

THE PASSING SHOW:**Thesis-Drama
On Our Stage**

By JOHN ROSENFELD

Several agitated telephone calls in Latin-American accents convinced us that not everybody thought we understood a new play, "Let the Dogs Bark" by Sergio Vodanovic, given at the Dallas Theater Center with Rockefeller Foundation assistance.

The burden of complaint was consistent. "Let the Dogs Bark" was a true portrait of penury in the upper Chilean middle class, of corruption in government (let's not be specific), of the frustration of youth, of the need for honesty and courage in politics. We were told that failure of North American newspapers to appreciate this, is driving Latin-American youth into Castro's camp. We, as a less than ecstatic appreciator of "Let the Dogs Bark" were now a "driver."

Far from resenting the protests, we were instructed. We had forgotten that the drama, in much of the European tradition, was more an instrument of political propaganda than not. Continental nations, especially, counted on censors to nod or to accept payola while the playwright slipped one over on the king or the duke.

Strict control of the arts was a primary move of, first, the Communist dictatorship and, second, the fascist, in our era. Obviously, our Chilean friends value "Let the Dogs Bark" as a tract of protest if not exactly as another "Hamlet."

* * *

"LET THE DOGS BARK," therefore, is a "defi" as we call it of a Battista-type governmental junta and is valued without regard to its literary merit.

An American drama critic, however, must distinguish between theatrical art and theatrical ham; between the literary creation and the thesis-play. This does not mean that the thesis-play is, ipso facto, devoid of literary merit. It does mean that the good message is not necessarily the eloquent message.

"Let the Dogs Bark," as a play, is old-fashioned with stereotypes rather than human beings as characters—the cast does much to compensate the script here. This Chilean play will remind the North American drama student of nothing so much as those thesis-plays of the Theodore Roosevelt days, when the municipal level was the favorite whipping boy. Charles Klein's "Hon. John Grigsby" and "The Lion and the Mouse" were favorites.

All were palpably inspired by the great ancestor of the modern thesis-play, Henrik Ibsen, and his still-playable "An Enemy of the People."

In this a scientist discovers that the resort baths of his town have been polluted. He thinks society will be grateful for the exposure of an unwelcome but life-serving truth. Instead, the community turns on him, labeling him a vicious troublemaker, a malicious wrecker of the civic economy, and all but stone him out of town. These plays, including "Let the Dogs Bark" have a weak ending. The resolution is either vague martyrdom or the nebulous road of the prophet.

* * *

THE THESIS-PLAY is less dominant in America and England than elsewhere. The average critic would be cheered more for evaluating a play's craft than its subject matter. Most people would say that the subject matter is not the critic's business nor

even the theater's except as the subject influences the craft.

It was therefore possible during the World War to dislike or to like a movie about the war services on the strength of its artistry alone.

The change came around 1953 when critics who objected to a movie called "My Son, John" were lumped as "pinko" by several "radical right" magazines.

"My Son, John" was produced by people we admire, Leo McCarey, the producer-director; actors Helen Hayes, Dean Jagger, Van Heflin, the late Robert Walker, Frank McHugh and Minor Watson. The theme was Communist infiltration and how Walker, an intellectual, became part of the apparatus. It ended rather preposterously in a shooting on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial.

* * *

THERE WAS NOTHING wrong with "My Son, John" except that it didn't come off as drama. To have said that it did sent no public to the theaters.

No, by passing up "My Son, John," America's brains had not been washed in a pinko bath. America was still attending theater for fun and not for duty.

So if we do not know all about the Latin-American thesis-play, Latin America still has something to learn about America's attitude toward the theater where, possibly, the play is still the thing.