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# THE ENGINEER'S BOOKSHELF

By WILSON R. DUMBLE

## The Eternal Road

(Reviewed by Miss Elizabeth Stanton)  
(Department of English)

An engineer need not be told that *The Eternal Road* is really a new engineering project which is now in process at the Manhattan Opera House in New York. It is under the masterly direction of Max Reinhardt (the man who handled the Hollywood production of Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream*), that great director-manager who has put on over 450 productions in leading capitals all over the world for the past 30 years. This is his first production to have its world premiere in the United States. Mr. Reinhardt, who is planning to take out American citizenship, is not only an outstanding producer but also an actor of note and it is perhaps to his varied capabilities along theatrical lines that the success of this unique performance is due.

*The Eternal Road* has a wealth of "great names" attached to it. The play was written by Franz Werfel (the author of *Forty Days of Musa Dagh*), translated into English by Ludwig Lewisohn (the critics of the original say that the play loses poetic beauty by translation), the music is by Kurt Weill (an exile from Germany and the composer of several operas), and the setting, costumes, and lighting are by Norman Bel Geddes. Last, but by far the greatest, are the characters, not the actors, for there are so many of them that no one is especially outstanding unless it be the thirteen year old boy, Sidney Lumet, on whom the denouement falls. For *The Eternal Road* is a magnificently conceived history of the Jewish race; consequently the great figures are those of Biblical history—Abraham, Jacob, Rachel, Joseph, Moses, Ruth, David, Solomon.

The idea for this Biblical play began back in 1933 in Paris. Reinhardt, Werfel, and Weill collaborated on the production and by February, 1934, *The Eternal Road* was taking concrete form but it was not until January 7, 1937, that it was presented to the public. On the technical side alone it is quite different from the usual play. It is conceived in a new form, "the musical theatre." In this the action of music are integrated so that each has its own individuality and purpose and yet each fits in perfectly with everything else. Corresponding to the four sections of the drama there are four finely executed finale, with the dramatic and musical climax coinciding. There is a march theme which is to be taken as a musical symbol of the eternal wandering from place to place and which in the fourth section, when all the characters of the play

advance toward the angel, brings the entire drama to an exalted close.

The stage itself is constructed on five levels, not separated, but each merging into the one above, and corresponding to the five strata in the consciousness of man. First is the stage of reality with its lightless anguish; next is the stratum of the road of fate, of the direction which a people are going; next is the stage of history or historic memory and symbol by which we seek to give meaning to the direction which so often seems meaningless. But these meanings vary and seem to fail us in our greatest need and so mankind must advance to the two last or highest stages of symbol or aspiration or faith.

When the curtain rises in the darkened theatre there is no suggestion of the great spectacle. What is seen is an ancient synagogue in some Central European country, filled with men, women, and children of the entire community. It is night and the spirit of impending disaster hovers over the group. The congregation is assembled for a night of fasting and prayer, awaiting an evil and uncertain decree. The one hope is that the Tyrant will commute destruction into a sentence of exile so that to escape death the entire community will have to leave its homes, synagogues, possessions, and set its feet once more on the Eternal Road of Promise. During these hours of suspense, the Rabbi reads from the scrolls to these Jews the record of their ancestors' hopes and struggles. This scene, on the first stage, remains throughout the play, vanishing into darkness and reappearing in the light as the exigencies of the drama demand.

As the Rabbi begins to read, the lights of the synagogue are dimmed, the congregation disappears from view. High above the synagogue on the highest of the five stages, the action begins with the Divine Voice confirming the eternal bond between the Jewish people and God. The first episode embraces the fate of several generations from Abraham through Isaac, Jacob, and Rachel to Joseph. The story of Joseph is elaborately presented from beginning to end with the stage filled by a tremendous Oriental banquet scene in the time of his glittering career in Egypt. Joseph's reunion with his old father, Jacob, brings the action back to the first stage where the thirteen year old boy, the son of the Estranged One, cries out, "I am Joseph." And indeed he is, in that he is returning to his people in the synagogue after long alienation in childhood.

The second episode unfolds the Deliverance of

Israel. Mass effects are used for the portrayal of the enslavement of the children of Israel from Egyptian bondage and their final liberation. The high point of this episode is the scene of the tragic and pathetic death of Moses. The third episode deals with the time of the Jewish kingdom in Palestine, with Saul, David, and Solomon and the struggle of Israel with the enemies from without and the corrupting forces within. The story of David the Giant Killer is made real on the first stage by a chorus of youngsters chanting the tale while it is envisioned on an upper stage. The climax of this third episode is in the colorful celebration in the Temple.

