

MR. INGE IN TOP FORM

Sensitive Play About Some Modest People

By BROOKS ATKINSON

IF William Inge were a less sensitive writer, "The Dark at the Top of the Stairs" would probably be nostalgic comedy.

Nearly everything that occurs in this chronicle of a small-town family in 1920 is comic if viewed from a hard-headed point of view. The temperamental quarrel between Rubin Flood and his wife, Cora, seems to be tragic and frightening to the people concerned, and particularly to the two children, who have a feeling of being dispossessed by something inexplicable that happens between their parents.

But the quarrel is only a family jar, as the audience half-suspects at the time and as Mr. Inge discloses in the final scene. Comedy thrives on these big emotional upheavals that are trifling in the light of the experience of the world.

There is one episode that could never be interpreted as comedy in any circumstances. The suicide of a Jewish youth, which is reported at second hand, is painful, particularly because he had misinterpreted the friendship of the young people around him. But this is the one episode in which Mr. Inge seems to have overreached himself and violated the homey tone of the rest of the play.

Dark Areas

Something less horrifying than an impulsive suicide might better serve Mr. Inge's purpose, which is to show the dark areas of misunderstanding that lie between people who assume that they understand one another. Each man is an island, contrary to the doctrine of Dr. Donne. At best the communication between islands is incomplete, though usually it is not fatal.

If Mr. Inge's "new play," as he calls it, is not pure comedy, it is because he thoroughly sympathizes with his characters. He respects the little dollops of anguish and loneliness that they carry inside themselves. The Booth Tarkington terrors of the Floods' adolescent daughter are real to her. She genuinely believes that she is ugly; she cannot endure being a wallflower. Cora Flood's sister looks and sounds like a comic character; she is a tornado of good-natured raillery and officiousness. But the hearty exterior is a mask; she has a desolate secret that is not comic.

Rubin Flood's furious rebellion over the cost of a party dress for his daughter seems to be comic, the storminess of his behavior being so out of proportion. But before the play ends his reaction to this incident turns out to have been more reasonable. He has been concealing anxieties about the family economy that are unselfish and genuine.

Universality

From a detached point of view, these people and their problems are comic. But Mr. Inge has the grace not to be detached. He has not forgotten that the common cares of commonplace people are real and painful, like a shroud that hangs somewhere off in the background. Although the cares can be laughed off, he does not feel heartless about them.

Mr. Inge was born in Independence, Kan., in 1913. He has been writing plays for Broadway ever since "Come Back, Little Sheba" was produced in 1950 (incidentally making a star of Shirley Booth). His second play was "Picnic," produced in 1953, and his third, "Bus Stop," produced in 1955. All of them have been interesting, especially "Picnic," which explored some of the minor problems of middle-class respectability, and "Bus Stop," which told a humorous tale about an empty-headed night-club singer and a chuckle-headed cowboy.

As a piece of craftsmanship, "The Dark at the Top of the Stairs" is less clever than "Picnic" and "Bus Stop." But it goes beyond either of these plays in the office of the writer, which is to understand human beings. It has universality of meaning; everyone recognizes in it some part of his own life. Nearly everything that happens (the suicide excepted) is small and familiar: a little boy's contempt for his older sister; gossip about neighbors; getting ready to go to a dance for adolescents at the country club; washing-up after dinner; going to the movies. Much of it is very funny, indeed.

No Judgments

But it leaves an impression of universality because Mr. Inge participates in the life he is describing by seeing in it truths that we have all confirmed in our own experience. He is not judging. He does not indicate whether he thinks his segment of life is good or bad. He does not suggest that the characters are the salt of the earth or that they are mediocrities. Drawing on his own knowledge of people and contributing his own forbearance, he has written a humorous, touching, generous portrait of the condition of middle-class Americans.

