering plausible Ronald Watkins' thesis that "the building of a twentieth-century Globe would . . . breed its own literature."⁹

Unlike *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (dealt with next), *After the Fall*, or *The Deputy*, Brendan Behan's play may legitimately be described in the same terms as those used by the London *Observer* critic, Kenneth Tynan, in praise of a later Littlewood production: [It is] a triumph *Unimaginable anywhere but on a stage*; it belongs uniquely to its birthplace—the bare boards that are Littlewood's home ground, filled with the passion of Littlewood's home team." (Italics added.)¹⁰

Polonius did not know the half of it: a modern a play can, if it wishes, be tragical-comical-historical-pastoral-farcical-satirical-operational-musical-music-hall, in any combination or all at the same time. And it is only because we have short memories that we forget that a phrase already exists to cover all these seemingly disparate breeds. It is *Commedia dell'Arte*. *The Hostage* is a *Commedia dell'Arte* production.¹¹

Undoubtedly, Brendan Behan's script *per se* is dreadful: if it were ever presented in a "community theatre" in the conventional, naturalistic manner, I am sure North American audiences would nail the cast to the floor before burning down the building. But it is theatrically viable, as were most of the *Commedia dell'Arte* scripts—some of them barely a page in length¹²—where some such play as *The Deputy* or *After the Fall* is not touched upon.

9. Ronald Watkins, *On Producing Shakespeare* (London: Michael Joseph, 1950), p. 53.

10. Kenneth Tynan, *The Observer Weekend Review*, March 24, 1963.

11. Kenneth Tynan, *Curtains* (New York: Atheneum, 1961), p. 219.

12. See note 5.

WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF? was presented for the first time at the Billy Rose Theatre, New York, on October 13, 1962.

SYNOPSIS: Following a faculty party on the campus of a small New England college, a history professor and his wife invite the new biology teacher and his wife home for a drink. The history professor's wife is the daughter of the school's president, and the couple have an imaginary son—invited as a consolation for the fact that they are actually childless. The "existence" of the son is a private matter which the couple have agreed never to mention in public. The "mother" breaks the taboo, and so goads her husband into taking vengeance by announcing to the guests that their "son" is dead. The biology teacher commits adultery with the history professor's wife, then departs with his own wife. The childless couple is left alone.

EDWARD ALBEE first gained international recognition as an Absurdist playwright in 1959 when *The Zoo Story* was presented as part of a twin bill with Samuel Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape* at the Schiller Theater Werkstatt in Berlin. Since then he has written three other one-act plays (*Fam and Yam*, *The Death of Bessie Smith*, and *The Sandbox*), three full-length (*The American Dream*, *Tiny Alice*, and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*), and an adaptation of Mrs. Carson McCullers's novella, *The Ballad of the Sad Café*. According to Thomas Meehan of the *New York Times* he is "the single most successful, talked-about, and respected new writer for the theater that this country has produced in nearly a generation."¹

In a word, then, Mr. Albee has finally become the Famous American Playwright depicted in *Fam and Yam*—" . . . right up there . . . along with a few others . . . Miller, Williams . . . Thornton Wilder, and . . . uh . . . (*Shrugs*) . . . Inge . . . uh . . ." The press clippings in his scrapbook say he stands alone, that he is a master technician, that he belongs in the first rank, and so on etc., etc. In a very real sense, therefore, we are discussing the American theater as a whole when we talk about our most talked-about dramatist, for upon him has been bestowed the respect of influential critics everywhere.

The respect is tempered in many quarters with occasional splashes of cold criticism, however—generally directed against Mr. Albee's choice of subject-matter—which annoys the young playwright no end. In his preface to *The American Dream*, Mr. Albee

1. Meehan, "Edward Albee and a Mystery," *New York Times*, December 27, 1964.



Behan in front of cast of the New York production "The Hostage."

