ACTUALITY—Thomas Wolfe at 15, an adolescent boy with restless thoughts of leaving his home town, Asheville, N. C.

ACTOR—Anthony Perkins impersonates Wolfe at 17 in the Broadway dramatization of Wolfe's first novel, "Look Homeward, Angel."

Thomas Wolfe Comes Home

Two decades after his death, he is back among the people and places of his youth, in the play based on his 'Look Homeward, Angel.'

By WILMA DYKEMAN and JAMES STOKELY

WHEN the curtain rose not long ago on the opening performance of Ketti Frings' hit adaptation of Thomas Wolfe's autobiographical novel "Look Homeward, Angel," scattered through the audience of New York first-nighters were a number of people from Asheville, N. C., the "home" of the play's title, the Altamont of Tom Wolfe's fiction. There were librarians from that same library that had refused to have a copy of "Look Homeward, Angel" on its shelves for years after its publication in 1929. There were clubwomen from some of those groups that had snubbed Wolfe's sister Mabel after they felt that his thinly disguised fiction had stripped and exposed them to public view. There were business men from the town whose citizens had once taken the same general attitude toward its native chronicler as the anonymous correspondent who warned him not to return home or they would drag his "overgroan karkus" across the town square.

Also present in the première audience were the only two living members of that Wolfe family which has become so closely identified with the fictional Gants. They were Mabel Wolfe Wheaton, portrayed in the novel and play as the fiercely devoted sister, Helen Gant, and Fred Wolfe, characterized as the large-hearted brother, Luke Gant. A few days earlier, when Mabel and Fred had arrived in New York, both had brushed aside news of well-known or influential people who might be attending the opening night, and had bent much more attention to discovering whether or not everyone from Asheville who wanted tickets had received them. Their roots are where Tom's were: in the native soil of his region, among the people with whom he grew up.

How deep his roots were, perhaps Wolfe himself did not always realize until the fact was challenged. During his visit home in 1937, Wolfe met F. Scott Fitzgerald, who was staying at a resort hotel in Asheville. When Fitzgerald asked him what he was doing in those "God-forsaken" hills where there was nothing for a writer, Wolfe protested passionately. "Don't you believe it, Scott! Why, I've just spent the morning out here in the mountains talking with a great-uncle of mine who fought at the battle of Chickamauga and there's more material out there than in all your fashionable hotels. That's where life is, Scott." And because Wolfe loved and hated and knew this place and these people so intensely, a play encompassing the fury of his feeling can open now, almost twenty years after his death in September, 1938, and find a ready audience and rave reviews.

In fact, so great is the vitality of Tom Wolfe that it often seems impossible to separate the man from his ever-mushrooming legend. There are the well-known stories of the difficulties of his size—6 foot 5 inches tall, 240 pounds—and his enormous appetites for food and drink and love, and of his writing as he paced the floor and stood using the top of a refrigerator for his desk. There is his familiar infatuation with America, its breadth and its variety, which spilled over into pages of poetry in every novel he wrote. ("God, I'd rather be a poet than anything else in the world!")

To travel even the briefest journey with him was to realize how intimately he wanted to know this land ("like the palm of my hand," he had written his mother from Harvard). Driving along a country road, he would suddenly interrupt talk of books to ask, "Is that cabbage or tobacco those people are setting out in the field yonder? Let's stop and see how they do it. What else do farmers around here grow for a living? I need more time on this trip, time to get out and walk around." And later, following one of the rivers of North Carolina, with moonlight shining on the rocky rapids between the steep mountains on either side, Wolfe's deep voice half-choked with the lonely beauty of the night: "I'll never forget that river—that river and the mountains in the moonlight, as long as I live."

THE sheer furious concentration by which Wolfe worked and lived has often overshadowed the kindness and concern he could display in everyday contacts with people. Perhaps two small instances are revealing. After Asheville's outburst against him when that first novel, which he had subtitled "a story of the buried life," was published, Wolfe did not return home for over seven years. When at last he did go back he was still apprehensive of his reception and made a brief trip across the Smoky Mountains to East Tennessee to look at a cabin which had been offered him there for his vacation.

