

The Case For Sentiment

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Miller never made the mistake of forgetting his one man. Willy Loman is a particular salesman and Linda is a particular wife. There is a particular tragedy. Without all these particulars, we never could get bound up enough in the details to believe, to care.

At the same time, "Death of a Salesman" is not a domestic drama written in an uninspired, everyday way. There are violations of naturalism's dogma at every turn — flashbacks and hallucinations and the recurring image of that forest in Africa from which even an ordinary man could emerge a millionaire.

Has Miller been accused of being unimaginative? Not by anyone who's seen "Salesman" lately. This is daring theater, for it shows us a weak and vulnerable man and still destroys us with his tragedy. It is humanism such as this that Broadway's audiences are waiting for.

Tennessee Williams's "A Streetcar Named Desire" is perhaps the most perfect play ever written by an American and even its stage directions are lovely. But the play's power lies in the perfection, the symmetry of the sexual equation it strikes — pitting the sensitivity and classicism of Blanche and the old refined South against the rude but vital brutality of Stanley and the new industrial South. The balance of these two is exquisite. Either can be seen as the crucial one, the victim or the survivor. Both are necessary.

This is the sort of drama that Broadway audiences are waiting for. There are as many theatergoers ready to support compassionate, human, involving plays as there were when "Salesman" and "Streetcar" set this town on its ear. For though conventionally naturalistic plays have been outmoded, touching stories and characters and themes have not. Proof of that is as near at hand as the current Off Broadway revival of "The Diary of Anne Frank."

This play should not have been a classic. Frances Goodrich and Albert Hackett were a pair of Hollywood screenwriters with innocuous credits such as "Seven Brides for Seven Brothers." But they were lucky enough to be caught by chance and history — by a character, a story, an idea that would force them to transcend their professional past. Though it seems incredible, no playwright had yet dealt with the Holocaust, though alive and writing

at the time were such playwrights such as Shaw and Anouilh and Brecht.

Anouilh would deal with fascism obliquely in his "Antigone," and Brecht wrote about the Nazis in "Arturo Ui." But somehow, these great playwrights missed the size of the event in the monstrous massacre of Europe's Jews. They missed it on the broad level of a careening civilization, and they missed it on the personal level of a child losing her life in adolescence.

Was it this fantastic opportunity that stimulated the Hacketts? Was it the once-in-a-lifetime chance to address history? Was it, to turn even the cynical stone, simple commerce, a good idea for a drama? No matter. They wrote a play that has stunned the world and broken its heart ever since. And not simply because of the subject matter.

"Anne Frank" is a carefully and tenderly constructed play that rises again and again to dramatic peaks, rolling over us with character and theme and a tragic conclusion we know from the start. This is what we go to the theater for. As long as we have been doing without emotionally sweeping plays — and we've been doing without them for so long — "The Diary of Anne Frank" reminds us of what we've been missing, and there is hardly anything old-fashioned about it. We're as ready to be knocked off our feet as we used to be, and that's why those of us who still go to dramas still go to dramas.

Apparently, the notion that emotionalism and story and characters had been too quickly forsaken occurred to Craig Anderson. The sudden successful emergence of his Hudson Guild Theater was based on exactly that idea. From the start Anderson sought out the dramas with heart — not old-fashioned, naturalistic plays, but ones that were lean without being chilly.

He found Christopher Hampton's "Treats," Simon Gray's "Molly," Hugh Leonard's "Da" — his Hudson Guild subscribers were the luckiest audience in town. Anderson says he pressed Tennessee Williams to abandon the surreal metaphysics that had devastated his career the last 15 years and to return to the poetic naturalism that seemed his best and most natural voice. Williams came up, in the last year, with "Vieux Carré" and "A Lovely Sunday for Creve Coeur." The two plays are not great, but they flash with hints of the Williams beauty, and hope for his recovery is hope for the American theater.

Most of the Hudson Guild's plays were written by established play-

wrights, but "On Golden Pond" was not. Who was Ernest Thompson and what was this first play of his doing, dealing with septuagenarians and fears of death and love of children and impatience with them, too? This drama, which opened to largely favorable reviews last fall and is now reopening on Broadway Feb. 28 at the New Apollo Theater, deals with nothing more complicated, profound — or universal — than the relationship between a husband and a wife, the sense of a couple. It balances the rewards of love against the risks: Can we refuse to give someone up?

Bernard Pomerance's "The Elephant Man," currently at the Theater of St. Peter's Church, more than any other recent work, demonstrates that modernness of dramatic style does not preclude narrative strength, believability of characters, and emotional power. Mr. Pomerance's play works first on the basic story level, as every good play must. John Merrick is a gruesomely deformed mutant, an "elephant man" too horrifying for even a freak show in turn-of-the-century London. Frederick Treves, a surgeon, takes him to a hospital for study, even treatment. Merrick proves sensitive, intelligent, creative. He thrives, but only briefly. Then he dies, his head so filled with dreams it is too large to bear.

