

BRITAIN TO-DAY



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PRICE ONE SHILLING

THEATRE—"CAPTAIN CARVALLO"

By T. C. WORSLEY

ANY art lives by its living practitioners; the theatre not least, in spite of its being able to conceal any paucity in this line behind revivals, in which so many other branches of the theatrical art than playwriting can be displayed. But if it is to be healthy the theatre must find new playwrights and encourage them. It used to be a constant complaint against our theatre before the war that it was hidebound, conventional, conservative, that managers would only look at plays which were built on a well-tried success pattern, and that a new kind of playwright had only a thousand-to-one chance of squeezing his offering through the needle's eye.

That complaint, whether true or not of the past, can certainly not be sustained to-day. There was never a time, I believe, when actors and managers were so open-minded, so ready to experiment, so eager to be persuaded that a new playwright has a new kind of talent. And the reason is, I suggest, that the leaders in the acting profession after this war are exactly the opposite kind of actors to the leaders of the profession after the 1914 war. Then, it was Sir Gerald du Maurier who was the idol of playgoers, and Owen Nares, and in due course Noel Coward, the exponents of the latest and most fashionable neo-realism, who delighted audiences by the completely natural way they lit a cigarette on the stage, or walked across a room, or sipped a cocktail. "Absolutely life-like!" exclaimed the stalls in astonishment; for they were accustomed to a stiff and formal—a stylized—naturalization in their earlier heroes. It was certainly a development in the art of acting that was then introduced. But it limited the actors' art drastically, and the mode was soon to find itself a more suitable medium in the cinema.

A marked change has come over taste since then, and it has crystallized in the post-war years. The admired actors of our day are those who have kept alive the old tradition of full-blooded acting—Olivier, Gielgud, Edith Evans—and adapted it to our day. It was largely revivals of the classics, English and foreign, of course, which made the popularity of these actors.

And they themselves have felt the necessity for discovering modern plays which give them as wide an opportunity to display the whole range of their art as do the great classical rôles. And each of these three I have mentioned have marked the break by appearing in a new non-naturalistic play—plays which because they are not “realistic” can use language rhetorically, dramatically and poetically. An actor needs something to get his tongue round quite as much as he needs “something to do.” And it was the failure of the realistic convention of the period between the wars to provide this that left actors (and audiences too, though they may not have known it) unsatisfied. So Dame Edith Evans played the leading rôle in James Bridie’s *Daphne Laureola*, John Gielgud saw Christopher Fry’s verse play *The Lady’s Not For Burning* at the Arts and promptly transferred it to the Globe with himself in the leading part, while Sir Laurence Olivier no less promptly commissioned a play for himself from this then almost unknown poet, and presented, as the first production of his newly formed actor-managership, the outcome of this commission, *Venus Observed*. And the surprising thing was that each of these ventures—each of which broke new ground in the theatre—was a commercial as well as an artistic success.

In short, we seem to have the first beginnings of a new dramatic revival in England, answering the needs of the actors themselves. (And the Renaissance is paralleled in other branches of the theatrical art. I believe that our production and our stage design can successfully contest the claim to be the best in the world at this moment.) *Captain Carvallo*, the second play to be put on by Sir Laurence Olivier at the St. James’s Theatre, which he now manages, is a new play by a new playwright in this new tradition. It is an intellectual comedy distinguished by an ironic enjoyment of the human situation and a happy turn of phrase in the writing. Mr. Denis Cannan, its young author, claims to be influenced primarily by the novelist Peacock, and one can certainly trace this influence in the fantastification of his approach. His comedy is about life as it is lived in our time, but he keeps his figures sufficiently removed from actuality to skate gracefully on ice which might seem a little too thin if it were even one degree nearer the real.

