

FIRST NIGHT REPORT

WALTER KERR'S REVIEW

'The Rope Dancers'

CORT THEATER

A new play in three acts and five scenes by Morton Wishengrad, staged by Peter Hall, designed by Boris Aronson, costumes by Patricia Zipprodt, presented by The Playwrights' Company and Gilbert Miller with the following cast:

Lizzie Hyland Beverly Lunsford
Margaret Hyland Siobhan McKenna
The Moving Man William Edmondson
Mrs. Farrow Joan Blondell
Clementine Barbara Ellen Myers
James Hyland Art Carney
Lameshnik Joseph Julian
The Cop Joseph Boland
Dr. Jacobson Theodore Bikel

THE ROPE DANCERS" is an intensely earnest, intensely acted play about people whose emotional responses are always in excess of the facts.

At one point in the second act Siobhan McKenna stands poised and trembling on a tenement window-ledge, five flights up. She is so terrified it will become known that her only daughter was born with six fingers on one hand that she is ready to plunge to her death if the truth is shouted. Art Carney, garrulous and high-spirited father of the child, is so hopelessly feeble in any and all crises that he can only sit slumped in a rickety chair wringing his hands. The child

herself, wan and wretched, is so disturbed by the havoc she has wrought upon those she loves that all control vanishes, her arms and legs flail wildly, and she falls in convulsions to the floor.

It is something of a tribute to author Morton Wishengrad's stubborn sobriety and savage determination that the scene holds. But Mr. Wishengrad's symbolic study of human deformity suffers, I think, from the same sort of excess he imposes on his characters.

He is, to begin with, unwilling to let us like them very much. Siobhan McKenna, her mouth drawn close in a tight, withered, contemptuous smile, turns venomously on her neighbors and violently upon her husband whenever a generous hand is stretched out to her. Her daughter's "shame" is what she lives and feeds on; no one must tamper with this carefully nursed sore.

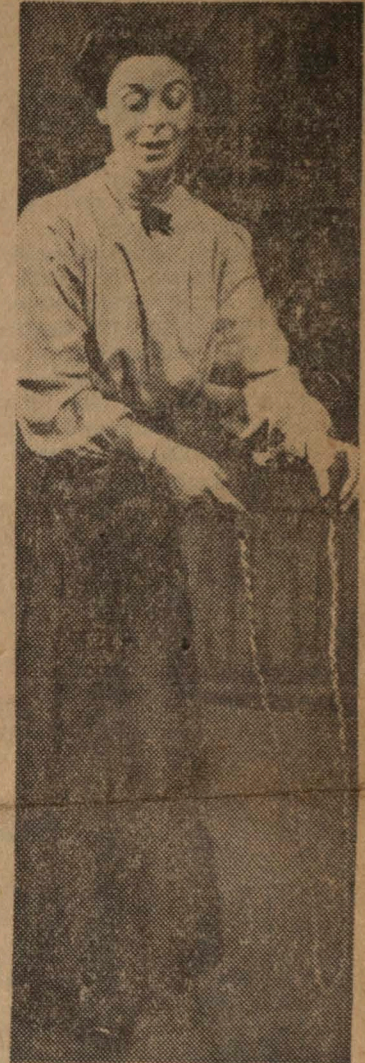
Miss McKenna is prepared,

with honesty and some dignity, to rap out every cold and cutting insult the author has handed her: if Mr. Carney makes a plea for forgiveness, she reminds him that their child was conceived on a night he'd come home drunk, and from a brothel; if slattern Joan Blondell offers her a friendly cup of coffee, she drains it immediately and arrogantly into the sink. The performance is straightforward, direct, controlled. But we are given so little insight into the harrowing beginnings of what is now a misshapen soul, so little in the way of homely sympathy, that we can only wonder why anybody offers this rigid woman anything, let alone love.

Art Carney, lowering himself down a fire-escape and bounding into a home that doesn't want him with a rococo flourish, is similarly willing to make every defeated gesture that is asked of him. His zest for a blathering, pseudo-poetic ne'er-do-well is very nearly contagious: he has great fun testing the intelligence of a truant officer who has come for his sadly warped child. Yet Mr. Wishengrad will give him nothing but weakness with which to win us. Even the blarney is suspect; to the end, he is something less than a man.

The grim insistence that we face only the sorry truth about sorry people infects every side of a hopeless puzzle: the girl herself, beating her father's shoulders with furious fists and shivering with fright beneath a blanket, is an unyielding sparrow from whom the warmth of life has long been drained. Only Joan Blondell, as a hearty slattern from the flat downstairs, is allowed a beaming, booming good nature; Miss Blondell plants her hands on her hips and makes the most of it.

But there is still another excess to be dealt with in the



Siobhan McKenna in "The Rope Dancers."

theater. Each of the play's small, symbolic actions mean more than they say. The six-finger embarrassment is, at one time in the evening, equated with being a Jew. When, at long last, a doctor (very well played by Theodore Bikel) simply cuts the finger away, the child dies. Perhaps man cannot live without what he considers—or a mistaken society considers—a deformity? The questions are big ones. The incidents on which they rest are too slender to carry them plausibly, to make us believe that the issue of the moment is also an issue of much greater moment.

Mr. Wishengrad writes of ugliness, of ravaged and unattractive people, with considerable integrity. What he does not do is make us care for the stricken figures who inhabit an ambitious—indeed over-ambitious—fable.

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