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retaliates by saying that the critical function of the American press has been misused: "May I submit that when a critic sets himself up as an arbiter of morality, a judge of the matter and not the manner of a work, he is no longer a critic; he is a censor."² There is some justice in this, unquestionably; but perhaps it would be truer to say that the acid test—the method of assessing honestly the worth of all that occurs inside a playhouse anywhere in the world—is at once both an aesthetic and a moral judgment, namely, *should it be there?* Members of the Commedia dell'Arte audiences knew well enough how to make just such a double-barrelled judgment; so did most of the Elizabethan citizenry, the Greek, the medieval, and those who understand Kabuki. The moral intentions of *The Hostage* seem open to question, true enough; but the play is aesthetically satisfying and, I believe, morally quite harmless in performance. Nevertheless, if Mr. Albee is asking that full attention be paid solely to the *manner* of his work, the abuse he has received thus far at the hands of certain sections of the American press has been merited several times over.

2. Albee, *The American Dream* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1961), p. 7.

WHOEVER approaches *Virginia Woolf* by way of the critics—i.e., reads criticisms first, *then* goes to see the play—scarcely knows what to expect. Emory Lewis declares that the play is about "the decline and fall of the West"³ no less; Richard A. Duprey says it is "a graphic and markedly overliteral dissection of the dynamics of despair."⁴ Getting down to the *manner* of the piece, these are a few of the critical comments which greeted the opening of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

Anthony West: The art of making bricks without straw, or even clay, is not given to everyone, nor is that of filling people's ears with lines which mean nothing but which seem to be witty and searching.⁵

Richard Gilman: The love-hate relationship of the couple fills the stage with wounds, glancing blows, destructions of confidence and of attitudinal clichés, revulsions, weaponless and unbearable intimidations, bitter exaltations and hopeless embraces . . . the rhetoric apart from a few speeches of improbable and high-pitched lamentation, is straightforward, cocky, brutal, knowing and tremendously *au courant* . . . and very funny.⁶

3. Lewis, "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" *Cue*, October 27, 1962.

4. Duprey, "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" *The Catholic World*, January, 1963.

5. West, "For Laughs," *Show*, January, 1963.

6. Gilman, "Here We Go Round the Albee Bush," *Commonweal*, November 9, 1962.

Emory Lewis: "[Edward Albee] has serious flaws. His plays are invariably and maddeningly incomplete. He often seems tongue-tied, unable to find clarity or direction."⁷

Richard A. Duprey: "It speaks, almost eloquently at times. . . . And it is all done with words—sneaky, hateful, foul, sonorous, banal, clever, beautiful, and fearsome words."⁸

Time Magazine: "The weapons are words—vicious, cruel, unspeakably humiliating, unpredictably hilarious—the language of personal annihilation. Jabbing, slashing, eviscerating. . . ."⁹

Howard Taubman: "Mr. Albee does not croon his audience into contentment with a saccharine lullaby. He storms and thunders and leaves it shaken."¹⁰

Walter Kerr: "Mr. Albee's ear did not seem to be listening for speech; it listened instead for a twist of the intestines and then phrased the spasm as though it were possible conversation. . . . There is talk—much talk. . . ."¹¹

So it seems. And, I daresay, depending upon the particular actors and actresses involved at any given time, it might be very interesting talk, once. At any rate, after studying these and similar reviews, a would-be patron of *Virginia Woolf* is, or ought to be, prepared for an *outré* experience, even as patrons of *The Deputy* were given an exercise in dramatic impropriety.

WELL, WHAT of it? Restoration plays were bawdy, too. At "Curtain Up" in Brendan Behan's play.

The whole company dances an Irish Jig after two figures in which two whores and two queers have danced together; MULLEADY is seen dancing with MISS GILCHRIST.

1st WHORE [to QUEERS]. Get off the stage, you dirty low things.

COLETTE. A decent whore can't get a shilling round here for the likes of you.

The bawdry, though, in this—as in much of the Restoration drama—is satirical and light; indelicate, certainly, and sometimes

7. Lewis, *op. cit.*

8. Duprey, *op. cit.*

9. *Time*, October 26, 1962.

