

THIS IS AN ORIGINAL MANUSCRIPT
THIS IS AN ORIGINAL MANUSCRIPT
IT MAY NOT BE COPIED WITHOUT
THE AUTHOR'S PERMISSION

THE DRAMATIC DEVELOPMENT OF ROBERT SHERWOOD
AS REVEALED IN HIS FIRST ELEVEN PLAYS

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School
of The University of Texas in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements

Approved:

For the Degree of

Harry V. Ransom

MASTER OF ARTS

R. H. Griffiths

W. L. Rouse

Approved:

A. P. Bogan
Dean of the Graduate School

Allen D. Bogan

Austin, Texas

June, 1941

THIS IS AN ORIGINAL MANUSCRIPT
IT MAY NOT BE COPIED WITHOUT
THE AUTHOR'S PERMISSION

THE LIBRARY
THE UNIVERSITY
OF TEXAS

THE DRAMATIC DEVELOPMENT OF ROBERT SHERWOOD
AS REVEALED IN HIS FIRST ELEVEN PLAYS

THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School
of The University of Texas in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Allen Ludden

Austin, Texas

June, 1941

488893

THE LIBRARY
THE UNIVERSITY
OF TEXAS

MISS COETA TERREL

Gift of the Author

AUG 1 1 1947

488893

great assistance, particularly his description of the London production of Acropolis, which he directed. And, finally, I wish to thank Miss Coats Terrell, without whose assistance this thesis could never have been written.

PREFACE

Let us suppose, as a premise, that we accept the fact that Robert Sherwood is an intelligent, thinking American. If he is more, it can be proved. In 1941 the student of Robert Sherwood and his work can observe the technical and spiritual growth of a playwright who has written eleven produced plays since 1926. That will be my task.

The plays will be studied in the order in which they were produced. No attention will be paid to Sherwood's translations or scenario writing. Because consistency is important for the full understanding of a study of this kind, each play will be analyzed, first, in general terms; then, in the light of the critical reception and the author's own comment on his work; and, finally, through detailed study of the play itself and its relation to its particular stage of the author's development.

Robert Sherwood is a young playwright. His career has only begun. This study is no final answer. It is a recognition of a good beginning.

* * *

I wish to thank Dr. Harry Ransom, first of all, for his instruction and assistance and to mention clearly that this thesis could not have been written without his kind encouragement. To Dr. R. H. Griffith I owe a course in drama, that has provided me with a background and philosophy of drama which I hope has made this writing more sound. A lengthy conversation with Mr. John Mason Brown was an invaluable source of inspiration and first-hand facts. Mr. Marc Connelly, too, was of

THE LIBRARY
THE UNIVERSITY
OF TEXAS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

great assistance, particularly in his description of the London pro-
duction of Acropolis, which he directed. And, finally, I wish to thank
Miss Coeta Terrel, without whose assistance this thesis could never have
been written.

Chapter I	
<u>The Road to Rome</u> , 1926	1
Chapter II	
<u>June, 1941</u> <u>Love Nest</u> , 1927	Allen Ludden 32
<u>The Queen's Husband</u> , 1928	36
<u>This Is New York</u> , 1930	40
<u>Waterloo Bridge</u> , 1930	47
Chapter III	
<u>Reunion in Vienna</u> , 1931	56
Chapter IV	
<u>Acropolis</u> , 1933	77
<u>The Petrified Forest</u> , 1934	83
Chapter V	
<u>Idiot's Delight</u> , 1936	109
Chapter VI	
<u>Abe Lincoln in Illinois</u> , 1938	128
Chapter VII	
<u>There Shall Be No Night</u> , 1940	146
Hierarchy of Robert Sherwood's First Eleven Plays	154
Bibliography	155
Vita	173

THE LIBRARY
THE UNIVERSITY
OF TEXAS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Chapter I	
<u>The Road to Rome</u> , 1926	1
Chapter II	
<u>The Love Nest</u> , 1927	32
<u>The Queen's Husband</u> , 1928	36
<u>This Is New York</u> , 1930	40
<u>Waterloo Bridge</u> , 1930	47
Chapter III	
<u>Reunion in Vienna</u> , 1931	56
Chapter IV	
<u>Acropolis</u> , 1933	77
<u>The Petrified Forest</u> , 1934	83
Chapter V	
<u>Idiot's Delight</u> , 1936	109
Chapter VI	
<u>Abe Lincoln in Illinois</u> , 1938	128
Chapter VII	
<u>There Shall Be No Night</u> , 1940	146
Hierarchy of Robert Sherwood's First Eleven Plays	154
Bibliography	155
Vita	170

See S. N. Behrman, "Old Monotonous," New Yorker, XVI, June 1, 1940, p. 35.

See S. N.
1940, p. 35.

THE LIBRARY
THE UNIVERSITY
OF TEXAS

CHAPTER I

In 1926 Robert Sherwood wrote The Road to Rome, his first play and his first great success. The actual writing took him three weeks, and the first draft was the one that was put into rehearsal and on the stage.¹

The Road to Rome is set in Rome in 216 B. C., during the time of the Second Punic War. The immediate scene shows Hannibal, the Carthaginian conqueror, outside the gates of Rome after the disastrous battle of Cannae. The principal character of the story is Amytis, a beautiful Greek lady.

Her husband, the celebrated Fabius Maximus the Delayer, adores her because of her beauty and perfection, because she puzzles and fascinates him with her joy of life, her boredom, her scorn for the simple, profitable ideals that he and the Romans live by. His ideals are sentimental without passion, he is too exhausted with succeeding in Rome to have any energy left for love or at least sex. Hannibal nears the gates of Rome, Fabius is made dictator. Amytis hears of Hannibal, he comes into her dreams, idealistic and erotic. The Roman ladies are to perish for Rome; she sets out on the pretense of joining her mother at Ostia, but really to visit Hannibal.

At Hannibal's camp Amytis is to be put to death as a spy. In her talk with Hannibal she sets forth her Greek ideas. Military ambition, she adds, is an affair of medals and schoolboy orations. And what does it come to -- all this driving for success, power and glory, and this confused forgetfulness of what she calls the human equation? Before she dies, she expects at least the usual practice of great victories, ravishing the women. Hannibal, after much resistance, falls into her spell, she passes the night in his tent. In the last act, Fabius comes with his delegation of Romans, trying to bluff it out. Hasdrubal urges Hannibal on to Rome. Amytis puts

Hannibal and his soul in the balance; will he be a conquering empty child, or will he follow his own far spirit; will he be above this vanity of power and striving, the futility of conquest, and leave Rome to her own destruction from within? He orders the army on to Capua and departs from the scene; Fabius thinks that Amytis has come there to save him and Rome.²

of today, tendencies of a regrettable nature. The dramatist is

Even as a young playwright, Robert Sherwood paid attention to out to wallop 100 per-centism, big business, imperialism, boasting his preface. In the preface of the printed edition of The Road to Rome that appeared in 1927, he writes at length concerning the play and its historical background. He says here that his play "was inspired by an unashamedly juvenile hero-worship for Hannibal; in manner and in intent, it is incorrigibly romantic."³ He tries to

persuade the reader that he is merely writing a play as every journalist should before he is thirty. The whole thing came about as possible to me that Hannibal, after the battle of Cannae, was suddenly afflicted with an attack of acute introspection -- that he double-meaning. That is what he said; that, no doubt, is what he paused to ask of himself the devastating question, "What of it?", sincerely believed. Since then, he has been hard to convince that and that he was unable to find an answer." Is it not more logical his mind inadvertently connects his political views with his talent that it was this idea that inspired The Road to Rome -- not for getting a thing said on the stage. Of Sherwood's first play, hero worship for Hannibal, not the urge to write a play -- any The Road to Rome, Stark Young can "feel no surer than he [Sherwood]

evidently did as to what he meant by the play."⁴ Young, however, There are four points in the preface to The Road to Rome, the proceeds to formulate what he thinks Robert Sherwood was trying to significance of which has grown in the light of Sherwood's plays

2

Stark Young, "The Road to Rome," New Republic, L, March 9, 1927, p. 70.

3

Robert Sherwood, "Preface," The Road to Rome, New York, 1927, p. xli.

4

Young, "The Road to Rome," p. 70.

say, mentioning "a beautiful theme,"⁵ but suspecting the innocence of its conception. And Young is the least insistent of the critics upon the playwright's message. Edmund Pearson argues that "Rome, as Mr. Sherwood writes, is used to represent American tendencies of today, tendencies of a regrettable nature. The dramatist is out to wallop 100 per-centism, big business, imperialism, boasting and boasting, and, incidentally, the Harding administration, the oil scandals, Mr. Coolidge, and everything which prevents the reign of idealism in America."⁶ Poor Robert Sherwood! That was his plight with his first play and with the critics of that very successful production.

In the same preface to this first play Sherwood says, "It seemed possible to me that Hannibal, after the battle of Cannae, was suddenly afflicted with an attack of acute introspection -- that he paused to ask of himself the devastating question, 'What of it?', and that he was unable to find an answer."⁷ Is it not more logical that it was this idea that inspired The Road to Rome -- not hero worship for Hannibal, not the urge to write a play -- any play?

There are four points in the preface to The Road to Rome, the significance of which has grown in the light of Sherwood's plays

5

Young, "The Road to Rome," p. 70.

6

Edmund Pearson, "Carthage Goes Democratic," Outlook, CXLVI, August 24, 1927, p. 546.

7

Sherwood, "Preface," The Road to Rome, p. xxxviii.

and his growth as a dramatist since 1926. They are: (1) that Sherwood's first play deals with political foibles and the futility of war; (2) that Sherwood insists that he had no such purpose in the original conception of the play; (3) that Sherwood used in this first play infallible theatrical devices -- sex, a beautiful woman, and witty, vulgar clichés; (4) that Sherwood's argument for the use of lusty twentieth-century language in the expression of the analogy between ancient Rome and America in the boom days reveals early his characteristic sanity and logical thinking processes.

The critical reception of The Road to Rome acknowledged almost unanimously the probable financial success of the play, predicting correctly the long run and the emergence of a new American playwright of some importance. A characteristic review said:

This is in no sense a great play -- indeed, it is doubtful if Mr. Sherwood could ever write a great one: he possesses too amused and keen a sense of human ridiculousness: but it is a fine and splendid piece of dramatic work. As a study in personalities, real or fancied, his play more than stands erect -- it moves irresistibly.⁸

Among the more significant observations made on the new playwright and his play was the comparison of his work to that of George Bernard Shaw. Robert Sherwood acknowledged and tried to explain this comment in his preface,⁹ but he was not so successful in his analysis of the reason for it as was Edmund Pearson when he said:

⁸

Independent, CXVIII, June 4, 1927, p. 592.

⁹

See Sherwood, "Preface," The Road to Rome, p. xxxix.

Mr. Sherwood, in the readable preface to his play as now published, says that for anybody to mention Bernard Shaw in connection with his work gives him great pain. Although it will hurt me more than it will hurt him, I must confess that I was instantly reminded of some other hours of happiness in a theater -- when I first saw Shaw's 'Caesar and Cleopatra.' But that there is any reprehensible imitation, or anything more than the natural influence of the foremost dramatist of the time upon a younger man, did not occur to me.¹⁰

A blatant and less secure critic, Richard Jennings, declares:

You will see that Mr. Sherwood's fund of philosophy, the substance of his satire, as well as his style and sense of probabilities, are not so ample, so secure, as those of his Shavian models. Almost any labels, indeed, could be affixed to his puppets. Any costumes might clothe them. His Hannibal might be a Tussaud or Charlemagne, an Attila, a Genghis Khan.¹¹

In the selection of excerpts from the many and repetitious reviews of this first play by Robert Sherwood there must be a bias, a sense of what is ambiguous and of what is agreeable to the point pre-determined. For the analysis of the problem involved, definite, reliable sources must be cited as the most sound, the most careful. For a chronological study such as this is to be, Stark Young and Brooks Atkinson are the critics in whom more confidence, more scholarly dependence may be placed than in any other available writers. For this reason we examine the first criticism by Stark Young of the new playwright.

10

Pearson, op. cit., p. 546.

11

Richard Jennings, "The Theatre," Spectator, CXL, June 2, 1927, p. 827.

Young, "The Road to Rome," p. 70.

Stark Young makes the following interesting opening comment on the play:

There are a dozen ways to begin an article on this play of Mr. Sherwood's, which is one of the most interesting ventures of the season; what I had best begin by saying is that I have only now seen it, some four weeks after its opening. Some changes may have gone on, no doubt, since that time, a shifting of accents. At any rate I had the sense of an audience that had come largely on a pornographic hope, dreaming of smart lustful epigrams and naughty inversions of stately histories. At the same time, I had the sense that the direction Mr. Merivale's and Miss Cowl's performances have taken must have grown more or less a disappointment to such visitors. I had the feeling that on both these players the idea that is inherent in the play whether it is carried through or not, has taken deeper hold in the course of their performances; they appear to be little concerned with the more risque possibilities of the lines and touched by the hint of the glory and exaltation of life that persists in the theme.¹²

And so, we have the word of an astute observer that the actors of the play have found more than an ordinary interest in the merit of the lines which they must speak. Certainly we must suppose that Young is aware that any actor is anxious for the success of the play in which he is currently performing; and for that reason we ask if he is giving Sherwood credit for writing such a play that should excite more than the usual inspiration in the actor. If Young is making this point, he is admitting subtly, however slightly, that here is a play more worthy than the average. From Stark Young that is enough. For he is more attentive to the details of a performance than the average critic, and within his analysis of the

12

Young, "The Road to Rome," p. 70.

acting is always to be found a sensitive statement of the theatrical as well as the literary merits of a script. For example:

Perhaps because it is a critic's responsibility to analyze what his reader must do just to do just that helps us toward a knowledge of what Mr. Sherwood at least might have meant by it. Miss Cowl could very wisely sharpen her attack at times in the witty effects. If also she would vary the speed of her second act more, she might give us more of the intellectual excitement and restlessness of this rebellious Greek in the midst of Rotarian Rome, and give us more, too, of this woman's abounding love of life and of what must seem to her Roman husband her fickleness of mood, her odd delight in the useless qualities of things, and her strangely perverse taste for what one of her own foolish philosophers would have called the immortal in mortality.

Stark Young, depends upon the later development of his critical attitude to a brilliant piece of casting. Mr. Merivale has taken the character that the dramatist supplied him and developed it toward a curious completeness. This Hannibal is a mystic all his life; his first mysticism a hatred for Rome -- as a baby his father had lifted him up to Baal and pledged him as Rome's destroyer -- his second the dream of his own reality in the midst of a blind and extraneous world of men and action: Amytis awoke that in him.¹³

three paragraphs, is he able to get down to a concrete analysis of Here are imaginative pictures of Amytis and Hannibal. Even Sherwood failed to invent such a glowing prose picture of his characters. Sherwood and his first play:

The significance lies in the fact that he created characters to stimulate Young's interest, and that the performances of the actors are discussed without belittling the vehicle, accepting it as an adequate motivation for the performances. From Stark Young's point of view, then, The Road to Rome fulfills one of the first requisites

of a play: characters are provided for the actors to interpret fully and with a certain aesthetic satisfaction.

Perhaps because it is a critic's responsibility to analyze what his reader understands as "a deeper meaning," Stark Young struggles to do just this in his second paragraph:

He has launched, how innocently I cannot tell, a beautiful theme: in the person of the woman, the finer mind of Greece, its subtler values, its sense of life, its final analysis, its zest of living, is presented in the midst of a naive, progressive, patriotic, materialistic, and platitudinous Rome.¹⁴

How seriously we must take this comment, so diffusely phrased by Stark Young, depends upon the later development of his critical attitude toward Robert Sherwood. For the moment, however, the simple reaction to this fragment of Young's analysis would be to regard it as one of the critic's more benevolent evasions. He seems not to be able to give the play his full approval, withholding always the reservation that it could be a better play. Not until he has written three paragraphs, is he able to get down to a concrete analysis of the play as a whole. Here, finally, is Young's opinion of Robert Sherwood and his first play:

At one moment he seems a poet, at another a wise-cracker, and again a writer of historical burlesque, now obvious and now witty. I think *The Road to Rome* a most considerable achievement, nevertheless; I found it far less bourgeois and tedious than Mr. Erskine's *Helen of Troy*, and much more suggestive of a certain hard scorn that the poetic can have. The family of the play is obviously that large one in which belong Landor's magnificent *Conversa-*

tions and letters of Pericles and Aspasia, Andreyev's Sabine Women, Bernard Shaw's Caesar and Cleopatra, and many other examples of classic material used to illumine or satirize modern life. The method in general in The Road to Rome is to take pot shots at our present-day problems and foibles in America, to put into Roman mouths our Rotarian platitude and into Roman souls our naive pursuit of ends that we cannot analyze with relation to ourselves, sentiments we pick up by crowd imitation, and a certain naive innocence of personal reflection and thought. The main theme in the play, or what might be the main theme and doubtless is, is presented through this Greek woman; it is difficult at best to get into stage terms; and in the third act Mr. Sherwood gets it muddled up and sidetracked into remarks about war and its futility. This is a natural but unfortunate turn to take, since to most of the audience the theme can then be regarded as more or less pacifistic and so labeled, at a great sacrifice of the essential point. It is in this scene, particularly, between Amytis and Hannibal in the third act, that Mr. Sherwood needs to think out his matter, find out exactly what he does mean, and try to drive it home to the audience.¹⁵

In this discussion Stark Young's points are important, first, because they state clearly and intelligently the consensus of the critical acclaim in general and, secondly, because Young's analysis of the weaknesses and merits of the play provides an excellent opportunity for argument. Let us examine in detail the points made here by Stark Young. He says the play is a "considerable achievement," chiefly because Sherwood has managed to eke out a comparatively honest play, lifting the whole tone of it above the sentimental -- this, I think, is what Stark Young means by his word "bourgeois" -- and keeping its drama compact and direct enough to prevent its being tedious. "A certain hard scorn that the poetic can have" is, I think, Young's

way of acknowledging only slightly Sherwood's sanity and direct
 dramatics. (This must be investigated further; it seems that the
 critics all stop too soon in discussion of this point. If there is
 in The Road to Rome evidence of this rare and worthwhile quality of
 playwriting -- and I think there is -- why was it not discussed?
 Why was not one critic, at least, able to see in it the very thing
 that all critics are later to recognize in Robert Sherwood's plays?

The answer may well be that a first play never allows the critic op-
 portunity to compare and make conclusions about a writer's style.
 However insecure the style may be in parts of The Road to Rome,
 there is abundant indication of the kind of writing that will be
 Sherwood's when he has become familiar with his tools.) Finally,
 Stark Young decides that Sherwood gets his theme and his play mud-
 dled in the last act. The third act, according to Young, is the
 weakest in the play. It gets away from the basic idea to talk about
 the futility of war. This is interesting, because it brings up the
 question of just what was the basic theme and wherein Sherwood does
 get sidetracked. Granted that the third act is a change in point
 of view, the question arises as to which of the two parts -- the
 first and second acts being part one, and the third act, part two--
 is the author's original conception. And that is good.

Brooks Atkinson takes the following stand in the opening of his
 first review of The Road to Rome:

In the last act of The Road to Rome, put on at the
 Playhouse last evening, Mr. Sherwood puts off his wearis-
 omely professional sense of humor and gets down to ro-

mance and human values worthwhile. Hannibal, the deadly Carthaginian, has his campfires burning just outside Rome. He is on the point of invading that defenseless capital, plundering it, and exalting in the fierce hatred that has led him thousands of miles through Spain, across the Alps, and down the long dusty miles of Italy. But a Roman matron, who strayed mysteriously through his lines, had robbed his victories of their glory by proving to him duties far more eternal. As for the conqueror, Hannibal might have had her killed as a spy; or, what is worse, might have betrayed her infidelity to her pompous husband, Fabius Maximus, Dictator of Rome in the great emergency. But he does not.

In a moment of human ecstasy, far nobler than the grim determination of his profession, he gives Rome as a gift to the gods, whom he does not understand, and marches his indignant army on to Capua. As Amytis, the woman, Miss Cowl plays this scene with depth and force, perhaps glad that at last she has something tangible to grasp after the trivialities of the first of the play. And as Hannibal, the engaging Mr. Merivale plays quietly a hero who has learned the joy of submission. Accordingly, the final curtain of Mr. Sherwood's play comes after the one creditable incident in the play.¹⁶

Atkinson is not favorably impressed with the play as a whole. But in regard to the third act, he finds it the one creditable moment in the play -- the only one in which Miss Cowl was able to play with depth and force, the only one in which there was something tangible for the actress to grasp, the only one in which Sherwood gets down "to romance and human values worthwhile."

Certainly Young and Atkinson do not agree. And that is good. It is significant, in observing their difference of opinions, that Atkinson in his praise of the third act does not mention that pacifistic theme that so sidetracked the play according to Young. In-

deed, Brooks Atkinson never mentions the pacifistic idea of the play. It is apparent that both he and Young found in The Road to Rome the same basic idea. That they do not feel the same about its presentation is clear in the following statement by Atkinson:

of sympathy:

Mr. Sherwood seems to have attempted a satire in the vein of Anatole France, Bernard Shaw, or our own sardonic John Erskine. This half-Athenian wife of a sonorous Roman Senator does not share the stern virtues of her city; with a smirking sort of superiority she pits Aristotle against Hannibal and talks smugly of science and learning while her husband thinks only of glory. In these scenes Mr. Sherwood has given modern foibles the anachronistic settings of Rome, 216 B. C. "Oedipus Rex" is damned as "coarse play," ill-becoming the wife of a respectable Roman Senator; and this pleasure-loving woman is reproved for demanding more dinner on "Sweetless Saturday," observed in Rome for the benefit of armies struggling on the battlefields.

... Instead of cutting us to the quick, Amytis, the wayward wife, rather suggests the true reason why the Romans hated the Athenians, and were contemptuous of those obsequious countrymen who affected the graces of Greek culture. This part, and the burlesque, is not superior wisdom. It is bourgeois sophistication and it soon becomes boring in the theater.¹⁷

We shall leave the discussion of the philosophical aspects.

Atkinson is so bitter! Young, so kind! Stark Young says that The Road to Rome is "far less bourgeois and tedious than Mr. Erskine's Helen of Troy." Brooks Atkinson says Mr. Sherwood has attempted a satire in the vein of John Erskine that results in "bourgeois sophistication." The variance does not end there. What Stark Young calls a "creditable achievement" Brooks Atkinson labels "indifferent entertainment."¹⁸ And the greatest dissension between these two critics

¹⁷

Atkinson, "Hannibal's Wild Oat," p. 24, col. 2.

¹⁸

Brooks Atkinson, "Sentiment to Satire," New York Times, February 6, 1927, sect. VII, p. 1, col. 1.

lies not so much in the opinion of the writing of the play as in the theater, these thrusts might carry a full load of the two attitudes toward the central character, Amytis. Stark Young is obviously in sympathy with the beautiful theme launched in the person of Amytis.¹⁹ And Brooks Atkinson is vociferous in his lack of sympathy:

Having begun on the note of satire, "The Road to Rome" Ah! And Aristotle! While her husband declaims in orotund periods about the greatness of Rome, she sings the praises of Aristotle, the peripatetic of the Lyceum, who left the world wiser than he found it, and ruined polite conversation for all times by laying down the principles of logic. No wonder the Romans despised the soft-handed Greeks with their soporific tea-table conversation. Nothing is more irritating than the condescending skepticism of a pretender. If Amytis had lived two hundred years earlier, she might have encountered Socrates in the market place and forthwith turned her skepticism modestly upon herself rather than her contemporaries. Then Mr. Sherwood would never have offered her in the role of a prophet. She is not; she is a sophist. As a satire "The Road to Rome" suffers from presenting her as inordinately wiser than the Romans. Mme. Bovary was no more egregious.²⁰

We shall leave the discussion of the philosophical aspects. The two attitudes explain themselves. It is with the realistic Brooks Atkinson's more technical opinions that we must deal at length. He is, in this instance, sure in his opinion. From the two articles that he wrote on The Road to Rome, the following selections are important in the analysis of the play as a piece of writing:

¹⁹

²³ See p. 9, supra.

²⁰

Atkinson, "Sentiment to Satire," p. 1, col. 1.

Written neatly, with a sense of spoken dialogue in the theater, these thrusts might carry a full load of irony and criticize the stupidities of the present day through the loose costumery of ancient history, as Mr. Shaw does it with a red-hot pen point. Mr. Sherwood's humor, however, seems mechanical and obvious. It is seldom edged with the reproving double meaning of brilliant irony.²¹

Having begun on the note of satire, "The Road to Rome" then drifts off into risque farce of the boulevards. Amytis has heard what calamities the Carthaginian soldiers visit upon the defenseless women of the region through which the army passes. Describing the cruelty and pestilence of Hannibal, Fabius Maximus concludes: "And an epidemic of pregnancy follows the course of his army." Married to an aging husband, all this seems far less dreadful to Amytis than to Fabius, and she seeks out Hannibal apparently with no other motive. Again Mr. Sherwood writes with heavy touch; and an episode that might seem brisk and salty in the suave style of an accomplished farceur becomes crude and at length stupid through its uncertainty. Mr. Sherwood does better with the "What Price Glory" satire of a squad of Carthaginian soldiers who suffer verbal indignities from an officious top sergeant.²²

Capital in its main idea, "The Road to Rome" emerges as indifferent entertainment, after all, by reason of its unsteady writing. For Mr. Sherwood dissipates his satire in clumsy workmanship; nor does his flat humor prick the surface to the bubbling pot of irony beneath.²³

Because Atkinson furnishes only one specific example to substantiate his accusations, we must go to the play directly to see exactly what he means and if he is just. For emphasis let us review the

²¹

Atkinson, "Hannibal's Wild Oat," p. 24, col. 2.

²²

Ibid., p. 24, col. 2.

²³

Atkinson, "Sentiment to Satire," p. 1, col. 1.

points made by our critic: first, that Sherwood's humor is mechanical and obvious; secondly, that the satirical thrusts miss fire because the play is not written neatly with a sense of spoken dialogue in the theater; thirdly, that Sherwood writes with a heavy touch; fourthly, that Sherwood does better with the "What Price Glory" satire of a squad of Carthaginian soldiers; fifthly, that Sherwood dissipates his satire in clumsy workmanship; and finally, that the third act is the one creditable moment in the play.

* * *

For centuries good plays have opened with servants on the stage to set the scene and speak the necessary introductory exposition. It is, no doubt, the simplest device for getting a play under way. Robert Sherwood, then, must not be discredited for the opening scene of The Road to Rome; it is commonplace, but it accomplishes quickly and efficiently what it must do. The servants, Meta and Varius, are quickly established and their story is told with a few bold strokes. Typical of several of the pedestrian passages in the play is the manner in which Sherwood tells the story of these two lovers. Within two minutes of the opening curtain, not only does he tell their story, but he also has them establish the characters of Fabius and Amytis, describe the background for the threatened Carthaginian invasion, and present a vivid picture of the Rome in which the play is set. That, to say the least, is efficient playwriting. Robert Sherwood makes the most of his training as a journalist.

No point could be made of the writing in this opening scene if it were the only instance of the kind. But here is an indication of

the young playwright that shows through in almost all of the expository passages of the play. This scene, and other similar ones throughout the play, are much the same as an elementary exercise; and the careful student, Sherwood, is following his rules closely, permitting no flight of fancy that will confuse his story-telling. The following dialogue will illustrate the playwright's self-conscious treatment of the smaller parts of his play. It is clear here that Sherwood does not allow himself to write excitingly. He is saving his best for the better and bigger moments.

META

Cheer up, Varius. (She puts her arm about him and strokes his hair.) It might have been worse -- it might have been much worse. Suppose we had been separated when they captured us?

VARIUS

I know. But why can't we have our love? Why are we compelled to smother our natural impulses? We belong to each other -- but we can't have each other, because we're slaves!

META

In Rome, it's wise for a slave to forget that he is a human being.

VARIUS

If you weren't here, I might be able to forget it. (He takes her in his arms.) But when I look at you, I can't remember anything -- except that I love you.

