

I don't impute craftiness to Huston—at the time of making the film, anyway. He took a giant first step, as large as he was presumably permitted at the time, maybe even a bit further. Milestones are honorable, essential: *Light* is a milestone. But—and it's not the first instance—suppression has helped its reputation.

Nine to Five is a comedy, it says. Incongruity is an essence of comedy. What could be more incongruous than to quote Plato apropos of *Nine to Five*? Here goes, from Book X of *The Republic*:

There are jests which you would be ashamed to make yourself, and yet on the comic stage . . . when you hear them, you are greatly amused by them, and are not at all disgusted at their unseemliness. . . . There is a principle in human nature which is disposed to raise a laugh, and this, which you once restrained by reason because you were afraid of being thought a buffoon, is now let out again. . . .

I guess I'm feeling guilty because I laughed a couple of times at this crock.

Nine to Five is not a comedy. It's an act of desperation, trying for laughs by any means—from comedy through farce to burlesque. The picture has one resemblance to *Coming Home*. Jane Fonda is in both of them and gave the impression before each that a serious subject was to be treated seriously: in the earlier picture, Vietnam; in this picture, the male exploitation, sexual and otherwise, of female employees and co-workers in business. Both films fizzled. *Nine to Five* is disgusting not because it's a comedy but because it is not. It's an old-style exploitation flick, exploiting another current hot topic.

It starts with a pretty good graph of the territory. A huge office floor of a big company is dominated by a vain male. Lily Tomlin is the knowledgeable assistant, cynical but competent and loyal; Jane Fonda is the newcomer, a divorcee returning to business after years in the household. For a while, their problems ring true. But Dolly Parton is unbelievable from Moment One as the boss's personal aide for whom he lusts. I've seen women in offices who were allegedly hired for their sexual possibilities. It was notorious 30 years ago that a big New York book publisher always had an easy lay on the staff who was billed as an editorial assistant; but she looked like an editorial assistant. Parton is dressed and directed like a caricature.

And the boss's advances toward her

are caricatures. If he devises ways to sneak looks down her cleavage, OK, though Parton would have had to be mentally deficient to wear dresses like that on the job. But when he chases her—literally—around his office, grabbing and missing and falling, with the door unlocked, the picture begins to go stupid. It goes very much stupider: at one point Fonda just accidentally misses murdering the boss with a pistol. Lack of conviction and brains takes its toll early. The absence of both quickly converts the women's vengeance into a base for a lot of incredibly incredible and offensive "comic" shenanigans. Anyone who

laughs at the humiliation of the man in this film is, I think, humiliating women, who are being exploited again in fake exposé of their business exploitation.

It was directed by Colin Higgins, who perpetrated *Harold and Maude*. He wrote it with Patricia Resnick. Fonda has no character, just some novice stuff at the start and some non-novice stuff later. Parton quickly passes from sweet vulnerability to pneumatic nuisance. Tomlin, who manages simultaneously to look like an attractive woman and a high-spirited filly in an animated film, has real comic gifts and managed to get a few laughs out of me. Plato, forgive.

Robert Brustein on theater

Crossed Purposes

I went to Sam Shepard's *True West* (Martinson Theater) expecting a significant event. The evening was significant, but not quite in the way I had anticipated. What it revealed was an important theater in a state of momentary disarray.

For all its problems, the New York Public Theater undoubtedly has been responsible for the most interesting productions thus far this season: Lee Breuer's *A Prelude to Death in Venice*, JoAnne Akalaitis's *The Dead End Kids*, André Serban's *The Sea Gull*. Evenings like these have provided what little distinction currently can be found in the New York theater, and the only grounds for hope. At the Public, one feels theatrical artists throwing off inherited conventions, challenging the audience with new experiences, breaking the crust of cold earth to discover warm fertile springs beneath.

