

The Knowledge Bank at The Ohio State University

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THE ENGINEER'S BOOKSHELF

By WILSON R. DUMBLE



TWENTIETH CENTURY PLAYS—*Edited by Chandler and Cordell—Thomas Nelson and Sons—1934. (\$1.80)*

PARADISE LOST—*by Clifford Odets—Random House—1936 (\$2.00)*

BOY MEETS GIRL—*by Bella and Samuel Spewack—Random House—1936. (\$2.00)*

ETHAN FROME—*A Dramatization of Edith Wharton's novel by Owen Davis and Donald Davis—Charles Scribner's Sons—1936. (\$2.50)*

Then and Now

Not so many nights ago I picked up a volume of *What Price Glory*, America's salty contribution to the dramatic collection of war plays, by Maxwell Anderson and Laurence Stallings. I had not gone far into the first act when I was already re-living not only the production when I first saw it in New York but also my own war experiences during those gloomy days of 1918. I recalled so well the production at a Broadway theatre in the Autumn of 1924 when I sat glued, apparently, to my chair, at the end of the second act; when I counted by the score the spinal chills I suffered as Lt. Moore pleaded with Capt. Flagg: "For God's sake, Captain, stop the blood!" And at this re-reading of the play my mind flashed back to a rainy night in October 1918, when I stopped at a first aid station not far back of the front line trenches to find the stretcher bearers bringing in the mangled and dying forms of what once were examples of America's young manhood.

It seems to me that in *What Price Glory* one finds all the essentials of a play about war. For instance there are the opening lines about the time honored topic of women put into the mouths of Gowdy and Kiper and Lipinsky; there too is found the existing conflict between the old guard U. S. Marines and the young college graduate "shave-tails," fresh from the training camps of America. Probably Captain Flagg and Sergeant Quirt will stand always as two of the most distinguished characters in American drama, and surely any one who has either seen or read the play will never forget Cognac Pete and his daughter Charmaine.

I recall the producer's note in the front part of the theatre program with words to the effect that *What Price Glory* is a play of war as it is, not as it has been pre-

sented theatrically for thousands of years; how the speech of men under arms is universally and consistently interlarded with profanity; how oaths mean nothing to a soldier save a means to obtain emphasis; and how he uses them in place of more polite adjectives. In other words this was an apology to the public for the cursing in the play. Strange, is it not, in a short twelve years how standards change? For since *What Price Glory* we have had *Tobacco Road* by Erskine Caldwell in the theatre and the novels of James Joyce and Ernest Hemmingway and William Faulkner. They indeed did not feel the urge to apologize for the cursing of the characters in their novels. In its day *What Price Glory* seemed bold, but I doubt very much that in 1936 we would take second consideration of that angle of the production.

What Price Glory, by the way, is one of several plays recently published in an edition edited by Frank W. Chandler and Richard A. Cordell, under the title *Twentieth Century Plays*. In the American list it contains, besides the Anderson-Stallings' play, O'Neill's *Marco Millions*, Rice's *Street Scene*, Connelly's *The Green Pastures* and Rachel Crothers' *As Husbands Go*. The list of British plays in the same volume are eight in number, the most important of which are Sheriff's *Journey's End*, Coward's *Private Lives* and W. Somerset Maugham's *The Breadwinner*. Indeed it is a happy combination of plays to read, not only for classroom use but also for personal pleasure.

Dodsworth

The last week in March Columbus theatrical audiences had the extreme pleasure of seeing Mr. and Mrs. Walter Huston in Sidney Howard's adaptation of the Sinclair Lewis novel, *Dodsworth*. The play is one of the very few examples of a good novel being transcribed into a good play. Mr. Howard, most naturally, gets the credit for this, and undoubtedly the further success of the stage production is due to the splendid work of the Hustons.

