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The Breaking String

THE PLAYS OF
ANTON CHEKHOV

By MAURICE VALENCY

Columbia University

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"Noted for his Giraudoux translations and critical assessments of European drama, Professor Valency has the advantage of both a scholarly and theatrical background, so it is not surprising that his full-scale treatment of Chekhov's plays is something more than just another academic survey. Suavely written, sympathetic, keenly interpretative, gracefully marshalled with illuminating extracts from the plays, counterbalanced with pertinent references to the short stories, letters, and relevant figures (Gorky, Stanislavsky, Ibsen), the commentary captures all the shifts and stresses of Chekhov's sensibility, avoiding annotative smog, crystallizing a complex spirit."—*Virginia Kirkus' Service*

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for such ignorance. And is reference to Freud and Strindberg (among many others) a "tradition" or a "tradition gone wrong," Dr. Kaplan? The continent of Atlantis is richer, more heavily populated—and more real—than even certain psychoanalysts are willing to admit.

Michael Kirby

Donald M. Kaplan will reply to Mr. Kirby's letter in the next issue of TDR.

THE EDITOR:

I have searched in vain for Richard Hornby's name in my Alumni Directory for the Yale Drama School. And yet his review of Robert Brustein's two books in TDR [T32] criticizes Yale from the viewpoint of an unhappy insider.

Although at times I have been an unhappy student and a critical alumnus of Yale, Hornby's criticism baffles me. While using all the correct names, he criticizes the school for all the wrong reasons.

George Pierce Baker and Alexander Dean may have been influential in their day, but that was over a generation ago. Certainly enough time has passed for what influence they did have to be softened, modified, even reversed. After all, no one has ever claimed that they were founders of a cult whose followers allowed no alteration to the original principles.

. . . Another person that Hornby chooses to discredit is Donald Oenslager, whom he accuses of "failure to subordinate design to the demands of the play." As a former design student of Oenslager, I can testify that he has never suggested that design be anything but subordinate to the play. If anything, his major theme of instruction is that a design must grow from the needs of the play. Hornby has picked up this silly criticism of a great teacher and repeated it without knowing the facts.

The detractors of the Yale design department have latched onto the obvious fact that the designs for Yale's major productions are almost always superior to the acting. From this observation they conclude that design is considered a thing unto itself. In truth, it is merely the nature of the two arts that makes this imbalance possible, and even inevitable. Before the performance, the design student can stand back from his work, hear criticism, make changes, see the results, and thus, with

help, bring his contribution to a higher level than can the student actor, who must learn from the performances themselves. Should the designer purposely limit his work to a student level to match the acting? No. In the educational situation the designer must produce his best work. Anything less would defeat the purpose of attending school.

What Hornby doesn't understand is that Yale's influence has diminished over the years because its administration has not kept up with the new theories and philosophies of theatre. Those of us who have watched this decline with vexation were happy to hear of Robert Brustein's appointment. But now, even before he has taken office, his statements, counter-statements, announcements, and retractions have caused us to fear that he is in danger of throwing out the baby with the bath water. . . .

Brustein's natural tendency would seem to be

against, as Hornby puts it, "the professional . . . having only his viscera with which to interpret dramatic literature." Fine. But let us hope that Brustein takes a cue from such groups as the Lincoln Center Repertory Company and admits that all the intellectualized literary criticism in the world cannot, alone, produce a play that people want to see. If, at the urging of critics like Hornby, Brustein repudiates Yale's present strengths instead of correcting its weaknesses, he risks losing even that excellence the school has maintained despite its faults.

As an interested bystander I wish Mr. Brustein ever good fortune in his new position. I only hope that he remembers that the school which he now heads is called the Yale School of Drama, and not the Yale School of Literary Criticism.

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