Each of these productions has been the result of Joseph Papp's traditional policy of offering space, facilities, encouragement to imaginative radical theater innovators, at a time when money and resources are scarce. Although this policy has earned for the New York Shakespeare Festival a well-deserved reputation for generosity, Papp's motives never have been entirely altruistic. As a paternal theatrical benefactor, Papp always is responsive to new talent; as a practical producer feeding hungry mouths, he also needs to earn some bread. Ever since the conventional sources of unearned income

went dry, Papp has been looking for another commercial oil well like *A Chorus Line*, the bonanza that has kept his theater functioning. Certain recent projects—the Wilford Leach production of *The Pirates of Penzance*, for example—very probably were developed with Broadway in mind, just as *Alice in Concert*—the Elizabeth Swados version of *Alice in Wonderland*, starring Meryl Streep—seems to have been undertaken as a pilot stage project for an NBC television spectacular. On the face of it, an arcane experimental theater company such as Mabou Mines is hardly in a position to provide Papp with a long-running Broadway hit, but it has been his habit first to encourage workshop productions by the most interesting and innovative American theater people—Foreman, Leach, Serban, Swados—and then to match them with a commercially viable project (*Threepenny Opera*, *Pirates of Penzance*, *Umbrellas of Cherbourg*, *Runaways*) in the hope of refining crude oil into Exxon Supreme.

The procedure is similar to the way certain large corporations underwrite research and development programs. By luring away some unworldly genius from his university laboratory, the corporate executives hope to put the scientist's basic research to profitable commercial use. In industry and medicine, this process has been responsible for advances in DNA research, for the development of the integrated circuit (or silicon wafer chip), in fact for most of the recent breakthroughs in modern

scientific and technological products. What's wrong with this, aside from the way it corrupts the aims of pure science? Not much, really. The only problem arises when the corporate producer, in his impatience to get results, begins to push his researcher a little harder than he wants to go.

On the premise that what's good enough for Hi Tech groups is good enough for theater, the same thing seems to have been happening lately at the Public. In his eagerness to clone *A Chorus Line*, Mr. Papp has begun to intervene in the creative process of his house artists, with the result that, within a matter of weeks, André Serban was removed from the production of *Alice in Concert*, Robert Woodruff resigned from the production of *True West*, and Sam Shepard repudiated his own play, declaring that he would never again give another work to the Public Theater. This theatrical Saturday Night Massacre was unquestionably the result of Mr. Papp's effort to accelerate the process of creation. Whether it actually improved the productions is a matter of debate, but it certainly provided delicious material for the media mills, most of it speculation on the character of Joseph Papp. This obscures the real issue, which has little to do with whether Papp is kind to crippled children. The issue, rather, is the desperate state of the non-profit movement, whose very survival has grown so dependent on grinding out hits for Broadway.

Papp was entirely within his rights in taking over the productions of *Alice* and *True West*—and not just legally, the way Richard Nixon was empowered to remove Archibald Cox through the good offices of his attorney general. It is quite possible that the productions were foundering, and required a producer's intervention. The confusion arises over whether Papp is developing artists or producing shows, whether the Public is devoted to experimental workshops or pre-Broadway tryouts. Until Mr. Papp clarifies his own role as a producer, and the function of his theaters, he is in danger either of alienating the talented people who work there, or instilling in them a cynical opportunism. Neither alternative provides inviting conditions

for serious creation.

The present production of *True West* is a case in point. It is heartbreaking in its failed opportunities. Not so much misdirected as undirected, it has the look of a show, the feel of a workshop. Shepard and Woodruff apparently assumed they would give Papp the same production of the play they did at the Magic Theater, including two San Francisco actors in the leads, while Papp apparently assumed he was buying something that would bring financial returns, enhanced by Shepard's recent Pulitzer Prize for *Buried Child*. The play rehearsed to the accompaniment of a lot of fanfare, including a long article about this reticent playwright in the magazine section of the *New York Times*; New York was primed for a serious "hit." Under these pressures, you don't go with the San Francisco equivalent of an off-off-Broadway cast, even if the director and playwright demand it; you go for movie actors. The result? Tommy Lee Jones and Peter Boyle.

