

Of the Stage and Screen

By Jay Carmody

Drama Editor of The Star

THE drama library of any year is most excitingly enriched when Eugene O'Neill is one of its contributors.

The Nobel, and three-time Pulitzer, prize winner this year exceeded the best of his past performances when Random House published his "The Iceman Cometh" in October.

This drama of O'Neill's achievement lies outside the merit, or demerits, of his play. As a publishing sensation, it is to be found in the circumstance that O'Neill broke a 12-year silence.

When the universally recognized Olympian among dramatists defers comment upon man and his affairs during the 12 most exciting years of human history, he has merely to rise to bring his audience to the edge of its chairs. That is why there was no other event in the whole field of publishing to compare in dramatic impact with O'Neill's latest words on "contemporary mankind."

There may have been finer, more lucid, more significant and useful contributions in the field of letters. More widely read commentators may be able to cite a full dozen, or more, of such. But one need have read little beyond the book and drama critics, and the editorial writers, to appreciate the sensation represented in "The Iceman Cometh."

Over a period of 20 years, O'Neill has evoked more consideration and comment than any other American writer. But never has there been such a tidal wave as the one of 1946.

Drama Books Followed Conventional Pattern

Otherwise, the flow of drama literature followed the conventional pattern. The critics collected their columns into the annual anthologies. George Jean Nathan offered his "Theater Book of the Year," the story of his first nights and his frustrations. John Mason Brown added up his weekly columns in the Saturday Review of Literature into a volume, "Seeing Things," which gave play reviewing the sound of a lively and enviable profession.

Beyond these, there were anthologies of American plays, Russian plays, one-act plays, "best" movies, and the usual assortment of miscellany. Either because they were at work, instead of at liberty, or because publishers have become more wary, there was a dearth of public exposure of their private lives on the part of famous players who might otherwise have concluded the time was ripe for their autobiographies. There were remarkably few of these, which the cynical are hailing, at year's end, as one of the healthier signs in publishing.

It is true, of course, that the prolific Robert, Bob, Hope collected again some of his smartest, rapid-fire variations of Joe Miller's joke book, into a volume called "So This is Peace." The comedian with the Gatling-gun delivery has a tremendous radio and movie audience, enough of it literate to raise Hope to best-seller lists any time he is seized by the whim to "do" another book.

There's Hope By the Bushel

One of the more interesting commentaries on Hope as author is that implied in the circumstance that he hires writers by the bushel to provide him with radio and screen material, also by the bushel. In the obituary notices that must come eventually to Hope and his writers, as to all men, the comedian alone among the group will be mentioned as an author. The others will achieve the transition from "ghost" to ghost as if death were, in honest analysis, no worse a fate for them than life.

There was one off-standard contribution to the year's drama bookshelf which created a measure of attention well above the usual force of such things.

That was Eric Bentley's critical volume, "The Playwright as Thinker." Mr. Bentley, an instructor at the University of Minnesota, is a scathing young man. What he thinks of the playwright as thinker is well below zero, a sentiment most ruthlessly expressed in his classification of O'Neill as "promising."

This Bentley estimate of O'Neill, even by those who have remained skeptical of the latter's right to glory, was at least ideally calculated to make every one

aware of Bentley. Such arrogant irreverence had the immediate and dramatic effect of sending a veritable posse of reviewers in search of Bentley's birth certificate. They found him to be a buoyant 29, a vigorous and proper age for tossing onto his pile of rejects such tired stalwarts of the American theater as Oscar Hammerstein III, Maxwell Anderson, Robert Sherwood, Elmer Rice, S. N. Behrman and a score of others.

These, Bentley found in his survey of the dramatist as thinker, were not even "promising," but rather pitiable performers long ago enslaved by that inexorable tyrant, the box-office.

