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Theater: Brecht and Langston Hughes

Double Bill Opens at Greenwich Mews 'Exception and Rule' and 'Prodigal Son'

By HOWARD TAUBMAN
PLACE the didactic simplicities of Bertolt Brecht side by side with the jubilant simplicities of Langston Hughes and you get an uncommonly rewarding evening.

In "The Exception and the Rule," which leads off the double bill that opened last night at the Greenwich Mews Theater, Brecht's manner is so transparently dogmatic that you begin by feeling patronized. Yet, before the short play is finished, your resistance ebbs, and you find that you are touched by its truth and humanity.

It is impossible to resist the exuberant high spirits of "The Prodigal Son," Mr. Hughes's uncomplicated telling of the ancient parable in song and dance. For the company of Negro dancers and singers perform with rare gusto and elation. If you do not join them at the end as they beat their palms to the pulsating rhythms, either you can resist any momentum or you are a critic, who is supposed to sit on his hands.

Brecht's little play is a parable for moderns. It describes the hard journey of a merchant and a coolie, who is his bearer, across a vast, unidentified waste to a city where the boss hopes to land an oil concession. The merchant, in the usual Brechtian style, is the capitalist villain personified, all calculation and evil. The coolie, of course, is quintessentially the helpless, exploited, abused worker.

As one brief scene follows another, in which the merchant is endlessly suspicious and mean while the coolie sweats, toils and suffers, one feels that one is watching illustrations from a Marxist primer. Occasionally there is a deft sardonic line that you would not anticipate in a primer; otherwise Brecht and his adapter, Eric Bentley, make no bones about the elementary design.

When Brecht reaches his main point at the end, how-

ever, he is anything but child-like in his simplicity. The concluding scene is a trial. The merchant is in the dock for shooting down the coolie and the latter was offering a kindness. The court in its wisdom acquits the merchant on the ground that he did not realize that the coolie meant no harm and that it's understandable and excusable if one with power murders out of fear of his victim.

Isaiah Sheffer has staged "The Exception and the Rule" in a formalized, yet simple way, which is right for Brecht. Paul E. Richards is effective as the merchant, and Joseph Chaikin plays the coolie with such integrity that one is moved by him even though he is meant to be a type rather than a fully defined human being. Richard Hamilton is forthright as a guide, and Frank Groseclose carries out a remarkable assignment as judge and pianist of a three-piece ensemble.

Mr. Hughes's "Gospel song-play" uses few spoken words. Philip A. Stamps dances the title role with admirable tension and passion, and Glory Van Scott sings and dances Jezebel with sinuous abandon. When these two, abetted by four other dancers, let loose in a number celebrating the joys of the flesh, the stage is all but combustible. When Dorothy Drake, who sings in a huge shouting voice, leads the company in a traditional song or in one by Mr. Hughes, the theater is flooded with prayer or elation.

Vinnette Carroll's staging captures the spirit of naivete that was once the exclusive fashion in presentations of Negroes by Negroes. We know now that there are many other aspects to the Negro, and we tend to be sensitive about oversimplified plays of his talents. But if we remember that this is only one side of his nature and potentialities, we can share in his gift for rapturously innocent song and dance.

"ON OR OFF BROADWAY, THESE TWO PIECES ARE AMPLE CAUSES FOR REJOICING!"

—Snyder, Herald-Tribune

"UNCOMMONLY REWARDING EVENING"

—Taubman, Times

"YOU ARE TOUCHED BY ITS TRUTH AND HUMANITY."

—Taubman, Times

"SHEER EXUBERANT ECSTASY AND JOY...A BLAZE OF MUSIC AND DANCE."

—Watts, Post

"COMPELLING, DRAMATIC EXPERIENCE."

—Snyder, Herald-Tribune

"GENERATES EXCITEMENT WITH THE FORCE OF ITS GLORIOUS NATIVE VIGOR."