EVEN WHEN such actors deliver, as Peter Boyle does splendidly, the purpose of the presentation gets clouded. The production has no unity, no style, no control. It's a wonder the actors aren't bumping into each other. Even so, the first act of *True West* comes through, largely because of Shepard's stubborn neo-Pinteresque power. It is a dazzling piece of writing—terse, suggestive, mystifying, intense. In the second act, however, when Shepard's inspiration flags, the faults of the production become glaring. Like *Seduced*, Shepard's recent play about Howard Hughes, *True West* has the feeling of a first draft. Shepard rarely revises any of his work extensively, but at his best (in *Buried Child*, for example), the initial rush can carry him through. In *True West*, his impulse is not sustained; the play looks thin, even emaciated, like a healthy organism turning anorexic before your eyes.

The play is about role reversal. Austin, a successful Hollywood screenwriter, lives comfortably in his mother's house, while his brother Lee—a shambling, paranoid, lopsided drifter—spends his time in the desert, emerging occasionally to steal appliances out of suburban homes. Just when Austin is about to sell a script to a Hollywood producer, Lee interrupts to describe a script idea of his own based partly on his experience, partly on an old Kirk

Douglas movie, *Lonely Are the Brave*. When the bedazzled producer unaccountably offers a munificent advance for this bizarre Western, and drops his option on Austin's work, Lee forces Austin to write the script. At the same time that Lee is turning his eyes on Hollywood, Austin is turning his eyes toward the desert and, to prove how liberated he is from middle-class values, steals 10 toasters from the homes of his neighbors. The two of them get drunk and wreck their mother's kitchen. When she returns, she witnesses her two sons engaged in an epic battle during which Austin almost strangles Lee to death with a telephone cord. The play ends with the brothers locked in deadly embrace under a crescent moon.

True West is fascinating as long as its design is hidden; finally, its very symmetry undermines its mystery. I suspect the work will ultimately be of interest mainly to Shepard's biographers, for it is possible to detect in the tension between the two brothers a personal meaning for the playwright. I have a feeling that Lee and Austin represent two aspects of Shepard's career—the increasingly renowned playwright and movie actor on the one hand, the freewheeling coffeehouse writer and carefree musician on the other. It may be that Shepard is working something out in this play, a kind of nostalgia for his past life, which he associates with the real or true West, as opposed to "shopping in the Safeway, riding on the Freeway," the suburban traps in which "There's nothing real down here anymore—least of all me."

The real Shepard is certainly not on display at the Public, and that, too, may be the price he is paying for his fame. Peter Boyle alone gives us a glimpse of authentic Shepard, moving through the space of the Martinson Theater like a huge tramp steamer pushing clumsily into port—his jaw slack, his hair lank, his body lumpy as if he had been poured into his clothes. It is he alone who provides the danger and menace of the play. Tommy Lee Lones, on the other hand, playing his entire part on a single note, never departs from his cool movie persona, even when he is supposed to be drunk, and thus never convinces us that he shares any blood with Boyle. David Gropman's set is appropriate in its characterless neatness, and Hank Williams's Country and Western songs provide a proper musical background—but the evening generally seems to be an exercise in sloppiness, without

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even the excuse of being a work in progress.

And that, ultimately, is the really pathetic thing about this exercise—that one of the few genuine dramatic writers of our time should have been so shamefully mishandled. I share Joseph Papp's doubts about the professional capacities of Robert Woodruff and I suspect that, under the circumstances, he was probably correct in intervening when he did. But it is one thing to launch a fully professional production

of this play, aimed for the commercial market; it is quite another to pretend to offer the conditions of a workshop, where the process of development is as important as the results. At present, Mr. Papp is confusing the purposes and the personnel of the experimental theater with those of the commercial stage, and thereby serving neither God nor Mammon well. Perhaps now that *Pirates of Penzance* has proved a gusher, he will be able to relax the pressures on his artists and let them do their work.