Mr. Inge has always been fortunate in his directors: Daniel



"THE MUSIC MAN"—Robert Preston, who poses as a musician in a plot to sell an on an idea to organize a boys' band, has the starring role in the Meredith Willson musical

Mann for "Come Back, Little Sheba," Joshua Logan for "Picnic," Harold Churman for "Bus Stop" and now Elia Kazan for "The Dark at the Top of the Stairs." There are spots that are a little self-conscious in Mr. Kazan's direction, as there were self-conscious spots in "Picnic." For both Mr. Kazan and Mr. Logan are forceful men whose impact on a script can be stronger than the author's.

Performance

But the performance in general profits from Mr. Kazan's interest in character, his awareness of children, his vitality, his idiomatic style and his skill in transitions of mood. Not that Mr. Inge has not written parts that are thoroughly actable. Nearly every actor has at least one illuminating scene. As Cora's sister, Eileen Heckart has a long, boisterous scene in the second act which she plays with great energy and variety.

Pat Hingle, as the head of the Flood family, has at least two resounding scenes which he plays with a snarling turbulence that is both funny and admirable. In the center of the play, Timmy Everett, as the Jewish youth, has a long scene in which the innocent goodwill of the character solidifies the play. Mr. Everett's candor and decency make this an especially memorable sequence.

The mother has no one big scene. Like a mother, she runs through every scene, attending to the needs of the others. Teresa Wright plays the part with extraordinary taste, modesty and beauty. In the parts of the children, Judith Robinson, Evans Evans and Charles Saari are at the same time amusing and disarming.

Like the play, in fact. Mr. Inge could have written it legitimately as comic entertainment. But he has transmuted it into a fine expression of charitable feeling and esteem.

DO NOT FORGET THE NEEDIEST!



RELIGIOUS DRAMA SERIES—John Astin attempts to strangle Martin Newman in Christopher Fry's "A Sleep of Prisoners," at the Phoenix Theatre this afternoon.

NEWS AND GOSSIP OF T

By ARTHUR GELB

THE news that Tennessee Williams had made his latest work—a twin bill called "Garden District"—available to a 299-seat off-Broadway theatre was greeted with surprise last month. Since then, there has been a good deal of speculation as to why one of our leading playwrights and a two-time Pulitzer Prize-winner made this apparently quixotic gesture.

Mr. Williams himself, breaking a long silence the other day, consented to shed some light on the situation. He said the principal reason for the off-Broadway production, set to open at the York Playhouse on Jan. 7, lies in the subject matter of the second and longer of the two plays.

"Now that I've heard it read," said Mr. Williams, "I find it isn't as shocking as I thought, at first, it would be. The total effect, I feel, is not distasteful; but it does involve material that will arouse some controversy." Specifically—or at least as specifically as Mr. Williams was willing to say at the moment—the play, subtitled "Suddenly Last Summer," is an account of "a shockingly violent occurrence" with a "symbolic" significance. Its leading character is a girl whose sanity is in question because she insists on giving an account of the occurrence, to which she was the only obtainable witness.

Mr. Williams fears that uptown audiences, who have criticized him for the violence in his plays, haven't strong enough stomachs for the new play, although he put it a little more tactfully:

"I don't want to attack Broadway audiences," he said. "But they gave me the feeling, when 'Orpheus Descending' was put on last season, that I had become a homicidal maniac, if

Williams Explains His Move Off Broadway—Additional Items

not worse. Possibly I exaggerated the reactions; however, I became a little frightened. I've always been startled by people who are antagonized by plays for reasons other than the quality of the work. Some of my plays, I think, have suffered from a reaction of ethical bias and an imposed and conventional morality."

Moreover, the production atmosphere of "Orpheus Descending" was one of terrific tension, and Mr. Williams, who said he started seeing an analyst soon after it opened, wishes to avoid, for the present, a repetition of that kind of stress. "I couldn't cope at this time with doing another controversial play on Broadway. The financial risk Off Broadway is not so great and the conditions, therefore, are less of a life and death matter," he explained.

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