This is a good story indeed, turned

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into high theater by a playwright who has made art of it by multiplying its levels and inventing a simple, stylized way of staging it, usually doing both with the same devices. "The Elephant Man" is not only the story of a victim. It is the story of all humans, deformed by their own individuality.

Broadway has seen fewer and fewer dramas with this sort of emotional impact since "Waiting For Godot" opened 22 years ago. Samuel Beckett's masterpiece was, in commercial terms, a flop, but it's hard to think of any play that changed our theater as much. "Godot" marked the end of naturalistic drama's hold on Broadway. It broke the rules of sequential story, consistent characters and coherent dialogue, but most of all, it broke the rule of emotion. Our best playwrights have been minority-appeal playwrights ever since. The public audience turned away from the chill on stage.

Among our best dramatists, Sam Shepard has been the most intransigent. Though he deals with a grassroots America as no playwright ever

did before him, Mr. Shepard has made virtually no contact with the great theatergoing public. They don't understand his plays; they aren't reached or moved by them, and it isn't their fault. Mr. Shepard speaks his own language, as any artist must. Unfortunately it is unintelligible to most theatergoers.

Now, after 10 years as a leading American playwright, he actually has two productions running successfully in New York. But neither "Buried Child" at the Theater de Lys nor "Seduced" at the American Place is top-drawer Shepard. The plays spell themselves out, coherently, obediently, as if in surrender. "Seduced" is not so bothersome. The reports of Howard Hughes's last days read like a Shepard play to begin with: the demented, reclusive, graybeard billionaire surrounded by bodyguards who ran his empire. "Seduced" merely runs through the gossip, not bothering to make a play of itself.

"Buried Child" seems more a self-betrayal by Mr. Shepard, for in it a character actually breaks through the playwright's style to notice how odd all the other characters are. This violates and even insults the integrity of Shepard's own vision, not only in this play but in all his plays.

Mr. Shepard has found a momentary public acceptance, but it isn't based on his best qualities. This new comprehensibility of Shepard's is not related to the storytelling, the characters, or the dramatic dynamics that have been absent from his work. Perhaps he should not and cannot become an emotional writer. He is the artist he is.

David Mamet, on the other hand, has a schizophrenic attitude toward theatrical emotion that might well lead to a fusion between modern, cool drama and the heated dramatics that audiences need. Mr. Mamet's best plays have been ambiguous and poetic and absurdist in the Pinter style — such plays as "The Water Engine" and "American Buffalo." But he has also written in a warm, direct style, and those plays have been embraced by the public. "Sexual Perversity in Chicago" was such a play, a series of perfectly accessible sketches dealing with the singles' life. "A Life in The Theater" showed that Mr. Mamet could adapt himself to a warm and touching story and still be quite original. This study of an old actor and a young one, old stage styles and modern ones, old ways and new ways, age and youth, had the classicism of a burlesque sketch.

Mr. Mamet has it in him to be clear and warm and yet modern, but others in America's modern generation of playwrights will long be struggling with the ghost of "Godot." Their interest in poetry, stylization and metaphor make real characters and real emotion unlikely. For example, Ronald Ribman's finer plays were the surrealistic "Harry, Noon and Night" and "Journey of the Fifth Horse," but his Broad-

Theater



Karen Gilborn

"SAYS I, SAYS HE"—Joe Grifasi and Brian Dennehy portray bricklayers in Northern Ireland in Ron Hutchinson's comedy with music. The Phoenix Theater production opens tomorrow at Marymount Manhattan.

way success was the less interesting, more accessible and naturalistic "Cold Storage."

Lanford Wilson captures the poetic rhythms in everyday lives. Richard Wesley deals with ghetto archetypes — they are stage poets as Ed Bullins is a poet of the stage. Yet none of them has achieved wide public acceptance. These playwrights must find the way back to heat and energy — emotionalism — without compromising.

David Rabe seems to have managed this feat. Without sacrificing literary qualities he has developed his storytelling abilities, has added flesh to his characters, has transmitted the electricity of feeling between his play and his audience. For all its poetic qualities, his "In the Boom Boom Room" was so basic in its craft and characterization that one could have imagined it written for the young Kim Stanley. Mr. Rabe's "Streamers" proved its communicability by becoming an actual hit.

Today, many of our plays are scenery dramas — "Equus," "Dracula," "The Crucifer of Blood." They derive their theatrical energy from production effects rather than literary or theatrical quality, but audiences are so thrill-hungry they'll take what they can get.

Entertainment, lest anyone has forgotten, remains the first purpose of all theater. We go for the fun of it — for deliverance, transport, at least diversion from the world out there. That's why we pay our way inside, even when what's inside is — on occasion — of noble character. But it is, first of all, entertainment, and that requires an emotional involvement by the audience — a letting go. We will meet offers halfway when the theater makes them. But the theater must make these offers tempting enough for us to step into the dark of the auditorium. Then it must take us, and though we might like to be led by the mind, it is the heart that counts.