10. Taubman, "Cure for Blues," *New York Times*, October 28, 1962.

11. Kerr, *The Theatre in Spite of Itself* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963), p. 124.

very rude, but seldom, if ever, vicious or disgusting.

At "Curtain Up" in *Virginia Woolf* the stage is bare; suddenly a crash is heard against the front door, Martha bursts in drunk and laughing, and cries "Jesus H. Christ." Insofar as either the aesthetics or the morals of the play are concerned, Martha means just what she says—with a vengeance; Whereas Behan's characters behave like the buffoons they really are. Mr. Albee asks if *The American Dream* is offensive; and the answer he gives hold equally well for *Virginia Woolf*—as indeed for *Tiny Alice*: "I certainly hope so; it was my intention to offend."¹² On the contrary, it was Brendan Behan's desire merely to spoof; and the declared intentions of both playwrights dictated the shape and substance of their dramas for better and for worse.

"CONFUSION about the appearance of theatrical material is endless," writes Benjamin Hunningher in *The Origin of the Theatre*, "and can be laid to the fact that for many scholars drama is only a form—indeed, a typographical form—by which an author conveniently illustrates a conversation. To call dialogue the only indication of drama is like calling rhythm the only indication of music."¹³ Short of printing this passage in italicized block letters I cannot think how to emphasize its importance. The greater number of productions now seen on the stages of the world should not be there for the perfectly simple and indisputably sound reason that in most cases they are not *theatrical*. They are not composed of elements *peculiar* to the theatre—or, as Kenneth Tynan would say, of elements "unimaginable anywhere but on a stage." Generally, though, the drama critics' yardstick of judgment today is scaled specifically to measure just the spurious elements in contemporary playwrighting, and to evaluate them in the hope that they will be given even greater prominence in the future. (I am referring still, of course, to this question of *manner*.) An original theme, treated in a reasonably literate fashion, in a dialogue format involving two or more characters, it is said, constitutes a "play." Armed with

12. Albee, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

13. Hunningher, *The Origin of the Theatre* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1961), p. 45.

this comforting criterion, most reviewers then proceed to discuss an author's Message, his subtle or symbolic meanings, his language, his literary style, the "social implications" of his work, or, his other plays. From time to time they toss in a handful of quotable phrases for use on the billboards in front of the theatre.

Mr. Howard Taubman writes: "From the outset Mr. Albee looked as if he had the making of a big leaguer. *The Zoo Story* testified eloquently to his gifts for the theatre. Here is a piece that says what it has to say and stops."¹⁴ The account goes on to tell us, then, what it was that Mr. Albee said; and there you have it—a blurb for the advertisements and another plug for the drama of "social significance." I don't for a moment question the fact that Mr. Albee has gifts: I am only anxious to discover whether or not they are for the theatre. The fact that *Virginia Woolf* is to be filmed this year in Hollywood, to my mind, is of far greater import than the fact that Mr. Albee says things eloquently.

"ALL dramatic poets whose plays are presented in the theatre declare that their mission is to instruct," noted Antonio Sebastiano in *Arte Poetica* (1563). He then went on to say that tragic poets accomplish their mission by producing wonder, fear, and pity; comic poets by awakening in the souls of the spectators pleasant and humane feelings.¹⁵ Our notions of dramatic instruction are somewhat altered now; consequently the nature of what we know as "theatre" is also changed. The very air we breathe today is filled with messages: radio and television stations, newspapers, clowns, detergent salesmen, professors, tragic poets and comic poets—all are busy cranking out their messages, pumping them into the bloodstream of the body politic. We live in what Kenneth Macrorie has called "the message-drowned world." Its critical characteristic, he says, "is not the dearth of high-quality messages—or even the profusion of second-rate messages—but simply the profusion of all kinds of messages."¹⁶

14. Taubman, *op. cit.*

15. Sebastiano (Minturno), "The Art of Poetry," in Clark, *European Theories of the Drama* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1947 edition), p. 58.