META

And I love you, Varius. I shall always love you. (She backs away from him, nervously.)²⁴

How much more he must have enjoyed writing the following scene. He is introducing his chief character. He has thought how cleverly

he might do it. it cleverly! Any actress would enjoy such an entrance and such an introductory scene. Amytis is brought on stage

FABIUS

Amytis, the Roman Senate conferred a singular honor on your husband to-day....

AMYTIS (taking another garment from the slave)

But here's the real prize -- a peacock-green dress from Damascus -- made of silk. Think of it! Real silk! The merchant told me that it came from the farthest reaches of the Orient. It was carried on the backs of camels across the desert -- "all for you, fair lady" -- those were his very words... Isn't it beautiful!

FABIUS

Yes, I suppose so. But do you think -- do you think it's quite the sort of thing to be worn by a lady of your position?

AMYTIS

My position? I have no position. I'm just the wife of an ordinary Roman Senator -- and, certainly, that doesn't mean much.

FABIA (bristling)

The wife of an ordinary Roman Senator, indeed! Do you realize what happened in the Senate to-day?

AMYTIS

Now, don't tell me they passed another law.

FABIA

To-day the Roman Senate proclaimed your husband, Fabius Maximus, Dictator.

FABIUS

Yes, my dear, they have placed me at the head of the Roman state.

AMYTIS

Isn't that nice.... Tanus, put those things in my room. Go on with dinner. I'll be right back. (She goes out at the left, with hurried instructions to TANUS to "lay them out on the bed so that I can see them all at once." META follows her out.)

FABIUS

She took it calmly.²⁵ Act I, p. 22.

And he has done it cleverly! Any actress would enjoy such an entrance and such an introductory scene. Amytis is brought on stage

for two minutes and whisked off in a sprightly manner, leaving the audience smiling and eager to see her again. Sheer theatrics. neither bad nor good, simply commonplace, half-pronounced ideas. And Sheer trickery. The scene reveals nothing, perhaps, but a keen sense of the craft. But here, early in the first act, is an example of the imagination and craftsmanlike construction that is going to punctuate Sherwood's plays -- distinguish his comedies, sharpen the edge of his satire, and add poignancy to his tragedy.

But The Road to Rome was Sherwood's first play. His stroke is not so sure as it will be later; and in this first play the technique of spoken dialogue in the theater, they might have carried a full load of irony and astute criticism of present-day foibles.²⁵ between Meta and Varius, Sherwood was being careful. The scene between Fabius and Amytis, after her first entrance, was successful doubt, Miss Cowl and Mr. Merivale injected enough spirit and intelligence. But there are many scenes, and particularly speeches, in this first act that might be cited as in between these two extremes. Such speeches as

themselves were for the most part sophomoric. But a playwright must never leave such a thing to actors. Indeed, written neatly, the

I have lived in Rome for seventy-three years, I have not found it monotonous. points of the satire. It is

apparent that Sherwood was to write brisk, satiric dialogue.

But, my dear mother, you must remember that you've never been anywhere else. I had the misfortune to be born in Athens, where gaiety is not listed among the complete unpardonable sins.²⁶

does nothing else, I believe he writes consistently with a remarkable and

27

²⁶ Sherwood, The Road to Rome, Act I, p. 27.

²⁷ Sherwood, The Road to Rome, Act I, p. 26.

See p. 14, *supra*.

sense of spoken dialogue. AMYTIS worst, he is better than the average playwright. The trouble with me is -- I'm bored. And I don't like it. Being bored is so -- so snobbish.²⁷

For this first play, at least, a generalization might suffice: miss being what their author intended. They are not quite readable-- to explain the great variance in the quality of the dialogue. When neither bad nor good, simply commonplace, half-pronounced ideas. And Sherwood is pointing his thesis or is in the heat of his plot, the dialogue on the whole is more dramatic and is delivered with more pointing. Particularly in the first act do they occur most disastrously. As the first act gains momentum, the dialogue is increasingly better. For instance, with the introduction of Scipio and the news in which Amytis talks of going to see that exciting tragedy Oedipus that Hannibal is at the gates, Sherwood's writing becomes more interesting. Rex, might well be one of the scenes that motivate Brooks Atkinson's statement that if the ironic thrusts had been written neatly with a sense of spoken dialogue in the theater, they might have carried a full load of irony and astute criticism of present-day foibles.²⁸ For as this scene reads now, too much is left to the actors. No doubt, Miss Cowl and Mr. Merivale injected enough spirit and intelligent double-meaning into the scene to make it move at the proper pace and leave the less critical of the audience unaware that the lines themselves were for the most part sophomoric. But a playwright must never leave such a thing to his actors. Indeed, written neatly, the scene would have been one of the high points of the satire. It is apparent that Sherwood was trying to write brisk, satiric dialogue. Not for one minute, however, must we conclude that Sherwood writes completely without a sense of spoken dialogue in the theater. If he does nothing else, I believe he writes consistently with a remarkable

²⁷

Sherwood, The Road to Rome, Act I, p. 27.

²⁸

Sherwood, The Road to Rome, Act I, p. 54.
See p. 14, supra.

sense of spoken dialogue. At his worst, he is better than the average playwright in this respect.

For this first play, at least, a generalization might suffice to explain the great variance in the quality of the dialogue. When Sherwood is pointing his thesis or is in the heat of his plot, the dialogue on the whole is more dramatic and is delivered with more punch. As the first act gains momentum, the dialogue is increasingly better. For instance, with the introduction of Scipio and the news that Hannibal is at the gates, Sherwood's writing becomes more fluent. It no longer creaks. The speeches on the whole are more readable and the action less impeded. Such moments as the following fall easily into the action, giving brilliance at times to the dialogue that runs for the most part in a prosaic key:

AMYTIS

Is Hannibal good-looking?

SCIPIO

Hannibal's personal appearance did not interest me at the moment.

FABIUS

This is a serious matter, Amytis. I must ask you not to bother us with irrelevant questions now...

AMYTIS

But this isn't irrelevant. It is very important for Hannibal to be handsome. Think of the statues.

FABIUS

What else happened, Scipio?²⁹

It would be impertinent to say that Robert Sherwood was not

pre-concerned with the message of his play if he had not admitted as much fourteen years later when he said:

ception. But in justice to Sherwood's planning, if for no other reason,

When I wrote "The Road to Rome" I didn't know what sort of playwright I might be, provided I might be a playwright at all. So I tried in it every style of dramaturgy -- high comedy, low comedy, melodrama, romance (both sacred and profane), hard-boiled realism, beautiful writing -- and, of course, I inserted a "message."³⁰

to be upon her introduction. The audience is prepared for the woman

With this statement before us, it might be possible to assume that the message was "inserted" after Sherwood had started the action rolling, the characters speaking. For within the first act there is, with little warning, a rather surprisingly new element thrown into the character of Amytis. She says in answer to Fabius as he asks her what she is thinking about, "I was just wondering what it would be like to be despoiled."³¹ And soon, after little more than a subtle indication that Amytis might be more sophisticated than Fabius and his mother, Sherwood confronts us with a woman who thinks and is able to say in answer to Varius' question concerning the destiny of the Greeks, "... We have the misfortune to be thoughtful people -- and there's no place for us in the world, as Rome is organizing it. We haven't that air of destiny, nor the self-confident strength that it gives. Thoughtful people are never very successful."³² For fear of seeming fatuous, we merely suggest that perhaps with this

³⁰ is, the final analysis, written with broad comedy strokes. And Sherwood, "Preface," There Shall Be No Night, New York, 1940, p. xiii.

³¹ Sherwood, The Road to Rome, Act I, p. 42.

³² Ibid., Act I, p. 47.

speech Amytis grew to be Sherwood's message-bearer. It is not an uncommon phenomenon for characters to grow in the process of their conception. But in justice to Sherwood's planning, if for no other reason, we must say that there is a possibility that Amytis was created entirely according to a pre-conceived pattern. At any rate, after this speech Amytis is no longer the flippant wife that she appears to be upon her introduction. The audience is prepared for the woman who is to turn Hannibal from the gates of Rome. (It is very likely, however, that Sherwood intended to use little more than sex to defeat the Carthaginian. The intellect and its force might well have been a noble afterthought.)

In regard to the humor of the play, Brooks Atkinson made the general statement that it is mechanical and obvious. We have observed attempts at humor that were just that. But we wonder if Atkinson is justified in so broad a condemnation. Certainly the line about the statues amuses without any labor, without seeming too obvious. There is, emphatically, reason to say that some of Sherwood's humor is mechanical and obvious, but if Atkinson is condemning the type of humor at the end of Act I, then we question the validity of his criticism. Sherwood is bringing down the curtain on his first act; he is writing a comedy and needs a curtain line that will give to his scene a substantial punch. No gentle tap will do. This play is, in the final analysis, written with broad comedy strokes. And so we feel that Sherwood was right when he "feeds his curtain line" by a whole minute of the obvious and mechanical device of having Fabia try to attract the attention of Fabius, and finally the dis-

tracted Fabius hears her.

FABIUS

... What is it, Mother?

FABIA

Did you notice anything about Amytis when she left?

FABIUS

She seemed to be in a hurry.

FABIA

Did you notice anything strange in her appearance?

FABIUS (impatiently)

No, I did not.

FABIA

She was wearing that new green silk dress.

FABIUS (not interested)

She was, was she? ... Now, if Hannibal attacks us on the right, you, Scipio, will move forward to meet him in pitched battle. If he concentrates on the left... the -- the green dress, eh! Isn't that rather a strange costume for traveling. (In the distance the war drums continue to beat their weird tattoo as the

CURTAIN FALLS.)³³

The audience is left with the play on the upbeat, slightly amused, anxious. Here is the first moment the audience is permitted to reflect. If the playwright has succeeded in grasping his material well enough by this time to recapture the interest lost by the tedious opening scenes, then certainly he has redeemed himself to some degree. Remembering that we are not proving this piece to be great literature, or even great dramaturgy, but are investigating only the mechanics of its humor, then certainly we must admit that our play-

wright has not failed irreparably. The humor in the first act, then, --
 of its enemies.³⁴
 and that is the weakest act -- is not, in the final analysis, so mechanical and obvious that it is lost sufficiently to spoil the total effect of the act.

The responsibility of a playwright to set his scene theatrically in keeping with the kind of play he is writing is as great as his responsibility to create consistent characters. It is not extraordinary that a playwright provide the scenic designer with opportunity to express theatrically his artistic enthusiasm, but in studying Robert Sherwood it is interesting to see that he consistently mounts his play in such a theatrical setting -- theatrical in the Elizabethan sense: vigorous, romantic. This fact seems to be significant because it indicates a quality in his playwriting that he later develops conscientiously into one of his most potent aptitudes. Alone, the description he presents of his second-act set in The Road to Rome means nothing. But in the light of its implications in regard to the type of mind the playwright has, it is, I think, most significant. Robert Sherwood bothers to tell his scenic designer in detail just how he visualizes the physical setting for his second act. Almost surely he wrote this description first; his second act was conceived in this setting.

Although the scene is a Roman temple, and although it is probable that HANNIBAL did not carry many household effects with him on his long march, strict realism and logic may be sacrificed for purposes of dramatic effectiveness in this scene. The barbaric splendor of Carthage itself must be reflected in all the trappings in this distant camp; the audience must feel that the action of the play has shifted from the virtuous but

been. unimaginative simplicity of Rome to the Oriental opulence of its enemies.³⁴

then I concur. But Atkinson declares that Sherwood "does better

with Speaking of Hannibal's soldiers, Robert Sherwood's insistence that their speech be as tough and hard-boiled as that of the corporals in What Price Glory is almost naive. He seems determined to argue the fact that it is not "unreasonable to assume that professional soldiers twenty-one hundred years ago did not differ materially from the professional soldiers of today."³⁵ Granted. It is a good point.

The Road to Rome proves the point. But for the most part Maxwell Anderson and Lawrence Stalling were more successful in putting words into the mouths of their idyllic soldiers than was Sherwood. Sherwood has caught the spirit certainly, but he misses the validity of selection. On the whole the dialogue is perfectly satisfactory, but our playwright has not yet mastered such earthy expressions that give to that kind of dialogue its force and interest. For example, if Sherwood meant the Second Guardsman to mean what he apparently does, he must know by now that the Second Guardsman would never have said, "If you ask me, Mago and the rest of the officers ain't been missing much. The women around here in Italy are terrible. They ain't got no originality at all!"³⁶ The writer of such conversation for the

stage must learn when and when not to pull his punches. Sherwood appears to have been timid in this instance, and he should not have

³⁴

Sherwood, The Road to Rome, Act II, p. 70.

³⁵

Ibid., Act II, p. 71.

³⁶

Ibid., Act II, p. 77.

been. If this is what Brooks Atkinson means by "a heavy touch,"³⁷ then I concur. But Atkinson declares that Sherwood "does better with the 'What Price Glory' satire of a squad of Carthaginian soldiers"³⁸ than with his more sophisticated dialogue of the first act. Briefly, Brooks Atkinson and I are not of the same mind.

The effort in the writing is so much less when Sherwood leaves his What Price Glory soldiers and turns to the introduction of Hannibal. How much more easily he finds words for Hannibal:

That's just the trouble with victory, Maharbal. You can't rest. You're only allowed to quit when you're losing.... Look at those seventy thousand Roman soldiers we butchered at Cannae. They don't care now whether Rome is destroyed or not. Their work is done. They're at liberty to take a rest -- a long rest.³⁹

Ever present in the study of The Road to Rome must be the fact that this was the first play of Robert Sherwood. The play's chief merit is that it offers an opportunity to observe the beginnings of a playwright. In it are concrete illustrations of "the raw materials" that Sherwood brought with him to his chosen profession. From it he grew.

We have investigated the critical reception given the play. The critics had no mind at the time to predict the possible growth of the playwright; their aim was to criticize the play as it stood, analyzing its virtues and its faults for what they were, not for what

³⁷

See p. 18, supra.

³⁸

See p. 18, supra.

³⁹

Sherwood, The Road to Rome, Act II, p. 88.

they might represent in the birth of a playwright. But we must look further. We have plays that were written since The Road to Rome to furnish us the perspective we need, and from them we are able to learn what in this first play was Sherwood's good and Sherwood's bad.

Sherwood's characteristic sanity was mentioned earlier. The meaning of this term becomes clear as we look closely at The Road to Rome. Within this play the evidence of Sherwood's sanity is more in his recognition of his needs as a young playwright for sound, simple construction than in any great philosophy he chose to propound. Certainly the fact that a young playwright recognizes his limitations is not astounding, but the fact that he is able to have the courage of his convictions as he writes his first play indicates something of the person behind the playwright. To say the least, he is a practical man. As for the playwright Robert Sherwood the same distinguishing quality appears. He is a practical man of the theater. But we must admit that within The Road to Rome he does reveal himself as full-fledged. For The Road to Rome offers proof of the young, the naïve, the experimental playwright. Even the most unobservant would recognize in it evidence of what the critics chose to call "unsteady writing." However, the unsteadiness of the writing of The Road to Rome is due to the fact that the writer is new to his medium and is not sure of his purpose.

The writing within The Road to Rome presents a graphic picture of the eventual development of the playwright. For the first act illustrates the young, insecure writing of the earlier era of Sherwood's plays. The second act is the middle period -- the period in

which Sherwood begins to feel his way toward having a thing to say, yet is shy in his attempt to give weight to his thinking. And the third act illustrates the playwright with his play behind him, his writing -- unsteady in that the idea is there, but the statement ideas and method of presentation clear in his mind, making bold, of it is weak, almost apologetic, and particularly within a play it somewhat brilliant strokes in the presentation of his play.

In the character of Amytis, Sherwood concentrates his play. In the speeches of Amytis are the most vivid examples for illustration in the expression of it. It is dramatic; it has the force that the playwright intended it to have. Almost incidental to the point in first, second, and third acts. The change within the first act has been discussed. Within the second act we offer the following two speeches for illustration:

AMYTIS

... You know, someday you'll have reason to think this thing out for yourself. Someday you'll say to yourself, "Here, I've marched three thousand miles, and crossed mountains and things, and spilt a lot of blood -- and what good has it done?" It would be most embarrassing if you suddenly realized that you'd been wasting your time.⁴⁰

AMYTIS

That wasn't the voice of Ba-al, Hannibal. That was the voice of the shopkeepers in Carthage, who are afraid that Rome will interfere with their trade. ... Hatred, greed, envy, and the passionate desire for revenge -- those are the high ideals that inspire you soldiers, Roman and Carthaginian alike... and when you realize the shameful futility of your great conquests, you turn around and attribute it all to the

it Sherwood gods..... The gods are always convenient in an emergency.⁴¹

ment" of the play is to be cited as the most exciting. We suggest that the first speech serve as an example of unsteady writing -- unsteady in that the idea is there, but the statement is from here that the play takes shape. The third act is written of it is weak, almost apologetic, and particularly within a play it closely; there is little waste. It opens with a most successful scene between the generals -- much more successful than that of the is written with a firm grasp of the idea and a deft choice of words in the expression of it. It is dramatic; it has the force that the playwright intended it to have. Almost incidental to the point involved is the fact that the latter of the two speeches occurs within a scene which Sherwood seems to have written with more concentrated intensity than any in the second act. Here Sherwood makes no apology for his writing, and writes with a vigor that anticipates the writing of the third act.

The controversy between our critics, Stark Young and Brooks Atkinson, lends to the discussion of the third act a note of dogmatic opinion. We agree with neither of the critics. We do not believe with Young that Sherwood sidetracked his theme in the third act to discuss the futility of war. If, ever, a theme is sidetracked, we think it occurs in the second act as Sherwood is finding arguments for Amytis to dissuade Hannibal from his war-like purpose. Nor do we agree with Atkinson that only in the third act does Sherwood find his theme and create with it a telling moment in the theater. Of the two, Brooks Atkinson more nearly approaches the truth. The third act is, on the whole, the best of the three acts; for within

41

Sherwood, The Road to Rome, Act II, p. 123.

it Sherwood's purpose is clear from beginning to end. But if a "moment" of the play is to be cited as the most exciting, we suggest that the "moment" begins in the middle of the second act. For it is from here that the play takes shape. The third act is written closely; there is little waste. It opens with a most successful scene between the generals -- much more successful than that of the What Price Glory soldiers in Act II. Hannibal's entrance is one of the best in the play. And although Sherwood felt the need of naïvely describing the change in his hero, -- "he is now gay, buoyant, care-free, and reluctant to concentrate on the serious business at hand. He has the air of one who doesn't much care whether school keeps or not"⁴² -- it was unnecessary, for the lines he gives Hannibal convey clearly what he intended and reveal a remarkably adult taste on the part of a young playwright.

The author moves through his scenes easily with a graceful stride. Only in the scene in which he must dismiss that what-must-be-annoying sub-plot of Meta and Varius does he **revert** to the sterile writing of the first act. But he dismisses the slave-lovers quickly and moves directly into the most effective scene in the play. The following speech of Amytis is not only the best in the play from the point of view of sheer dramatic technique, but is proof that Robert Sherwood anticipates his growth in The Road to Rome:

Then I choose to go back to my husband.... Go ahead with your great work, Hannibal. Burn Rome to the ground; obliterate it. Keep your army here forever, to make

⁴²

Sherwood, The Road to Rome, Act III, p. 141.

sure Rome stays destroyed. Instruct your men to crush any blade of grass, any flower that dares to thrust its head above the ashes of the dead city. Prolong your victory. Glory in it till your dying day.....

If But don't ever look to me, or to my memory, for sympathy or applause.⁴³

ing of his fifth play, This Is New York, he would most certainly have

remains Say that Sherwood's humor is mechanical and obvious. But remember it is the first attempt; it amused Broadway and Chicago audiences for two years, and is still played frequently in amateur theater. Say that Robert Sherwood writes with a heavy touch. But observe that the writing improves within the play itself, and recognize that the mind behind the writing is not slow and, in any sense, dull. The Road to Rome remains a very good beginning. Because of it, a playwright took stock of his materials at hand and set about conscientiously to replenish and improve his implements for writing. The Road to Rome. It was a dramatization of a Ring Lardner We must remember The Road to Rome, for the next four plays are less encouraging.

disparaging. In the Saturday Review of Literature, Oliver M. Saylor

43

wrote Sherwood, The Road to Rome, Act III, p. 162. to be prompted more by the pleasure he took in the fact of a satire on Hollywood than by any great merit in the play itself.

In the mere game of making motion pictures, with all its exaggerated self-importance, there would seem to be a fertile field for the pen of the satirist.

At least that is evidently what Ring Lardner thought when he wrote his acidulous tale, "The Love Nest;" what Robert E. Sherwood thought when he decided to expand its ironic hints into a full-length play; what the Actor-Managers thought when they chose this play to open their season at the Comedy Theatre.

CHAPTER II

If Robert Sherwood's playwriting career had ended with the writing of his fifth play, This Is New York, he would most certainly have remained an undistinguished playwright. But regarded as mechanical exercises, the plays that follow the writing of The Road to Rome are valuable documents in the study of the dramatic development of Robert Sherwood. Because the four plays The Love Nest, The Queen's Husband, Waterloo Bridge, and This Is New York represent a single phase in this development, they are to be observed together as such. Each play is but an integral part of this early period in Robert Sherwood's development.

The Love Nest was the first play by Robert Sherwood to be produced after The Road to Rome. It was a dramatization of a Ring Lardner short story satirizing Hollywood and its movie industry. The play was not successful. But the critical reception was only mildly disparaging. In the Saturday Review of Literature, Oliver M. Sayler wrote at length of the play, but his writing seemed to be prompted more by the pleasure he took in the fact of a satire on Hollywood than by any great merit in the play itself.

In the mere game of making motion pictures, with all its exaggerated self-importance, there would seem to be a fertile field for the pen of the satirist.

At least that is evidently what Ring Lardner thought when he wrote his acidulous tale, "The Love Nest;" what Robert E. Sherwood thought when he decided to expand its ironic hints into a full-length play; what the Actor-Managers thought when they chose this play to open their season at the Comedy Theatre.

If "The Love Nest" were a little better play than it is, if it did not run thin in its preparatory first act and again in its third, we would have an excellent test of whether the public wishes to hear the truth about its idols. As a matter of fact, if it were a better play, the motion picture industry could well afford to buy up the production and close it -- provided the owners would sell, which I doubt! Even as it is, skating as it does over the thin ice of barely plausible illusion, except through its superb second act, "The Love Nest," thanks to a well-nigh perfect production, cuts deeply and fearlessly at the same time as it amuses.

To Sherwood, despite an achievement less consistently flawless than in "The Road to Rome," must go more credit than is usually due to him who dramatizes novel or short story. The actual and deliberately suggested material in Lardner's tale might be good for ten or fifteen minutes on the stage. Sherwood's independent creative power is disclosed not only in generally providing atmosphere and background for this story of a gnawing canker beneath the placid exterior of a supposedly happy home, but more explicitly in transferring his scene from the banks of the Hudson to Hollywood's pretentious palaces and its manufactories of false emotion; in altering Lardner's newspaper reporter to a resplendent sob-sister of the profession, uncannily, though I am told not intentionally, like a composite of two of the best-known actual figures in that profession; and in creating the whimsical when not tragic character of Forbes, the butler, to motivate Celia Gregg's revolt from a life of unendurable artificiality. In other words, Lardner was interested only in the personal problem of this whited sepulchre of a home, whereas Sherwood, retaining the personal element, has given it institutional and social significance....

As I have said already, Sherwood has used Lardner's short story only as a hint, a springboard to independent creation in strictly dramatic terms....

Working independently as he [Sherwood] was, he could not set his own limits. Accepting the traditional duration, however, he assumed the responsibility of filling it to the brim with cogent invention. It is this responsibility which I feel that he has occasionally betrayed. And it is this betrayal that suggests to me that "The Love Nest" might have been a more pungent, more incisive, evening in the theatre, a more devastating and unanswerable satirical attack on the humbug of the motion pictures, if

it had been written and played as a concentrated hour or hour and a half.¹

Sherwood's talent for the creation of theatrically effective atmosphere and background will establish itself even more vividly in the plays that are to follow. The ability to reconstruct another author's characters into theatrically substantial ones will mature into the greater talent for the conception of theatrical personages of Sherwood's own invention. The cogent invention Mr. Sayler speaks of will recur and we will see why Sherwood might easily have been guilty of over-indulging in his flair for such inventive devices. It is one of the last lessons that Sherwood is to learn, and logically his most grievous error in this respect could have been made in this early play. He had to learn when to stop talking.

Brooks Atkinson was not kind to Robert Sherwood in his review of The Road to Rome. For The Love Nest he had even fewer kind words to speak.

In spite of rickety playwriting and mixed styles of acting, the essential tragedy of Ring Lardner's brilliant story still obtains in "The Love Nest", put on by the emigres Grand Streeters at the Comedy last evening. From the compact, savagely ironical story of fireside buncombe in Hollywood, Robert E. Sherwood, editor of Life and author of "The Road to Rome," has ground out a sprawling play -- mechanically comic in the first act, mechanically dramatic in the last with a taught, revealing act in between....

On its way to the stage Mr. Lardner's story loses the swift, relentless quality that distinguished it in book form. First it presented the immaculate exterior of a great director's home life in Hollywood --

¹

Oliver M. Sayler, "The Play of the Week," Saturday Review of Literature, IV, January 7, 1928, p. 499.

Of the pure wife devoted to her guiding genius and their three little kiddies. Then, swiftly, it tore the mask away to reveal a wife driven to madness and to drink by the false part her position required her to play.

As a short story it was no more than the germ of a play. Filling it out to three-act form, Mr. Sherwood has prefaced it with a scene on "the stage of the Gregg Unit in the World-Famous-Schipstein studio at Hollywood," where the majestic Lou Gregg himself is directing a banal shot in a hokum scenario. Here are all the official obsequious hangers-on, the exotic sheik in person posing for a moonlight scene, and a "double" performing a boudoir silhouette against a curtained window. "Drop it rhythmically," the director bellows as Mae Jennings loosens her negligee -- don't forget the homogeneous rhythm!" And here comes the sinuous, hobbledehoy New York motion picture critic into whose astonished ears Mrs. Gregg pours her Bourbonized disillusion.

To give the story conventional dramatic form Mr. Sherwood has been compelled to provide a solution. Mrs. Gregg makes off with the butler. One suspects this would be a scurvy trick to play upon an earnest stage heroine if her husband were not such a chucklehead.

In his dialogue, as well as in his play form, Mr. Sherwood does not tend towards subtlety. He makes a wry face at his motion picture idols more as a burlesque than as irony, meanwhile trundling in a "gag" or two. And somehow the dialogue seems to sputter when in good playwriting it ought to flow. Yet the central situation of a woman reluctantly completing the idyllic background of a charlatan's domestic life still emerges as true and sombre. Told swiftly in the cynical vernacular of the day it carries tragic implications.

Like the play, the acting ranges from dramatic to caricature, and the pace from desultory to fast....

The pity is that the play and the direction do not establish one style for all parts. Then the story might be told in its true proportion, not merely as farce but as mordant irony.²

2

Brooks Atkinson, "Double Play, Lardner to Sherwood," New York Times, December 24, 1927, p. 9, col. 1.

Of this early phase in Robert Sherwood's development, Brooks Atkinson is consistently articulate. His criticisms of the four plays of the period explain themselves, and when compiled they present a remarkably clear picture of Mr. Atkinson's opinion of the young playwright, Robert Sherwood. But what is more important, Mr. Atkinson has found the vital weaknesses of the plays of this period and has been persistent in his attack on them.

On the heels of his review of The Love Nest, Atkinson wrote but a month later two discussions of The Queen's Husband.

In the composition of his latest comedy, "The Queen's Husband," shown at the Playhouse last evening, Robert Emmet Sherwood is so fickle in his moods and so bewildering in his transitions that the innocent playgoer scarcely knows what to believe. After nearly a year of "The Road to Rome," which was Mr. Sherwood's first play, one might not unreasonably expect irreverence and burlesque in the new piece, and, incidentally, one is not disappointed. But Mr. Sherwood also talks solemnly of politics and economics; he concludes with Graustark romance. On the whole, "The Queen's Husband" makes for mixed entertainment in which the various ingredients do not blend well.

