

The Age of Parody

The Theatre of Revolt, by Robert Brustein. Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1964. 435 pp. \$7.50.

Drama and Commitment, by Gerald Rabkin. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1964. 322 pp. \$6.00.

The Impossible Theatre, by Herbert Blau. New York: The Macmillan Co., 1964. 309 pp. \$10.00.

"WHAT DO YOU DO about the Bomb?" asks Herbert Blau on page nineteen of *The Impossible Theatre*. "All questions coagulate in that." At the conclusion of this review I may venture to suggest a reply, of sorts.

Mr. Robert Brustein is the *New Republic's* theater critic and a professor of dramatic literature at Columbia University. In *The Theatre of Revolt* he writes candidly of nine major modern dramatists. His phrases are judiciously chosen, his ideas straightforwardly and succinctly expressed:

The theatre of revolt . . . is the temple of a priest without a God, without an orthodoxy, without even much of a congregation, who conducts his service within the hideous architecture of the absurd. A missionary of discord, he spreads a gospel of insurrection, trying to substitute his inspired vision for traditional values, trying to improvise a ritual out of anguish and frustration. Instead of myths of communion, he offers myths of dispersal; instead of consoling sermons, painful demands; instead of a liturgy of acceptance, a liturgy of complaint. He is an apostate priest, and one who secretly would be God. Taking as his motto Lucifer's *Non serviam*, he emerges as the spirit of denial, the man who says No, pursuing his Yes down the countless avenues of revolt.

In case you cannot think of anyone offhand who fits this description, Mr. Brustein is referring to Ibsen, Strindberg, Chekhov, Shaw, Brecht, Pirandello, O'Neill, Artaud, and Genet.

Mr. Gerald Rabkin, now an assistant professor in the English Department at Indiana University, adds several other notable names to the list of apostate priests: Clifford Odets, Elmer Rice, S. N. Behrman, Maxwell Anderson, John Howard Lawson, et al., men "politically aware" who were "ir-

revocably involved with the political issues and forces of the age." Mr. Rabkin observes, however, that the term "commitment" as such "is necessarily ambiguous, for it is obvious that neither in common nor existentialist usage is it possible to speak of the act of commitment without predicating an object to which one is committed. The question which inevitably arises is: commitment to what?"

Indeed. Well, says Mr. Herbert Blau,

In 1929, someone named Velona Pilcher wrote wisely in *Theatre Arts*: "I don't think it goes too far to declare that a play is no concern of a living playgoer, play-reader, producer, or player unless somewhere within it, or within the art that shall present it, there moves the reflection of these things: Four years of World War; Frazer's *Golden Bough*; Epstein's bronze Madonna; The Prose of D. H. Lawrence; The Thought, as far as it could reach, of *Back to Methuselah*; *The Mask* of Gordon Craig; Einstein and the scientists; The Union of Socialist Soviet Republics; The dramatic dancing of the Diaghilev Company: *The Outbreak of Peace*." To this day [Mr. Blau muses gloomily] some of these things aren't adequately reflected in our theatre, not to mention the outbreak of the second world war, the gravitational-field theory, the approach to a genetic code, the work of the Berliner Ensemble, the baked meats of Belsen, Pollock's *Totem #1*, Hiroshima, the films of Antonioni (not to mention Eisenstein), *The Plague* of Artaud, serialist music, and all the fractures and tensions of art brought on by our cormorant Cold War.

Then Mr. Blau pops the all-important question, "What do you do about the Bomb?" (He also wonders what can be done about the John Birch Society, Defense Secretary McNamara, Cuba, strontium 90, and related theatrical matters.)

Now it seems to me that Velona Pilcher, and by implication Mr. Blau, in seeking to write off all the plays published or produced in the world prior to 1929 are rather tending to narrow the body of Dramatic Literature down to ground zero, so that a man like William Shakespeare, who never in his life gave two hoots for the Bomb, but who was as committed as any man could possibly be to the higher imagination, is given the boot for no good reason at all.

The question is not "What do you do about the Bomb?" The question is "What do you do about yourself? Your relationship to God? Your life in this earthly place of trial?" For, as Father William Lynch remarks in *Christ and Apollo*, "[the] drive toward common movement and ritual existence is one of the most powerful movements in the soul of

man. If it is choked off and denied on the deepest and religious levels of existence, as indeed it has been, it will concentrate the whole of itself on the most superficial levels of life, the immediately social, and will end in becoming an absolute, a parody of itself and of its own dignity." Rather than go chasing after Mr. Blau, pursuing some vague Yes down the countless avenues of revolt, I think it best to stand with Henry David Thoreau who said he wouldn't walk around the corner to watch the world blow up. We'll simply have to sit this century out, and wait for the parodies to stop.

Reviewed by KENNETH PAUL SHOREY