The fourth episode is at once the darkest and the most radiant in the drama. Its theme is the corruption of the Jews, their inner failure and defeat, their external failure; yet it ends on a high note of inspiration and hope. In this episode the parallel between the past and present is achieved. The Jews wander out into exile from Jerusalem driven by the power of the Babylonian empire. The Jews wander out into exile from the Synagogue driven by the power of the Tyrant. There is double motion which is single: on the upper stage the Jews leave, in lamentation, the Holy Land; on the lower stage the Jews leave, in lamentation, the land of their adoption. Both streams carry with them the symbols of their hope and faith. And an echo of the redemption breaks into the vast double scene. Just as the Jews returned from their Babylonian exile, so they will be redeemed from this exile of the twentieth century. The two streams of wanderers meet and mingle. The stage is filled with the characters; they are all contemporaries: Abraham, Moses, David, Solomon, Isaiah, the Rabbi in the Synagogue, the Estranged One's Son—they have one destiny and one hope. And the drama ends with the chorus of the one hundred and twenty-sixth Psalm: "When the Lord returned to the Capital of Zion, we were as in a dream. Then our mouths were filled with laughter and our tongues with song."

*The Eternal Road* is truly a great and moving drama, a real engineering feat in the largest sense of the term. It is far too vast to be comprehended in one seeing but possibly my impressions will make some of you want to attempt an appreciation of it for yourselves. It is worth a trip to New York because it is a great production. Its meanings are universal.

## The Good Earth

(Reviewed by Harold Isay, Engr. '40)

Laotzu, a great Chinese philosopher of the sixth century B. C. said, "The heavy is the root of light; the quiet is the master of motion. Therefore the wise man in all the experiences of the day will not depart from dignity. Though he be surrounded with sights that are magnificent, he will remain calm and unconcerned." Centuries of stoicism has left the Chinese face with a mask that betrays no emotion. Paul Muni might well have steeped himself in Chinese customs before attempting the por-

trayal of Wang Lung, for he showed to excess every emotion from uncontrollable mirth to equally uncontrollable anger. Suffice it to say that his interpretation was putrescent. Muni's makeup was very realistic as a young man; but at 70 he has the Muni occidental pompadour, a trim lithe figure as well as all the fire of youth, which is a sharp contrast with the hoary-headed, paunchy, peace-seeking old man of Miss Buck's book.

Miss Rainer as O-lan surpassed anything I had imagined. Her acting exceeded even the adjectives which Hollywood uses all too often. She was ugly, she was stoical, she was grand. Her face was immobile as time itself; but being human you sensed what must be going on inside her. She had so few lines that they were hardly noticeable and yet she dominated every scene. A further attempt on my part to analyze her performance would be folly itself.

The actor who played Cheng was too little seen. He had a rich musical voice and the dignified mien of a mandarin.

Walter Connolly as Wang Lung's uncle was very amusing if not always oriental in character.

The photograph was above reproach and the film was of a rich lustrous brown which added greatly to make the scenes more realistic.

I suppose the two remaining things of importance to discuss are the plot compared to the book and the interpretation. The picture was long but still so short as to touch only the high spots of the book, consequently many important characters and scenes were entirely ignored in the picture, incidents were altered to please their fancy. Some events were added that Miss Buck would never have dreamed of. One event in the picture as displeasing as any, and there were a number of them, was O-lan's death. As O-lan lies dying on the bed, certain things transpire to give you the impression that Wang Lung was full of love and compassion for O-lan, but Miss Buck describes him as writhing with inner shame because he could not help noticing how ugly O-lan really was. So Hollywood tacked on their "happy ending."

All of these faults might have been forgiven had the picture left you with the same general impression as the book. Miss Buck pictures the incidents in relation to people; Hollywood rendered a Thomas Hardy impression of man against the forces of nature. These strayings from the pattern of the book certainly failed to add to the credit of the motion picture industry.

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Mrs.—Here's a dress advertised by Sello Brothers that's priced at a song.

Mr.—Well, my dear, if you expect me to furnish the notes you may as well change the tune.

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Uneasy is the tooth that wears the crown.

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Fausteris—There is nothing that can surpass the warmth of a woman's love.

Mahufftic—Oh yes there is—the heat of her temper.