Although the program announces specifically that "the action of the play takes place in an island kingdom in the North Sea" the situation does not seem purely imaginative. For the domineering queen of this principality, like one of recent memory, travels to America where she stands for her photograph with Grover Whalen and Charlie Chaplin and negotiates a substantial loan. She is, moreover, an industrious matchmaker.

But Mr. Sherwood does not dwell upon that single character. The chief figure is, as the title declares, "The Queen's Husband," King Eric VIII, impersonated pleasantly by Roland Young. Like the Hannibal of "The Road to Rome," this Eric does not stand on ceremony. He plays checkers with a flunky. He speaks flippantly of his office. When revolution breaks out he impetuously welcomes the excitement. In the opening scenes, under the

lash of the Queen's termagant tongue, Eric appears to be a weakling, amiable but futile, superfluous as a husband and ruler. Before "The Queen's Husband" reaches a conclusion, however, he suddenly asserts the old royal prerogatives by turning out the dictator and the Prime Minister, dissolving Parliament, installing the radical leader and furtively marrying his daughter to the son of a wholesale plumber. A benevolent monarch, indeed. As the curtain drops he is patiently off to the cathedral where his shrewish wife and every officer of the State expect to witness his daughter's marriage to Prince William. What they will say, how he will explain it, are wisely left to a malicious imagination.

In all this rigmarole there is sufficient material suggested for several plays of individual temper: The farce of the unregal, bored ruler, the tragedy of the daughter betrothed unwillingly as a pawn of state, the drama of political revolution. Three acts of "The Queen's Husband" leave all these points inconclusive. Yet Mr. Sherwood several times makes them effective in individual scenes. The spectacle of a monarch playing checkers with a frog-like flunky who is none too trustful of his master's ethics is both concrete and entertaining. When the military wagons clatter outside in the courtyard and the bombs of the revolutionists whine and crash in the palace, the drama of politics takes effective form. When the Princess Anne and Prince William discuss hopelessly the prospect of their loveless marriage, the romantic tragedy of political marriage trembles on the edge of pathos. Although seldom writing with subtlety or distinction, Mr. Sherwood often manages these episodes well. What they need, for complete fruition in the theatre, is sustained and resourceful cultivation. The profitless conclusion of "The Queen's Husband," one suspects, is a matter of incompetent craftsmanship....

Written with a firm hand and a sense of proportion, "The Queen's Husband" might completely justify the good stuff that is in it.³

In at least one respect Robert Emmet Sherwood's new comedy, "The Queen's Husband," recalls his first play, "The Road to Rome," which drew enthusiastic audiences in New York for nearly a year. The central situation in both comedies, without exaggeration or clowning,

yields the absurd incongruity from which good humor is distilled. Accustomed to regard the great figures of Roman history as demigods, we found them in "The Road to Rome" flatly contemporary in their vernacular and modernly half-hearted about the grand militaristic enterprises we have been taught to reverence solemnly. Accustomed to regard royalty as heroic people apart from the ordinary human scene, we find them in "The Queen's Husband" henpecked and roundly abused like any of the plowboys and cabbage-cutters of democratic society. Thus, in both plays Mr. Sherwood has contrived a major situation satiric in its immediate implications; it needs little specific exposition on his part. As soon as we have grasped it we understand -- and if we are in the least bit irreverent ourselves -- we relish the comic incongruities that are promised all through the play.

* * *

The initial situation in "The Queen's Husband" is technically similar to that of "The Road to Rome." Far from being a hero to his Prime Minister, or even his valet, King Eric VIII is the caricature of the conventional king. His bitter-tongued, monstrous, domineering Queen constantly abuses him; officers of the State can scarce conceal their impatience. But, in spite of them, the likable, wistful, lonely monarch leads his own life unobtrusively, furtively playing a clumsy game of checkers with his footman or secretly delighting in the armed forays of the revolutionists against his throne. With Roland Young in a beguiling interpretation of the role, King Eric is the disarming stuff of which hilarious and illuminating comedies are made.

Yet "The Queen's Husband" remains stubbornly inconclusive, in humor, story and characterization. Mr. Sherwood appears not to have planned it fully or finished it scene by scene. After a creditable and promising first act it prattles commonplaces about politics, the rights of the populace and the story-book cruelty of marrying a princess to a degenerate prince. Even when the King fearfully comes out into the open in the last act and amazes his henchmen by bluntly asserting the royal prerogative, Mr. Sherwood still leaves the surrender of the Queen undramatic, almost flat. For he has hardly developed his theme at all. Being content to take whatever lies ready to his hand, he lets his comedy degenerate into mediocrity. More's the pity, for "The Queen's Husband" might just as well be delightful as an uneven bore.

* * *

Brooks Atkinson, "Tender Reproof," New York Times, February 22, 1928, sect. VIII, p. 1, col. 1.

Brooks Atk.,
1928, sect. VIII,

The trick of candor, as a trick, has already lost its freshness. With the writing of "The Queen's Husband," also, one suspects that Mr. Sherwood has not squeezed enough original substance out of his material to justify a full-length play. It is journeyman entertainment. Now that Mr. Sherwood has amply demonstrated his skill in using the stage as a platform for dramatic exhibitions he needs only to take infinite pains with the designing and writing of his plays, and plenty of time for sapient reflection.⁴

Writing of Waterloo Bridge, Atkinson admits only a slight merit.

Shortly after the curtain is up on "Waterloo Bridge," which was acted at the Fulton last evening, Robert Emmett Sherwood gets down to the basic facts of modern life -- the war and the women. In this case the women are les belles impures, who draggle back and forth across a London bridge in the evening in search of wayward soldiers and employment. Before the play is over Mr. Sherwood has found the tender spot in the heart of one of his street-walkers and restored her to virtue by the example an upright American soldier sets her. It is a tedious journey in a voluble play by the author of "The Road to Rome" and "The Queen's Husband"; it is a play lacking the completeness of the major characterization and the guileless acting of Glenn Hunter and June Walker, both of whom are singularly affecting, it is a desultory evening of sentimentalities that run toward a foregone conclusion.

Mr. Sherwood begins with the romantic chiaroscuro of employment hour for the erring sisters who are the chief interest of his play. In the quiet and peace of a typical London evening Kitty is tagging after the soldiers and discussing affairs of trade. Myra is just returning to it after several months of unprofitable boredom as a farmerette. She is an American, and while she is still on the way to her old shabby lodgings she has the good fortune to meet a young American enlisted in the Canadian Army. The first of the four scenes thus introduces the two chief characters.

Having introduced them, Mr. Sherwood devotes the rest of his play to their salvation. For it soon appears that Roy Cronin, who is the lad from up-State New York, never suspects the antiquity of Myra's profession.

⁴

Brooks Atkinson, "Tender Reproof," New York Times, February 12, 1928, sect. VIII, p. 1, col. 1.

How he innocently falls in love with her, how Myra's sense of fair play compels her to resist him, how he still loves her when at length he knows what breed she is and how his native chivalry touches her and shames her into reformation -- is the substance of the play.

It is not much to go on for a full-length drama. It is, in fact, rather sophomoric in its point of view. What Mr. Sherwood does accomplish is illumination of his principal characters, especially in the first act when they are discussing the commonplaces of life over a scrappy meal in Myra's lodging house. The part of Myra is meagerly developed except passively. But Roy, who is just out of the hospital and glowing with happiness over his good fortune in finding an American, fairly bubbles over with youthful high spirits....

In a play composed so much of talk, it would be well if the talk were consistently pithy, for Mr. Sherwood has relied on the talk to make points that are always more vivid in action. It is the long way round, and the easiest way to lose an audience's interest.⁵

On the program title page he quotes an old saying: And finally, with the fifth play, Robert Sherwood won from Brooks Atkinson a favorable comment, and unknowingly Atkinson anticipates himself by about four years. Not until The Petrified Forest is Brooks Atkinson to speak so kindly again of Robert Sherwood as he does in this review of This Is New York:

Without being especially fervent about anything in particular, Robert E. Sherwood has turned out a genial piece of entertainment in "This Is New York," which was acted genially at the Plymouth last evening. It is his best comedy so far. In its story of a South Dakota Senator flaming with wrath over the moral depravity of New York, it meanders a good deal, never quite sure in which direction it is going, and it is pretty dull going toward the end. But the dialogue is spontaneously humorous and the point of view is amiable. In "The Road to Rome" and "The Queen's Husband" Mr. Sherwood's sense of humor was on the professional side. Writing of his own town in the new play he is jovial and genuine, and his ideas are full of common sense. For the civilized playgoer the

pleasantries of character and chatter should compensate for the aimlessness of the story.

The characters represent two opinions about New York. Senator Harvey L. Krull from the pioneer Northwest and his grimly uninteresting wife would be glad if New York seceded from the Union. Sitting over a rare steak and a piece of hot pie in his suite at the Hotel Roosevelt, he declares passionately that Manhattan Island ought to be towed across the ocean to Europe where it belongs. But his daughter is somewhat less rigid. For she is in love with one of New York's most gilded youths, and she hopes to marry him if he can square matters with an avaricious mistress who lives in splendor on Central Park West. Squaring matters fills the rest of the play. It involves a loud, damp party given by an influential racketeer, a suicide, a scandal that brings the tabloid photographers running fast, a long debate on Gotham wickedness, and a decent reconciliation at the end. Sometimes you suspect that Mr. Sherwood has absent-mindedly forgotten his story. But he puts it all in good order at the end.

On the program title page he quotes an old saying: "New York is a nice place to visit, but I wouldn't live there if you gave me the place," which really has very little to do with the play. Since he is writing an evening's entertainment he does not rush to the defense of Cosmopolis. But the frankness of the New York people he puts on the stage will predispose you in New York's favor. The avaricious mistress sounds formidable in the abstract. But when you meet her she is charming and intellectually honest. The racketeer is a man of decent impulses. It is only the Senator who is full of cant. Mr. Sherwood has discussed his characters with good-natured informality, rambled along leisurely about one thing or another and made impertinent remarks about a number of people of importance in the town....

In fact, the actors have been as unobtrusively genuine about their work as Mr. Sherwood has been about his.

Not to be unduly secretive about these affairs of the theatre, "This Is New York" is genuine comedy and good entertainment in an unpretentious vein.⁶

With this lengthy evidence of Brooks Atkinson's critical style and turn of mind, the reader can judge his critical method. Because Brooks Atkinson's criticism will be an important source in this study, it is wise to point out at this time this critic's one important limitation. He is a New Englander whose critical perspicacity is in most cases reliable, but whose one blind spot is his weakness for a noble sentiment. If Atkinson is inclined to agree with a playwright's point, he sometimes indulges his sympathy to the extent of neglecting his critical responsibility. In the case of Robert Sherwood, however, it is to Atkinson's credit that he has been on the whole admirably consistent and astute. In the reviews just investigated, Atkinson has succinctly summed up the major points of interest and has discussed them for the most part sufficiently, but it cannot be the final answer. The Queen's Husband, for instance, is not necessarily as worthless a play as Atkinson indicates, nor is This Is New York quite so good as Atkinson would lead us to believe. In the main, however, we have based the discussion of these four plays on his comment.

Limited to the development of Robert Sherwood's dramatic prowess, this study will of necessity avoid discussions of certain of the important and interesting aspects in the playwright's philosophical growth. But it is impossible to separate distinctly a playwright's dramatic development from his mental and emotional development. The two are integrated. Therefore, in so far as is possible, the investigation of the prefaces written by Robert Sherwood will be guided by the light those prefaces throw on the actual playwriting at the time of their composition. Out of the period under investigation at the moment,

perhaps the most significant single piece of work by Robert Sherwood is the preface he wrote for the printed edition of The Queen's Husband.

John Mason Brown says that the preface to The Queen's Husband is "one of the sanest, soundest, most irrefutable, and important essays that have yet been written on the contemporary American drama."⁷ It is that and, what is more, it is the sanest and soundest bit of writing yet to come from Robert Sherwood's pen. Brown's use of the words "sane" and "sound" is fortunate because as this argument progresses, we shall strive to prove that these words become more and more characteristic of the kind of writing that is Robert Sherwood's. In the case of this preface the motivation for the writing of it is, of course, less important than the thing itself; but for the full understanding of it, a reader must realize that it was no doubt prompted by the critical reception of his play The Queen's Husband. But Robert Sherwood is not a man to quibble with the critics merely because they censured The Queen's Husband for its sentimentality and fantasy. To Sherwood this critical attack was unjustified and indicative of the state of the American theater. And so with a clear voice Robert Sherwood speaks against the critic and the playwright of the day, avoiding the sound of a petulant playwright with an unsuccessful play and speaking as one justly irritated. His logic is sound, his perception acute, and his writing effective.

Robert Sherwood makes his point in the following manner:

7

John Mason Brown, Saturday Review of Literature, V, June 8, 1929, p. 1093.

The critic is a product of the journalistic tradition that governs contemporary American letters. He is a "good newspaper-man"; he has a large "following" (or "consumer appeal"), and is consequently highly paid by his employers....

The writer who would endear himself to the critic and to the cash customers, or boobs, for whom the critic speaks, must be a "good newspaper-man" himself. He must be literal. He must "get down to brass tacks" and "come down to cases." He must never, under any circumstances, expose himself to the damning charge of sentimentality. He must establish himself as an iconoclast, a misanthrope, a fearless exposé of the mediocrity and hypocrisy of life.... He must be illusionless and, like all other successful Americans, he must be "he."

As a result of the dominance of this journalistic tradition, we have developed a literature that is hemmed in on all sides by city desks -- a literature that is not literature but "copy," dedicated to a muse who wears a green eye-shade, wields a blue pencil and asks, in a cold, contemptuous tone, "Have you verified this?"...

The American writer wants to be known as one who faces facts -- grim facts -- and the grimmer, the better. Reporting is his job, and he does it well. Our literature gives an extraordinarily faithful, honest, and revelatory portrait of our country and its people. But a faithful, honest and revelatory portrait is not necessarily a work of art; it can only be a work of art if it retains its merit in the eyes of one who knows nothing and cares nothing about its subject....

Probably the main trouble with the American writer is that he is eternally afraid of being kidded....

Knowing that that which passes for "realism" is still the most fashionable literary commodity of the day, he goes to the great realists for his models. He fraternizes with Flaubert, Tchekov, Stendhal and Ibsen...

But he never achieves the one faculty that made these great men great, which is the faculty of appreciations. He may describe ugliness with remarkable fidelity, but he is rendered inarticulate in the presence of beauty. He charts "the American scene" with mathematical exactness, but he has not dared to explore those lost continents where dwell the immortals....

In the theatre, we have set up Ibsen and Tchekov as

models of tragedy, and Shaw as the model of comedy. We have neglected to notice that the tragedies of Ibsen and Tchekov are high tragedies because they came from the intense, aching sympathy of artists, rather than from the cool, calculated scorn of reporters....

The American writer is desperately afraid of glamorous romance.... He knows, because the critics have told him so, that Romance is Hokum, Fantasy is Hokum, and Sentiment is the lowliest Hokum of all. Poetry may also be hokum unless it is salted with references to "muscles," "guts," "blood" and "sweat."...

It may be as well to eliminate hokum from the novel (though none of the great novelists, including Samuel Butler, Thackeray, Dostoievsky, Hardy and Conrad, have done it); but the elimination of hokum and buncombe from the theatre would result in the elimination of the theatre itself. Hokum, as the term is applied in these disillusioned states, is the life-blood of the theatre, its animating force, the cause of and the reason for its existence. The theatre is and always has been a nursery of the arts, a romping-ground for man's more childish emotions. Ibsen, the most relentless of the realists, knew this; that is why he equipped little Eyolf with a crutch so that, when the child is drowned at the end of Act I, the audience may be chilled by a description of the crutch, floating on the water....

It ought to be obvious that any wholesale slaughter of illusions would be disastrous to the theatre, which survives solely because of its ability to create and sustain the illusion of reality....

To be able to write a play, for performance in a theatre, a man must be sensitive, imaginative, naive, glib, passionate; he must be something of an imbecile, something of a poet, something of a liar, something of a damn fool. He must be a chaser of wild geese, as well as of wild ducks.... He must be independent and brave, and sure of himself and of the importance of his work; because if he isn't, he will never survive the scorching blasts of derision that will probably greet his first efforts. He must not shrink from the old hokum; he must actually love it....

The theatre is no place for consciously superior persons. It is a place for those incurable sophomores who have not been blessed by God with the power to rise above their emotions. The theatre is and forever will be the theatre of Rose Trelawney and Fanny Cavendish and the

quality Crummels family....reaching for the moon on the painted

backdrop. Nevertheless, it is my firm and unshakable belief that a playwright should be just a great, big, overgrown boy, Now we reaching for the moon.

ing. It is The moon is not unattainable. Playwrights have reached it in the past; they have even brought it down to earth, and pasted it on a back-drop. The moon is never more beautiful than when it is seen shining down on an insecure balcony in a canvas Verona.⁸

From the point of view of this study it is not necessary that it, Sherwood reverts to prose and does excellently in his preface these words written by Robert Sherwood in 1928 be his final words what he fails to do in his play. The preface is an exciting description on the subject or even a credo by which he is to write in the future. The significant point is that after his third Broadway production War, it might well serve as a description of London in this present Robert Sherwood was able to produce so sound and so earnest an argument. No other evidence is so conclusive as this for the fact that less at random, illustrate vividly the timeliness of their words and Sherwood was a playwright with a firm foundation in even this, his the poignancy of their present application: growing period. Lengthy debate of some interest could arise from this preface and the plays that followed it. Proof could be offered to substantiate the claim that Robert Sherwood did not live up to his argument for playwrights, that he himself became the most successful example of a "journalistic" playwright. But such an involved argument is unnecessary. The answer is that Sherwood grew in his times and adapted himself and his artistic philosophy to the deep need he felt for writing plays of his times. No one can argue that Sherwood has lost his feeling for the romantic; that feeling has matured. Few will deny Sherwood's consistent love for theater -- "hokum" is the word he used. And let no one ever say that Robert Sherwood lost the

8

Robert Sherwood, "Preface," The Queen's Husband, New York, 1928, pp. xi-xix.

quality of the little boy reaching for the moon on the painted backdrop. But such will be the matter for the rest of this study. Now we must take this essay for what it is in the time of its writing. It is honest; it is intelligent; it is sound.

For the printed edition of Waterloo Bridge the playwright again provided a preface. Writing this time because he seemed to feel that his play did not sufficiently cover the material he had provided for it, Sherwood reverts to prose and does excellently in his preface what he fails to do in his play. The preface is an exciting description of war-time London. Although it was written of the first World War, it might well serve as a description of London in this present grotesque sequel. Such paragraphs as the following, selected more or less at random, illustrate vividly the timeliness of their words and the poignancy of their present application:

In the air-raid shelters -- underground stations and cellars -- were strange gatherings of noblemen and navvies, most of them either very old or very young, some in evening dress, some in their night clothes, some playing bridge, some reading, some carrying on their domestic squabbles in strident tones. All of them were trying, in an obviously self-conscious manner, to appear unconcerned; and each of them, while recognizing that his neighbor's stoicism was no more genuine than his own, was infinitely comforted to know that whatever the circumstances Englishmen would not precipitate embarrassing scenes.

It was an incomparable performance of what Alexander Woolcott has correctly called "the tragedy of the stiff upper lip."

London was wearing its traditional armor of phlegm. Viewed from this remote distance (twelve years), that armor appears absurdly thin and false. One may truthfully say, "poor things -- they were kidding themselves." But in 1917 the British phlegm was both an imperishable

wall of defense and a saving grace. It caused the alien observer to realize that these people had not achieved their previous estate of world domination by accident. What they had gained they had earned.⁹

The play is but a weak reflection of such a picture. Obviously it was intended to be more, but it failed pathetically to live up to any such promise. The one moment in the play that is even reminiscent of the feeling displayed in the preface is a speech obviously intended by the playwright to be the important speech in the play:

Yes -- fight the war! What's the war, anyway? It's that guy up there in his aeroplane. What do I care about him and his bombs? (He goes to the wall and leans over it as though beyond it were a vast crowd listening to him.) What do I care who he is, or what he does, or what happens to him? That war's over for me. What I've got to fight is the whole dirty world. That's the enemy that's against you and me. That's what makes the rotten mess we've got to live in.... Look at them -- shooting their guns up into the air, firing their little shells at something they can't even see. Why don't they turn their guns down into the streets, and shoot at what's there? Why don't they be merciful and kill the people that want to be killed?... Oh God -- if they'd ever stopped to figure things out the way I've had to do, the whole lot of them would be committing suicide instead of shooting into the air.¹⁰

This speech stands out as an aria. Surrounded by the most middling dialogue, the speech itself might have proved an obvious attempt at profundity if the playwright had not been careful to mold his play with a craftsmanlike touch that gives it an air of being a better play than it is.

⁹ Robert Sherwood, "Preface," Waterloo Bridge, New York, 1930, p. xvi.

¹⁰ Sherwood, Waterloo Bridge, Act II, Scene 2, p. 168.

Said the critics of Waterloo Bridge:

Some plays are unconvincing because they are obviously untrue to life; others for no other reason than that they have been seen so often that they inevitably remind one of the theater; and the present piece belongs to the latter class. For all I know, events something like those it recounts may have happened frequently and, in so far as I am able to judge again a bit of writing so much like countless others, I am inclined to suspect that the author has done a reasonably competent job. But a tale told so often inevitably lulls the faculties to sleep.¹¹

real consequence; it is simply that the playwright did not treat it

The piece was evidently written in haste, the lines contain no meat of any kind and no dramatic diction, no dialogue with point, no speech that has any reality of any kind or any sort of edge; and yet, by virtue of its resting on a story that is safe stage platitude, and through the staking out of the curtains and main points in the story, a considerable effect of drama arises. "Waterloo Bridge" remains rubbish, it is the well-scrutinized rubbish of an intelligent man, and so, at least, it does not block the actors' steps.¹²

satire -- all are to be seen again in Robert Sherwood's writing and

The reader or playgoer may not quite believe in the story of "Waterloo Bridge," but the action is smoothly and tenderly fashioned, and it does convey something of the English spirit in wartime.¹³

compilation of excerpts seems to make its own point:

The character-drawing is pleasant, easy but shallow; it is a smooth adaptation of a tragic theme to the taste of comfortable playgoers; it is competent theatre, but no more.¹⁴

There would be no reason to believe that the author of three

¹¹ Joseph Wood Krutch, "Magdalene," Nation, CXXX, January 22, 1930, p. 106.

¹² Stark Young, "Mostly the Actors," New Republic, LXI, January 22, 1930, p. 251.

¹³ Springfield Republican, May 28, 1930, p. 14.

¹⁴ London Times, Literary Supplement, May 15, 1930, p. 410.

plays and as many prefaces would decide to omit the preface for such a play as This Is New York. Certainly this play came no nearer to saying all the playwright had to say than any of its predecessors. The fact that it had less to say in toto does not alter the case. The preface for This Is New York, however, is little more than a smart journalist arguing cleverly on a weak and unimportant subject. It is not that something of the subject of This Is New York is of no real consequence; it is simply that the playwright did not treat it as of consequence. The play and preface are almost wholly "smart" writing.

But This Is New York fits admirably into the pattern of the growth of our playwright. The smart dialogue of its characters, the basically melodramatic plot, the slight but evident attempt at modern satire -- all are to be seen again in Robert Sherwood's writing and might well have benefited from this early exercise.

Once again the reviewers explain themselves admirably, and the compilation of excerpts seems to make its own point:

It is a shrewd and pleasant comedy, chiefly notable for its portrait of a canting Senator, admirably acted by Robert T. Haines.¹⁵

This Is New York... is the most ambitious of Mr. Sherwood's ventures into satire, and for that reason I like it best, even though it is not so completely realized as The Road to Rome. But there is in it a good deal of remarkably intelligent comedy, even though it is mostly episodic. The dramatist starts out to contrast the modern New Yorker with the Provincial, and he ably presents each point of view -- granting that his representatives

¹⁵

H... H..., Nation, CXXXI, December 24, 1930, p. 716.

of each are fairly typical, which we can if we are not overparticular; but the trouble is that when his ideas run through and his plot shows up, he is led into an entirely new channel, starting out, toward the end of the second act, to write something perilously close to a conventional crook drama, with police inspectors, bootleggers, judges and all. From this point on, we bid good-bye to satire and try to adjust ourselves to something quite different.

Yet, all the time I found myself held it was the occasional flashes of comedy that did the trick. But I wish Mr. Sherwood would think his play through next time. I believe he has it in him to write a play that will satisfy himself -- and the rest of us at the same time.¹⁶

From a first act, that seems rheumatically slow, Act II jumps briskly into melodrama, low company and the police. The jokes are many of them so eminently topical that they seem timed for a limited run. The Mirror, the Graphic and the News are particularly featured; the scale of humor being below the strata of the New Yorker.¹⁷

A humorous play on the present day morals of New York City, as contrasted with those of a senator from the wide open spaces. The upshot of it is that South Dakota, when roused, is not far behind New York in the matter.¹⁸

"This is New York" was not a great success in the theater. Perhaps the trouble was that even the Broadway first nighters had a sneaking suspicion New York is considerably more than the collection of bootleggers, rounders and rotters here presented for our delectation and for the horror of the Senator from the West, whose daughter gets mixed up with them.¹⁹

16

"This is New York," Drama, XXI, January, 1931, p. 13.

17

Catholic World, CXXXII, January, 1931, p. 464.

18

Book Review Digest, edited by Marion A. Knight, Mertice M. James, and Dorothy Brown, New York, 1932, p. 968.

19

Walter Pritchard Eaton, "Books," New York Herald-Tribune, June 21, 1931, p. 8.

It is a shrewd and pleasant comedy, chiefly notable for its portrait of a canting Senator.²⁰

Apart from a lot of wise and witty lines and the inevitable brilliant second act climax, This Is New York is distinguished by the freest use of the real names of celebrities that I have heard on the stage.²¹

Interesting as it is, the criticism that Sherwood veered from an original intention for satiric writing in This Is New York will assume its real significance when we see it again in a more important and successful instance. Of the rest of the critical comment little need be said except that it will prove more interesting as our history develops and we are able to see that from the good and the bad of this play Sherwood has worked to make of himself the playwright that he is today. We cannot leave This Is New York, however, without offering concrete evidence of the type of play that it is.

In the third act Sherwood voices his thesis. Although the scene almost explains itself, the reader should observe the lack of restraint within the writing of the lines, the flagrant gaudiness of the speeches and of the people from whom they come:

KRULL
If there are, I'm listening to him. I'm treasuring every word he says. I am glorying in the realization that such as he is opposed in every way to such as I -- the realization that I have been right, eternally right, when I have said that New York is not America....

PHYLLIS
Now listen...

20

H... H..., Nation, CXXXI, December 24, 1930, p. 131.

21

Otis Chatfield-Taylor, Outlook, CLVI, December 17, 1930, p. 629.

JOE

You keep your mouth shut.

PHYLLIS

I've heard that crack before. Will Rogers always gets a hand with it when he's playing Chatauqua time. Well -- what I want to know is, if you foreigners don't like it here, why don't you go back where you came from -- and take your amendments with you?

KRULL

It's peculiarly appropriate that the spirit of this city should find voice in one of your kind.

MRS. KRULL

You're degrading yourself by entering into any discussion with her.

PHYLLIS

Why don't you get into it yourself, Mrs. Krull? It's turning into a free-for-all.

KRULL

By God -- I wish the whole pack of you would secede, and precipitate another Civil War, so that the true patriots might have an opportunity to wipe out this -- this bawdy shambles of law-breakers, and millionaire wastrels, and drug addicts, and perverts and harlots....

EMMA

That's right, Pop. Stand up to 'em.

JOE (to KRULL)

I suppose there aren't any law-breakers or harlots in Sioux Falls....

KRULL

If there are, it's because this city with its stinking money power is seducing the inherently decent minds of our people....

PHYLLIS

I thought it was Hollywood that was supposed to be doing that.

KRULL

Hollywood is the illegitimate offspring of Broadway!

PHYLLIS

Don't let Will Hays hear that.

KRULL

I take note that you've found your own level, here.

KRULL

Oh -- you New Yorkers are willing enough to exploit America, to suck America's life-blood -- and at the same time to champion every cause that's un-American, to flout the Constitution, to sneer at the very flag itself!

and what's more, I JOE

Oh, for God's sake! Who cares what's un-American and what isn't?

