

TIGERS IN THE SNOW



A REVIEW

"TIGERS IN THE SNOW" is by far the finest production yet staged at the Half Moon Theatre, and among the most memorable theatrical experiences of recent years.

A large part of the credit for this must go to an outstanding cast, who give without exception such sincere portrayals of the characters they play that it is virtually impossible to single out any performances as superior to others. The talented director, Sue Parrish, deserves heartiest congratulations on having woven these figures into a tapestry which will long remain in the memory of those who have seen it.

It is unnecessary to say more about the production, which has been justly praised by a number of critics whose views have been published. I believe, however, that the play itself deserves greater attention than has been given to it by these critics -- for without a worthy script the best actors in the world can be little more than a row of empty beer barrels.

On the whole the critics have reviewed the play unfavourably. One trusts that the author is as pleased by these unfavourable notices as he should be: when the "Financial Times" begins to praise Mr. Marson's work it will be time for him to take up market gardening!

But how does one judge the quality of a play -- of any work of art, for that matter -- with objectivity? Many people, including many professional critics, would base their judgment on the question: Is it diverting?

It is obviously very understandable that so many people should see the theatre as a means of diversion -- as a means of escape from the problems which face them in the real world. "Why" -- goes the old joke -- "should I pay to see on the stage poverty, slums, unemployment, murder, incest and sodomy when I have all these at home with the family?"

It is therefore understandable that in our society at the present time -- a society which is beset with social problems -- plays which enable audiences to escape from these social problems for a couple of hours, plays which "divert" their audiences from these problems, tend to make most money at the box-office.

On this basis "Tigers in the Snow" must be accounted a dismal failure. No one -- except perhaps a prison officer from Wakefield -- could possibly find that terrible game of musical chairs in Act Two "amusing".

But is this really the criterion of aesthetic quality. If a poll shows that the majority of the population find "Crossroads" more entertaining than "Macbeth", is this really because Shakespeare's play is a third-rate dramatic work in comparison with the former? Is "The Mousetrap" really the greatest play of all time?

Clearly there must be a truer criterion on which to judge the quality of a play than either its ability to divert or its box office takings. Most plays of the past which were "successes" in their time are mere museum pieces, while others written at the same time are still capable of gripping, moving, inspiring an audience. The latter must have qualities which the former lack, and it is on an analysis of these qualities that a scientific theory of aesthetics must be based.

On the basis of this analysis it is possible to elaborate certain questions which, if answered, provide a reliable criterion of the real quality of a play. These questions are:

Does the play help to break down the complacency, the prejudices from which all of us suffer to some extent?

Does it assist in tearing off the protective blinkers we wear and enable us to see the world and the people who live in it more truthfully?

And finally, does it inspire us to right rather than wrong?

In these days mention of morality is prone to arouse guffaws from certain quarters which regard themselves as "intellectual" and "progressive". But in fact, to seek to divorce aesthetics from morality is neither intellectual nor progressive: if a play inspires me to go out into the street and stab the nearest Pakistani in the guts, then it is a bad play! And the better it is acted and produced, the more effective and so the worse it becomes.

The answers to these questions are linked to the fundamental test of the quality of a play:-- indeed, of any work of art: does it conform to reality? Are its characters real flesh-and-blood people -- the mixture of good and evil, of rationality and absurdity which all of us are -- or are they mere lifeless cardboard cut-outs? Are the situations portrayed those which do, or at least could, occur in real life, or are they mere artificial contrivances of the playwright?

It might seem that the height of artistic realism should be obtained by bringing actuality on to the stage. Fortunately for the acting profession, however, ordinary people are unable to behave completely naturally when their life is transferred to a stage in front of an

audience.

I recently saw in Italy an attempt to solve this problem. A flat was fitted up with movie cameras concealed in the walls of its four rooms, and the flat was then let to an unsuspecting couple who were not informed of their presence. The cameras (equipped with automatic reel-changers so that they could run for a whole day) were then switched on. The product was screened simultaneously on four screens and claimed to be "the most realistic film ever made". Called "Twenty-four Hours" it ran, of course, for twenty-four hours! The director had chosen to begin his film at 2 a.m., so that for the first six hours three of the four screens were devoid of anything but furniture, while the fourth screen showed the couple already in bed asleep. I cannot say whether things became more interesting after 7 a.m., for by this time -- philistine that I am -- I had escaped into the Rome sunshine.

Such experiments have nothing in common with artistic realism -- indeed they have little in common with art. This kind of superficial naturalism is no more a realistic work of art than my act of shaving in the morning. Realistic art penetrates beneath the surface of the real world in order to show motives and forces which may not be visible to the unaided eye. The achievement of this requires not only the perception of these motives and forces on the part of the artist, but the selection from reality by the artist of precisely those characters, situations, events and facts which portray the aspect of reality concerned in concentrated, heightened form.