Virginia Woolf in her last letters.

Enemies Within and Without

by Edwin J. Kenney Jr.

Volume VI of Virginia Woolf's *Letters*, which contains letters written between 1936 and 1941, completes the publication of *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, edited by Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann. Just as this final volume is only a part of the collected *Letters*, so too it is only a partial record of the years 1936 to 1941. To be properly understood, the letters must be read not only as a complement to Woolf's public writings of this period—her novels *The Years* and *Between the Acts*, her biography of Roger Fry, and her feminist pamphlet, *Three Guineas*—but also as a counterpoint to her diary, which is now being published in its entirety under the editorship of Anne Olivier Bell, and to her autobiographical memoirs composed during this time, some of which have been published as *Moments of Being*, edited by Jeanne Schulkind. Such a context is necessary to define and understand the peculiar nature of Woolf's letters and their relation to the final act of her life, her suicide.

Over the years of publication of the individual volumes of *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, many reviewers have praised them as "vibrant," "brilliant," "enchanting," and "wicked." But the most pervasive characteristic of the collected *Letters* is their ordinariness. Woolf's is not a literary correspondence, for she does not openly discuss her fiction; it is not

philosophical, and it certainly does not demonstrate any historical or political comprehension of world events. However, this ordinariness is so powerful that it must be understood not as a lapse, which a few critics have charged, but as an achievement, an act of will.

In *Moments of Being* Woolf reveals that she always felt life on two distinct levels, which she called "being" and "non-being." She defined non-being as the "nondescript cotton wool" of daily life. She considered the painful "sledgehammer" blows of fate as "being," not only because they were intense, but also because she believed that such blows were "tokens of some real thing behind appearances." Virginia was ambivalent about both non-being and being. Non-being might be nondescript appearance, but it was safe and reassuring; being might be the "revelation of some order," but the revelation was threatening and the order was uncertain. In non-being the self was the author of the action. In being the self was only an actor, only a part of a work of art, whose creator and whose end were unknown, for "certainly there is no God."

In her letters more than in any of her other writing, Virginia Woolf confined herself to the cotton wool of daily life, without discussing her "mountain summit moments" of revelation. In this way she demonstrated almost daily to her friends and herself that everything was all right and that she was all right—safe and normal. This deliberate limitation of scope is especially apparent in the last

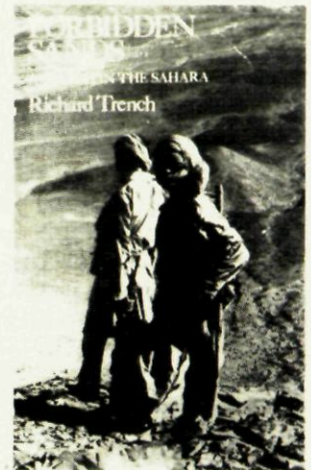
volume of letters, written during the time of Virginia's mourning the deaths of her friend Roger Fry and her nephew Julian Bell, her anxieties at the destruction of Britain during the war, and her growing fears of insanity. In her letters Woolf characteristically and obsessively focuses on the minor irritations of daily domestic life: the getting of lunch and dinner, the buying of garters, the severity of the cold, the noise of workmen, the aches of the flu, the interruption of visitors, the pruning of the yews, the breeding of pets. Woolf is crotchety and often funny about these matters, but the overwhelming impression is that she is willfully restricting her attention to the ordinary to avoid "blows" that were terrible and deeply felt. The reader of the *Letters* knows that something more was going on, for on March 28, 1941, Virginia Woolf filled her pockets with stones and drowned herself in the icy Sussex Ouse. But with a few telling exceptions and the suicide notes to her husband and sister, most of her letters prattle on. If one did not know that Woolf killed herself, one would not consider these letters those of a deeply disturbed person. But in hindsight, the knowledge that these letters lead up to and end with her suicide both allows

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