KRULL

Who, indeed, in this European pig-sty!

EMMA

Don't argue, Joe. You're not in Pop's class as a debater.

JOE

I don't want to argue. (He approaches the senator.) I only want to agree with you, Senator, and be on your side, and admit that the whole thing is rotten, and degraded.

KRULL

I do not solicit your support.

JOE

You believe that I'm speaking in good faith, don't you, Mrs. Krull?

MRS. KRULL

I do not! You'd best leave your defense to this trollop of yours.

EMMA

Mother!

PHYLLIS

That's what I am, Mrs. Krull. A hundred per cent American trollop!

KRULL

Don't you befoul the name of my country by mentioning it in that...

PHYLLIS

Your country! Your exclusive country? Would you like to know where I come from, Senator? I come from Texas. That's in America, too.

KRULL

I take note that you've found your own level, here.

PHYLLIS

I got here just the same way that you got to Washington. You're not the only one who has represented the U. S. in an official way. You may not know it, but I've been Miss America in my time. Yes, sir! I carried the Stars and Stripes in the International Beauty Contest, and what's more, I won. If it hadn't been for me, the championship would have gone to Czecho-Slovakia. And then where would our great nation have been? So maybe you'll pay a little more attention to me when I tell you that New York is America -- boot-leggers and millionaires and crooked politicians and all. In fact -- that's my chief complaint against this town.²²

he leaves this continent for the more colorful background of Europe.

And such was the play that Robert Sherwood wrote in 1931. It was his fifth play. He had been writing plays for five years. With the writing of This Is New York, Robert Sherwood seemed to have purged himself of those bad influences that permeate young playwrights' work, and he was free to take a deep breath of clean air and pause a moment for contemplation.

²² Robert Sherwood, This Is New York, New York, 1931, Act III, pp. 168 ff. In order to see how Rudolph has changed, and so to clear her mind of his image. Rudolph arrives, having smuggled himself through the frontier; the two meet; he is certain of his old charm; she, while the rest of Vienna, has not faded; she responds and does not respond to her returning lover. She finally escapes through the bathroom and comes back again, followed by Rudolph, who in turn is followed by the police. It is the husband who has to use his influence with the government in order to get Rudolph safely out of the country; he leaves the house on this errand, the architect and the former mistress are left together; she decides at last, after he has given himself to despair over himself, the past, present, and future, that she will join him in the bedroom. In the morning the husband and the lover of other days depart for the frontier; Elena and the old father are left at breakfast, and we have a sense of happy solutions.¹

¹ Stark Young, "Three More Plays," New Republic, LXXIX, December 2, 1931, p. 70.

CHAPTER III

The pause was but one year. In 1932 Robert Sherwood wrote Reunion in Vienna. It followed closely the experience of This Is New York, rather remotely, The Road to Rome. Reunion in Vienna is the climax, the end, of Robert Sherwood's first stage of development.

Again Sherwood chooses a romantic setting for his play; again he leaves this continent for the more colorful background of Europe. In this respect the play is directly comparable to The Road to Rome and The Queen's Husband. And, as in The Road to Rome, he hinges his plot on the maneuverings of one sex in pursuit of the other.

The story is that of a former archduke who returns to Vienna for a reunion dinner that the mistress of a famous hotel gives for her onetime royal patrons. The real reason for Rudolph's return is to see again his oldlove Elena, now married to a famous psychoanalyst. The husband, jealous in spite of his skill in curing others, urges Elena to give herself the test, in order to see how Rudolph has changed, and so to clear her mind of his image. Rudolph arrives, having smuggled himself through the frontier; the two meet; he is certain of his old charms; she, unlike the rest of Vienna, has not faded; she responds and does not respond to her returning lover. She finally escapes through the bathroom and comes home again, followed by Rudolph, who in turn is followed by the police. It is the husband who has to use his influence with the government in order to get Rudolph safely out of the country; he leaves the house on this errand; the archduke and the former mistress are left together; she decides at last, after he has given himself to despair over himself, the past, present, and future, that she will join him in the bedroom. In the morning the husband and the lover of other days depart for the frontier; Elena and the old father are left at breakfast, and we have a sense of happy solutions.¹

1

Stark Young, "Three More Plays," New Republic, LXIX, December 2, 1931, p. 70.

his Around this set of situations Sherwood has contrived to introduce many theatrically interesting characters. He has successfully realized the type of comedy prescribed by his situation, and the play moves with a grace that permits the inherent comedy full opportunity for its expression. As a piece of theatrical writing it is far superior to The Road to Rome. There is practically none of the looseness of construction so evident in that earlier play. Perhaps the intervening five years explain this new oneness of construction; and perhaps it may be explained by the fact that Sherwood took time to think his play out more carefully before he started writing it. Whatever the explanation, it is not simple, and is less important at this moment in our analysis than the fact that the unity is there.

Before we can go further, we must dismiss the problem of his preface to the play. We must decide which play we are going to investigate -- the one described in the preface or the one that was actually written. For indeed these are two plays. Reunion in Vienna, through the eyes of the preface, is a laborious attempt to be "another demonstration of the escape mechanism in operation."² We may be grateful that Sherwood did not interrupt the course of his play with his commentary on social issues that seems to seethe within him and found its expression in his preface. Granted that in 1941 the problem of the depression and kidnapping in the world is less by comparison than other problems so flagrantly displayed today by the bombing of London and Berlin, it is none the less apparent that Sherwood displayed in

2

Robert Sherwood, "Preface," Reunion in Vienna, New York, 1932, p. vii.

his preface a too passionate concern for even the problems of 1931 -- or perhaps it is that his concern confuses his articulation of the problems, and the result is a sophomoric analysis. It is no doubt good, however, that Sherwood got the things said. It is significant that he was concerned by them. But we cannot now, considering Sherwood's ultimate point of view, regard such statements as the following as his final analysis of the problems of the world:

The discredited vicars of God believe they can be helpful. They say, "Go back to the faith of your fathers!"

They might as well say, "Crawl back into the wombs of your mothers."

The discredited ideologs of the laboratory believe that they can be helpful. They say, "Be aware! Be confident! Go forward with firm tread through the entanglements (which are purely logical), inspired by the assurances of our continued research. If you feel that you suffer from a plethora of science, then the only cure for it is more science." They even go so far as to suggest that the physicists might mark time for a while, to allow the biologists, psychologists and sociologists to catch up. The human organism must be reconstructed so that it will be as fool-proof as the adding machine.

Man is, for the moment, scornful of the formulae of the scientists, for he believes that it was they who got him into this mess. To hell with them, and their infallible laws, their experiments noble in motive and disastrous in result, their antiseptic Utopia, their vitamins and their lethal gases, their cosmic rays and their neuroses, all tidily encased in cellophane. To hell with them, says man, but with no relish, for he has been deprived even of faith in the potency of damnation.³

This frantic search for truth, this exaggerated statement of

things as the author sees them, reveals a Robert Sherwood not yet able to strip his thinking of passionate detail to reach a simple, sane analysis. The fact that he must write a preface to state his idea and is unable to incorporate it successfully into the play he is writing at the moment is significant because it illustrates the state of Robert Sherwood the playwright at the time of the writing of Reunion in Vienna in relation to Robert Sherwood the thinker, the man. But here again we are able to see an example of Robert Sherwood's characteristic sanity; he did not delude himself; he was aware that his talent at that time was for the writing of sophisticated dialogue. He did not overstep his limitations while writing his play. The union of the playwright and the social philosopher was to come later, after the success of Reunion in Vienna, after he was more sure of his tools.

Although the preface reveals an over-anxious writer, there is also in it slight evidence of the quality of Sherwood's thinking that is to make itself felt in Abe Lincoln in Illinois and There Shall Be No Night. Certainly such comparatively quiet moments as the following from his preface predict the type of writing and thinking that will lend stature and essential sanity to his later plays:

When man accepts the principles of collectivism, he accepts a clearly stated, clearly defined trend in evolution, the theoretic outcome of which is inescapable. He is enlisting in the great army of uniformity, renouncing forever his right to be out of step as he marches with all the others into that ideal state in which there is no flaw in the gigantic rhythm of technology, no stalk of wheat too few or too many, no destructive passion, no waste, no fear, no provocation to revolt -- the ultimate ant-hill. Man is afraid of

communism not because he thinks it will be a failure but because he suspects it will be too complete a success.⁴

And so we must consider the play and the preface as two distinct commentaries. The preface may be dismissed as an expression of what Sherwood would like to have done with his play. The play remains the thing he did. The two are finally incompatible. We find justification for this arbitrary attitude in Robert Sherwood's own words, written nine years after the writing of the play and its preface:

I went into this play with what seemed to me an important if not strikingly original idea -- science hoist with its own petard -- and came out with a gay, romantic comedy.⁵

The critics were not of one mind in regard to the play; indeed, they did not even form opposing camps. Each took a stand of his own and no two quite agreed. In so far as general comparison is possible, the critics fall into two categories: those who sought and criticized the theme of the play and those who reveled in the comedy and sophistication of the plot and lines. Such interesting excerpts as the following may be compiled to illustrate the differences of opinion:

In spite of its atmosphere of airy satire and quick-spoken comedy, the theme of his play is nothing more nor less than the condoning of adultery.⁶

⁴

Sherwood, "Preface," Reunion in Vienna, p. xiv.

⁵

Sherwood, "Preface," There Shall Be No Night, p. xiv.

⁶

Richard Dana Skinner, "The Play," Commonweal, XV, December 9, 1931, p. 160.

It makes rather pitiless game of the ruined Viennese aristocracy but is a broad burlesque of Dr. Freud. From that standpoint it serves a worthy end....

The best one can say of the morals of the play is that there are none. Perhaps that is better than having some perverted. Mr. Sherwood has wit and dash and a good sense of honest hokum but he does not err on the side of delicacy.⁷

"Reunion in Vienna" is as modern as the latest theory of the neuroses, and yet it is a modernism that is now mature enough to have languors and regrets and nostalgias.⁸

Mr. Sherwood might perhaps have delved a little deeper into his characters without slowing things up perceptibly.⁹

"Reunion in Vienna" is gay, robust, sophisticated, popping comedy of a very high order, by far the best play Mr. Sherwood has yet written.¹⁰

... the real content of the play, which deals with royal, conjugal, Freudian and other reactions among the characters, and which as a situation is in itself full of brilliant possibilities. As for the comedy itself, it is now and again dragged along, many of its implications are but slightly touched, and the finish it might acquire is often lacking.¹¹

Though Robert Sherwood, the author, has concocted a

⁷ "Plays of Some Importance," Catholic World, CXXXIV, January, 1932, p. 467.

⁸ Thomas H. Dickinson, "The Angle of Incidence," Saturday Review of Literature, VIII, May 14, 1932, p. 728.

⁹ Otis Chatfield-Taylor, "The Latest Plays," Outlook, CLIX, December 2, 1931, p. 438.

¹⁰ Benjamin De Casseres, "Broadway to Date," Arts and Decorations, XXXVI, January, 1932, p. 68.

¹¹ Young, "Three More Plays," p. 70.

rather amusing tale in what we are pleased to call the 'Continental' manner, there is in the comedy itself little to distinguish it from a dozen other competent jobs of the same sort; but it does, on the other hand, afford so excellent a romp for Lunt and Fontanne that few will ask for more.¹²

Occasionally a play approaches modern problems only to slither weakly away from them, as did Robert W. Sherwood's Reunion in Vienna... The Archduke's beautiful ex-mistress who has become the dutiful wife of a psychologist whose father was a cobbler, the psychologist himself, now a person of influence and importance, famous on two continents, the ex-Archduke, transformed into an all but penniless taxi-driver, the poverty-stricken adherents of the old regime, the upstart officials of the new, all were characters who might have been at once personalities and expressions of the opposing forces which have so rapidly changed places. This they were to some extent, but to an extent both limited and obscured by the author's determination to be smart and "sexy."¹³

It is evident that this is a pretty flimsy playlet -- even the loquacious liberality of the wise Herr Doktor (which is much too liberal for an old foggy like myself) fails to add much substance to the evening's entertainment.¹⁴

And finally Brooks Atkinson makes what is, perhaps, the most significant comment. In this play Atkinson sees (and is one of the first to point out) the quality in Sherwood's writing and thinking that is to distinguish the playwright. Of particular interest is Mr. Atkinson's fine distinction between a wit and a humorist and

¹²

Joseph Wood Krutch, "Sham Battle of the Sexes," Nation, CXXXIII, December 9, 1931, p. 650.

¹³

Louise Maunsell Field, "The Drama Catches Up," North American Review, CCXXXIV, August, 1932, p. 174.

¹⁴

Francis Fergusson, "A Month of the Theatre," Bookman, LXXIV, January, 1932, p. 564.

his declaring the play a slap-stick comedy.

But the Just how good a play Mr. Sherwood has written this ordinarily informative column is unable to declare. Probably that depends on how good a play you want. If you want a thoroughly compact comedy, carefully designed, solidly built and towering toward that Galsworthian "spire of meaning," "Reunion in Vienna" will not satisfy your ideal....

with a gay. As a playwright Mr. Sherwood continues to be lacking in technical skill. The fine points in his plays never crystallize. You miss in his work the pure craftsmanlike joy of a thing that is perfectly thought out and finished. From the technical point of view "Reunion in Vienna" is apprentice work. But all that really matters in the present instance is that Mr. Sherwood has an exuberant sense of humor. He is not one of the wits, of whom we have several, but he is one of the humorists, of whom we have very few. He sees the ludicrous side of solemn subjects, such as psychoanalysis and royalty. It is fresh, boyish humor, bubbling over with fun. It mischievously takes psychoanalysis out of character by the logical process of showing you a psychoanalyst hot with unscientific jealousy. Taking royalty out of character is much easier, since it is a thoroughly tangible subject, and it delights Mr. Sherwood most of all.

Investigation The most uproarious part of "Reunion in Vienna" is, accordingly, the second act in the Hotel Lucher during the reunion of the deposed royalists. It is humor in the purest sense to present counts and countesses not as imposing personages, but as shabby, petulant old boors, gravely honoring a tradition that is dead. But Mr. Sherwood's funniest prank is his portrait of Prince Rudolph Maximilian von Hapsburg as a high-spirited schoolboy with his mind not on matters of State but on the lusty joys of living. Between Mr. Sherwood and Mr. Lunt this prince emerges as hilarious company. He is a topsy-turvy fellow, lacking in dignity, yet alert to his royal authority. He steams around the room, hugs Frau Lucher, slaps her where the slapping is broadest, takes an unabashed royal bow in his shirt-tails, handles his former mistress shamelessly and carries everything by storm. Being fantastic, it suits Mr. Sherwood's abilities better than the comedy of logic in the final act. It is abdominal humor; it is outrageous burlesque. As produced by the Theatre Guild, where "Intellect knows Fashion's fond Caress," it is

for the the heartiest slapstick of the season.¹⁵

But there is no one critic to whom we may go for confirmation or agreement. Our analysis of the play must, then, follow its own chief comedy character, but his part is to provide the course unguided by any one contemporary critic.

Sherwood has said of the writing of his play that he "came out with a gay, romantic comedy."¹⁶ We agree. Essentially Reunion in Vienna must be treated as a romantic comedy. In the final analysis, what Sherwood has actually done with his Freudian psychologist, his dashing Hapsburg prince, and the glamorous ex-mistress is to have concocted a clever, scientific, and modern version of the age-old triangle-comedy. If it were meant to be more, that is now completely incidental. Its merits lie in the fact that the new version of the age-old comedy situation is interestingly embroidered and cleverly phrased. Wherein, then, might we call Reunion in Vienna a comedy? Investigating the definition that comedy is the result of the frustration caused by a departure from the pattern set down by society for the moral behaviour of its members,¹⁷ we find that Sherwood's play fits admirably into this mould. Pursuing the point, we find that in light of this definition, whatever serious intention Sherwood may have had for his character of the Freudian psychologist-husband fails miserably when that character turns out to be merely the basis

¹⁵

Brooks Atkinson, "Lunt and Fontanne, Comedians," New York Times, November 29, 1931, sect. VIII, p. 1, col. 1.

¹⁶

See p. 6, supra.

¹⁷

From R. H. Griffith, English 323 class lecture, The University of Texas, 1940.

for the comedy that is to result from a departure from pattern. If Krug had behaved in the conventional manner, Sherwood would have had no comedy. The character of the psychoanalyst is by no means the chief comedy character, but his part in the play is to provide the motivation for the antics of the two chief comedy characters. Ironically enough it is through this very psychoanalyst that Sherwood gives to his play its semblance of reality and to the situations the necessary logic, however unreal the character himself may appear at times to be. ph. Old Krug, too, represents the old order of

thing. One of the tests of the finesse of a playwright is the degree of expertness with which he handles minor characters. The Road to Rome, for example, displayed an inability on the part of the playwright to create interesting people in whom he could place the responsibility of caring for the necessary details of exposition and transition. On the other hand, Reunion in Vienna reveals a playwright who has mastered the problem and handles minor characters with a deftness and an imagination that make his play theatrically more substantial and as a piece of writing, more artistic. Although old Krug is best of the minor characters in Reunion in Vienna, his characterization is representative of the manner in which Sherwood was able to infuse interest and well-chosen theatrical detail into each of the many lesser characters. In fact, old Krug remains the most nearly perfect characterization in the play. Sherwood has done a brilliant piece of devising here. Old Krug is able to articulate the necessary exposition that Sherwood, as a builder of a play, intended him to do and at the same time he is able to appear to the

audience a vitally interesting, essentially amusing, and coherent character. Within Krug, Sherwood was able to incorporate what are often unfortunately incompatible ingredients of a play: the Greek chorus, the local color, and the interesting character. It is old Krug who must first introduce the reunion party; it is he who describes the doctor's background; he again must tell the audience for the first time that Elena was at one time "more than a doctor's wife"; and finally he lends to the whole third act interest and the essential focus on Rudolph. Old Krug, too, represents the old order of things and the inability of that order to adjust itself to the new. And withal, old Krug turns out to be a lovable, amusing old gentleman, whose childish pleasure in the past life of his daughter-in-law and in his new wireless from America succeeds in delighting the audience and the reader, and in persuading them that they want to see more of him. (We feel, after all, that one of the truest tests of the merits of a characterization can be found in the answer to the question, "Does the audience want to see this character again?")

For fear of leaving the impression that all of the minor characters are as well handled as old Krug, we must mention that there is one character who is inartistically treated. Gisella is only one of the broken-down aristocrats whom Sherwood introduces, and her character is not of itself tremendously important. She is in the general framework little more than a piece of mosaic, but her part of the general picture is the weakest. Where in the other members of the reunion party Sherwood was able to create a type and to choose substantial and clever details for the succinct statement of that type, he

seems to have failed in the case of Gisella. What he intended is perfectly clear, and the idea of her character is good. But the lines he gives her are a little too blatant -- they smack of the amateur, the inexperienced; there is none of the subterfuge or subtlety that can give to a character drawn in outline form flesh and blood, reality and substance.

Sherwood's saying that he started writing Reunion in Vienna with what seemed "an important if not strikingly original idea -- science hoist with its own petard--"¹⁸ is best substantiated by the way he prepares his audience for the character of Anton Krug. He has old Krug in the early part of the first act tell the young student of his son's earlier life. Old Krug is given the following difficult two speeches -- difficult in that they are completely out of key with the character and the rest of the play:

They [the Hapsburgs] were smart, too. Whenever things became too hot for 'em here at home they'd start another war, and send all the worst of the trouble makers into the front line. They did that with him. They put him to work patching up all the soldiers they'd broken there in Gorizia -- patching 'em up so that they could send 'em out to be broken again. But do you know what he said about it? He said it was murder they were doing -- that the enemy were our comrades. Comrades! The Italians! And on top of all that, every soldier that was sent to him was marked unfit for further military service. He told 'em all to go home. But they soon put a stop to that. They took away his commission from him, and made him a laborer in their stone quarries; and that's why he could never be a surgeon again. They crushed his hands with their stones!¹⁹

¹⁸

See p. 6, supra.

¹⁹

Sherwood, Reunion in Vienna, Act I, p. 21.

Oh, it didn't upset him. He said, "If I can't use my hands to chop people to pieces, I can still use this." (He taps his head.) And he did. And now they don't put him in prison for what he says. They pay him! Why -- they sent for my boy all the way from America, and he went across the ocean to tell those Americans how to live. They didn't know. And when he came back he brought me a present -- that wireless machine, there. Did you ever see as fine a one as that? (He gazes lovingly at the radio.) It's mine -- but they won't let me play it.²⁰

his psychoanalyst. In the scene between Elena and Krug at the end of the first act, Sherwood seems to have his eye on the first Krug. He is completely sympathetic, entirely worthy of the faithful writing of Reunion in Vienna. It does not take Sherwood long to put in him by his students, and attractive enough to have won a wife and abandon such a serious attack on the character of Krug, for it is apparent that he felt its incongruity in the play he was writing. Indeed he lightens the impact of the speech introducing Krug within representing to them all science and its deadly presumption that it can master the human equation. Left with this impression, the audience encounters no difficulty in believing Rudolph's being defeated by Anton's charm in the beginning of the third act. But soon after staging of the script. The explanation for the existence of these speeches might simply be that Sherwood was loath to relinquish altogether his original purpose, and found in them some satisfaction for comedy of which he is a part. It appears that Sherwood is over-anxious to make the situation clear, and forgets to write with all the grace the fact remains that the characterization of Anton Krug suffers from that his play demands. We admit that we might be stretching a point, a change in the point of view of the playwright. But Sherwood is but we suggest that in this scene Anton's charm becomes too labored more of a technician than he was when he wrote The Road to Rome, and too soon -- that Sherwood anticipates the direction he gives when he says, "ANTON is beginning to betray evidences of impatience which was to take than he was in that earlier play. Krug undergoes no might easily develop into violent wrath,"²¹ by several pages of dia-

abrupt metamorphosis; rather, Sherwood manages to make the most of Krug in the comedy that was to come later. And so, in the final analysis, all that this introductory speech does to the play and to the character itself is to lend an uncomfortable note of virility and sordid reality. As for the rest of the play, we are of the opinion that Sherwood was never quite sure just how far he was to take his psychoanalyst. In the scene between Elena and Krug at the end of the first act, Sherwood seems to have hit upon the right Anton Krug. He is completely sympathetic, entirely worthy of the faith put in him by his students, and attractive enough to have won a wife such as Elena. For the moment, the audience forgets that his hands were crushed by the Hapsburgs or that he is a world-famous scientist clear to his audience that Anton was not above being a normal husband. But we cannot help conjecturing how much more consistent the can master the human equation. Left with this impression, the audience encounters no difficulty in believing Rudolph's being defeated by Anton's charm in the beginning of the third act. But soon after this scene in the third act begins, Sherwood starts to write with too heavy a pen, and Anton takes on too serious a mien for the light, gay comedy of which he is a part. It appears that Sherwood is over-anxious to make the situation clear, and forgets to write with all the grace that his play demands. We admit that we might be stretching a point, but we suggest that in this scene Anton's charm becomes too labored too soon -- that Sherwood anticipates the direction he gives when he says, "ANTON is beginning to betray evidences of impatience which might easily develop into violent wrath,"²¹ by several pages of dia-

21

Sherwood, Reunion in Vienna, Act III, p. 170.

logue when he permits Anton to make such condescending replies to

Rudolph's effusive explanation as: grace of a well-made high comedy

into a craftsmanlike comedy moment that is too technically perfect.

RUDOLPH

Sherwood ... For I assume that she would have become a com-
monplace, obese, bourgeois housewife.

ately, and he fails to add the unstudied detail of lifelike behavior

ANTON

that would She has resisted the influences surrounding her.²² and would

not, in the final analysis, have cheated him of what he had devised

RUDOLPH

as his big ... That sounds a bit disgusting, doesn't it? construction

did not, most certainly, ANTON through in the stage production of the

Nothing is disgusting that is said with such art-
play; less sincerity.²³ live people to speak his lines and to give

to his moment its semblance of life. Indeed the scene upon the first

It is difficult to be sure that Sherwood was wrong in suggesting so

reading does not appear to be faulty. Only when the reader looks at

clear to his audience that Anton was not above being a normal hus-

the play again and again as a piece of play construction, regarding

band. But we cannot help conjecturing how much more consistent the

carefully the remarkable facility that the playwright displays in

scene would have been with the scene in the first act if Sherwood

telling his romantic story so charmingly and yet so believably, is

had permitted Anton a few moments more of complete composure. Along

he able to sense the difference between this scene and the one, for

with this consideration we wonder about the scene in which Anton

example, between Elena and Rudolph immediately following. The only

weakens and all science slips for a moment. By comparison with some

possible point that can be made of this rather tedious scene

of the other moments in the play, this scene is not all that it should

be that it illustrates a quality in the writing of Sherwood

be. Perhaps there are too many words spoken; Rudolph is allowed to

that, although it is not prevalent, it is a quality that weakens the

elaborate his proposal for too long a time. Or perhaps it is that

play from being a truly good one. He sought to give his scene the

Sherwood in his effort to give his scene the "punch" that he felt it

ity that caused the critics so much concern and that he felt it

needed was too careful to keep Elena out of it. For although Elena's

they at the time did not appear to realize it

words are well chosen, the effort on the part of the playwright to

²²

Sherwood, Reunion in Vienna, Act III, p. 166.

²³

Ibid., Act III, p. 167. an excellent comedian who plays

place those words at the right moments shows through, and the scene as a whole falls from the lilting grace of a well-made high comedy into a craftsmanlike comedy moment that is too technically perfect. Sherwood forgets here that human beings do not behave so appropriately, and he fails to add the unstudied detail of lifelike behavior that would have given to his scene a more believable aspect and would not, in the final analysis, have cheated him of what he had devised as his biggest scene in the play. This weakness in play construction did not, most certainly, show through in the stage production of the play; for the author had live people to speak his lines and to give to his moment its semblance of life. Indeed the scene upon the first reading does not appear to be faulty. Only when the reader looks at the play again and again as a piece of play construction, regarding carefully the remarkable facility that the playwright displays in telling his romantic story so charmingly and yet so believably, is he able to sense the difference between this scene and the one, for example, between Elena and Rudolph immediately following. The only possible point that can be made of this rather tedious discussion can be that it illustrates a quality in the writing of Reunion in Vienna that, although it is not prevalent, appears at times and prevents the play from being a truly good one. We suggest that it was this quality that caused the critics so much concern and disagreement, although they at the time did not appear to realize it.

Francis Fergusson said:

The third act is weak; but the Lunts, with the aid of Mr. Henry Travers, an excellent comedian who plays

Dr. Krug's father, manage to put it across to a vastly delighted audience,²⁴

while Richard Skinner had the following to say:

Robert Sherwood has spoiled what might have been an interesting comedy about the dregs of old Austria by a very obvious and unimaginative ending.²⁵

And with that the critics completed any attempt at a comment on the end of the play as a piece of writing. The critics concerned themselves almost exclusively with the problem of whether or not Elena really did spend the night with Rudolph. Their reactions are interesting and varied. The Catholic World, for instance, declared:

The ending is lame for everyone but Rudolph. Elena had shown admirable intentions but she did not seem to object to trying a new remedy. Chastity has no premium in the Freudian theories.²⁶

Richard Skinner seems to have no doubt in his mind as to what happens after the curtain goes down:

The play ends with the departure of the archduke after he has accomplished his main purpose.²⁷

And Joseph Wood Krutch offered the most elaborate discussion of the problem of the ending of the play, and his answer is, I think, sig-

24

Fergusson, "A Month of the Theatre," p. 564.

25

Skinner, "The Play," p. 160.

26

"Plays of Some Importance," p. 467.