It so happened that a rather poor and winsome mountain family were being allowed to occupy the cabin until it should be needed, and despite the fact that Wolfe liked the place, with its clear mountain stream in front and towering spruces behind, its sense of time and space in which to work, he refused to consider seriously the possibility of staying there. He had realized that his summertime use of the house would mean that the family living in it would have to move elsewhere, and during a few seconds' casual conversation he had discerned how much the shy, slim mother wanted this home for her children. It has been asserted that Wolfe was selfish because he made candid use of his family and friends in his writing. Those who knew him intimately would perhaps say instead that he was selfish for his art—but not for himself.

LATER, during that same summer, when he had finally located a house out in the country near Asheville, he employed a local girl as secretary. To his dismay he soon discovered she knew very little about typing and even less about rules of punctuation and spelling. He explained to friends that he now found himself doing not only his own work but hers as well—yet he could not bring himself to fire her because she had been "so damned eager for the job" and he did not want to wound her pride. It was a curious sight to see this huge, intense man, who had been accused of *(Continued on Page 46)*

WILMA DYKEMAN and **JAMES STOKELY** are a husband-wife writing team from the Carolina-Tennessee country, and each was a friend of Thomas Wolfe. Their book, "Neither Black Nor White," has just been published.

DO NOT FORGET THE NEEDIEST!

Boy and friends—Thomas Wolfe, at 16, poses with lodgers at his mother's boarding house.

Thomas Wolfe Comes Home

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callousness in telling the unvarnished truth about the intimate lives of his fellow-men, asking visitors to his workshop how he could bring himself to tell one poor girl she could not spell. Again, the first and larger truth had to do with integrity as a writer, while the latter was merely a matter of personal irritation and inefficiency for which he was loath to make someone unhappy.

TOM WOLFE'S maternal ancestors came from some of the oldest Scotch-Irish (Westall-Penland) lines in North Carolina. These were people whose ingrained belief was that "a man's a man for a' that," and neither of his parents—W. O., from the Pennsylvania Dutch country, or "Miss Julia"—had ever taken the first artificial step toward "social climbing." Miss Julia, the stout-willed Eliza Gant of Wolfe's fiction, was a short, invincible woman who outlived her son Tom and, at the age of 83, talked to students at New York University, or movieland gatherings in Hollywood, with the same deliberate and involved reminiscence that marked her conversations with friends back in Asheville.

"Pshaw, I always told Tom, I don't care if you make me out to be like old Aunt Caroline Peavine—she used to be on the streets around Asheville here and the children would all make fun of her—and I said, well, Tom can make me out to be like Aunt Caroline if he wants to and it helps his books."

HER interior motto was evident in every line of her straight back and every direct look of her brown eyes: anyone could be her equal, no one was her superior.

And Tom himself must often have heard the anecdotes the family still tell with gales of laughter, mocking the mannerisms that sometimes infected their fellow-townsfolk. Perhaps at 8 or 10 years of age he heard his father, standing at the midday table carving a great steaming rib roast of beef or loin of pork, recount the story Mabel or Fred remembers today: when George Vanderbilt constructed Biltmore House, one of the most elaborate private residences in America, at Asheville just before the turn of the century and went there to live, some of the people in the little mountain town began to vie with each other for a place in the charmed social circle.

One old gentleman, a local colonel of English extraction, trained his man-of-all-work to perform double service as butler when Mr. Vanderbilt should come to call. "You're to take his hat and cane, bow low, and announce at the door to my study, 'My lord, Mr. Vanderbilt.'" After several rehearsals, George Vanderbilt did, indeed, come to call. The old yardman-turned-butler took one look at the famous visitor standing in the door, then ran to the study and shouted, "My God, it's Mr. Vanderbilt!" Wolfean laughter over this story of the old colonel was gargantuan, the laughter of people free from the pettiness of pretension.