Naturally, writing under such a positive title as "The Playwright as Thinker," it is not enough to brush off the whole contemporary lot as nonthinkers. The man who wants to write a book must have more material than that. Accordingly, Bentley turns for contrast, and for the bulk of his book's content, to some of the 19th century's giants. With a sharp and happy sense of the odiousness of his comparisons, he looks into the works of Ibsen, Shaw, Pirandello, Brecht and Wagner, and finds in them what is missing in the present-day group.

In the fashion of authors

in it, for all their passionate protests to the contrary.

He wrote a four-hour play. In doing so, he neglected to conform to the pattern. He was assailed immediately as having no right to do this. After all, what of his responsibility to commuters? What of his responsibility to patrons who could find no proper food in the vicinity of the Martin Beck theater where "The Iceman Cometh" is playing? Is a writer free to do this to the domestic tranquility of suburbanites, the intestinal harmony of theatergoers? Mr. O'Neill might well ask these questions in view of those he has been asked about what he thinks his rights are.

A larger, and more meaningful right, on which his play has inspired challenge is its essential gloominess. The "Iceman" coined by O'Neill is death. His play says mankind is on its way to doom, sustained on the journey by its pitiable pipe-dreams.

Has he a right to say such a foreboding thing, to speak thus to ears that are tuned only to words of hope?

There was no doubt in O'Neill's mind that this was his privilege. But he must have learned by now that that was incorrect. Statesmen may be inept, lost, helpless before the violent currents. And politicians, naturally. But not playwrights. They are expected to find truth, and it must be an optimistic truth.

It is something for the play-



From his penthouse, O'Neill surveys the New York gutter.

thinking unhappily about the thinking capacities of more mortal men, Bentley transcends the immediate limits of his theme to make his volume a work of social commentary.

Whether one agrees with him, or disagrees, "The Playwright as Thinker" is not a book to be read listlessly, a quality instructor Bentley most clearly had in mind.

Most Exciting Drama Volume

As the season's most exciting drama volume, "The Iceman Cometh" evoked such torrents of comment that virtually nothing remains to be said of it.

There is one aspect of the play's impact, however, that seems to have received less attention than it deserves. The one best qualified to give it the particular attention is O'Neill. In view of the challenge which his play has inspired, he might well ask many of his critics how much they believe in freedom of speech. Certainly he has many reasons to doubt that they really do believe

wright to brood upon. While he is doing that and coming, no doubt, to the conclusion that he might well abandon writing, the others will continue to fill the bookshelf of the drama.

From the standpoint of peace of mind, if not of profits, it is better to write a lively book of querulous comment such as Nathan's. Or Brown's critical diary. Or Grace Moore's "Book of the Ballet."

One might even find escape from too much responsibility by compiling an anthology of "Seven Soviet Plays," a compendium of sentimental propaganda which shows the playwright as thinker when the state asks him to think its way.

Such are the works that inject a restlessness and excitement into the lives of those who comb the drama bookshelf.

North Europe

(Continued From Page 6.)

the Night." The heroine, Ann Magrit, grows into a symbol of those qualities, the courage of the poor and the vitality of those pure of heart, in which Falkenberg puts his hope for the future of Norway through all vicissitudes.

The centenary of the death of of Henrik Wergeland, our greatest genius, has been celebrated by books on him and reprints of his works, some of them showing what the Norwegian art of book-making is able to do in spite of severe handicaps.

It may amuse American readers that the craving for light reading has been satisfied by the collected works of—among others—Patrick Quentin-Jonathan Stagg. His mystery stories have made a tremendous hit over here.

Recommended

THE ICEMAN COMETH, by Eugene O'Neill (Random House; \$2.75).

THEATER BOOK OF THE YEAR, by George Jean Nathan (Knopf; \$3.00).

SEEING THINGS, by John Mason Brown (Whittlesey; \$3.00).

THE PLAYWRIGHT AS THINKER, by Eric Bentley (Reynal; \$3.00).

SO THIS IS PEACE, by Bob Hope (Simon; \$1.00).

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