27

Skinner, "The Play," p. 160.

nificant because in it is a clear revelation of just how much the critics of this play were influenced by the performances of Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne:

Next morning no questions are asked, and the audience, as well as the husband, is left to guess what really happened. Did Miss Fontanne consent or did she not? Now, I do not know whether I am supposed to give an answer, but if I am, then my guess is yes, and I base it upon a certain blankness which passed over Miss Fontanne's face at the instant when she had just said "no" so effectively that the departing Hapsburg shut the door of his bedroom behind him. At that moment the second-act curtain descends, but a temptation is never so seductive as in the instant when we are struck by the fear that we have just succeeded in conquering it once for all. It leaves an emptiness behind which only the forbidden can fill, and it is at that moment that we begin to hunt eagerly through the tall grass for the apple we have just thrown away. Surely it was thus that Eve fell, and it was Eve who set the old fashion which never changes.²⁸

Interestingly enough, Stark Young dismissed the ending of the play by saying, "And we have a sense of happy solutions."²⁹ And there you have what we think is a rather pertinent indication of the merit of the general critical comment of Reunion in Vienna. Whether or not the critic was favorably impressed, the production of the play seems to have succeeded in precluding any studious critical analysis. True, several critics³⁰ mentioned briefly Sherwood's failure to live up to the promise of the first act and some mentioned

²⁸

Krutch, "Sham Battle of the Sexes," p. 650.

²⁹

See p. 56, supra.

³⁰

See Catholic World, CXXXIV, p. 467; Field, "The Drama Catches Up," p. 174; De Casseres, "Broadway to Date," p. 68; Dickinson, "The Angle of Incidence," p. 728; Skinner, "The Play," p. 160.

slight irregularities in characterization; but no one bothered to take the play and study it as a piece of dramatic literature.

To ignore the presence of Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne in the writing of the characters of Rudolph and Elena would be foolhardy. Sherwood himself admits in his preface that he wrote the play "with the help of God and a few Lunts."³¹ No critic reviewed the play who did not write at length about the brilliant performances of this acting couple. Indeed most criticisms of the play treated it more as a vehicle for the Lunts than as a play in itself. And so, in analyzing the characters of Rudolph and Elena as portrayed in the play, it is essential that the reader bear in mind at all times that these actors were on hand to do their bit in the formation of the characters they were to play. It is, we think, not presumptuous to assume that they spoke no lines they did not want to speak, that they had lines written when they needed them to allow for certain stage business or stage movement that they, as actors, had devised. Just how much of Elena and Rudolph is Robert Sherwood and how much is the Lunts is difficult to ascertain. But it is fairly certain that there is little, if any, of Elena and Rudolph in the play that is Robert Sherwood without the grace of the Lunts. A playwright would be foolish (and Robert Sherwood is not foolish) to have ignored their wishes. We do not feel that the play suffers from their such theatrical technicalities as the playing of comedy on the stage part in it. Conceivably the whole tone of the play might have been making the audience laugh, then we ask only, "What else should a different without them; but if they were the influence that kept give a comedy part fully and with all its ramifications, then we Sherwood to the writing of a comedy without comment, they were right.

³¹

Sherwood, "Preface," Reunion in Vienna, p. xvi.

As we have said before, Robert Sherwood was not ready to bear a message and a play. If it was Lunt who insisted that Rudolph be made

Elena moves through Reunion in Vienna as easily as Lynn Fontanne moves through a performance on the stage. If Elena at times is superficially conceived, it is because Lynn Fontanne plays comedy superficially.³² Only in the moments previously discussed does Elena, as a literary character, fail to live up to her obligation to life and theater. Those moments, we hope, have been explained. On the whole, then, Elena remains one of the most delightfully drawn women that we have encountered in dramatic literature. The ease and consistency of her characterization, along with the almost complete absence of self-conscious writing, make Reunion in Vienna a much better play than it would have been without her.

As for Rudolph, almost the same may be said for him as for Elena, except that here possibly Sherwood should be given more credit, because the character of Rudolph was a much more difficult one to write than it was to play on the stage. Whatever Alfred Lunt did with the part must have been remarkable, for everyone who wrote of the play mentioned its merit. But it was Robert Sherwood who conceived originally the idea of this happy, half-mad, egocentric archduke; and it was he

32

Here we digress to mention that we have never been convinced that the term "superficially" is necessarily adverse in regard to such theatrical technicalities as the playing of comedy on the stage. If it implies that the actor or actress plays a part with an eye to making the audience laugh, then we ask only, "What else should a comedian do?" If it means that an actor or actress does not conceive a comedy part fully and with all its ramifications, then we think the term is misapplied. Miss Fontanne, for instance, has been blamed for being a superficial actress. We feel that she is an admirable technician and an intelligent person.

who accepted the responsibility of creating such a theatrically worthy character. If it was Lunt who insisted that Rudolph be made as attractive as he is instead of the unattractive person he might have been, then he is to be commended. If it was Sherwood, then he is to be commended. Whatever philosophical inconsistencies may be found in the characterization are, we think, tedious and out of the spirit of the play. For Rudolph is not a realistic character at all, but rather a romantic idealization of a person who, if he were real, would be little more than a fool. Existing as he does, though, as a representative of the last of the glorious Hapsburgs forced to live in this twentieth century, he is an imaginative and tastefully drawn character for the stage.

With this consideration the discussion of Reunion in Vienna might be ended. In an effort to sum up the total effect of the play, we turn to Thomas Dickinson for his statement of this effect:

"Reunion in Vienna" is, of course, far more than another dramatization of a Viennese waltz. It is so much more that I have had moods while reading it (and it should be read as well as seen) of thinking that it is the wisest and ripest comedy ever written in America. I cannot at the moment think of another that moves with such a lively grace and still keeps an intelligent head on its shoulders... Sherwood has so often been compared with Shaw that the association of their names is no longer flattery to either, and yet Shaw has done so many things with a provocative badness that it is a satisfaction to see the same things done with a graceful finality.³³

We do not dare go so far as Dickinson in saying that it is the wisest,

ripest comedy ever written in America. We can conclude, however, that it is the best comedy Robert Sherwood has ever written and that its success is of great importance for the full understanding of Robert Sherwood's later development as a playwright.

But Sherwood is taking full strides as an adult playwright. He seems at last to have acknowledged the writing of plays as his medium. He knows the theater is his mode of expression.

through the medium of the theater. In *Reunion in Vienna* and *The Petrified Forest* and the flimsy moment of *The Queen's Husband*, the author who shouted the need for romance in the theater,¹ and who seemed to find the most efficient and yet exciting means of injecting that romance into his theater, seemed, at last, to have focused his powers and himself in the play *The Petrified Forest*. *The Petrified Forest* is, according to Robert Sherwood himself, the beginning of the real playwright.²

In the preface to *Reunion in Vienna* we found a playwright who was unable to integrate his message and his play. It was apparent that here was a man who thought with clarity and vigor and whose writing displayed an exciting mastery of the theater and its vital forces. Yet the playwright was forced to state his ideas in his preface and to write his play with explicitness as the theater world, ignoring for the moment the possibility of the play's exposition of his thesis. For *The Petrified Forest* Robert Sherwood wrote no preface.

¹ See Sherwood, "Preface," *The Queen's Husband*, pp. vii ff.

² See Behrman, "Old Manorhouse," p. 54.

72

CHAPTER IV

Knowing this, Robert Sherwood put away the romance, the distance of the old world with its foreign attractiveness and turned his talents to the present and, what is more important, to America. The writer who had moved consistently from the awkwardness of The Road to Rome, to the refreshing dexterity of Reunion in Vienna, through the maudlin exercises of This Is New York and Waterloo Bridge and the flimsy moment of The Queen's Husband, the author who shouted the need for romance in the theater,¹ and proceeded to find the most efficient and yet exciting means of injecting that romance into his theater, seemed, at last, to have focused his powers and himself in the play The Petrified Forest. The Petrified Forest is, according to Robert Sherwood himself, the beginning of the real playwright.²

In the preface to Reunion in Vienna we found a playwright who was unable to integrate his message and his play. It was apparent that here was a man who thought with clarity and vigor and whose writing displayed an exciting mastery of the theater and its vital forces. Yet the playwright was forced to state his ideas in his preface and to write his play with emphasis on the theater therein, ignoring for the moment the possibility of the play's exposition of his thesis. For The Petrified Forest Robert Sherwood wrote no pref-

1

See Sherwood, "Preface," The Queen's Husband, pp. xi ff.

2

See Behrman, "Old Monotonous, I" p. 34.

ace. At last he was able to combine the two. S. N. Behrman astutely suggests that this new integration was not a sudden development appearing for the first time in The Petrified Forest, but one that is first seen in the unsuccessful Acropolis. It is logical, certainly, that Sherwood might have taken a half-step in the direction of The Petrified Forest before he made the successful leap. We cannot move on to The Petrified Forest without acknowledgement, at least, of the significant yet unsuccessful Acropolis.

"It was by all odds the best play I had written and the most positive affirmation of my own faith. It was a reaction, a rebellion against the despairing spirit of the 'Reunion in Vienna' preface, a rebellion that I have continued ever since. 'Acropolis' was another historical analogy, but a legitimate one."³ Thus speaks Robert Sherwood in 1940 of his play of 1933. The play was coolly received in London, and was never produced professionally in the United States. As a step in the development of Robert Sherwood it is an interesting document. It is reminiscent of the first, The Road to Rome, and anticipates the latest to the extent that phrases in it recur in There Shall Be No Night.⁴ It is apparent why this play stands as the only completely unsuccessful play in Robert Sherwood's experience. (It cannot be compared, of course, with The Love Nest.) The playwright forgot, in the effort to inculcate his message,

to employ to a great enough extent his first and finest tool: ex-

³ Sherwood, "Preface," There Shall Be No Night, p. xix.

⁴ See ibid., p. xix.

citing theater. As opposed to Reunion in Vienna, Acropolis had the idea but neglected the play.⁵ In writing of Acropolis the New York Times reviewer in London showed remarkable perspicacity. He could not have written a more significant review.

Robert Sherwood's "Acropolis" was performed for the first time last night at the Lyric Theatre under the direction of Marc Connelly, with Raymond Massey as Cleon, Gladys Cooper as Aspasia and Ian Hunter as Phidias, now engaged in the building of the Parthenon. Mr. Sherwood has permitted himself a certain liberty in the adjustment of dates, but none that fantastically distorts his study of Periclean Athens, and though he allows his people to speak modern English instead of attempting to impose upon them, he has avoided, with admirable conscience, all the chances which Shaw and lesser men than Shaw would have eagerly taken to get cheap laughter by deliberately anachronistic challenges. In brief, Aspasia's house is in no way related to a night club or a speakeasy. It is what Mr. Sherwood has imagined Aspasia's house to have been.

There comes Hyperbolus, the rich man, contemptuous of the supreme, civilized detachment that has its centre in Phidias and seeing in Cleon and his warlike nationalism his passionate doctrine of blood and iron, a chance of profit. And Aspasia orders him to leave. The steadiness and discretion of this scene are typical of the restraint with which the whole play is written. A fool with one eye on the gallery and the other on the box-office would have treated the expulsion of Hyperbolus as if he were a vulgar old man being thrown out of a brothel. What we see, instead, is a request that he will not continue to use a club where he is not welcome. He goes and the remaining company is a happy one--Socrates, whom we first encountered chisel and mallet in hand on the Acropolis, now talking at ease and leisure; Anaxagoras, a gentle and skeptical old man; Alcibiades,

5

Such arbitrary statements must be regarded as generalities, and cannot be accepted as all-inclusive facts. In this case, of course, we do not seem to indicate that Reunion in Vienna abandoned the thesis altogether while Acropolis ignored completely the theatrics. The point is merely that the proportions of these two elements were reversed in each play.

hot-headed, proud, generous, intellectually uncertain; Aristophanes, gay and wise, thinking of himself as a tragic dramatist, in the tradition of Sophocles; Phidias himself, who cares for nothing but his art, an example of passionate and exalted singleness of mind. Pericles himself does not appear, but he emerges from the conversation of the others as the political support of their ideal.

* * *

The play's conflict is a conflict of values. On the one hand is the set of values represented by an eagerness for enduring beauty, for the adornment of the city, for the work of Phidias, for the independence of Socrates's thought; on the other is the doctrine of Cleon, who, caring for imperial aggrandizement and military prowess, taunts the Athenians for their effeminacy and for not being as the Spartans are. When the Spartan invasion comes, Cleon, in the eyes of the mob, appears to be justified. Aspasia, Phidias and Anaxagoras are tried and Phidias condemned to death. We witness his end; then on the Acropolis the completed Parthenon looking out, as it were, across the future to justify the age of Pericles when the heats of the Peloponnesian wars are cold.

The contemporary moral is not remote. The world is thick with Cleons, inflaming nationalism with their rhetoric -- men whose triumphs are the disasters of mankind; and because Mr. Sherwood keeps to his Athenian subject and makes no parade of modern instances there is no reason that modern audiences should suppose that the fate of Athens as a political entity and its survival as a source of art and philosophy are disconnected with their own lives.

But I shall not be surprised if the general public finds "Acropolis" dramatically too cool for its taste. (It did; the play closed a week ago, after nine days.--Ed.) Mr. Sherwood has neither concentrated upon the personal life of any one of his people nor, even while writing of a group, has he driven his play to an emotional climax of the sort that makes the gallery shout. So much the better, in my personal judgment; I like the quietness and dignity of his approach; but I will confess that I waited, and waited in vain, for that plunge below the surface of ideas which his method seemed to invite. Mr. Sherwood is over-much inclined to be content with presenting one aspect of each character. I would have given much for light on Cleon in private, when he had no longer the support of his pose as a demagogue and when, as even tub-thumpers must now and then, he had

to sub a glimpse of life from his opponents' point of view.

like the All the parts are well performed and the production has an even distribution of emphasis. As far as they go, the people are carefully drawn and the group is shrewdly assembled. The play is, in consequence, continuously and steadily interesting -- but not as intellectually exciting as it might have been. Phidias in the hour of death visited by Aspasia -- what a prospect of the Greek mind that scene could have opened up! As it stands, it has tenderness and restraint; it gives a light suggestion of the truths underlying it; it is, like everything else in the play, admirable as far as it goes. It does not strike the heart of its subject.⁶

From Morgan's discussion there are two pertinent points that fit into the larger scheme of Robert Sherwood's whole development. From Charles Morgan we learn that in Acropolis Sherwood "has neither concentrated upon the personal life of any one of his people nor, even while writing of a group, has he driven his play to an emotional climax of the sort that makes the gallery shout." Here then is one of the weaknesses that Robert Sherwood subconsciously, at least, must have recognized in this his first important play.⁷ He was never again to be guilty in this way. The other point is perhaps the more important because the problem in playwriting that it represents is the one that Sherwood has been least able to solve and remains as a more or less general comment on all of Sherwood's writing. Morgan by his very choice of words indicates the difficulty in laying one's finger on the fault. Refusing to make the opinion dogmatic, Morgan rather resorts

⁶ Charles Morgan, "Elegy on a London 'Acropolis,'" New York Times, December 10, 1933, sect. X, col. 6, p. 1.

⁷ See Sherwood, "Preface," There Shall Be No Night, p. xxi.

to subjective ambiguity and says that in his personal judgment, "I like the quietness and dignity of his approach; but I will confess that I waited, and waited in vain, for that plunge below the surface of ideas which his methods seemed to invite." It is that phrase "below the surface of ideas" that is to recur in the discussion of Robert Sherwood as a serious playwright. It is not sufficient, accurate, or just to say that Robert Sherwood is superficial. He is not. But in the consideration of him as an important playwright dealing with serious sociological and political problems the student confronts the disturbing question of Mr. Sherwood's lack of thoroughness and profundity. The problem is not one that can be answered here. For the moment we must content ourselves with a recognition of it and herewith include it in any further discussion of Robert Sherwood's writing, aiming at a final answer. As for the quietness and dignity of approach mentioned by Mr. Morgan, it is important to remember this comment. It is not one that will be repeated in the criticism of the following two plays. And for the moment we must content ourselves with the logical assumption that Sherwood was unable to incorporate into such an approach the other elements of playwriting that Morgan suggests Acropolis lacks and that Sherwood set about to infuse in his next plays. Morgan also introduces the consideration of Sherwood's inclination to deal with one aspect of each character. Of this we will have much to say in our observations of The Petrified Forest.

* * *

Although no critic at the time made a point of it, the critical

reception of The Petrified Forest reveals clearly that the critics generally seemed to take a new lease on the business of considering Robert Sherwood and his plays and treated him with more deference and respect than they had ever shown before. It is not to the discredit of the critics that they were unable to recognize and state clearly the significance of this play in light of the other plays of Robert Sherwood; they did not enjoy the advantage of the perspective we now have. Our consideration of the play must, however, be guided always by the fact that Robert Sherwood himself said of it six years later:

"The Petrified Forest" was a negative, inconclusive sort of play, but I have a great fondness for it because it pointed me in a new direction, and that proved to be the way I really wanted to go.⁷ long as any play now extant in New York....

And we must dissociate from the bulk of the critical comment those points that touch, however unintentionally, the essential qualities of The Petrified Forest that make it the play that pointed Robert Sherwood in the new and right direction.

Again we have chosen to present the pertinent comments of the critics in a series because in this way the most accurate impression may be got of the critical tenor inspired by the play.

Mr. Robert Sherwood after extended wanderings through ancient Rome, the Balkans and Vienna has at last settled down temporarily in his native land, and to celebrate the event has given us not satiric comedy, but melodrama. Of course it is melodrama with modern trimmings, even with philosophical and social ones, for Mr.

⁷ Sherwood, "Preface," There Shall Be No Night, p. xxi.

Sherwood is ever Mr. Sherwood. The petrified forest is in Arizona, and it symbolizes the philosophical content of the book or what we are assured is that content -- that the pioneer is passing away, as is the esthete and the gun-man. These we are told by the esthete, in the person of Leslie Howard, are the last individualists, and they are all doomed to extinction. Perhaps they are, though the gun-man just now shows small signs of it, but I for one refuse to believe that the girl who recites Francois Villon between bursts of up-to-date profanity is the hope of the future. In fact I am very much of the opinion that the cow-boys, the gun-men, the esthete, and the girl herself are simply age-old types of American melodrama, and despite their greater power of expression might very well have come out of "Arizona" or "The Girl of the Golden West." The only difference is in the fact that Mr. Sherwood knows how to write and loves to play with ideas. Over the rough bones of an impossible story he lays the patina of real brilliancy, a patina which may very well deceive the average theatre-goer into the belief that he is present at the birth of something new in dramatic art. But though he isn't, he is present at a vibrant, exciting melodrama which will probably run as long as any play now extant in New York....

The patina is in Alan's monologues, but the excitement is in the vibrant action and in the humors of the characters.⁹

There have been filling stations before and Arizona deserts and machine guns and fleeing bandits, but never before has a lunch room housed more interesting types or developed their characters under more breathless circumstances. That is because Mr. Sherwood has written a soul into each of his creations; he has teased a bit of romance out of every spirit and has shot poetry out of the last rattle of the machine gun. Even Duke Mantee, the Killer, steps out of melodrama and shows the corner of a human heart. He knew enough about poetry at any rate to know that he had to fire that last shot. "I've spent the most of my life behind the bars," he says, "and I'll most likely spend the rest of it -- dead." He had just staged a small massacre before the Court House in Albuquerque when

Alan Squier, with a rucksack on his back, walks into the Black Mesa Bar-B-Q which was owned by Gramp Maple. Gramp was an old-timer and an original pioneer who had been shot at by Billy the Kid, the Killer of the '70's. Gramp's son had fought in the Great War which had won him a French wife who couldn't stand the Desert and returned to France leaving Mr. Jason Maple the solace of the American Legion and little Gabrielle.

It was of Bourges and spires and poppies and gay French laughter and dancing in the streets that little Gabby dreamed as she served hamburgers and read the translated rondeaux of Villon in the volume her faraway mother had sent her from France. She wasn't interested in the love-making of the gas station attendant, a half-back from Nevada Tech but when Squier tramped in from the Riviera, her precocious childish eyes recognized another Villon under his shabby tweeds. The unsuccessful author of one novel; the disillusioned young husband of a rich woman, Alan has come from the Riviera to try to find the secret treasure of life that he has lost. Strangely enough it is Duke Mantee who gives him the helping hand.¹⁰

The new play for Mr. Howard is a frequently strange, but always likable, preachment, with Mr. Howard and half-a-dozen competents taking the place of Mr. Sherwood in making the observations which tuck the jitters of this era into their proper pigeon-holes. Mr. Howard, as Alan Squier, a New England-born novelist, comes upon the sad realization that he is no major artist, boxes up religion, morality, ethics, romance, the American Legion, machine-gun-swinging killers, even thievery and mass murder -- and, with the expert help of the others in the cast, does that boxing up tidily and neatly....

The play becomes a mixture of thoughtful contemplation of today's evils and melodrama, with the latter rising to flood for the last few minutes of the action.

The first act is smooth and alluring, and more than ordinarily cosmic. The second, suddenly, is exciting, filled with tension, and makes its points with a thump.¹¹

¹⁰

¹³ Euphemia Van Rensselaer Wyatt, "The Drama," Catholic World, CXL, February, 1935, p. 601.

¹¹

"The Petrified Novelist," Literary Digest, CXIX, January 19, 1935, p. 19. 1934, sect. IX, col. 5, p. 1.

inspired by Mr. Sherwood's argument is less impressive than his stagecraft. The play should be great fun when the actors start to substitute firearms for philosophy; the dialogue is lively and the whole is easily read.¹²

said it. The critics even agreed as to the general value of the

he has said The scene is a desert gas-filling station and the petrified forest refers both to the actual forest adjacent and to several of the characters. The garrulous old ex-pioneer, living in the past -- and off the income from his real-estate speculations -- the American legionnaires, unaware that a new world has grown up since they came back from the war, and several others, are 'petrified.'... The gunmen who finally shoot up the place are the only ones who definitely know what they want and go straight about getting it in the hot present.¹³

inspired to such philosophical discussions of them. Perhaps it is possible to say of the body of reviews represented by the

Though it has a deceptive gloss of realism and vivid speech, it is at bottom warmly sentimental and romantic. A filling station at a lonely crossroads in Arizona Mr. Sherwood peoples with a bankrupt writer hitch-hiking West and a gang of desperadoes fleeing from a bank hold-up. Quixotically, the writer, disillusioned with life, makes over his insurance policy to the daughter of the filling station proprietor and asks the bandits to shoot him. He has fallen in love with the girl, and by such means he will give her opportunity for a fortune in which neither he nor the bandits belong. They and himself, like the trees in the neighboring petrified forest, he believes, are relics of a past age.

Mrs. Isaac Though the plot has familiar aspects which can be seen through its modern dress, Mr. Sherwood decorates it with sparkling comments ranging over a variety of topics from the American Legion to French characteristics.¹⁴

It provides an entertaining evening without strain or aimed at the intelligence or the imagination, but without boring

Although much of this critical "talk" is effusive and in the final analysis inconsequential, it is of a different kind from that in-

¹²

Ivor Brown, Manchester Guardian, January 2, 1936, p. 5.

¹³

Saturday Review of Literature, n. d.

¹⁴

E... F... M..., "A Couple of Back Bay Matters," New York Times, December 30, 1934, sect. IX, col. 6, p. 1.

spired by Reunion in Vienna. The critics agree that Sherwood has written a melodrama and that he has had something to say and has said it. The critics even agree as to the general outlines of what he has said, and there is an apparent interest manifested by the critics in the characters that Sherwood has chosen to people his play. This interest is new; for although always before the critics have found it expedient to discuss one or two of Sherwood's characters, never before have Sherwood's characters so consistently inspired the critics to such philosophical discussions of them. Perhaps it is possible to say of the body of reviews represented by the excerpts quoted above that although they say more, or attempt to say more, than is usual, they really say nothing that is not apparent on the surface and nothing that is of any real critical consequence. And so again we turn to a few of the more inquisitive critics for our discussions. The Edith J. R. Isaacs makes a point that can well serve as an opening for a discussion of the characterization in The Petrified Forest. Mrs. Isaacs, who is always interested in the actor in a play, has this to say:

It provides an entertaining evening without strain on the intelligence or the imagination, but without barring their presence entirely. It is easy, fluent writing, with a straight melodramatic story that has the interest of a lively game and with a fantastic love-story thrown in for good value. Moreover, it has a number of good -- if fairly obvious -- characterizations....

15 Robert Sherwood undoubtedly had some pleasure in thinking out that character and its motivations. Leslie
Monthly Howard undoubtedly saw in that life the possibility of
16 character delineation. But while a playwright can be

can be f excused for making a mistake that playwrights often do make, thinking that they are putting into their play what is really only in the play's background, Squier 1 Leslie Howard is too shrewd and experienced a player even app not to have known when he read the script that all of the story, except the end of it, was done before he entered that gas station and put down his nearly empty pack beside the little lunch table. Although he is on the stage almost continuously throughout the play, there is nothing for Mr. Howard to do, after the first speech in which he tells his story, but to exhibit Mr. Leslie Howard's charming presence and listen to Mr. Leslie Howard's pleasant English voice until the moment comes when he gets himself shot in Mr. Leslie Howard's most graceful manner, in the financial interest of his new-found love, Gabby Maple, who as Peggy Conklin plays her, really isn't worth the shot.¹⁵

Besides being inconsistent, Mrs. Isaacs appears to be petulant and sophomoric. If the play is as she says, a melodramatic story with a lively interest, then how can it be a play whose story is done before the curtain goes up? But Mrs. Isaacs' point is not altogether invalid. Unintentionally, we suspect, she has hit upon a quality in The Petrified Forest that tends to make it finally the "negative, inconclusive sort of play"¹⁶ that Sherwood calls it later. We cannot credit Edith Isaacs with sensing this inherent weakness, because she is too obviously concerned with wanting Leslie Howard to have something to do in the course of the play. And her complaint is not aimed at an argument concerning the play's philosophical substance, which is what Robert Sherwood is referring to in his declaration of its inconclusiveness. It is, however, only fair to say that argument

¹⁵ Edith J. R. Isaacs, "When the Actor Is Bored," Theatre Arts Monthly, XIX, March, 1935, p. 169.

¹⁶ See p. 84, supra.

can be found for the criticism that the characterization of Alan Squier is one-dimensional, and Edith Isaacs is the only critic who even approached such a consideration.

Joseph Wood Krutch writes with his characteristic fluency:

Mr. Sherwood, the author, has something to say and he is obviously in earnest, despite the light grace of his manner. He is also, however, too accomplished a craftsman to ask indulgence from any Broadway audience, since he knows the tricks of his trade and has a witty fluence quite sufficient to make something out of nothing.... I am saying only that "The Petrified Forest" could succeed upon its superficial merits alone, and that one has some difficulty in deciding whether or not one has been charmed into granting it virtues deeper than any it really has.

To begin with, the play is quite capable of standing on its feet as a simple comedy melodrama of a familiar type. The lonely filling station on the edge of the desert has been used before, and so has the band of fleeing desperadoes which descends upon it to take charge temporarily of the assorted persons who happen to find themselves there. In itself all this is merely sure-fire theatrical material, and so is the fresh and innocent rebelliousness of the budding young girl, who happens in this case to be the proprietor's daughter. Add, for love interest, a penniless young man who has made a failure at writing, and there is still little to distinguish the play from very ordinary stage fare. Imagine further that the dialogue is bright and the characterization crisply realistic. You have now a play admirably calculated to please anyone intelligent enough to prefer the routine when it happens to be well performed. What is more, this routine play can easily be detached from all the meanings which Mr. Sherwood has given it. It is complete in itself and it is, as I remarked before, quite capable of standing alone.

Yet for all this, it is plain enough that this play is double and that the familiar situations may be taken, not at their face value, but as symbols. Solidly realistic as the filling station is, it is obviously intended also as a place out of space and time where certain men can meet and realize that they are not only individuals but phenomena as well. Though there is no obvious pat-

turning, no hint of plain allegory even for an instant, the characters represent the protagonists in what the author conceives to be the Armageddon of society. The young man is that civilized and sophisticated intelligence which has come to the end of its tether; the young girl is aspiration toward that very sensitivity and that very kind of experience which he has not ceased to admire but which have left him bankrupt at last. About them are the forces with which they realize they cannot grapple: raucous bluster in the commander of the American Legion, dead wealth in the touring banker, primitive anarchy resurgent in the killer and his gang. By whatever grotesque name the filling station may call itself, and no matter how realistic the hamburger being served across its lunch counter as "today's special" may be, the desert tavern is Heartbreak House, a disintegrating microcosm from which the macrocosm may be deduced. And the moral -- or at least the only one which the only fully articulate person in the play can deduce -- is a gloomy one. What he calls Nature, and what a poet once called Old Chaos, is coming again. We thought that she was beaten. We had learned her laws and we seemed to manipulate her according to our will. But she is about to have her way again. She cannot get at us with floods and pestilence because we are too clever for that. But she has got us through the thing, not even in itself. It can only stand idly by with refinement and gallantry and perception while the world is taken over by the apes once more. And so when the bullets of the posse begin to shatter the windows, the young man and the young woman drop to the floor in each other's arms. It is a symbol of all they know or can still believe in, but they have no illusion that it is enough.