16. Macrorie, "Too Many Messages," *The Reporter*, July 20, 1961.

Rolf Hochhuth, among other things, wants us to know that the Nazis were cretins; Edward Albee says we are leading empty lives; Arthur Miller says *he* is leading an empty life, and so on. Many drama critics, too, are ever eager to let us know what a particular play is about: plays are always "about" something—about sex, about the nation's poor, about the anguish of the farmers (or the Negroes, or the taxi-drivers, or the salesmen *et al.*), about excruciating states of mind, about broken men and



Edward Albee

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broken dreams. *Othello* is said to be about Jealousy. (It isn't, of course: *Othello* is about Othello.) The stage has come to be regarded as a "potent platform and pulpit," and playwrights who have something to "say" are accordingly encouraged. Anyone taking pains to question the validity of such a concept of "theatre" is instantly jeered as an anti-intellectual; after all, did not Antonio Sebastiano say that all dramatic poets, etc., etc., etc.?

Howard Taubman, in the passage quoted earlier, mentioned the tendency of the American theatre in the thirties to editorialize.¹⁷ From the context of his column it is clear that Mr. Taubman means that a theatre which *does not hesitate to editorialize* is

17. See Shorey, "The Deputy: An Exercise in Dramatic Impropriety," *The Intercollegiate Review*, January, 1965.

ipso facto a good theatre, i.e., a theatre functioning normally. H. L. Mencken, too, once pointed out (and in so doing he seriously believed he was doing Ibsen a favor) that "from end to end of his life there is no record that Ibsen ever wrote a single word or formulated a single idea that might not have been exposed in a newspaper editorial."¹⁸ Eric Bentley, for his part, believes that the works of Ibsen and Shaw, Sartre and Brecht, offer "an impressive apologia for the playwright as thinker."¹⁹

THE criticisms which have been advanced in these four essays, however, against Hochhuth, Miller, and Albee, are not intended to be taken as a form of anti-intellectual intellectualism: we do not object to the playwright-as-thinker because we object to *thinking*, but because the playwright has traditionally been so much more than a thinker.²⁰ Ibsen is not a great dramatist by virtue of his having been a thinker, or even because he was the first playwright in history ever to write newspaper editorials in dialogue form. A dramatist achieves or fails to achieve greatness solely on the basis of his ability to utilize to the fullest extent (and eventually to master) the resources of a theatre. If Ibsen is great it is as a result of writing *Peer Gynt*, or possibly *Brand*, but certainly not *Ghosts*, or even *An Enemy of*

the People (which, incidentally, and perhaps significantly, Arthur Miller has adapted.)

When we hear special pleaders arguing that the theatre *must* reflect or dramatize the issues which confront modern man, we are usually listening to someone who is simply nuts about "issues" but just so-so about "theatre." Such a person tends to think that plays "about" problems which legislators have ignored are necessarily important; yet more often than not the assigned importance attaches itself to the problem treated rather than to the treatment of the problem. As it happens, the "issues" which confront modern man have not changed noticeably since the year dot, and never have been susceptible of legislation anyway: they are those of heroism and integrity, honor and virtue, liberty, love, death, and eternal salvation.

WHO'S Afraid of Virginia Woolf? takes a myopic squint at an infinitesimally small corner of "real life" in a fictitious New England college town—sets it down eloquently, with scarcely a shred of relevance to life anywhere else on the face of the earth, and so somehow elicits from Mr. Emory Lewis the stunning declaration that "Albee has a vision of the apocalypse."²¹ Even if it were true, the *manner* of Albee's vision palls; the eloquence is spent upon drink and genitalia, or the constantly recurring need to vomit. Once again, Boss Mangan takes the stage—to tell us what? Only the critics know, and they'll be happy to tell you, little realizing that what they are actually writing about is not "theatre" but society. When most reviewers seek to promote a new playwright, usually they have *matter*, not *manner*, on their minds. Mr. Harold Clurman, as I mentioned earlier, is forever on the lookout for plays with "human significance" or "social significance"—not a confrontation with "theatre" which transcends reality; and dramatists who touch upon the relationship between negroes and whites are hailed, not for their artistic acumen but for their moral commitment to the question of Civil Rights.

