

The Theatre

WORK in the theatre may be art or it may not be. Whether or not it is art, it is bound to contain its element of propaganda. The propaganda may be positive and easily recognizable, whether in favor of one social class or another. It may even be aggressive in this respect. Or the propaganda may be entirely negative. That is to say, the element of propaganda may originate in an author's mere acceptance of a social *status quo*. If a playwright accepts a social *status quo*, it is dollars to doughnuts that in his play he will seek in some way, perhaps only half-consciously, to justify it.

It should be clear, therefore, that to understand the American theatre it is necessary to do more than applaud or condemn from one arbitrary angle alone. For example, suppose we take the Theatre Union's production of *Peace on Earth*.

What is the more important factor about this production? Is it that this play has been produced under any circumstances at all? Or is it that the Theatre Union's production definitely marks a technical advance over previous plays in America of similar intent?

Broadway, the capital of the American bourgeois theatre, has been making swift progress in stage mechanics in the past three or four years. Is it significant that the Theatre Union in *Peace on Earth* at the Civic Repertory Theatre has appropriated to itself all it could of this technique, for the sake of improving the technique of propaganda? Or, regardless of technique, as such, is it still more significant that the art of the theatre has been irrefutably impinged upon by the subject matter and the portent of this play?

Then there is always the possibility, in this period at least, that the typical Broadway comedy may be taken too lightly and the typical Broadway drama too seriously, by critics interested in the point of view of a particular

economic class, or by members of an audience, who have a similar interest. The advent of the Theatre Union seems to make this truism doubly sure. The avowed policy of the Theatre Union cuts directly across the tacit and complacent class policy of the established Broadway producers. It is a challenge. It is also a challenging invasion of a field that has been considered by the ringmasters to be inviolate, for the reason that art, of whatever form or medium, has been assumed to be "pure" in the sense of being safe from politics.

If there is always the chance that the Broadway comedy may be taken too lightly and the drama too seriously, a journal of revolutionary opinion may be especially in danger of making these mistakes. To turn either form glibly backward upon itself—the comic form or the catastrophic form—is always a temptation. And I use the term catastrophic, instead of tragic, advisedly in this reference to form, because the writers who express the serious aspirations of the capitalist class in the present phase are no longer possessed of the genius of tragedy, which is the higher conception.

There would seem to be good reason, in this Number One of the weekly *NEW MASSES*, to call attention to the possible scope of dramatic reviewing on this page.

The drama, whether comic or serious, will always be considered controversially as art and as propaganda. At the same time, and with a slightly different approach, notable tendencies in the drama as a whole, as well as points of departure in a particular play, must be treated plainly as fact. Whatever their social content, plays are sometimes also facts to be reported upon objectively. Sometimes the simple reporting of a fact about the theatre is the most useful kind of criticism. This is only true, however, when the report is related to and governed by a point of view, a policy.

This department, furthermore, will assume always that its remarks and reports are addressed mainly to three different elements in American society. All three are important, though not equally so.

The first group consists of members of the

proletariat who have advanced to the point of demanding that art expression and art enjoyment, along with meat and potatoes, shall belong to the workers, and who are consequently interested in arguments on the subject. The second group consists of intellectuals who have advanced to the point of being actuated in their affairs by social consciousness, the ultimate pivot of such consciousness being the Marxian conception of the class struggle. The third group consists of the many proletarians and the few intellectuals who have already merged their interests to the extent of participating together in the revolutionary struggles of the Communist Party. In this third category, of course, the intellectuals have altered their individualism in favor of sufficiently complete identification with the working class.

And the first principle of every commentary and of every objective report will be that any play offered as light entertainment or any play offered as an emotional stimulus, or any play offered as political argument, shall be understood to contain testimony as to the special interests of a particular economic class.

WILLIAM GARDENER.

The Screen

EDDIE CANTOR has always been an excellent gauge for the petty bourgeois temper. The shifting emphases in his humor have reflected admirably the shifting world-view of the American middle classes during the past ten years. In the golden age of Coolidge his was the smirking smart aleck humor of the boy who had made good, his trivial wit revolving about wives, commuters, office secretaries and first generation Americans.

But it was in 1929-30 that he first became a popular national figure; the Everyman of the stock market crash, the sorely pressed petty bourgeois of the Hoover-Roosevelt world. Now, in *Roman Scandals*, the Goldwyn production that opened on Broadway the other day, he has added his voice, too, to the most recent development in American bourgeois thought. The desperate need of the middle classes to replace the uncertainty of the present day, to escape into the stability and tranquility of the past has produced during the past six months films like *Alice in Wonderland*, *The World Changes*, *Dr. Bull*, *State Fair* and a host of others that have assumed the proportions and significance far beyond the ordinary cycle.

By joining this parade into yesterday, Cantor, whose expression has always been more vulgar and less abstracted than the average bourgeois statement, has indicated how profound this temper for the past is. In the role of Eddie, the homeless errand boy of the township of West Rome, America, who sees about him political corruption and the eviction of poor families, he expresses his desire to return to ancient Rome "where men were real men." Not, however, till Cantor has gath-

CAMERON MACPHERSON'S

"DAWN to DAWN"

"*** Unusual Technique."—Daily News.

Directed by Josef Berne

Also Dr. J. S. Watson's—"LOT IN SODOM"
This is the INDEPENDENT Film Makers Show!
Little Carnegie 57th St. E. 25c to 2 P. M.
of 7th Ave. DAILY.

THE THEATRE UNION presents THE ANTI-WAR PLAY

PEACE ON EARTH

By GEORGE SKLAR and ALBERT MALTZ, authors of MERRY-GO-ROUND

JOHN STRACHEY

says: "There ought to be a hundred such plays performed in every part of the capitalistic world."

SIDNEY HOWARD

says: "Real theatre the like of which is not on Broadway. A really thrilling play."

HENRI BARBUSSE

says: "I shall write and talk about this play in France."

5th BIG WEEK!

CIVIC REPERTORY THEATRE

14th St. & 6th Ave. WAtkins 9-7450; Evenings 8:45
Matinees Wednesday & Saturday 2:30

30c to \$1.50 NO TAX