When Cervantes had finished the first part of "Don Quixote," he was visited, so he says, by a friend to whom he confessed his inability to describe in any Introduction what his aim in the book might be; and upon this the friend replied that he should not worry about either explanations or meanings. "Strive," said he, "that the simple shall not be wearied and the great shall not disprove it." One can hardly deny that the method worked in that particular instance, and it works again in the case of Mr. Sherwood's play. I have, to be sure, a lingering feeling that there are dangers inherent in the effort to write on two levels at once, and some scruples about accepting as symbols things as familiar in their literal use as some which "The Petrified Forest" employs. There is an unresolvable ambiguity at times, not only concerning the meaning but also concerning

ness. But the emotional tone, and the melodrama as such sometimes gets in the way of the intellectual significance. But most of such objections are purely intellectual. Mr. Sherwood has achieved the almost impossible feat of writing a play which is first-rate theatrical entertainment and as much more than that as one cares to make it.¹⁷

If Robert Sherwood recognized The Petrified Forest as an exercise in writing on two levels and approached the play with such premeditated ambition, then we must begin to change our conception of Robert Sherwood as a playwright. But it is apparent that he did not. Joseph Wood Krutch does not indicate any such action on the part of Robert Sherwood, and he would probably be the first to admit that the final result was not reached by any such self-conscious effort at writing allegory. The answer, we suggest, is a simple one. Robert Sherwood had a thing to say, and his mode of expression was determined by the talents at his command: a natural gift for melodrama, sure-fire theatrics, and good humor. But the point of interest raised by Krutch's lengthy and learned discussion is the proof it offers to the fact that at last our playwright has written a play and successfully incorporated his message. More than any other one critic Krutch offers elaborate evidence of the impact that The Petrified Forest had on some of its thinking audience.

Arthur Hopkins, the director and producer of the play, was perhaps prejudiced. Perhaps the article he wrote for the New York Times was a publicity gesture. At any rate, it is not possible to regard his article without considering, at least, the doubt of his serious-

17

Joseph Wood Krutch, "Heartbreak House," Nation, CXL, January 23, 1935, p. 111.

ness. However, he has said some very interesting things, interesting most of all because of the light they throw on The Petrified Forest as a directing problem. As a document representing the director's approach and conception of the play, Hopkins' article is a valuable opportunity for a study of this kind.

Three plays that seem to me to fly side by side high above the realistic theatre are Gorki's "Night Lodging," Berger's "The Deluge" and Sherwood's "The Petrified Forest." Each, curiously enough, finds its release in the same way. Each on its flight snares an unrelated group of travelers, lifting them up from their normal paths to a new view of themselves and each other, revealing hidden aspects which somehow expose to them for the first time the meaning of that unknown and little explored relationship called brotherhood.

It would seem that it is not what we know of each other that keeps us apart, but what we do not know. It seems not to matter what really knowing reveals. It is as though a heart looked into generates love -- the love that is felt by workers among the outcasts, by the confessor in the death house. Perhaps it is not our faults that separate us, but our concealments. Our concealments build up our pretenses, and with these effective barriers against understanding we walk alone amid our fellow-pretenders.

In crisis the barriers are down. In crisis men weep for each other. On this fundamental truth have Gorki, Berger and Sherwood founded their plays, Gorki pessimistically, Berger ironically, Sherwood affectionately. Sherwood's approach seems to me the soundest, since affection is the essence of the fundamental idea.

There is singing in the first two plays which I miss in the Sherwood play. There is something about closer fellowship which seems to induce song as is witnessed by the sobbing survival of Sweet Adeline, that touching lady of all lost loves or loves that were never found. Under her influence how many hearts have been unburdened, how many secrets tragic and trivial have found release, how many strong men have enfolded and comforted each other. The appearance may be alcoholic but there is more hunger than thirst. Adeline should be glorified in sculpture. She is the only American goddess, the goddess

of consolation. Men sing before her and weep. They open their hearts to her.

* * *

Though there be no song in "The Petrified Forest," there is music in Sherwood's words and the completeness of the spell he has woven is revealed not only by Squier's desire to give his life for a good deed but by the startling offer of herself to Duke Mantee by the previously congealed and seemingly hateful Mrs. Chisholm, a situation comic in appearance but poignant in significance. Surpassing is Sherwood's use of people as symbols and his gift for evoking panoramas with words.

* * *

Back of the speeches of Gramp one sees the whole colorful excitement and energy of the pioneer West -- Indians, stage coaches, covered wagons, undaunted men and women pushing on, settling, battling bitter challenge, never turning back. Piercingly are we reminded of our softened bones.

Again three hurtling eras are summoned in Squier's speech, "I was born in 1901, the year Victoria died, too late for the great war, too soon for the revolution." Two of these eras many of us have lived in. In the third we are now groping. What pictures these few words evoke!

He summons the dismay of the intellectual world in the person of Squier and behind this defeated figure we see panoramas of frantic material development, mills, steamships, railroads, skyscrapers, subways, washing machines, refrigerators, telephones, airplanes, bombing planes, poison carriers, politicians, Mickey Mouse, purgative crooners, bread lines, strikes, riots, new deals, communism, fascism. Around the intellectual whirls this chaos as he walks into the sunset toward the Petrified Forest.

Behind Mr. Chisholm there is a parade of puzzled and weary bankers, pillars that have shaken loose. Behind his wife a line of bitter-faced women staring through limousine windows.

Behind Jason Maple are seen all the futile men who with uniforms and affiliations and platitudes seek assurance of their own significance.

Beyond Gabby the future, which summons different pictures to all of us; to some dark, to others bright

and full of promise.

And Duke, the tragic, outmoded bandit, on his way to the Petrified Forest, soon to be followed, perhaps, by his legalized brethren. May they all have "an honorable funeral."¹⁸

Here again we have seen evidence to establish the conviction that Sherwood's people in The Petrified Forest are symbols. Hopkins' appreciation for Sherwood's choice of words is a new one and, we think, a just one. It is to become more and more apparent; this ability to choose the right word is not new, but one that is truly more manifest in The Petrified Forest than in any of the preceding plays. In the closer scrutiny of the play that is to follow we must remember this point and offer instances for its proof. But of all the points made by Arthur Hopkins, the most interesting, perhaps, is his statement that Sherwood founded his play on a fundamental truth affectionately. Brooks Atkinson was the first to sense in Sherwood's writing this gently simple quality when he mentioned the good humor in the writing of Reunion in Vienna. And of The Petrified Forest Atkinson has even more to say of this "affectionate" quality.

Being pretty much in love with America, Mr. Sherwood has spun an exuberant tale of poetic vagabonds and machine-gun desperadoes; and Arthur Hopkins has drawn the tang of the open spaces into the direction. For literate melodrama, written by a man who is mentally restless in a changing world, "The Petrified Forest" is good, gusty excitement.

If it differs somewhat from conventional shooting shows, it is because Mr. Sherwood has taken an interest

in his characters.... But Mr. Sherwood has a little wistful heroism for his concluding scene and a few drops of sentiment that will do no theatregoer any harm.

As a matter of fact, Mr. Sherwood takes enormous pleasure in the company he is keeping.¹⁹

Although Robert Sherwood has been writing popular comedies for seven years he has never, I think, found such a congenial environment for his humors as in "The Petrified Forest." Nor, in spite of the wit and horse-play of "Reunion in Vienna," has he ever written such a downright enjoyable play.... Fundamentally, it is Western melodrama, shot through with ideas as well as gun-fire, and free of sophistication. Although he shares the general misgivings about the present and future of manifest destiny, America suits him. His relish of buccaneering excitement, his love of vivid character, his salty humor, his sense of romance and his earnest idealism exhale the indigenous American spirit. Underlying the humors and sentiments of his other plays there has always been a determination to think and act in terms of homely common sense. But it seems to me that he has never before chosen characters and dramatic material that are so becoming to his lanky turn of mind....

Mr. Sherwood has written it in the robustious argot of tough plays, enjoying also the nervous tension of the scene. Having a sense of humor, he knows how comic serious thinking can sound in that febrile environment. As the background for a play that is soberly intended Duke Mantee's fortified lunch hour is inspired showmanship. Sherwood does not pretend. Sherwood is not self-conscious.

For at heart Mr. Sherwood is serious, and he is telling a story that is darkened with shadows of these times. ... Although Mr. Sherwood never climbs into the pulpit, he contrives, very skillfully, very persuasively, to strike a few general echoes off these central characters, and to make, in passing, several pungent comments about the avarice of old age and the bumptiousness of the American Legion. He argues an idealistic faith in the future which most theatregoers would not listen to if the background of the play were grandiose or solemn.

19

Brooks Atkinson, "The Play," New York Times, January 9, 1935, p. 22, col. 1.

As it is, Gabby and Alan talk about life and beauty with a fervor that often makes theatregoers uncomfortable.... But the philosophy of "The Petrified Forest" sounds as wholesome as the melodrama, for it is fired with the earnestness of Mr. Sherwood's convictions, and Arthur Hopkins has staged it. Of all the directors in the New York theatre Mr. Hopkins is the one who can put the solid foundation of truth beneath a decent sentiment....

As a man of the theatre with a number of thoughts in his head Mr. Sherwood has found a background as robust as his sense of humor.²⁰

To say, "Yes, you're right, Mr. Atkinson," could be presumptuous, but we must risk it. Brooks Atkinson is right. If nothing else, he, of all the reviewers, is the one who has caught the spirit of Sherwood's writing and appreciates it as such. He did not like Sherwood's of rewriting. In a hypothetical reconstruction of the writing of plays when Sherwood was trying his "playwriting legs." But now that he feels that the playwright has come into his own, he is sympathetic and lyric in his comments. Our point has been and will be to prove that Robert Sherwood is a playwright of consequence and worth because he is a man of good sense and good humor and a playwright who is able to use that sense and humor in the writing of plays that tell on the stage. Sherwood does not pretend. Sherwood is not self-conscious. Sherwood is what he is, and tries to be no more. Brooks Atkinson appreciated this in a playwright; we concur.

* * *

If we are to believe S. N. Behrman, and there is no reason why we should not, Robert Sherwood wrote The Petrified Forest in four weeks while he was in Reno awaiting a divorce. He got the idea for

a play one day as he took a drive with his lawyer. The idea, it seemed, was "the paradox of the perpetual sluicing through this primeval Nevada valley of the thick, sedimentary stream of decayed urban society." The title of the play and the hero's destination were found when Sherwood got a road map from a filling station and traced with his finger "a line on the map from Reno to Truckee, California. At Truckee, on the map, beside a little arrow he saw a notation, 'This is the way to the Petrified Forest.'"²¹ It was probably as simple as that.

By now it is apparent that much of Robert Sherwood's writing is instinctive. He writes fast and finds no need for a great amount of rewriting. In a hypothetical reconstruction of the writing of The Petrified Forest we suggest that Robert Sherwood sat down to write his play with a general outline of Alan Squier in mind and the pleasurable contemplation of setting his play in the lunchroom of the Black Mesa Filling Station and Bar-B-Q on the desert in Eastern Arizona. From here the play took shape rapidly. From Reunion in Vienna Robert Sherwood borrowed the character of Old Krug and redressed him as Gramp Maple. The character of the Legionnaire might well have preceded the full picture of his daughter, Gabby Maple. Duke Mantee was very likely the most difficult character to conceive because with him came Sherwood's effort at creating symbols out of his characters and the actual work of formulating his thesis into a succinct and well-made statement.

²¹

S. N. Behrman, "Profiles, Old Monotonous, I," p. 35.

be. The opening scene of the play is adequate and shows Sherwood's growing facility in the use of pungent dialogue to give his play the momentum it needs. Nothing can be said of the first moments in The Petrified Forest except that they are not dull, profound, or brilliant. They reveal clever use of devices, but no writing to distinguish them from thousands of similar moments. The introduction of Alan Squier is well devised. Sherwood's stage directions for his entrance again offer an interesting illustration of his familiarity with the needs of theatrical presentation and now is as good a time as any to recognize this element in the writing of The Petrified Forest. For the actor playing Alan Squier, Sherwood provided his usual

aid:

He is a thin, wan, vague man of about thirty-five. He wears a brown felt hat, brown tweed coat and gray flannel trousers -- which came originally but much too long ago from the best Savile Row tailors. He is shabby and dusty but there is about him a sort of afterglow of elegance. There is something about him -- and it is impossible in a stage direction to say just what it is -- that brings to mind the ugly word "condemned." He carries a heavy walking stick and a ruck-sack is slung over his shoulders. He is diffident in manner, ultra-polite and soft spoken; his accent is that of an Anglicized American.²²

With the straightforwardness that, as Brooks Atkinson points out, gives to Robert Sherwood's writing the wholesomeness and honesty that prevent it from becoming maudlin and uncomfortable, Sherwood launches immediately his most ticklish scenes and is successful. Gabby is no pastel characterization. Under other treatment Squier could easily

be. But it is the sturdiness in the writing and the point of view behind the writing that permit such a scene as the following to be successful in a modern stage play:

and act Squier says to the Duke:

SQUIER

I don't know anything. You see -- the trouble with me is, I belong to a vanishing race. I'm one of the intellectuals.

GABBY

That means you've got brains. I can see you have.

SQUIER

Yes -- brains without purpose. Noise without sound. Shape without substance. Have you ever read The Hollow Men?

(She shakes her head.)

Don't. It's discouraging, because it's true. It refers to the intellectuals, who thought they'd conquered Nature. They dammed it up, and used its waters to irrigate the wastelands. They built streamlined monstrosities to penetrate its resistance. They wrapped it up in cellophane and sold it in drugstores. They were so certain they had it subdued. And now -- do you realize what it is that is causing world chaos?

GABBY

No.

SQUIER

Well, I'm probably the only living person who can tell you..... It's Nature hitting back. Not with the old weapons -- floods, plagues, holocausts. We can neutralize them. She's fighting back with strange instruments called neuroses. She's deliberately afflicting mankind with the jitters. Nature is proving that she can't be beaten -- not by the likes of us. She's taking the world away from the intellectuals and giving it back to the apes...²³

Within this dialogue, Sherwood declares, is the essence of the play.²⁴

²³

Sherwood, The Petrified Forest, Act I, p. 62.

²⁴

See Sherwood, "Preface," There Shall Be No Night, p. xx.

Here is the play's preface.

On this scene Sherwood embroiders. A few isolated speeches throughout the play stand out as further elaboration. In the second act Squier says to the Duke:

You'd better come with me, Duke. I'm planning to be buried in the Petrified Forest. I've been evolving a theory about that that would interest you. It's the graveyard of the civilization that's been shot from under us. It's the world of outmoded ideas. Platonism -- patriotism -- Christianity -- Romance -- the economics of Adam Smith -- they're all so many dead stumps in the desert. That's where I belong -- and so do you, Duke. For you're the last great apostle of rugged individualism. Aren't you?²⁵

A characteristic Sherwood device -- the use of a comic incongruity at the end of a serious speech -- that was seen in Reunion in Vienna at the end of one of Old Krug's more serious speeches²⁶ is used time and time again in The Petrified Forest, but is best illustrated in the way Sherwood dismisses his big scene in which he states, as he says, the essence of his play. Squier has talked long and seriously. At the end of the speech he finishes his glass of beer and says, "That beer is excellent." And Gabby replies, "It's made in Phoenix. You know -- you talk like a Goddamn fool."²⁷ In Reunion in Vienna the device was explained as Sherwood's apology for the speech that preceded it. In The Petrified Forest it is used not as an apology, but as a highlight. In Sherwood's hands it is, in most

²⁵

Sherwood, The Petrified Forest, Act II, p. 113.

²⁶

See p. 68, supra.

²⁷

Sherwood, The Petrified Forest, Act I, p. 63.

cases, sound theatrics, and perhaps more than any other one trick gives his writing that quality of good humor and reality that relieves the audience of any embarrassment. Sherwood is not willing to take himself too seriously.

But he comes very near at times in this play to committing the very error he consciously tries to avoid. Granted that his play is moving well and that he has given Squier alcohol and excitement to excuse such talk, the following speeches nevertheless stand out in the reading and playing of the scene as a bit too thick and slightly out of character:

SQUIER

And let me tell you one thing -- you're a forgetful old fool. Any woman is worth everything that any man has to give -- anguish, ecstasy, faith, jealousy, love, hatred, life or death. Don't you see -- that's the excuse for our existence? It's what makes the whole thing possible, and tolerable. When you've reached my age, you'll learn better sense.

...

SQUIER (to GRAMP)

That lovely girl -- that granddaughter of yours -- do you know what she is? No -- you don't. You haven't the remotest idea.

GRAMP

What is she?

SQUIER

She's the future. She's the renewal of vitality -- and courage -- and aspiration -- all the strength that has gone out of you. Hell -- I can't say what she is -- but she's essential to me, and the whole damned country, and the whole miserable world. And please, Mrs. Chisholm -- please don't look at me quizzically. I know how I sound.²⁸

And Squier's apology to Mrs. Chisholm does not quite do the trick of relieving such talk. Here the device does not come off, but again we see evidence of Sherwood's use of it.

Mr. and Mrs. Chisholm stand as interesting examples of what Sherwood can do with auxiliary characters. Perhaps it is fanciful to consider such an idea; but nevertheless it seems logical to suggest that if Mr. and Mrs. Chisholm were in the original plan the characters they turn out to be in the final draft, then Sherwood is not the kind of writer we think he is. The Chisholms in the hands of some playwrights would have remained stock characters, useful to the action of the play. But Robert Sherwood turns Mrs. Chisholm into a surprise character and uses her to extraordinary advantage. Her long speech is in itself inexcusable, but Sherwood does not allow it to drag down his action or interest and it is eminently readable. Without the saving grace of its readability, this speech would be an atrocity:

You haven't the remotest conception of what's inside me, and you never have had and never will have as long as you live out your stuffy, astigmatic life. (She turns to GABBY.) I don't know about you, my dear. But I know what it means to repress yourself and starve yourself through what you conceive to be your duty to others. I've been through that. When I was just about your age, I went to Salzburg -- because I'd had a nervous breakdown after I came out and I went to a psychoanalyst there and he told me I had every right to be a great actress. He gave me a letter to Max Reinhardt, and I might have played the Nun in "The Miracle." But my family of course started yapping about my obligations to them -- who had given me everything, including life. At least, they called it "life." They whisked me back to Dayton, to take my place in the Junior League, and the Country Club, and the D. A. R. -- and everything else

we feel that's foul and obscene. And before I knew it, I was married to this pillar of the mortgage, loan and trust. first And what did he do? He took my soul and had it stencilled on a card, and filed. And where have I been ever since? In an art metal cabinet. That's why I think I have a little right to advise you.²⁹

Two pages later the Duke says, "I've spent most of my time since I grew up in jail, and it looks like I'll spend the rest of my life dead. So what good does it do me to be a real man when you don't get much chance to be crawling into the hay with some dame?" And Mrs. Chisholm, after a slight and thoughtful pause, says, "I wonder if we could find any hay around here?"³⁰ The question arises as to whether or not this "gag" is legitimate playwriting. It is doubtful that it got by without a laugh, a big laugh; and Sherwood does not construct the scene of which it is a part so as to suggest that he wants a laugh here. Mr. Sherwood's inclination for comedy misleads him. If the long speech was written as a springboard for this "gag," it is a serious breach in dramatic good taste. But we prefer to believe that Mrs. Chisholm's line about the hay was a spontaneous excursion of the moment and not a premeditated one.

Of the construction of The Petrified Forest into two acts little need be said other than the recognition of the variation from the conventional three-act form and the fact that it is the first time that Sherwood has felt the need for a variation. Perhaps a point could be made of this initial excursion from the conventional; but

²⁹

Sherwood, The Petrified Forest, Act II, p. 143.

³⁰

Ibid., Act II, p. 146.

we feel rather sure that if Sherwood had wanted but two acts in his first play, he would have used them. The critic for the Saturday Review of Literature modifies his favorable review of the show by the statement that "the showman gets away with the witty satirist before he finishes and that which starts as a sort of study of a bewildered generation ends in frank melodrama."³¹ No other criticism states so definitely the opinion that the construction of the play is inconsistent. And this is what this reviewer is trying to say. If it is, we do not agree, for we believe firmly that for the first time in Sherwood's career he has written a play that is, on the whole, structurally consistent. He started out with the intention of writing philosophical melodrama, and he wrote it without veering from his course.

Critics have been sufficiently distinct in their statement of the more philosophical points of interest within The Petrified Forest. There is little left to be said concerning Sherwood's success in the presentation of his thesis and the mastery of his use of his characters to gain his proclaimed end. What is left unnoticed -- or rather, without sufficient notice -- is Sherwood's peculiar use of the melodramatic elements of his play and the especial merit in this use. Already in the study of Robert Sherwood's writing we have observed his fluency and his leaning toward the romantic. We have noted his inclination for solid gusty humor. We have seen that Sherwood seldom errs in his use of the theatrical devices at his command.

31

Saturday Review of Literature, XI, March 23, 1935, p. 572.

He is, we have concluded, a playwright of particular talent for the theatrical. And now we must observe closely these factors in the writing of The Petrified Forest because in the further study of Robert Sherwood and his development newer and more important interests will attract our attention. It is then because we intend, for the time being, to conclude our consideration of this point that we dwell on it at such length at this time.

In the scene in which Boze tries to gain possession of the machine gun and is thwarted by the alert bandits, Sherwood includes the following direction:

PYLES has followed JACKIE out of the kitchen, his machine-gun at the alert, his mouth full.³²

Small as it is, such a detail as this is representative of the kind of right moments with which Sherwood fills his plays.

When Squier asks Gabby if her paintings are good, she replies, "Hell, no!"³³ What a cue this is for the actress playing Gabby! Here Sherwood hits the character accurately and with such a deft stroke that it goes completely unnoticed but lends to the whole scene the feeling of rightness that obscures whatever else might be there to detract from it. It is such a sense of dialogue that makes for successful playwriting. Profanity, as such, is often a cheap device to shock an audience into listening; but when it springs out of a masterly feeling for characterization such as this, it is

³²

Sherwood, The Petrified Forest, Act II, p. 122.

³³

Ibid., Act I, p. 53.

right. ~~less wobble.~~ Having created the moment, filling it with such

~~a str~~ Still another example of the same sort of sure grasp on the dialogue he is writing, yet a variation, is found in the final and big scene of the play. The blustery, frightened legionnaires have entered and are confronted by the bandits. The Duke says:

Sit down, boys.

ANOTHER LEGIONNAIRE (very basso)

Where?

JACKIE

On your can, Legion.³⁴

Incidentally, yet so powerfully, Sherwood here makes his comment on the Legion. It is such a comment that rings sound, such a comment that an audience gets without knowing it. Such playwriting is right.

Stark Young characteristically is the only reviewer to make a specific comment on the point in question. He says:

The end of "The Petrified Forest" wobbles a bit, for the last two minutes, as if seeking a way to bring the curtain down. But in the main the play is engaging, vibrant, slightly fantastic and atmospherically and humanly poetic. It has many full, revealing speeches. One of these comes where the hero, after the killer has kept his promise and shot him, says to the girl that it does not hurt, at least it does not seem to. Granted the dramatic moment, almost the whole character is in that speech. It would make a fine curtain.³⁵

We feel that Stark Young's suggestion is a good one. The end of the

³⁴

Sherwood, The Petrified Forest, Act II, p. 153.

³⁵

Stark Young, "Particular and General," New Republic, LXXXII, February 13, 1935, p. 21.

play does wobble. Having created the moment, filling it with such a stringent potency, he talks on. His final stroke is diffused.

But Sherwood learns quickly from his own mistakes.

Success warranted a two-season run on Broadway, a nationwide country tour, and an enormous sum for the movie rights. It established Robert Sherwood as one of the leading American playwrights and proved to him and the public that he was a playwright to be listened to.

In a hotel on a mountain peak just inside the Italian border, an international collection of travelers are interned until Rome has time to see who is going to fight whom in an impending war. There are a pair of honeymooning Britons, a German scientist, a French Communist, all of whom give every evidence of being men of good will. There are also a French propellant maker, his Russian mistress Irene (Lynn Fontanne), a troupe of U. S. showgirls whom she calls "obvious little harlots," and their blatant but philosophical master of ceremonies, Harry Van (Alfred Lunt). When a nearby Italian airport provides the required military "incident" by sending planes off to destroy Paris, when England squares off against Germany, France against Italy, Russia against Japan, one by one the interned travelers break out their national colors. For some unindicated reason, the hooper and the Russian girl remain critically aloof from the passions of nationalism. However, in an emotional outburst which sends her protector toward more sympathetic ends, Irene looks heavenward, declares: "Poor, poor soul, playing Hitler's Delight. The game that makes war and never ends."

Shortly thereafter Harry Van reveals that he and Irene once spent a night together in the Caspian Bryan Hotel in Czechoslovakia. This scene, filled with remarkable protocols indicating a complex relationship, ends the piece.

"It's positively Wagnerian, isn't it?" exclaims Irene, as the whole world starts toward stabilization.

"It looks to me exactly like 'Hell's Angels,'" says

CHAPTER V

Idiot's Delight was the Pulitzer Prize play of 1936. Its success warranted a two-season run on Broadway, a successful cross-country tour, and an enormous sum for the movie rights. It established Robert Sherwood as one of the leading American playwrights and proved to him and the public that he was a playwright to be listened to.

In a hotel on a mountain peak just inside the Italian border, an international collection of travelers are interned until Rome has time to see who is going to fight whom in an impending war. There are a pair of honeymooning Britons, a German scientist, a French Communist, all of whom give every evidence of being men of good will. There are also a French armament maker, his Russian mistress Irene (Lynn Fontanne), a troupe of U. S. showgirls whom she calls "obvious little harlots," and their blatant but philosophical master of ceremonies, Harry Van (Alfred Lunt). When a nearby Italian airport provides the required military "incident" by sending planes off to destroy Paris, when England squares off against Germany, France against Italy, Russia against Japan, one by one the interned travelers break out their national colors. For some unindicated reason, the hooper and the Russian girl remain critically aloof from the passions of nationalism. However, in an emotional outburst which turns her protector toward more sympathetic arms, Irene looks Heavenward, declares: "Poor, dear God! Playing Idiot's Delight. The game that means anything and never ends."

Shortly thereafter Harry Van recalls that he and Irene once spent a night together in the Governor Bryan Hotel in Omaha, Neb. This union, plus some remarkable pyrotechnics indicating a bombing raid, ends the piece.

"It's positively Wagnerian, isn't it?" cries Irene, as the whole world starts toward annihilation.

"It looks to me exactly like 'Hell's Angels,'" says

craftsmanship. Harry.¹ And style, Idiot's Delight and The Petrified Forest occupy a single place in our hierarchy of the stages of Robert Sherwood's dramatic development. And thus Time, with its characteristic vividness, tells the story of the play that was so honored by the Pulitzer Prize Committee. The more curious might well ask why a play of this sort should merit a place on the supposedly venerable rostrum of Pulitzer prize winners. The answer is simple. Idiot's Delight was the most exciting theater, the most important comment seen on Broadway that season by the supposedly venerable committee. The play was more than it appeared to be.

For ten years Robert Sherwood had written plays that were more than they appeared to be -- or rather, Robert Sherwood had thought they were. The Petrified Forest had been successful in its presentation of a message by means of exciting melodrama. And Idiot's Delight is its parallel with two exceptions. The message in Idiot's Delight is more exciting because it is more concrete, less philosophic; and its vehicle for expression is similarly more exciting, more vivid. The Petrified Forest was set in the somber colors of a desert filling station, and its chief protagonist was a dusty world-weary philosopher. Idiot's Delight is set in the Italian Alps on the eve of the next World War, and its protagonists are a pseudo-Russian harlot with a blond wig and a brassy American hoofer with a straw hat. The differences in these two plays, then, are a difference in color and a difference in the quantity and potency of excitement. But fundamentally, from the point of view of the playwright's

¹ "New Plays in Manhattan," Time, XXVII, April 6, 1936, p. 28.
1936, p. 490.

craftsmanship and style, Idiot's Delight and The Petrified Forest occupy a single place in our hierarchy of the stages of Robert Sherwood's dramatic development.