What concerns me is the fact that *any*

21. Lewis, *op. cit.*

18. Mencken, Introduction to *Eleven Plays of Henrik Ibsen* (New York: The Modern Library), p. viii.

19. Bentley, *The Playwright as Thinker* (New York: Meridian Books, 1955 edition).

20. What is it, after all, that makes a playwright? And how does he get that way? William J. Lynch affirms in *Christ and Apollo* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1960), p. 182, that "certainly he must make himself more than a 'thinker,' more even than a poet as we now understand the term. Such a restriction would be theatrically fatal. He should know a good deal, and this in terms of his own blood stream, about the dance and ritual in the oldest and widest senses of these terms. He should be an actual man of the theatre, as Shakespeare probably was. . . . He should be a man who delights in the coronation of a queen or the inauguration of a President, who delights generally in a public style of life for man. He should know history and not think that his private mind can alone create a theatre. . . . He must, finally, come to an intimate knowledge of the work of the choreographers and the musicians, and not leave his own skills in isolation from theirs.



George Grizzard and Uta Hagen in scene from "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?"

Wide World Photos

point of view is "necessary."²² What, specifically, would you say was the "point of view" in *Macbeth*? or *The Merry Wives of Windsor*? or *Volpone*? or *Oedipus Rex*? or *Gammer Gurton's Needle*? or Brendan Behan's *Hostage*? What "social significance" have these plays? How would their authors vote if they were still alive? What attitude might each playwright have taken toward the

22. Readers who disagree are hereby cordially invited to tear this passage from its context and have a field-day with it. At the same time, though, recalling André Malraux's comment to the effect that it is not emotion that destroys a work of art, but the desire to demonstrate something, I draw attention to Walter Kerr, *How Not to Write a Play* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1955), pp. 65-66: "A good play does not busy itself trying to enunciate moral values; it assumes them, and gets on with its own work." Cf. also, Eckermann, *Conversations of Goethe with Eckermann* (New York: Everyman's Library edition), p. 179: "I do not object," said Goethe, "to a dramatic poet having a moral influence in view; but, when the point is to bring his subject clearly and effectively before his audience, his moral purpose proves of little use, and he needs much more a faculty for delineation and a familiarity with the stage to know what to do and what to leave undone. If there be a moral in the subject, it will appear, and the poet has nothing to consider but the effective and artistic treatment of his subject. If a poet has as high a soul as Sophocles, his influence will always be moral, let him do what he will. Besides, he knew the stage, and understood his craft thoroughly."

arms race? or Cuba? or the Congo? or Civil Rights? or the John Birch Society?

Do you care? Because *I* certainly don't, and for this reason: I believe the "social significance" or the "point of view" or the "moral" of a dramatic work ought to rest with the spectator and not with the dramatist. As Goethe says, "If a poet has as high a soul as Sophocles, his influence will always be moral, let him do what he will." Surely our notions of recreation are rather trite and foolish if we cannot think of any better uses for an actor than to make an axe-grinder's monkey of him.

* * *

THE FOUR plays which have been discussed in these pages exemplify in their several ways the kind of dramaturgy prevalent today. Brendan Behan, regrettably, will never move beyond *The Hostage*; Rolf Hochhuth, if we can believe him, will turn now to the writing of an historical study; Arthur Miller will, after *Incident at Vichy*, in all probability go back into retirement for another nine years. Whether or not it is comforting to think that the future of American playwriting rests in the hands of Edward Albee and others with assorted visions of the apocalypse, I leave the reader to decide.

[This is the final installment of the series.]