



## ERRATICISM IN ACT

by Richard A. Ogar

After two successive nights in the theatre, I discovered that A.C.T. is very much like the girl with the curl in the nursery rhyme: when she is good, she is very, very good, and when she is bad, she is horrid.

The very, very good applies to the A.C.T. production of Dylan Thomas' "Under Milkwood." Thomas called his work "A Play for Voices," and certainly no one was better qualified to write one.

Thomas' voice, as anyone who has heard him—or read him—knows, was deeply resonant, carrying whole images alive on its rippled surface, swelling and dropping like the surge of one of his own beloved rivers down to the sea. That voice is clearest in Ray Reinhardt's rendering of the First Voice, but it is bell-and-sunlight clear throughout the play.

"Under Milkwood" is a loose poetic sketch of the sun's full circle over a small Welsh seaside town as its dwellers wake from their dreams to live and love their way toward bed again.

Director William Ball (assisted by Robert Bonaventura and Stephan Carnovsky) has wisely muted the production so that nothing interferes with the music of the language. Stuart Wurtzel's bare set, steeped in darkness, holds the actors in its grip until the lights (the work of John McLain) impel them to action.

This production is not a mere concert reading, as was Thomas' own New York premiere, but a fully staged enactment of the words. The direction, as brilliant as it is complex, produces several striking vignettes: Lord Cut-Glass (Rene Auberjonois) surrounded by his ticking actor-clocks, for example, or Mog Edwards (Ken Ruta) and Myfanwy Price (Ellen Geer) crooning their mutual love from opposite ends of the stage, while the postman and his wife (David Dukes and Judith Mihalyi) devour Mog's love-letter in the center.

With the exception of Paul Shenar, who seemed a bit unsure of himself as the Second Voice, the cast performs with vibrance and clarity, moving from role to role like gamboling chamelions.

Those I haven't already mentioned are: Peter Donat as sea-dreaming Captain Cat, Barbara Colby as the fastidious Mrs. Ogmores-Pritchard, and DeAnn Mears as the loving Polly Garter.

### ZOO STORY

But from here on, things get progressively worse. Moving from "Under Milkwood" at the Geary to "Albee Acts" at the Marine's was like watching Lucifer's distressing fall from heaven, and I still find it difficult to believe that the same company was responsible for both productions.

"Albee Acts" is A.C.T.'s pseudonym for a pair of independent productions, "The American Dream" (directed by William Ball), and "The Zoo Story" (directed by Richard A. Dysart). Since most of my comments will be given over to Mr. Ball, let me dispose of the latter piece first.

Dysart has played "The Zoo Story" for laughs, and I suppose there's really nothing to stop him from doing so. In script, the play can go either way. For me, it's always seemed melodramatic, but I realize that the only real difference between comedy and tragedy is the point of view taken by the author or assumed by the reader. The two views should coincide, if the playwright has done his job well: since Albee hasn't, it's anybody's game. Or almost so.

Almost, because—whatever Albee's in-

tentions may have been—I don't think the comic approach works too well in practice. Since the play concludes with an overwrought exercise in horror, I should think that the production would lead up to that horror in somewhat direct fashion.

The result of Dysart's direction is that Scott Hylands (as Jerry) is forced into some very uncomfortable emotional gymnastics. Dexterous he may be, but convincing, never.

(I would like to say something nice about Robert Goldsby, who plays Peter but there is so little to his role that it's difficult to make an accurate assessment of his talent. It does, of course, require extraordinary patience to sit through Jerry's long-winded story more than once.)

Albee admits, with his characteristic pretentiousness, that "With the exception of a three-act sex farce (he) composed when (he) was twelve," "The Zoo Story" is his first play, and I find no reason to doubt the claim. It's weak enough that one can't really blame Dysart for trying to spice it up a bit, all and all, it didn't help much.

### THE AMERICAN DREAM

Now for "The American Dream." As one may have gathered by now, I don't care very much for Albee, but I don't dislike him enough to wish Ball's production on him. Like Dysart, Ball may have tried to help things on, but with him for a friend, as the saying goes, one doesn't need any enemies.

I cannot condemn the production too strongly. To begin with, Ball has literally lacerated the text, gashing out whole sections of essential dialogue, and tried to resuscitate the remains with a bellows-load of overwrought and underhanded gagsmanship.

The excisions from the text were apparently made in order to clear space for Ball's own less than dashing humor. Take these lines: Young Man (after Mommy has whisked in and out of the room): Who was that? Grandma: Would you believe Mommy?

Not even Albee stoops that low for laughs. Other additions include M.s. Barker's incredibly sexless and thoroughly inappropriate torch-dance, and the concluding Statue of Liberty tableau.

I would like to make it clear that I am

not legislating against directoral innovation; but I AM against creative bungling. Albee's play is held together with a thin string of incident. To wit: sometime in the past Mommy and Daddy bought a baby (or "bumble") from Mrs. Barker, an adoption agency volunteer. The child was subsequently dismembered to correct its "imperfections," died as a result, and left Mommy and Daddy yearning for "satisfaction."

During the play Mrs. Barker returns for reasons clear to no one; later, the Young Man (or the American Dream) shows up and is discovered to be the twin of the dismembered child. He is substituted for the faculty "bumble" and all is well.

Apparently Ball mistook this faintly tangled plot for the Gordian knot and severed it. Little of the dialogue needed to establish these important connections remains in the production, and what does is mangled beyond recognition. The speech in which the Young Man (Scott Hylands) establishes his identity for the audience is played in competition with a tape-recording of the same speech. Neither wins.

If the handling of the text is bad, the staging is worse. Apparently under the influence of "Motel" (from "America Hurrah") and Arthur Kopit ("Dad, Poor Dad"), Ball indulged himself in an orgy of technological gimcrackery and physical grotesquerie.

Gaudy as a yenta's jewels, Paul Staheli's miniaturized set is a maze of mirrors that multiply the shamble of appliances strewn about the room: TVs, radios, blenders, tape machines all in full electrical bloom.

The acting style is either a gross parody of bad acting, or the genuine article: whichever it is, it obviously results from an awkward lunge for laughs. Mommy (Ruth Kobart) is straight out of Kopit, and irritates from the start with her consciously overwrought diction ("buyyyy-eeeee" for "beige," "loooooovly" for "lovely"). Where Daddy (Harry Frazier) comes from, God only knows—but his (read Ball's) characterization of the emasculated male is as broad as it is shallow.

If Mommy and Daddy are simple past-work, Mrs. Barker (Ann Weldon) and Grandma (Jay Doyle) are complete betrayals. Miss Weldon takes all honors as the worst performer of the evening. Mrs. Barker is supposed to be a "professional woman" but Miss Weldon, for all her prancing, mincing and mugging, can't even make it as a flapper.

Albee's Grandma is a shrewd old woman who plays at whining senility. For Ball, she becomes a transvestite cross between Jonathian Winters' Ma Frickert and Herb Caen's LOL in tennis shoes. With the sophistication characteristic of the production, he—she continually mounts a center stage platform and blows a duck-call like a gym instructor before delivering her homilies on old age.

If Mr. Ball were more interested in directing, and less in exhibitionism, he would have realized that the humor in "The American Dream" derives from the contrast between the ORDINARY setting and the extraordinary action it provokes. To do as he did—to destroy the basic incongruities—is to destroy the play. And at THAT, at least, Ball was pre-eminently successful.