Joseph Wood Krutch compares the plays thus:

Last year Robert E. Sherwood's "The Petrified Forest" was a delight to its audiences, a god-send to its actors, a gilt-edged investment for its producers, and an embarrassment to no one except those of us whose business it is to break butterflies on wheels. Our problem was the problem of deciding whether or not it really was merely one of the lepidoptera safely to be treated as such, and to this day I am not quite sure just how seriously I ought to have taken the gaudy creature which flitted gaily about while ostensibly discoursing upon one of the grimmest of topics namely, the social and spiritual bankruptcy of modern life. One expects that a man who goes about crying "Woe to Israel" shall behave with something of the prophet's uncouthness, and it is more than a little disconcerting to find him delivering his message with all the disarming facility of the parlor entertainer. Mr. Sherwood was not merely skilful. He was positively slick. And yet what he had to say still seems to me to have been both interesting and sound.

With His latest play, "Idiot's Delight," acted by the Lunts and presented by the Guild at the Shubert Theater, is the same, only more so. The audiences find even greater entertainment, the actors are even more perfectly suited, and the producers will be even more substantially enriched. At the same time the theme -- war -- is, if anything, even more grim, while the manner and methods are even more conspicuously those of the slickest contemporary stagecraft. Whatever else "Idiot's Delight" may or may not be, it is the result of the most accomplished showmanship exhibited in New York since "Broadway" set a new fashion, and, indeed, there is much in both the pace and the methods by which the pace is maintained to suggest those of that phenomenal melodrama.²

While Richard Lockridge says,

² Joseph Wood Krutch, "Idiot's Delight," Nation, CXLII, April 15, 1936, p. 490.

is just: It is a play of flashing moods, racing and shining like quicksilver from comedy to stinging protest; it presents is at once brilliant entertainment and bitter questioning of the idiot stupidity which lets war happen. as a play. It is, beyond any possible doubt, Mr. Sherwood's best play.³

marily with what Robert Sherwood thinks or feels on a given subject.

Brooks Atkinson decides that "Mr. Sherwood's new play is a robust theatre charade, not quite so heroic and ebullient as 'The Petrified Forest,' but well inside the same tradition."⁴ And the Catholic

World agrees: themselves with agreeing or disagreeing with Robert

Sherwood's point that it has been difficult to find succinct state-

ments on It is the same effective structure that Mr. Robert Sherwood used in his Petrified Forest as a background for his satire on the mechanistic age in America. Now against the immobility of the snow mountains instead of the desert, he gathers together another collection of incongruous types, but this time they are internationally selected...

that Robert Sherwood's argument is inconclusive:

As a play, Idiot's Delight suffers by contrast to The Petrified Forest, in line, characterization and story.⁵

his column observes that the discussion of war is inconclusive and that the mood of the play is somewhat too trivial for such a macabre subject, it is

With its place identified, Idiot's Delight provokes next an observation of its message. Because this study is concerning itself with the dramatic development of Robert Sherwood, it is imperative that we not be misled by the equally interesting development of Robert Sherwood's point of view. And so again, it is pointed out that the discussion of what we please to call "the message" in the play

³ Richard Lockridge, "'Idiot's Delight,' With the Lunts, Opens at the Shubert Theatre," New York Sun (Quoted in Theatre Arts Monthly, XX, June, 1936, p. 466.)

⁴ Brooks Atkinson, "Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne Appearing in Sherwood's 'Idiot's Delight,'" New York Times, March 26, 1936, p. 26, col. 5.

⁵ Catholic World, CXLI, May, 1936, p. 212.

is justified because, to a degree, the author's message and his presentation of it are fundamental indications of his development as a playwright. But in no instance must we concern ourselves primarily with what Robert Sherwood thinks or feels on a given subject. Our problem will remain the investigation of his statement of what he thinks. Because Idiot's Delight dealt with so timely a subject as war, it excited much critical discussion. Indeed the critics so concerned themselves with agreeing or disagreeing with Robert Sherwood's point that it has been difficult to find succinct statements on the more important subject of how he made that point. But sooner or later most critics voice such an opinion.

Brooks Atkinson states what is the consensus of the critics: that Robert Sherwood's argument is inconclusive: lightful play, witty, inventive, full of theatre.

If this column observes that the discussion of war is inconclusive and that the mood of the play is somewhat too trivial for such a macabre subject, it is probably taking "Idiot's Delight" much too seriously.

...

Mr. Sherwood's talk is not conclusive, but it is interesting. In the course of the play he does manage to show that all but one of his characters are helpless victims of internationalism, drawn unwillingly into contests between fear and inferiority, jungoism and bravado. "Idiot's Delight" draws that grotesque distinction between the personal, casual lives people want to live and the roar and thunder that crack-brained governments foment. As the hooper says, the people are all right as individuals. They are bowled down by a headlong, angry force that is generated apart from themselves.

All this Mr. Sherwood's play suggests, though not so forcefully as perhaps he intends, for the rag, tag and bobtail mood is misleading. What you will probably enjoy more than his argument is the genial humor of his dialogue, his romantic flair for character and his

Stark Young, "Idiot's Delight," *New Republic*, 1936, p. 253.

relish of the incongruous and the ridiculous.⁶

It is too platonic. Mr. Sherwood's sentiments are on the right side. He also makes several shrewd comments. Every one will agree with his main thesis that the world is populated chiefly by decent people who do not make war nor want it. As the hoover remarks about his experience with human nature: "It has made me sure that no matter how much the meek may be bulldozed or gypped, they will eventually inherit the earth."⁷

Stark Young speaks thus:

Mr. Sherwood's play, as performed by the Lunts, supplies a point in esthetic principle. The reason for its not being a significant play is easy to state. It exhibits many ideas on war, themes of the individual's worth and the overwhelming public thing destroying him, and it has brilliance in statement now and then. But the measure of it lies in its tone as a whole. The tone does not convey, or create, anything very significant on a large theme. But it is a delightful play, witty, inventive, full of theatre.⁸

Charles Morgan, after the London production, wrote a lengthy essay

on the problem Robert Sherwood approaches in his play. He alone, of the reviewers, suggests what Sherwood might have done. Although Morgan might be accused of taking the play too seriously, his reactions are significant and were no doubt read with interest by Robert Sherwood.

My own admiration for it as a piece for the theatre and

6

Atkinson, "Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne Appearing in Sherwood's 'Idiot's Delight,'" p. 26, col. 5.

7

Brooks Atkinson, "Dancing before the Cannon," New York Times, April 12, 1936, sect. IX, p. 1, col. 1.

8

Stark Young, "Idiot's Delight," New Republic, LXXXVI, March 24, 1936, p. 253.

for its evident sincerity is qualified by dissatisfaction in it as an intellectual contribution to the subject.... particularly interesting because it reveals

Mr. Sherwood's characters offer several tentative replies. Quillery lays the blame on capitalism. Achille Weber accepts the blame for the heavy industries. Dr. Waldersee's abandonment of scientific detachment and his return to Germany in her hour of need implicitly sets up nationalism as the key of the problem. Harry Van asks "Why? Why?" in agonized fury, and, finding no answer, spends himself in generalized moral indignation. No one -- and this is the play's defect -- pauses to analyze the problem itself or to ask whether the seeming paradox may not be based upon false assumptions....

If Mr. Sherwood had asked: "Are the ideas for which men will die worth defending?" he would have gone to the root of his own problem. If he had asked: "Is the idea of non-resistance greater than all the ideas, even that of freedom, by which warlike resistance is inspired?" he would have come near to solving the problem as mankind may one day solve it. As it is, his play, in the last analysis, though skillful in treatment and powerfully effective in the theatre, may almost be summed up in the phrases: "War is dreadful. No one gains anything by it. Why do men take part in it? Why don't they refuse to fight?"

Sherwood's symbols * * *
The answer is that men will always fight a defensive war as long as there is something they value more than their property or their skins, and other men, proceeding from a determination to impose their faith, their Weltanschauung, upon others, will always fight an aggressive war until they reach that degree of civilization in which it becomes apparent that the imposition of their ideas upon others is not necessary to the validity or the enjoyment of those ideas. Because it fails to recognize this, Mr. Sherwood's piece, though a splendid piece of rhetoric, remains unsatisfying because it seems to have missed its aim as a criticism of contemporary life.⁹

Richard Lockridge, being of a more peaceful turn of mind, seems not to be angry or even very much annoyed with Sherwood's lack of conclu-

⁹ Charles Morgan, "London on 'Idiot's Delight,'" New York Times, April 10, 1938, p. 2, col. 1.

sion. His comment that the play is little more than a fine evening in the theater is particularly interesting because it reveals a critic who is still a good audience.

But Mr. Sherwood, for all his expert showmanship, is really this time making his protest good and asking his questions in a voice which is not muffled although it pierces through comedy. 'Why?' says his wandering carnival man, when the bombers fly. 'What I want to know is, why?'

It is not a new question, of course. Perhaps it is even naive. But it has not been asked better on the stage and it is evidently one of those naive questions which bear infinite repeating, since it has never yet been answered.

Mr. Sherwood doesn't answer it, in any case, so I suppose that, except for a fine evening in the theatre, we are left much where we were.¹⁰

And finally we quote John Mason Brown:

Whether one grasps the full meaning of all of Mr. Sherwood's symbols or not, or feels he has not said all that might have been said on the subject of war and the hysteria which causes peacetime internationalists to revert overnight to the blindest prejudices of nationalism, Idiot's Delight can be counted upon to provide an amusing, often stimulating, evening.¹¹

And here is the answer. Idiot's Delight does not propose a solution, does not suggest an answer. Robert Sherwood is yet to produce a play with a great world-shaking argument. Carefully and consistently, though, he is moving toward the writing of such a play. Within

10

Lockridge, "'Idiot's Delight,' With the Lunts, Opens at the Shubert Theatre," p. 466.

11

John Mason Brown, "Idiot's Delight," Two on the Aisle, New York, 1938, p. 167.

this play he asks why, and has the good sense to realize that he does not know the answer. His good sense also persuades him to state that question in such a way that people will enjoy listening. His passion and sincere concern for the state of world affairs do not obscure the use of his medium, and at the risk of being accused of inconclusiveness he proceeds to write a play dealing with a contemporary momentous problem in the best way he is able. There are high, grand moments in Idiot's Delight, but there is no moment that is pompous or self-consciously profound. The author of Idiot's Delight cannot be accused of doing a half-hearted piece of writing. He has written honestly, saying no more than he feels himself capable of saying.

Whatever may be said of the incompleteness of the philosophy within Idiot's Delight, it cannot be denied that Robert Sherwood chose for himself an extremely difficult technical problem when he wrote such a play on such a theme. John Mason Brown recognized the feat of writing within Idiot's Delight, and discussed it more clearly, perhaps, than any other critic.

In Idiot's Delight, Mr. Sherwood shows that, solemn as his major theme may be, he cannot resist laughing when the world's funeral is interrupted by the gay tinkling of a musical chair. The background of this latest of his entertaining allegories is the grim outbreak of the next European war; time, any day now; and the special observation turret from which he surveys it is a hotel in the Italian Alps near the Swiss and Austrian frontiers.

His foreground includes a group of stranded travelers who, for the most part, are more typical as spokesmen for their respective nations than are the high-hatted representatives who assemble in Geneva.

Enlivening this foreground is an American song-and-dance man who, with the six scantily dressed maidens in his troupe, is ready to oblige his fellow tourists with the liveliest enticements of a third-rate floor show. Spanning the middle distance which separates this gaudy carnival from the black apocalypse behind it, and attempting to fuse the two of them into an integrated whole, is the diverting story of the past knowledge the American hooper thinks he has had of a mysterious Russian lady who has **also** signed the hotel register.

It is out of these sharply diverse materials Mr. Sherwood has built one of the most haphazard but engrossing of his dramatic pictures. That he has taken on a job which would have challenged the best efforts of Snug, the joiner, goes without saying. If an artist had attempted to create unity of mood in a single canvas by placing the gay details of one of Reginald Marsh's impressions of a burlesque show before a background by Goya depicting the horrors of war, he could not have set himself a more difficult problem. That Mr. Sherwood manages to do as well as he does (which is very well indeed) in getting an arduous task done is the result of his ability to mix aphrodisiac with allegory, flesh with spirit, sunshine with sermons, comedy with tragedy, and good showmanship with interesting thinking.

Idiot's Delight may not rank among the best-carpentered of his plays. In his building of it you may find he has not entirely boarded the long hall which connects his ballroom with his library, his bar with his chapel. Yet regardless of what structural defects the blueprint boys may find in his building, or of the mild fogs which some of the weathermen may claim surround his edifice, Mr. Sherwood is a dramatist who can be counted upon to be an accomplished and generous host. He knows how to make his paying guests feel at home and to give them a good time. He is a stimulating talker who is accomplished at preventing a conversation from becoming too solemn by enlivening it with a timely jest. His heart may be heavy but his tongue continues to be glib.¹²

The Commonweal argues somewhat differently, but makes the same point:

12

Brown, Two on the Aisle, p. 166.

XX, May, 1936, p. 340.

XX, Ma

"Idiot's Delight" is not all of one piece. It is perhaps even too shrewdly made for popular appeal. It is in its entirety neither comedy, melodrama, musical comedy nor propaganda play. It is by turns all these, with the result that everyone who sees it finds something to his liking. From a box-office standpoint this is all to the good, for Mr. Sherwood shows himself a master in all these branches of the dramatic art; yet there are those who would have wished he had stuck a little closer to artistic unity. But even granted this weakness, his sense of character, his mastery of pungent dialog, his imagination, and the passion of his hatred for war and all its works, makes "Idiot's Delight" a worthy recipient of the prize.¹³

Mrs. Edith J. R. Isaacs characteristically says very little, but a few of her words add a quality of feminine reasoning to this composite picture of the critical opinion:

Robert Sherwood's drama, *Idiot's Delight*, with which Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne have come back to New York, although it is as close to the news as anyone could wish who clamors for contemporary comment in its most direct form, makes the news come all the way out to the theatre before the playwright swings into action with it. And even then -- leaving the facts of imminent war and its causes all their essential and degrading truth -- Mr. Sherwood picks and chooses among them, taking only what a playwright needs for the strict uses of his theatrical situation, his drama's action, his characters' motivation, singly and in conflict. Over and around these facts he builds his play and, because he is an artist and has done his work well, he gives back to his audience, through his actors, the abundant pleasure of fine theatre performance (which is what they paid for at the box-office), plus the full shock of the news 'seen through a temperament'.¹⁴

Joseph Wood Krutch continues the discussion:

Despite all the gags Mr. Sherwood manages frequently to

13

"The Pulitzer Prize Play," Commonweal, XXIV, May 22, 1936, p. 104.

14

Edith J. R. Isaacs, "Broadway in Review," Theatre Arts Monthly, XX, May, 1936, p. 340.

this play treat his serious theme with no little effectiveness....
 When all has been said and done, there is no doubt about
 the fact that despite all the comic interludes the sense
Idiot's Delight of the folly and the horror of war has been conveyed about
 as effectively as it has ever been conveyed upon the stage.

Sherwood...lays. Remembering the opening scenes of The Petrified Forest

Reunion I can say only that I am at least pretty sure that -- what-
 ever the result -- a great many more people will expose
 with the themselves to "Idiot's Delight" than usually expose them-
 selves to treatments of similar subjects by our more un-
 not diff compromising dramatists.¹⁵

it. Idiot's Delight is the fastest-paced play that Robert Sherwood has
 And finally Time uses its peculiarly terse style of writing to a great
 ever written, and its tempo is set from the beginning. Moreover, Idiot's
 advantage in concluding the critical picture:

Delight is in a sense a dramatization of the war of nerves that pre-

ceded the Mr. Sherwood's views on world politics approximate
 those of a great body of contemporary writing men who
 ple one, habitually seek from their hearts instead of their heads
 the answers to pregnant questions arising outside their
 rical hol profession. As stated in the postscript, the lesson con-
 tained in IDIOT'S DELIGHT is that "by refusing to imi-
 of this tate the Fascists in their... hysterical self-worship
 and psychopathic hatred of others, we may achieve the
 toward the enjoyment of peaceful life on earth rather than degraded so
 death in the cellar." Happily, the solemn depths of this
 well in shopworn text are instinctively bridged by Mr. Sherwood's
 great gift for high comedy.¹⁶

World War was best represented by a gaudy, frantic picture. Seeing it

thus, Closer observation of the play will bring to light the fact of
 the technical problem within the writing of Idiot's Delight. For now
 we must conclude that the critics have provided us with three major
 points. Idiot's Delight is in the same category with The Petrified
Forest. Robert Sherwood's argument is inconclusive. And the play
 embodies an example of the union of two diverse elements: a broad-
 comedy style with a high-tragedy theme. And now we look closely at

15

Krutch, "Idiot's Delight," p. 490.

Ashley, 16

1938, p. "New Play in Manhattan," p. 38.

this play. point, but the fault lies not in the conception of the char-

* * *

acters but in the playwright's handling of them. The playwright
Idiot's Delight opens in a key that is peculiar to it, of all of
 philosophy behind the creation of these two gaudy characters repre-
 Sherwood's plays. Remembering the opening scenes of The Road to Rome,
 sends a vivid imagination and a remarkably revolutionary treatment
Reunion in Vienna, and The Petrified Forest, and comparing those scenes
 of an allegorical theme. As a piece of artistic symbolism Idiot's
 with the one that the opening curtain of Idiot's Delight reveals, it is
 light might well be the most cleverly conceived of all of Sherwood's
 not difficult to sense immediately the kind of play that is to follow
 plays. But Robert Sherwood allowed his symbols to run away with them-
 it. Idiot's Delight is the fastest-paced play that Robert Sherwood has
 selves. The very turn of mind that allowed for the conception of such
 ever written, and its tempo is set from the beginning. Moreover, Idiot's
 a treatment as Robert Sherwood planned prevented its full artistic suc-
Delight is in a sense a dramatization of the war of nerves that pre-
 cess. Harry Van is too realistically drawn. The symbol that Sherwood
 ceded the present European chaos. Such a dramatization is not a sim-
 had intended for him becomes little more than an over-sized golden
 ple one, but certainly Robert Sherwood's facility in the use of theat-
 jacket that he takes off and puts on at will. Irene, too, does not
 rical hokum and sharp dialogue is a great asset in a dramatic problem
 fit easily into what she represents, but finds too much time to be
 of this kind. And Sherwood did not approach this problem with a view
 merely what she is. Robert Sherwood knew his types, knew precisely
 toward the use of the restraint and quietness that he had mastered so
 how to create such characters; and because he knew so well how to draw
 well in The Petrified Forest. In Sherwood's mind the eve of the next
 vivid characterizations of this gaudy variety, he permitted himself to
 World War was best represented by a gaudy, frantic picture. Seeing it
 become too involved in the situations that they seemed to suggest. It
 thus, his use of a carnival barker and a fake Russian mistress as his
 is, then, not the fact that Robert Sherwood chose the wrong characters
 chief protagonists does not seem so out of question with the message he
 to represent the little people; it is that he did not allow them to
 was to put into the mouths of those people.

represent, but permitted too minute detail to individualize them and
 But several of the more querulous critics have pointed out that
 make them too much a picture within themselves. When the audience be-
 the characters of Irene and Harry Van are not of sufficient stature to
 came too much interested in Irene for the hoax she was, they could not
 pronounce successfully the important sentiments proposed by Robert Sher-
 listen properly to the important things Robert Sherwood had for her to
 wood in the play Idiot's Delight.¹⁷ There is certainly justification
 say.

17

See Grenville Vernon, Commonweal, XXIII, April 10, 1936, p. 664;
 Ashley Dukes, "The English Scene," Theatre Arts Monthly, XXII, June,
 1938, p. 410.

for such a point, but the fault lies not in the conception of the characters but in the playwright's handling of them. The playwriting philosophy behind the creation of these two gaudy characters represents a vivid imagination and a remarkably revolutionary treatment of an allegorical theme. As a piece of artistic symbolism Idiot's Delight might well be the most cleverly conceived of all of Sherwood's plays. But Robert Sherwood allowed his symbols to run away with themselves. The very turn of mind that allowed for the conception of such a treatment as Robert Sherwood planned prevented its full artistic success. Harry Van is too realistically drawn. The symbol that Sherwood had intended for him becomes little more than an over-sized golden jacket that he takes off and puts on at will. Irene, too, does not fit easily into what she represents, but finds too much time to be merely what she is. Robert Sherwood knew his types, knew precisely how to create such characters; and because he knew so well how to draw vivid characterizations of this gaudy variety, he permitted himself to become too involved in the situations that they seemed to suggest. It is, then, not the fact that Robert Sherwood chose the wrong characters to represent the little people; it is that he did not allow them to represent, but permitted too minute detail to individualize them and make them too much a picture within themselves. When the audience became too much interested in Irene for the hoax she was, they could not listen properly to the important things Robert Sherwood had for her to say.

Writing with the sensitivity for details of characterization that he had carefully encouraged in the preceding ten years of writing for

the theater, Sherwood sketched Irene into his first act with bold, telling strokes. She was obviously intended, from the first, to speak the lines that Sherwood put into her mouth in the second and third acts. Indeed, the most powerful speeches in the play are spoken by Irene, and it was not false reasoning to suppose that she was the one character in the play to whom the audience would listen with the greatest interest. And Sherwood cannot be accused of repeating the experiences of The Road to Rome: he did not change the course his character was to take in the middle of his play. But in this play he permits Irene to talk too much nonsense before she delivers his sermon of the evening. It is a shock to an audience, who has heard in the immediately preceding scene the obvious, but amusing, lies of Irene's escape from Russia, to hear from the same lips such speeches as the following:

IRENE (looking upward, sympathetically)

Yes -- that's quite true. We don't do half enough justice to Him. Poor, lonely old soul. Sitting up in heaven, with nothing to do, but play solitaire. Poor, dear God. Playing Idiot's Delight. The game that never means anything, and never ends.

IRENE

Well, I made several escapes. I am always making escapes, Achille. When I am worrying about you, and your career. I have to run away from the terror of my own thoughts. So I amuse myself by studying the faces of the people I see. Just ordinary, casual, dull people. (She is speaking in a tone that is sweetly sadistic.) That young English couple, for instance. I was watching them during dinner, sitting there, close together, holding hands, and rubbing their knees together under the table. And I saw him in his nice, smart, British uniform, shooting a little pistol at a huge tank. And the tank rolls over him. And his fine strong body, that was so full of the capacity for ecstasy, is a mass of mashed flesh and bones -- a smear of purple blood --

like a stepped-on snail. But before the moment of death, he consoles himself by thinking, "Thank God she is safe! She is bearing the child I gave her, and he will live to see a better world." (She walks behind WEBER and leans over his shoulder.) But I know where she is. She is lying in a cellar that has been wrecked by an air raid, and her firm young breasts are all mixed up with the bowels of a dismembered policeman, and the embryo from her womb is splattered against the face of a dead bishop. That is the kind of thought with which I amuse myself, Achille. And it makes me so proud to think that I am so close to you -- who make all this possible.¹⁸

Irene has become tedious with her stories, and this one loses its impact because it appears as only one of the several fanciful tales she is to tell. If she were to be no more than a phony Russian with talent for story-telling, it might perhaps be permissible to have included this gruesome story in her repertoire. But Robert Sherwood does not intend this story to be one of many; it is the story that she is to tell on the stage. The other stories are but a piece within a characterization. All Robert Sherwood needed to tell us of Irene before this moment was told in the first act. We were interested in this mysterious woman, and we were sufficiently aware of her phoniness not to be surprised at the later developments in her character. But as the play stands, Irene's important story does not get its proper emphasis nor achieve its intended significance.

Harry Van does not suffer the same fate as Irene. His characterization is kept in line, and for the most part he serves his purpose well and with interest. Although the characterization itself is more successfully achieved, he does not completely fit the pattern prescribed

18

Robert Sherwood, Idiot's Delight, New York, 1936, Act II, Scene II, p. 103.

for him as a symbol. He too successfully sells himself to the audience as a carnival barker concerned with renewing an old acquaintance to remain in the audience's eye a symbol of the little man asking the frantic question "Why?" and finding no answer. Here, again, we see an instance of Sherwood's excessive degree of talent for individualizing his characters by use of strikingly effective theatrical detail. For Harry is too well drawn; he is not, as is the case with Irene, overdrawn. The false moments in his characterization stand out clearly as insertions on the part of Sherwood in remembrance of his thesis. In the first act, for instance, Harry's entrance is completely characteristic, but he soon says of the Italian people:

I don't believe it. I don't believe that people like that would take on the job of licking the world. They're too romantic.¹⁹

As played by Alfred Lunt, perhaps Harry Van might speak this line, but in print it stands out as inconsistent. And yet in a moment of greater consequence Sherwood does not repeat his error, but writes with masterly strokes two of the most important speeches in the play. They stand out in contrast to the long speeches of Irene. They are emphatic, and Harry Van has not talked too much of nothing before he says them.

HARRY

I know just how you feel, Doctor. Back in 1918, I was a shill with a carnival show, and I was doing fine. The boss thought very highly of me. He offered to give me a piece of the show, and I had a chance to get somewhere. And then what do you think happened? Along comes the United States Government and they drafted me! You're in the army now! They slapped me into a uniform and for three

Sherwood, *Idiot's Delight*, Act I, p. 60.

whole months before the Armistice, I was parading up and down guarding the Ashokan Reservoir. They were afraid your people might poison it. I've always figured that that little interruption ruined my career. But I've remained an optimist, Doctor.

DOCTOR

You can afford to.

HARRY

I've remained an optimist because I'm essentially a student of human nature. You dissect corpses and rats and similar unpleasant things. Well, -- it has been my job to dissect suckers! I've probed into the souls of some of the God damnedest specimens. And what have I found? Now, don't sneer at me, Doctor -- but above everything else I've found Faith. Faith in peace on earth and good will to men -- and faith that "Muma," "Muma" the three-legged girl, really has got three legs. All my life, Doctor, I've been selling phoney goods to people of meagre intelligence and great faith. You'd think that would make me contemptuous of the human race, wouldn't you? But -- on the contrary -- it has given me Faith. It has made me sure that no matter how much the meek may be bulldozed or gypped they will eventually inherit the earth.²⁰

And it is within this last speech that Sherwood creates his best moment within the play. We know now that within this speech Sherwood came more closely than in any other moment to pronouncing the real philosophy of the play because Sherwood has told us so himself five years later.²¹ But what is more important is that within this speech is evidence of the kind of play that Idiot's Delight might have been. Here is an example of the force and penetrating significance that could be made of the color and manner of conception that Sherwood chose for his play. Had the whole play been written as well as this one speech, then truly it would have been a fine play.

²⁰

Sherwood, Idiot's Delight, Act I, p. 60.

²¹

See Sherwood, "Preface," There Shall Be No Night, p. xxii.

Robert Sherwood is not the hypersensitive artist who will look back forty years from now at Idiot's Delight with any feeling of remorse or shame for its weaker points. He will smile and remember how dissatisfied he must have been.

CHAPTER VI

When Robert Sherwood finished writing the rollicking Reunion in Vienna, with its despairing preface, he wrote five plays; four went directly into a bureau drawer,¹ and the fifth, entitled Acropolis, was produced unsuccessfully in London. But Sherwood says of that play that it was, by all odds, his best play and the most positive affirmation of his own faith.² We may conclude, then, that Acropolis was a serious endeavor on the part of Robert Sherwood to write a serious play. Its existence is concrete evidence of the fact that Sherwood had within him an urge to write of important themes in a dignified manner. But he forestalled that urge and wrote what he must have considered a compromise, The Petrified Forest, and, even more so, Idiot's Delight. Now, Sherwood is not of the kind who would consciously plan his career; he is too unpretentious for that. His metamorphosis is as much a surprise to him as to anyone else, and so it is no doubt unlikely that he said to himself, after the gaudy success of Idiot's Delight, "Now I will write a dignified play about Lincoln." It is more logical to believe that he had long been an admirer of Abraham Lincoln, that he was growing more and more in earnest about his love of his country and about his fear for the European situation. And the play was not written impetuously. Indeed, Raymond Massey tells us that he had suggested to Sherwood four years previous to the writing of Abe Lincoln in Illinois that he write a play about young Lincoln,

¹

Sherwood, "Preface," There Shall Be No Night, p. xix.

