

Heard and Seen

BEAT AND OFF-BEAT

It is not until one goes to see a good play, like *Ross* for instance, neatly tailored, well-produced, with one coruscating star and several more than competent character actors delivering impeccable lines in precisely the way the author wrote them, and sees how old-fashioned it appears that one realizes how profoundly the atmosphere of the London theatre has changed over the last year or three. It began, perhaps, with the Royal Court and Theatre Workshop, but the influence has since spread more widely and the inquisitive experimental theatre-goer can now find off-beat plays breaking through all over the West End. It appears immaterial whether these be imported or of indigenous stock, the essentials remain constant and the fluidity, the fidgety uncertainty of contemporary existence is mirrored with a fidelity that is positively reassuring to the fugitive from theatrical convention.

The recent London season has seen the infiltration of more and more plays of this kind and one begins to wonder where, in a year or so, the great coaches from Luton, Loughton or the New Towns will be able safely to deposit their merry loads. François Billeldoux' enormously exciting *Chin-Chin* is a case in point: adapted by Willis Hall, the author of *The Long and the Short and the Tall* and co-author of *Billy Liar*, both authentically of the newer school, this profoundly disturbing play unfolded its message in a way that was clearly, in the immortal words of Miss Gertrude Stein, enough to make a dog uneasy. Faultlessly acted by Celia Johnson and Anthony Quayle, it began by showing the ultimate in non-communication between the stuffy, public-school English-woman and the expansive emotional Italian, whose only link lay in the fact that their respective spouses had gone off together. Little by little as the play proceeded one realised that the further these two penetrated into their arcane, almost fantasy world of withdrawal, comfortably eased with liquor, the warmer, the more human became their companionship. The final apparent disintegration—physical and financial—is in reality their salvation; they wander off together into the *terrain vague* of Sean Kelly's brilliant set having lost their social lives but saved their souls. I find myself absolutely in agreement with Mr Harold Hobson here; this was one of the most religious plays London has seen for a long time.

The triple bill called, simply, *Three* is made up of three one-acters by the General Staff of the anti-play movement in England—John Mortimer, N. F. Simpson and Harold Pinter (in an ascending order of non-conformity). The evening is a worrying one in a satisfactory way: Mr Mortimer's play (heard first on radio) is called *Lunch Hour* and shows a young woman and a man who have gone to an hotel room probably to make love, but certainly to discuss the

difficulties of their illicit situation. Typically, the imaginary relationship provided by the man for the girl becomes so real to her that two o'clock strikes before they have even taken their coats off, so busy is she arguing her imaginary wrongs. This is pathetic, compassionate and comprehensible. Mr Pinter's terrifying *A Slight Ache* plunges one straight into nightmare, with a husband and wife so unsure of their identity that when he finishes up by taking the place of the silent match-seller at their gate neither of them seems to notice much change. Mr Simpson's *The Form* is less concerned with identity, but travels a long way into the higher levels of non-communication. The interview—it is of course being tape-recorded—with which the play ends alarmingly explores the use of a great many words to add up to total nonsense. *Three* provides an evening at once less evidently dramatic and more fantastic than *Chin-Chin*; Jack Gelbur's play *The Connection*—so successful in New York, such a flop here—produced its surprisingly compulsive effect by the realistic projection, hardly theatrical at all, of an actual situation so extraordinary that one could hardly believe one's eyes and ears, and yet was perfectly convinced of the authenticity of it all. As I watched the junkies in Leach's mouldering flat slouch and mumble, declaim, attitudinize or simply fall asleep while they killed time waiting for their heroin to arrive, when the jazz quartet launched into its occasional cool comment on their predicament or the dynamic Cowboy erupted into brief action as he dispensed the dope, I remembered Jack Kerouac's dotty beat film, *Pull my Daisy* and recognized that, preposterous though this all was, it was clearly true.

Chin-Chin was uncommonly good as a play as well as significant as an experience; *Three* was undoubtedly an extension of existence as well as a series of absorbing theatrical experiments; *The Connection* was a slice of very unusual life and, if apparently quite undramatic nevertheless held one hypnotized from start to finish. I doubt if any of these productions would have been put on before Beckett and Ionescu softened up the London scene, and yet to-day a great many people feel far more at home in this shifting amorphous landscape than they do in the demonstrably better constructed stage worlds of Mr Rattigan and Mr Coward. You cannot call it escapism for the off-beat playwrights take no pains at all to provide us with an escape hatch from to-day; instead they probe yet further into the fissioned lunacy that surrounds us all: it is a braver way, it seems to me, and I would rather wait for Godot than in the wings with Mr Coward.

MARYVONNE BUTCHER