He sets his scene at a farmhouse in occupied territory. No specific territory, and one occupied by no specific enemy. He wishes to use for his purposes the climate of war—which, whether we face it or prefer not to face it, is the prevailing climate of our time. But since his objectives are purely comic, it is the climate of war at one remove from the reality of it that he aims at. The starting point of this play is the arrival of a charming, handsome young enemy officer, Captain Carvallo, who claims a billet for himself and his batman from the handsome farmer's wife; who is immediately, as he means she should be, rather taken with him. (The maternal instinct, he remarks, as he munches her ham, is the one truly international thing. I have only to look a little young and tired to draw it out anywhere.) His arrival at this moment is particularly inopportune; for the farmer, a lay preacher as well, is engaged on a mission for the local partisans, and mixed up in the business with him is a professor of biology from a nearby town. These two most incompetent and not very keen partisans have to transact their secret business under the eyes of the enemy captain. And it is from this situation that the comedy springs and grows. Ordered by their superiors to kill the captain as a gesture to mark their country's Independence Day, they cannot bring themselves to do it—they are not exactly professional partisans, they have only joined so as to be politically respectable when the war ends. Besides they have grown to like the romantic young captain. So instead they try to devise a means of satisfying their superiors by blowing up the barn in which the captain is sleeping, while at the same time making sure that he is not in it at the time. If this bald description sounds a little flat, that is in the nature of comedy, which depends less on what happens than on the way in which it happens. But it is easy to imagine, I think, that this framework can produce a number of very amusing situations in the right hands, and Mr. Cannan is an inventive comic writer.

For Mr. Cannan is himself an actor, and he knows tricks of stage comedy and he can write very good, veryactable parts. (Byactable in this tradition, I repeat, one means very speakable as well.) Sir Laurence Olivier has cast the play to perfection. For the handsome romantic captain, James Donald, a young

actor who combines an assured comedy technique with lavish charm. For the farmer's wife Miss Diana Wynyard; no-one could suggest more exactly than she the virtuous woman of early middle age who is all too sharply reminded by the young captain's attentions that youth is passing and won't return. How deceptively easy her manner is and what art that easiness conceals! The two amateur partisans are played, one by Mr. Richard Goolden, who gives a dazzling performance as the lay preacher farmer—a typical near-farce part of the perpetual butt, with, in his case, only quotations from the Prophets to protect himself with; and the other, the atheist-biologist, by Peter Finch, a young Australian actor who first came prominently to our notice as the romantic Pole in *Daphne Laureola*. Here he is an over-ingenious argufying professor, and he makes a brilliant thing of it, perfectly judged and carried precisely and exactly through.

Fine comedy acting parts finely acted, and owing a good deal more than shows on the surface, perhaps, to Sir Laurence's immensely skilful and clever production. Mr. Denis Cannan will undoubtedly write better plays than this one as he grows more experienced. But for a start this is much more than promising, and it is a very strong pointer towards the tendency I have been referring to that this play, first produced by the Bristol Old Vic Company, of which Mr. Cannan was then a member, should at once have caught the notice of Sir Laurence Olivier, and at once have been produced by him in London.

“*The Little Hut*”

I have left myself space to report this month on only one more play from what looks like being a most interesting season: and I have chosen this one from several others (which I shall hope to mention later) because it bears out what I have been saying about the very high standard of English stage production. *The Little Hut* is an English adaptation by Miss Nancy Mitford from an extremely successful, extremely light, Parisian comedy. It is the merest whisked-up trifle about the eternal triangle: a man and his wife and their best friend marooned on a desert island. Shocking by any standards, it is yet sufficiently witty in the way the situations are devised to avoid

offence. But I mention it here because all accounts agree that the English production surpasses the French at every point. Mr. Peter Brook, the producer, and Mr. Oliver Messel, the designer, have combined to add to this witty, but otherwise not very distinguished, little piece an elegance which it may not perhaps deserve, but which makes it a delight to see. Mr. Messel's set is a concoction of all the most exaggerated children's book illustrations of desert islands, while Mr. Brook keeps the fun going with an unceasing flow of inventive improvisations on the desert island theme. And of course there is Mr. Robert Morley in the centre, giving one of his very best comic performances. But it is the combination of talents—designer's, producer's, actors' and adaptor's—which keep a rather thin piece spinning like a coloured top through the whole evening.