—Snyder, Herald-Tribune

"SUBSTANTIAL, DRAMATIC EVENT...TERRIFIC THEATER!"

—Gottfried, Women's Wear

"A REFRESHING SHOW...ROUSED THE FIRST NIGHTERS THOROUGHLY."

—Jordan, CBS-TV

"A GEM OF PURE BRECHT. CYNICAL, BITTER, FUNNY."

—Probst, NBC-TV


"EXCITING THEATRE...YOU'LL LOVE 'THE PRODIGAL SON'."

—Thompson, Jrl.-Amer.

the
exception
and
the rule

by
BERTOLT BRECHT

Adapted by
ERIC BENTLEY



LANGSTON HUGHES'
the
prodigal son

"THERE IS SOUND AND FURY, SINGING AND DANCING, AND ABOVE ALL, STIRRING THEATER."

—Snyder, Herald-Tribune

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GREENWICH MEWS, 141 West 13th St. CH 3-6800

New York Herald Tribune
Friday, May 21, 1965 *dup*

Brecht, Hughes And Rejoicing Off Broadway

By Louis Snyder

There was sound and fury, didacticism and lyricism, singing and dancing, and above all, stirring theater last night downtown at Greenwich Mews, where two unlikely bedfellows, Bertolt Brecht's "The Exception and the Rule" and Langston Hughes' "The Prodigal Son," made the theater's low rafters ring to very divergent tunes. Probably it would not occur to many producers to bracket two theatrical craftsmen, so relentlessly dedicated to cynicism on the one hand and salvation on the other, as Brecht and Hughes. But the combination proved to be invigorating in both instances, even if each work, despite its contemporary qualities, was, in theatrical terms, something of a throwback to the stage of day before yesterday.

This being a season to brush up on your Brecht, "The Exception and the Rule," a product of 1930, is required seeing and hearing. Despite a pervading impression of being an impressionistic "East Lynne," this Marxist-oriented piece still comes over the footlights as a compelling dramatic experience, weighted as it is with villains in clown-white make-up and the scales of justice overloaded with obvious social connotations which are now common property.

Brecht's capitalistic Merchant, crossing a desert with a "union" Guide, whom he distrusts and discharges, is left with a Coolie to lead him. This poor man, similarly terrorized by the unfamiliarity of his surroundings, also becomes the victim of the Merchant's fears, and is killed in a misconstrued gesture of helpfulness toward his employer. At a trial, in which the chalk-faced judge bends logic many ways, the Merchant is acquitted of murder, on grounds of "self-defense."

since he could "reasonably" have expected the Coolie of wanting to do away with him, whether or not this was his real intention.

Believe it or not, as staged by Isaiah Sheffer, and acted by Paul Richards (Merchant), Joseph Chaikin (Coolie), Frank Groseclose (Judge), and Richard Hamilton (Guide), this made documentary sense, not a little of which was aided by a score by Stefan Wolpe, written in the idiom of the time. Loaded dice or not, the play is offered honestly, and one may decide for himself how close to parody the passing of time has brought it.

There is no parody in Hughes' "The Prodigal Son."

It is a straightforward, strong-lunged "gospel song-play," which retells the Biblical story in musical narrative, arranged by Marion Franklin, and vividly choreographed by Syvilla Fort. Restlessly staged by Vinnette Carroll, unhibitedly sung by Dorothy Drake, Joseph Attes, Robert Pinkston and Jeannette Hodge, among others, and danced to perfection by Philip A. Stamps, in the title role, and Glory Van Scott as a devastating Jezebel, this "Prodigal" swept social significance out into West 13th Street with the force of its glorious native vigor. Mr. Hughes' words and the music by Billy Eaton and Jobe Huntley, along with traditional songs, generated pathos and excitement, as the occasion demanded, and when, at the end, one and all were invited to "Come on 'n the house" to welcome the return of the Prodigal, the performers found a cheering audience ready to join the celebration.

On or off Broadway, these two pieces are ample causes for rejoicing!