The story of the play is a simple one. It deals with Mr. and Mrs. Dodsworth of Zenith City who take a six months vacation in Europe. They cross on a luxurious ocean liner, stay at an English country house, haunt the Palais Royal hotels on the Continent, make acquaintances among the human driftwood of expatriated Americans and take part in all things that wealthy Americans do in France. They are the kind one sees at the Ambassadeurs

in Paris, dancing at Ciro's, visiting the Petit Trianon in a Rolls-Royce, drinking champagne and eating caviare at five o'clock in the morning at the Moulin Rouge and passing by the da Vincis and the Rodins in the Louvre with a sneer. Fran Dodsworth returns to America an adulteress, with three lovers to her credit. The first love affair shocks her husband while the second one sends him into an impassioned rage; but he looks at the third through philosophical eyes which in turn flash towards a "sweetie" of his own.

The theme of the play, one can see, is the sex war in America, and the narrowness of the Dodsworths' life in Zenith City expands into disaster on the other side of the Atlantic.

Personal Appearance

Another legitimate treat of recent date was the Brock Pemberton production of *Personal Appearance*, that satirical jab at Hollywood written by Lawrence Riley. *Personal Appearance* tells the story of a famous movie actress and her adventures while on tour, making one night personal appearances in the smaller Pennsylvania towns. Beautiful but dumb, this Hollywood star says only what she is supposed to say, autographs her pictures with a rubber stamp and about wrecks an old and well-established family who, because of the depression is running a tourist house on the main highway. Hollywood's tile swimming pools and facial treatments, short-lived marriages and easy divorces are the butts of an evening of grand entertainment.

Paradise Lost

Within the last two years Clifford Odets has become the chief figure in American drama. Last season Mr. Odets' *Waiting for Lefty* proved a sensation. This season it is his *Paradise Lost*, now published in book form. It is the story of the Gordon family, struggling to get through their middle-class days, a kind of play patterned after Anton Chekhov's *Cherry Orchard*. The dialogue is strong and the characterization is splendid, but the play as a whole does not have the punch that one found in *Waiting for Lefty*.

Boy Meets Girl

Several years ago the first play to poke fun at Hollywood was *Once in a Lifetime*. This has been followed by many others, one of which, *Personal Appearance*, has been mentioned above. Better than either of these, however, is *Boy Meets Girl* by Bella and Samuel Spewack. It is the old story of a firm of scenarists who takes a simple plot and in a simple manner makes a simple play out of it. But the thread of plot has little to do with the Spewack success of *Boy Meets Girl*. It is the terrific punch that they put into the lines. I guarantee that if you wish a good evening's entertainment, you should read *Boy Meets Girl*.

Ethan Frome

Owen Davis and Donald Davis have converted the famous novel by Edith Wharton, *Ethan Frome*, into one of the finest plays to appear in New York this season. The drab story of Ethan's life with his wife Zeena, and his blighted love affair with Mattie Silver is made to live before your eyes in a grueling fashion. Terrible indeed is the coasting scene when Mattie and Ethan plan to steer straight for the big fir tree. If you are at all interested in reading plays, do not miss this one. You will never forget it after you put the book down.

A Cycle of O'Neill

Some time ago after Eugene O'Neill has finished and produced his *Strange Interlude* and followed it so closely with his *Mourning Becomes Electra*, the public was informed that he was working on a cycle of eight plays where the action of the last seven was dependent upon the story of the one that preceded it. That was three years ago and during that time little has been learned or written about Mr. O'Neill and how he was progressing with his work.

The first intimation of his work on this cycle was contained in a small article appearing in the April 3rd edition of the *New York Times*. Here it is:

At Sea Island, Ga., working on that cycle of eight plays, is Mr. O'Neill, who takes his time. But people who go down there return with news of progress. The latest emissary from Dixie is the Theatre Guild's own Mr. Crouse. Mr. Crouse, who spent three days there and should know, doubts if any item of the eight will be ready for the public's gaze next season, though the synopsis of the whole is complete and the author himself is "very pleased" with what he has accomplished. The O'Neill habit is to finish a play, put it away and return to it fresh from other labors. About three of the eight will have been completed in this fashion before the first one reaches a stage.

By the way, there is no truth in the report that Mr. O'Neil is working on some script apart from his cycle.