On one point in this respect Mr. Marson's otherwise brilliant play must be criticised -- and criticised strongly. It is perfectly legitimate that John, the charge nurse, who is portrayed as "a nice bloke", should have prejudices against what he calls "wogs", for it is by no means unknown in the real world at the present time for otherwise "nice blokes" to have such racist prejudices. But realism demands that this racism must be shown up for the irrational and dangerous delusion that it is. Instead of doing this, however, the playwright creates a psychiatrist with an Indian name who is presented as being lazy and as having a complete disregard for the welfare of his patients. No doubt, the author would claim that there are in reality doctors of Indian descent who are lazy and callous. No doubt. But there are also lazy, callous doctors with white skins and doctors with dark skins who are models of professional skill and dedication. Skin pigmentation is totally irrelevant to these qualities, and by selecting these two partial aspects of reality and placing them in juxtaposition the effect is to appear to make the point that the charge nurse's racism is not a prejudice at all. but a belief which is justified by the facts. If,

as one hopes, this play is presented elsewhere, this serious defect should be eliminated -- unless, of course, Mr. Marson consciously wishes to make propoganda for the National Front.

This apart, does the play conform to the requirements of realism in other respects? Only someone who has had first-hand experience of life in a mental ward could answer this question with complete certainty. Without this experience one can only say that it rings true, that it portrays in the form of a moving and horrifying work of art all that one has heard and read about the contemporary psychiatric service in Britain.

Indeed, this service is beset with contradictions and inconsistencies. It has long been recognised that social factors play an important role in the causation of both crime and mental illness. In the case of crime, these adverse social factors lead, or at least contribute to acts which the state defines as unacceptable but rational, to be dealt with by the state penal system; in the case of mental illness, these adverse social factors lead, or at least contribute, to acts which the state defines as unacceptable and irrational, to be dealt with by the state psychiatric service.

The patients in Mr. Marson's play exhibit or recount various forms of unacceptable and irrational behaviour, such as constantly removing one's tights or stabbing one's mother. Then into their midst is thrown (as in the film "One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest") a catalyst in the shape of ex-convict Vera Bell. Born into more appalling social conditions than any of the other inmates of the ward, Vera's behaviour (drug-taking, prostitution and repeated acts of grievous bodily harm) has previously been categorised as unacceptable but rational, and so dealt with by the penal service. Now, wrongly believed by the authorities to have burned down her own house, her behaviour has been reclassified as irrational, bringing her within the ambit of the psychiatric service.

Where social factors have played a causative role in either crime or mental illness, it would be logical if the removal of such adverse social conditions were to form a fundamental aspect of the state's penological and psychiatric treatment. But in most cases this would involve the revolutionary transformation of society, whereas one of the key functions of the state is to defend the fundamental structure of existing society. The state-employed psychiatrist is, therefore, compelled to confine his "treatment" to attempts to condition the individual mental patient so that he/she passively accepts the adverse social conditions to which he/she is to be returned on discharge, and no

longer reacts to them by unacceptable behaviour.

Now that lobotomy has become unfashionable even in Cherry Tree Ward, psychiatric treatment thus involves custodianship of the patient while the attempt is made to transform him/her -- by means of drugs, electro-convulsive therapy, frequent cups of tea and children's games -- into a passive zombie. In the play we see patients at various stages of this process, and it is not without significance that this "treatment" is carried out throughout the play entirely by the hard-working but only semi-skilled nursing staff, while neither we nor the patients ever get to see the psychiatrist who is nominally in control of the ward.

But "Tigers in the Snow" has wider implications.

If a factory worker demands higher wages than the "norm" laid down by the state, and particularly if he/she supports such demands with the threat of industrial action, the state may characterise his conduct not only as unacceptable, but as irrational -- since, according to the official myth, wage increases above the approved "norm" render the recipient "worse off" through inflation. It would, therefore, be logical for workers who are guilty of such "unacceptable and irrational" behaviour to be brought within the scope of the state psychiatric service. Indeed, on this basis it could be argued that the "welfare of the working class" requires the provision of a psychiatric clinic in every factory, where "trouble-makers" may be given the drugs and ECT required to turn them into what the Confederation of British Industry considers "ideal workers".

And if the criterion of "psychological normality" is that one should accept intolerable social conditions passively, without protest, then it is logical that the protester, the dissident, should be regarded as in need of compulsory psychiatric treatment. In these terms the replacement of the concentration camp by the psychiatric hospital can be presented as an indication of the progress of civilisation .

To sum up, "Tigers in the Snow" provides not only a gripping and moving evening in the theatre, but also food for thought and discussion long after the curtain has (metaphorically) descended. It is a salutary reminder that it is only six years to 1984