

BLACKFRIARS

THE PLAY

In an historical play a certain licence is inevitable—the telescoping of events, the invention of encounters and conversations, a simplification of outline. But unless its foundation lies in truth, it has no *raison d'être*.

In the last century, an evil tradition, to be traced to the early Romantics, allowed the author to use famous names as a peg on which to hang improbable and wholly invented plots. Sardou's *Dante*, a melodrama of disguises and duels and eloping nuns, with Irving in the title-role, became a by-word. But it was never intended to be other than a romantic extravaganza, whereas the *Dante* of Mr. Langley's *Forever*, at the Shaftesbury Theatre, is presented as a real psychological (not to say pathological) study. 'How interesting!' murmurs the audience, 'that must have been why he was banished! That was how he came to write the *Inferno*!' And all the time, neither characters, nor background, nor events bear the smallest relation to the far more interesting and attractive truth. Instead of the Florentine Republic we are shown a mythical dukedom; the trenchant, beauty-loving, fierce but highly-civilized personages of history, become a set of boors, ineptly rude and quarrelsome, while 'Dante' is a neurotic young bully, obsessed with sex, who, to revenge himself for Beatrice's marriage, persuades the 'Duke' to withdraw his deposits from her husband's bank. His behaviour is too much for Beatrice's delicate health, and she dies. 'Dante,' with a moan of 'God could not be so cruel! She is all I had!' (the language of the whole play is on this original level), sinks on a divan, the stage darkens, and all the characters of the play appear in black, muttering 'What have you done?' And then the ghost of Beatrice enters, to sit on his bed and talk about waiting for him in the other world.

Had the play been frankly woven round an imaginary minor poet, one could concede it certain merits. It holds the interest of the public, though largely through the superb acting of Mr. Eric Portman and Miss Margaretta Scott, and the beauty of the setting. As it is, it is an ugly profanation; there are decencies that should be observed, even though no law of libel protects the dead of long ago.

The settings of *Forever* were half the battle. *Lady Precious Stream*, at the Little Theatre, must stand by its merits, for of scenery there is none. It is a traditional Chinese play, in the production of which the Chinese translator and adapter, Mr. S. I. Hsiung, has co-operated with Miss Price. When the characters ride on horse-back, they simply prance. They indicate the presence of steps by the movements of their feet, and the

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curtains they draw, the doors they open and shut, remain invisible. Yet the result is more thrilling and convincing than the most utter realism.

The story is the universal one of the maid of high degree who loves a beggar, but in the course of centuries the play has acquired a delicate sophistication. There is nothing primitive about the drawing of the henpecked Prime Minister (Mr. Esmé Percy), or the witty, subtle women who over-rule him (so beautifully represented by Louise Hampton and Maisie Darrell). Humour and farce mingle with a pathos incomparably conveyed by the restrained, symbolic gestures that are all the Chinese technique allows. The result is an exquisite *divertissement*, like a Chinese porcelain, one of the loveliest and most satisfying things now showing. The People's National Theatre deserves our gratitude on a gallant venture in which the managers of fifteen—or was it nineteen?—'commercial' theatres had seen no prospect of success.

BARBARA BARCLAY-CARTER.

GRAMOPHONE

Jazz, remarks Mr. Spike Hughes, is no more than the secularization of the Spiritual, the transferring of this negro music from voices to instruments. Swing music existed long before it was popularized in Europe by the gramophone and monotonized by the dance bands; the blare of trombones was a feature of religious music way back in the eighteenth century. Berlioz, adds Mr. Hughes, knew a thing or two about brass, and as early as the turn of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries Masses were written on score paper of fifty-two staves, most of which were occupied by trombones. The serious devotees of jazz do not claim that it is the only representative music of our time; they recognize that it is new in neither its rhythms nor harmonies.

In origin jazz would seem to be a method rather than a conception, a method of improvisation on a simple theme or series of chords; executant's music that began by being played, not composed or orchestrated. 'Several of the boys,' says Mr. Leonard Hibbs in *A Short Survey of Modern Rhythm on Brunswick Records* (1/-), 'would foregather at a friend's house and they would play just for the sheer enjoyment that it gave to themselves as performers. A few chords would be struck on the piano, and one by one they would all join in taking it in turns in a friendly way to take solo choruses. And in the concerted passages the harmonies came naturally and spontaneously.'

A far cry to many of the collections of sounds we now accept for jazz; the deadly dullness behind the excitement, the cotton