WOLFE'S adult attention to "little" people—those who could neither lionize him after his early acclaim, nor be the lions themselves—existed not only in North Carolina but in New York as well. When a young would-be writer from his mountain region came to live for a short while in the metropolis Wolfe had taken so greedily to heart—symbolizing Manhattan as "the enfabled rock" meshed in the web of time—he shared with the newcomer both his growing knowledge of literary circles and that time of which he felt he had so little left. Wolfe took him to Orson Welles' production of "Julius Caesar." ("Shakespeare said it all. Why do we keep on trying?" Wolfe wondered.) He included him in a literary party ("I don't go to these things myself but once a year") and warned him against unnecessary awe and those who would confine writers in little cliques. They ate huge meals at Cavanagh's and Luchow's. And there was nothing of the "great man" in the friendship—just the warmth coming from remembrance of a previous journey made from Altamont by an earlier young hopeful. A hopeful who had believed that physical flight could leave the place and people of home behind—only to discover that home was inescapable.

So Thomas Wolfe, after having tried his hand at drama and failed—"Mannerhouse" and "Welcome to Our City" were turned down by Broadway producers—went to England when he was

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26 and began the long homeward look which was to grow into his gigantic first novel and the three novels which would follow in autobiographical sequence, two published after his death at the age of 37.

One clue to Wolfe's growing self-knowledge and dedication during this period of hard work and little money was his refusal of an offer from Hollywood to write for the movies at $2,500 a week. He explained that he had more important work to do: writing his novels.

THESE novels established his reputation as a native writer in the tradition of Melville, Whitman and Twain. With their publication in eleven countries, many Europeans have found in Wolfe the voice of our rich, sprawling continent. Perhaps a visitor like J. B. Priestley, from the tidy English Isles, could best express why Wolfe should not be judged by formulas: "He was the vast, undisciplined continent made literate," Priestley wrote, "a giant out of the American soil. He had dozens of faults that any neat little whippersnapper of a novelist could correct but, unlike all such, he had the creative fire, the teeming mind, the great heart."

The British actor, Charles Laughton, has called Wolfe America's greatest writer, her "Dickens and Rembrandt." But perhaps a fellow Southerner, Nobel Prize winner William Faulkner, could best appreciate the demonic joy and despair in Wolfe's work when he said he considered Wolfe America's finest contemporary novelist — not necessarily because he had achieved most, but because he had dared most. "He tried to put the Lord's Prayer on the head of a pin."

Finally, what of the people of "home"? What of those citizens of Altamont-Asheville who once cried out in pain and anger and misunderstanding when they found a native son had revealed the waste and hope, the meanness and grandeur of their lives, and now find their children or their neighbors — or themselves — making a pilgrimage to New York to see a fresh triumph for the book they once rejected? Well, "Dixieland," the boarding house which was Wolfe's home and which became one of the memorable houses in American fiction, still stands and is now a literary shrine where visitors may see the creaking swing on the front porch and the long tables still in the dining room. And Wolfe himself told the story of his reacceptance, many times, both in his writing and in conversations. "For years I was afraid that if I went home to Asheville they'd kill me with their venom. Then I went — and instead, they nearly drowned me with their hospitality."

Would-be buddies offered him tidbits of information about the private lives of their neighbors—("Why Tom, if I'd known you were writing that kind of a book I could have told you a lot of stuff you left out")—as if his novels were merely gossip magazines with a plot. Old friends who had remained steadfast through the storms of criticism—and there were a few—came frequently to his summer cabin to rejoice at the return of the triumphant prodigal, and they consumed the time and energy he needed for his work. He could deny none of his family or few of his town, but he saw each now in a way he had never seen them as a child. That summer he wrote portions of his last book, "You Can't Go Home Again."

THAT title is not wholly accurate. Tom Wolfe *has* gone home in two different ways. Mabel Wolfe Wheaton said after "Look Homeward, Angel's" opening night, "It was a good play—but it was hard for us to watch some of it. I remember home—Papa and how meticulously he always dressed with his wing collars and well-brushed suits, and how well we always ate and our good moments together, and how Tom describes those times, as well as the bad ones, in his book, and I missed seeing them on the stage. Of course, Tom always wanted a play on Broadway—that was his first love." So Tom Wolfe has come home again in this sense, too—to the world of the theatre which once rejected him, and which he satirized in his later work, but which now accepts him in full measure.

Second, as one North Carolinian said outside the theatre at the close of the play's first performance, "Tom never completely left Asheville, did he?" No, and he never totally discovered the world, either: he carried both within himself, and as he looked homeward most deeply, he looked outward most truly.

SOLUTIONS TO LAST WEEK'S CROSSWORD PUZZLES