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"STRANGE INTERLUDE."

By
EUGENE O'NEILL

Reviewed by W. H. Thomas

In the "Bookman" for October, Mr. Upton Sinclair gives his literary credo as follows: "It is my idea that a writer, to be of any consequence, should have something to say which is likely to be of use to other men in understanding how to live." In announcing an article to appear in the December "Forum," the editor of that publication states that "O'Neill, Joyce, Dreiser, and their followers have been dredging the gutter for a long time. Are they looking for something or do they just enjoy wallowing in it? Will they sink out of sight or emerge with a triumphant discovery?"

From the vantage ground of these two quotations, one a declaration and the other a question, I am emboldened to speak somewhat depreciatingly of Eugene O'Neill's recent play, "Strange Interlude," which has been running in New York City for the better part of a year. O'Neill in "Strange Interlude" may have attempted to forestall hostile criticism by carefully selecting the words of his title. The conduct of Nina, the central character in the play, is very strange, and, after all, merely episodic. Her final restoration to sanity keeps the play from being unbearable—at least, to people who get no pleasure out of "wallowing in the gutter." Just why the author of so good a play as "The Hairy Ape" should have chosen to write a play of this kind is difficult for me to understand, unless his motive was purely commercial. Samuel Butler said that a man with a wife and

three children was capable of anything. To paraphrase, one might say that a playwright who starts out to live off the royalties of his productions is capable of writing any kind of play that will draw large audiences.

The girl Nina, the daughter of a poor college professor, had a sweetheart named Gordon, who was killed in the Great War, and she doesn't get over it until just before the curtain falls in the ninth act. To me, this is the first unreality of the play. All the young ladies of my acquaintance that lost lovers in the Great War married other fellows after a decent interval and are living happily.

Nina idolized Gordon to the extent that she hated herself for not having encouraged Gordon to become the father of her child, regardless. To atone for this illusory cowardice, she gets the queer notion that she must throw herself away on anyone that suffered during the Great War.

Then she marries Sam Evans. Sam was a Babbitt-like fellow that couldn't be happy without an heir. But there had been a great deal of insanity in the family; consequently it was Nina's duty to secure an alien paternity for Sam's heir in order to save Sam from a fatal unhappiness. The whole play pivots on this situation. As one reads through the play, one finds oneself constantly saying, "It is a wise father that knows his own son and it is a wise son that knows his own father." Evans leads a happy and successful life and, fortunately, dies in ignorance of the real paternity of his son Gordon, thanks to the religious duty of Nina.

There is nothing much to the play except some dramatic situations of a more or less horrific nature. This play impresses me as a study in what has been aptly called "phosphorescent decay." Of course, it has the usual sex titillation expected in art nowadays—this for instance: "Nina: That last night before he sailed—in his arms till my body ached—kisses until my lips were numbed." But the movies have done this sort of thing so much more vividly that I doubt whether it is any longer effective as soliloquy.

In the first part of the drama, O'Neill was near to giving up some

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