²

See ibid., p. xix.

and that it was two and a half years later that Sherwood made the first outline, and that the actual writing took only three weeks.³ Yet it is very interesting that Sherwood left the Alps on the eve of the next World War, the phony Russian harlot and her brassy lover, with whom he had had so much success, and moved quickly to Mentor Graham's cabin near New Salem, Illinois, and began a serious play of twelve scenes about the American idol Abraham Lincoln. It was to the casual observer a great and unexpected transition. To us who have watched his career thus far, it was a logical one.

Abe Lincoln in Illinois is a puzzling play. The author's overwhelming sincerity of purpose and reverence for his theme shine through the writing to such an extent that the play cannot be dismissed as either good or bad, successful or unsuccessful. A piece of creation so honestly contrived and earnestly presented by a playwright of Robert Sherwood's stature is necessarily a play worthy of careful observation. But Abe Lincoln in Illinois has faults that preclude its being the great American play that it might have been.

Of all the critics (and there were several) who voiced the criticism that Robert Sherwood's play was not a play within itself, John Mason Brown was the most vociferous accuser; and of those defending Sherwood's play as a great play, Brooks Atkinson was the most effusive and intent.

John Mason Brown makes his point clearly, and so without further comment we offer the major arguments proposed by him:

3

See Theodore Strauss, "Abe Lincoln of 45th St.," New York Times, October 30, 1938, sect. IX, p. 1, col. 5.

The program names Robert Emmett Sherwood as the author of Abe Lincoln in Illinois. So he is, but he does not work without collaborators whose aid at times proves far more potent than any contribution he has to make. One of these collaborators is the foreknowledge we bring with us, as members of an American audience, of Lincoln, the man and the martyr. This endows us with a wisdom no characters on the stage can claim. By permitting us to measure what was by the tragedy of what was to be, it adds a certain weight to the leanest of lean lines and grants an undeniable pathos to the sketchiest of undeveloped scenes.

Another of Mr. Sherwood's collaborators is Mr. Lincoln himself....

The best scene in Mr. Sherwood's play is ghost-written by a ghost who haunts all Americans and is the chiefest glory of our dream. This scene is the episode in which Mr. Massey faces Douglas on a public platform to speak some of the fine, free words Lincoln himself delivered during the course of these historic debates....

Timely, reverent, and ultimately impressive as it becomes, Mr. Sherwood's play is not so much written as it is assembled in the best manner of Detroit, though not on the belt. Among the virtues it can claim is that of serving its public as an echo cave. It is capable of giving back to those who sit before it the cries of anguish or hope they may bring to it. From the dark confusion of its hero, audiences can in these dark days derive a certain consolation. To a people at present confused it is doubtless comforting to realize so great a man as Lincoln was once as confused as they are.

Mr. Lincoln is not the only historical figure Mr. Sherwood has relied upon as a collaborator. There is another person, seen or unseen, who always makes his ugly contribution to plays about the Emancipator. His name is John Wilkes Booth. Our constant awareness that history holds his horse in the alley behind Ford's theatre distends with tragic meaning, for all of us who love Lincoln, any references to his future which the martyred President may utter in plays or books about him. Let an on-stage Lincoln, after his election, say in effect, "I'm going to Washington, and I don't think I'll be quite happy there," and, because of the knowledge we bring to them, these words take on a pathos that would not otherwise be theirs. Ask John Jones to say the same speech and it emerges as a sentence which, merely as a sentence, would by no means pulverize us emotionally or tempt us to rank it with "Good night, sweet prince, and flights of angels sing thee to

thy rest." We have all of us heard of too many people who have gone to Washington and not been quite happy there to be surprised by such a statement. Put the same simple confession of an unheavenly destination into the mouth of an on-stage Lincoln and the result is, I repeat, different, wonderfully different -- not because of what a dramatist has written but because of the way in which history has done his playwriting for him.

Such an episode of Mr. Lincoln's writing in Mr. Sherwood's play as the Lincoln-Douglas debate is not enough to carry the script's twelve episodes. No matter how timely or exciting this single scene may be, Mr. Sherwood's inescapable job as a dramatist is to write for Lincoln rather than to have Lincoln write for him. At doing this Mr. Sherwood fails, and fails signally, until he reaches the two moving episodes in his final act which find Lincoln expressing his long-smothered hatred of Mary Todd on the very night of his election, and delivering, as a great, gaunt, tragic figure whose shoulders are draped in a shawl, a melancholy farewell to his Springfield friends from the back platform of the Presidential train which was to carry him to the burdens and the tragedy the Capital had in store for him.

Before these concluding scenes are reached Mr. Sherwood writes reverently but without awakening much interest. His subject is the young Lincoln, the tormented mystic of the early days, the raw, unambitious rail-splitter who courted Ann Rutledge. It is the emerging Lincoln, whose friends feared for his sanity when on his wedding day he is said to have dodged marrying the ambitious Mary Todd, and who after his subsequent marriage to her suffered from her nagging and her lack of mental balance. Mr. Sherwood follows Abe from the 1830's in New Salem to that day thirty-one years later when as the newly elected President he set out from Springfield to fulfill his historic mission in Washington.....

Unfortunately Mr. Sherwood leaves out most of his illustrative action. He functions like a man who is giving an illustrated lecture and has left his lantern slides at home..... His intermissions are his most active interludes. It is during them that we are led to believe his characters have their most interesting say. Certainly it is during them that all their growing is done.

For example, Mr. Sherwood does not prepare us for Lincoln's greatness. His greatness overtakes him during an intermission. Abe is an unhappy, mystical, and shiftless fellow in the earlier episodes. Although he is fearless

and good, and intermittently witty, he is no more than that. Yet suddenly this same small-town boy is presented by Mr. Sherwood as a national figure, equal to the greatness shown in his debates with Douglas. The result of such uncertain writing is a drama singularly becalmed for most of its first two acts. A record so lacking in tangible proofs of Lincoln's incipient qualities is bound to resemble a portrait of the Great Protector that makes the mistake of being all wart and no Cromwell....

Let it be quickly stated Mr. Massey joins hands with Lincoln and with history as one of Mr. Sherwood's most dependable collaborators. It is he who rises above the ineptness of an otherwise inept production and grants cohesion to a script more reverent in its spirit than distinguished in its writing.⁴

To these arguments Brooks Atkinson offers opposition. In the search for a final answer, Mr. Atkinson's argument is presented immediately; for the reader must first understand these two opposing reactions to Sherwood's play before he can see clearly the merits of each and of the play itself.

Mr. Sherwood has written his finest play, "Abe Lincoln in Illinois." ... In the breadth and depth of its understanding it is far above the general level of commercial theatre; one hesitates to tarnish it with the familiar adjectives that announce a box-office success. For Mr. Sherwood has looked down with compassion into the lonely blackness of Lincoln's heart and seen some of the fateful things that lived there. As a craftsman he has had the humility to tell the story quietly. As a contemporary American he has had the candor to see that much of it applies to us today, and he has courageously said so. With Raymond Massey giving an exalted performance as the lanky man of destiny, "Abe Lincoln in Illinois" is an inspired play -- inspired by the sorrowful grandeur of the man it portrays.

* * *

⁵ The facts of Lincoln's life in Illinois are good enough for Mr. Sherwood....
 "Abe Lincoln in Illinois," New York Times, October 17, 1939, p. 18, col. 4.

John Mason Brown, Broadway in Review, New York, 1940, p. 147.
 Brooks Atkinson, "Lincoln's Prairie Years," New York Times, October 23, 1939, sect. IX, p. 1, col. 1.

Sometimes Mr. Sherwood has genially tossed a brand of hokum into his plays to set them to blazing on the stage. But he is writing scrupulously this time, looking the facts squarely in the face and recording them in deadly earnest. Full of admiration for his chief character, he is also overflowing with love for the principles that Lincoln reluctantly accepted from destiny and made his own. They are Mr. Sherwood's now, and also ours; and "Abe Lincoln in Illinois" is a noble testament of our spiritual faith.....

For "Abe Lincoln in Illinois" is a drama of great pith and moment, and this reviewer's only anxiety is that he may not herald it vigorously enough.⁵

Through the life and spoken thoughts of Lincoln Mr. Sherwood has been able to express his own high-minded convictions with a deeper emotional force than ever before. Here, among many pungent and homely things, are some of the charitable principles we need for personal guidance today.....

Mr. Sherwood is a realist and disposed to speak bluntly; he does not let his wits woolgather and his "Abe Lincoln in Illinois" is no idyll or song of devotion. But by close adherence to the facts it is still the improbable tale of a raw youth out of the wilderness who was limp inside from melancholy and constitutionally unable to make a decision without ambition and practically without self-respect....

Mr. Sherwood is too human a playwright to assume the solemn manner. Beginning in our theatre a little more than a decade ago as a humorist, he still relishes the dry phrase. His sense of humor gives him a sense of proportion. Having a tolerant mind, he enjoys the stiff-jointed oldsters who think that the world has gone to the dogs and also the hot-headed youngsters who think that virtue is just beginning. Most of all, he loves the character of Lincoln, and in this long, plainly written drama he has told honestly the savory story of those early days amid the familiar men and women of the prairie.⁶

To me "Abe Lincoln in Illinois" is one of the genuinely

5

Brooks Atkinson, "Raymond Massey Appearing in Robert E. Sherwood's 'Abe Lincoln in Illinois,'" New York Times, October 17, 1938, p. 12, col. 2.

6

Brooks Atkinson, "Lincoln's Prairie Years," New York Times, October 23, 1938, sect. IX, p. 1, col. 1.

The fine plays on the modern theatre's shelf. None of the objections urged against it affects my love for it. To say that it is not a play, as some of the academicians do, is only technical objection. It is a story told on a stage: ergo, it is a play. To say that the best lines are Lincoln's and not Sherwood's seems to me a microscopic objection. Out of all the mass of Lincolnians, which has been available for about eighty years, Mr. Sherwood has discovered exalted thoughts that flow naturally into his portrait of one of the world's great men and that illuminate and clarify men's minds at this troubled moment in history. It is very much to Mr. Sherwood's credit that he has assimilated the character of Lincoln so thoroughly and had the wisdom to distinguish the immortal parts of it from the transitory. What was Mr. Sherwood to do -- rewrite Lincoln? No, this objection puts playwriting on a purely sportsmanship basis with the implication that it is not cricket to use lines not invented by the author for the occasion.

One of my colleagues complains that "Abe Lincoln in Illinois" has no unity. Well, there is the character of Lincoln towering over every scene in the play: that supplies a unity of sorts. And ever since the play opened last Autumn some playgoers have said: "I'd like to know what you think of the play if you and every one else were not so deeply absorbed in the national legend of Lincoln." Put that down as the most egregious comment of all. For the fundamental fact about "Abe Lincoln in Illinois" is that it is a play about Lincoln. He is the subject of the play. He appears in it. Many of the most familiar episodes in his life turn up in the sequence of scenes. Many of his private and public thoughts appear in the dialogue. To consider "Abe Lincoln in Illinois" apart from Lincoln and the Lincoln legend is a futile occupation for arid minds. Ladies and gentlemen, "Abe Lincoln in Illinois" is a play about Lincoln -- nothing more, nothing less. Let's mix a little common sense with intellect and esthetics.

* * *

This would seem to be evidence to sustain Brown's argument, and that it is. In judging a work of art, the choice of subject is the first fact of importance. Everything else derives from that. Mr. Sherwood has chosen one of the most glorious subjects to be found in the common domain of playwriting. Let us not quibble about the credit to which he is entitled for selecting a good theme.⁷

Brooks' argument first.

7

Brooks Atkinson, "Critics Lay an Egg," New York Times, April 23, 1939, sect. 10, p. 1, col. 1.

Abe Lincoln in Illinois, New York, 1939, p. 129.

These two eminent critics have seized the important arguments concerning Abe Lincoln in Illinois as a piece of writing and have presented their points soundly and with interest. We have within their arguments the discussions important to our study. But before we proceed to voice opinions, let us first return to a device we have come to rely upon: the recognition of the author's need for supplementing the printed version of his play with more explicit discussion. We remember that Sherwood wrote detailed and excellent prefaces for The Road to Rome, The Queen's Husband, Waterloo Bridge, This Is New York, Reunion in Vienna, that he did not write a preface for The Petrified Forest and Idiot's Delight. For the printed edition of Abe Lincoln in Illinois he has written a sixty-one-page analysis of his play, calling it "The Substance of 'Abe Lincoln in Illinois.'" highly and make of it

The purpose of these supplementary notes is to state the principal sources from which the material of this play and the conception of its various characters are derived; to attempt to tell what is the historical basis for each of the twelve scenes, and wherein and why I have departed from the recorded facts; to indicate the events which occurred between scenes; and also to give me an excuse for adding some information which I was unable, for one reason or another, to incorporate in the play's structure.⁸

This would seem to be evidence to sustain Brown's argument, and that it is. Sherwood himself has established the validity of the criticism. But Brown's answer is not final. Atkinson, too, is right; and his proof is found not in the notes, but in the play itself. We shall investigate Brown's argument first.

B

Robert Sherwood, "The Substance of 'Abe Lincoln in Illinois,'" Abe Lincoln in Illinois, New York, 1939, p. 189.

We hold no brief for the excellence of Robert Sherwood's writing. When it exists, that excellence is apparent. And so we do not argue with John Mason Brown and his point concerning Sherwood's omission of illustrative action in Abe Lincoln in Illinois. We agree. But to us who have tried to understand Sherwood, there is a rather simple explanation that, however little it might bear on the play itself, cannot be ignored. We think we know why Sherwood omitted what Brown so lucidly calls illustrative action. It is not, certainly, that Sherwood was unable to write that action; it was simply that he was afraid to write it. We have seen how well Robert Sherwood can present action that is theatrically significant. We know by now that Sherwood has a fertile imagination and never lacks idea. But with all this it has been apparent that his tendency is to color his action highly and make of it a broad melodramatic sort that would have been entirely out of keeping with the kind of play he was writing in Abe Lincoln in Illinois. There is no suggestion here that broad, melodramatic action cannot be a part of a dignified play, but the point is that Sherwood is no Shakespeare and has as yet been unable to emanate the master's genius in the use of hokum in high tragedy. Here, indeed, has been Sherwood's most serious flaw. He has shown us in the past, and proves conclusively in Abe Lincoln in Illinois, that he must write in either one of two ways: melodramatically with brilliant strokes of comedy and theatrics, or dully with earnestness and dignity and great lack of theatrical effect.

But, to get to Brown's point (and it, of all of Brown's points, is the most significant for this study). Says John Mason Brown, "His intermissions are the most active interludes." Says Robert Sherwood,

"The purpose of these supplementary notes is... to indicate the events which occurred between scenes." And there it is. Sherwood writes his play in his supplementary notes. The play, compared to the supplementary notes, is but a reverent hat-tipping to a great and exciting subject, while the notes reveal a playwright who had too much to write about and too much to write it with. Sherwood was actually awed to the point that he became too tasteful. Scene I, when read and thus not given the fire that Raymond Massey's performance must have given it, is nothing but dull. True, there is about it an air of solemn and great things to come, but that is not enough to hold a scene even so short as this on the stage.

Scene II, in which Sherwood introduces such important characters as Bowling Greene, Ninian Edwards, and Ann Rutledge, and with them the scene of Lincoln's first decision to enter politics and the only scene between Ann and Lincoln, is little more than an outline that Sherwood forces to a great purpose. Granted that Sherwood was unable to devote too much time to this moment in Lincoln's career, it is not the length of the scene or the content that is disturbing. It is the fact that the scene needs the hokum, of which Sherwood is a master, to give it a spirit and interest that it lacks. We wonder, for instance, why Sherwood treated the character of Mattling, whom he declares "is introduced solely to show that Lincoln knew men who had fought in the Revolution,"⁹ so sketchily when he was able to provide such magnificent characterizations with the same sort of character in

⁹ Sherwood, "The Substance of 'Abe Lincoln in Illinois,'" p. 127.

Sherwood, "The Substance of 'Abe Lincoln in Illinois,'" p. 203.

Old Krug of Reunion in Vienna and Gramp in The Petrified Forest. Sherwood might well answer that there was not time so to develop Ben Mattling, but we reply that there was time to provide at least one characterization of the timber of such characters as Krug and Gramp. And whatever the excuse, there is no adequate explanation for the failure on the part of such a playwright as Robert Sherwood to make the most of his auxiliary characters. The fact that he did not is a glaring fault throughout the play, and the play suffers for it. Sherwood was not unaware of his deficiency. He said, "These other characters had to be used, for dramatic purposes, not as people important in themselves but as sources of light, each one being present only for the purpose of casting a beam to illumine some one of the innumerable facets of Lincoln's spirit."¹⁰ And here is a most revealing comment on his conception of the play he was writing. It is amazing that Robert Sherwood did not realize that his play of Lincoln would not have been less a portrait if he had surrounded Lincoln with characters of the sort that would not only have "thrown a beam" but would have augmented the character of Lincoln, and thus the play of Lincoln, by supplying it with that richness of detail, that brilliance of color, saying to the audience in more ways than one, "Here is Lincoln, here is Lincoln's environment, there is a play of Lincoln." Could this have been what John Mason Brown meant when he said that Sherwood functioned "like a man who is giving an illustrated lecture and has left his lantern slides at home"?¹¹ If not all, it is

¹⁰

Sherwood, "The Substance of 'Abe Lincoln in Illinois,'" p. 197.

¹¹

See p. 131, supra.

certainly a part of Brown's point. We suggest that the only slide Sherwood brought was a black and white profile of Lincoln, and a two-and-a-half-hour traffic on the stage needs much more than one picture. The scenes themselves and the handling of each of them are not all that is implied by John Mason Brown's statement concerning the importance of the intermissions. There is the even greater consideration of the actual subject matter dealt with in the scenes and that which is left to take place while the curtain is down. The most forceful illustration of the point in question is the action that Sherwood leaves untold between Scenes VII and VIII of Act II. It is here that Sherwood asks his audience to realize that the procrastinating, frightened Abe Lincoln has resolved himself into action of the determined sort that would lead him eventually to the White House and the helm of the nation through the near-disaster of the Civil War. The purpose of Scene VII is obvious: it is a little incident in Lincoln's life that came at just the right moment to awaken him to his destiny. Says Sherwood of this scene:

Of all the twelve scenes, this one is the most completely fictitious, and the one which presented the greatest difficulty in the writing. It requires explanation.

It is obvious that, in the course of his life, Lincoln underwent an astonishing metamorphosis, from a man of doubt and indecision -- even of indifference -- to a man of passionate conviction and decisive action. This metamorphosis was not accomplished in one stroke, by one magnificent act of God. It was so slow and gradual that its progress was not visible to any one, even (in all likelihood) to Lincoln himself. What caused it?...

When he did go forward, it was entirely under his own steam. But what were the deep fires of wrath that produced that steam?

In this seventh scene, I had to try to suggest the answer to that question.¹²

And we pause to wonder at Sherwood's saying that this scene presented the greatest difficulty in writing. Why should it have been difficult for a playwright of Robert Sherwood's imagination to write such a scene? Obviously he realized its importance and its possibilities, and here he must have stopped. The possibilities frightened him, and he curbed himself so carefully that the scene became finally only a hint of what it might have been. The conception behind it was right; but its development was on so small a scale that it lacks that heartbreaking poignancy that Sherwood could so easily have given it. With the following two speeches, Sherwood asks his audience to grasp the full significance of the change that has come into his chief character's history and offers no more than these words from Lincoln's mouth to verify it:

You mustn't be scared, Seth. I know I'm a poor one to be telling you that -- but I've been scared all my life. But -- seeing you now -- and thinking of the big thing you've set out to do -- well, it's made me feel pretty small. It's made me feel that I've got to do something, too, to keep you and your kind in the United States of America. You mustn't quit, Seth! Don't let anything beat you -- don't you ever give up!¹³

Oh God, the father of all living, I ask you to look with gentle mercy upon this little boy who is here, lying sick in this covered wagon. His people are traveling far, to seek a new home in the wilderness, to do your work, God, to make this earth a good place for your children to live in. They can see clearly where they're going, and they're not afraid to face all the perils that lie along the way. I humbly beg you not to take their

¹²

Sherwood, "The Substance of 'Abe Lincoln in Illinois,'" p. 220.

¹³

Sherwood, Abe Lincoln in Illinois, Act II, Scene VII, p. 121.

only one child from them. Grant him the freedom of life. Do not condemn him to the imprisonment of death. Do not deny him his birthright. Let him know the sight of great plains and high mountains, of green valleys and wide rivers. For this little boy is an American, and these things belong to him, and he to them. Spare him, that he too may strive for the ideal for which his fathers have labored, so faithfully and for so long. Spare him and give him his fathers' strength -- give us all strength. Oh God, to do the work that is before us. I ask you this favor, in the name of your son, Jesus Christ, who died upon the Cross to set men free. Amen.¹⁴

In Scene VIII the following dialogue is all that occurs concerning the new Abraham Lincoln:

ABE

On the prairie, I met an old friend of mine who was moving West, with his wife and child, in a covered wagon. He asked me to go with him, and I was strongly tempted to do so. (There is great sadness in his tone -- but he seems to collect himself, and turns to her again, speaking with a sort of resignation.) But then I knew that was not my direction. The way I must go is the way you have always wanted me to go.

MARY

And you will promise that never again will you falter, or turn to run away?

ABE

I promise, Mary -- if you will have me -- I shall devote myself for the rest of my days to trying -- to do what is right -- as God gives me power to see what is right.¹⁵

That is all. The rest is left to the audience's foreknowledge and imagination. The biggest scene in the play is unwritten. In his effort to avoid too obvious theatrics, Sherwood becomes too subtle. John Mason Brown brands it as "uncertain writing." Although this instance is

¹⁴

Sherwood, Abe Lincoln in Illinois, Act II, Scene VII, p. 121.

¹⁵

Ibid., Act II, Scene VIII, p. 127.

only one of several such in the play, it is, as has been said, the most glaring and important one. For had the second act included a scene in which the audience was allowed to see vividly the transition in Lincoln's character, the whole play would have taken on a brilliance and excitement that might well have made of it a truly exciting piece of writing.

Of Brown's point concerning the omnipresence of John Wilkes Booth's horse in the alley behind Ford's Theater, there is little to add. He developed his point sufficiently. His other arguments, too, seem to explain themselves. We turn now to Brooks Atkinson.

It is not an effort to belittle that prompts us to remind the reader of a point made earlier in this study concerning Brooks Atkinson's tendency to ignore a play's technical demerits if the play's thesis and manner of conception are of the sort that pleases him. It is simply that at times Brooks Atkinson is swept away from what are his usual acute critical faculties. His reviews of Abe Lincoln in Illinois are at times examples of this over-enthusiasm, but on the whole Brooks Atkinson is being honest and is arguing soundly. In fact, his genuine appreciation for the play has forced him to discover in it many of the play's true merits, and he has recorded his discoveries brilliantly. The serious student cannot deny that Abe Lincoln in Illinois is "in breadth and depth of its understanding... far above the general level of commercial theatre," that Abe Lincoln in Illinois is "a drama of great pith and moment," or that Sherwood "is writing scrupulously... looking the facts squarely in the face and recording them in deadly earnest."¹⁶ These things are true. But Atkinson fails to recognize

¹⁶ See pp. 132 ff, supra.

the fact that they do not necessarily argue that the play is as great as he would have us believe. And we would be the first to agree that "Mr. Sherwood is too human a playwright to assume the solemn manner." Indeed, that is one of the favorite points of this study. And heretofore we have agreed with relish with Atkinson when he says that Sherwood's "sense of humor gives him a sense of proportion."¹⁷ In regard to this play we do not concur altogether. And we ask Atkinson just where in Abe Lincoln in Illinois does Sherwood tell "honestly the savory story of those early days amid the familiar men and women of the prairie."¹⁸ Most of all, we ask wherein is this story savory?

Only when Atkinson is arguing with the critics concerning the merits of Abe Lincoln in Illinois does he make points that provoke real argument. His saying that "it is a story told on a stage: ergo, it is a play"¹⁹ is as stupid a bit of refutation as we have encountered. We would not be more surprised if he had argued that it is lines spoken by actors behind a proscenium arch: ergo, it is a play. The critics' objection that the play is not a play was based upon the fact that the play is in twelve disconnected scenes, and tells no specific story embodying the conventional plot structure. That Atkinson should dismiss this objection with such an argument is, to say the least,²⁰ annoying. There is much better proof within the play itself at Atkinson's disposal than the fact that it was put on the stage. Indeed, the technical structure of this play is rather good, in so far

¹⁷

See p. 133, supra.

¹⁸

See p. 133, supra.

¹⁹

See p. 134, supra.

as the structure itself is concerned. The fact that the structure is very weak at the climax prompts criticism, of course, of the basic structure; but it nevertheless stands as a structure with a plan behind it. That the play lacks unity is a valid criticism. Most plays of twelve scenes covering such a period of time do lack unity of a kind. And Atkinson is right in declaring that the unity of Abe Lincoln in Illinois is the result of the single, towering figure of Lincoln himself. Where Atkinson fails his responsibility as a critic is in his negligence to point out that little more has been asked of plays for years. Unity of a well-made play variety is becoming somewhat passé, and so Abe Lincoln in Illinois is not to be blamed for the lack of that. However, again Atkinson fails to grasp the full meaning of the opposition's argument. The critics who excited Atkinson by declaring the lack of unity within the play were do doubt referring in part to the fact that the play lacks the essential flow of events, action of the kind that can carry an audience with it through twelve episodic scenes. And there is no argument for that. It is true.

But it is to Brooks Atkinson alone that we turn for statement of the argument refuting the complaint that Sherwood has used Lincoln's own words in his play. When Atkinson calls this a "microscopic objection,"²⁰ we concur. As far as it is possible to determine without searching all of Sherwood's sources, we feel that Sherwood has done a remarkable job of assembling the available Lincolnisms and turning them to excellent dramatic and patriotic use. Indeed, the scene of the Lincoln-Douglas debates, in which Sherwood has rearranged speeches

20

See p. 134, supra.

from almost all of Lincoln's important addresses, is the most excit-

ing scene in the play. And Atkinson cleverly answers the objectors

Simplicity is the keynote of Robert Sherwood's character. Thus when he asks, "What was Mr. Sherwood to do -- rewrite Lincoln?"²¹

an intimate friend describes him. Simplicity is the outstanding merit

If for no other reason, Sherwood's direct use of his source material

of There Shall Be No Night. It is a play concerning the invasion of

in Abe Lincoln in Illinois stamps this play as a bright promise for

Finland, at the precise time the events were taking place. Robert

the future writing of Robert Sherwood. In another play Sherwood

Sherwood is an American with a profound love of his country and a sus-

might be able to allow his own writing a larger part, and with so

cerns for the present European chaos. The war in Finland ended while

excellent a talent for selection of historical detail a great histor-

the play was in rehearsal. Yet, There Shall Be No Night is a simple

ical play might result.

story, quietly told, with a passion that is not unleashed, that is not

Finally, then, Abe Lincoln in Illinois stands as a threshold in

flagrant, that is not self-conscious. Having watched Sherwood grow,

the career of Robert Sherwood. From here he may go in any one of sev-

we know why it is possible and, what is more, why it was logical that

eral directions. There is no predicting him or the course he is to

Robert Sherwood should write such a play.

take.

But from the outset it is necessary that the point be made clear

21

conce. See p. 134, supra. the play There Shall Be No Night is the study

of the dramatic development of Robert Sherwood. It is Sherwood's latest

test play. It is perhaps his most widely publicized play. But it is

not, let us hope, the last play that Robert Sherwood will write. For

that reason, establishing it as a step toward any further development

is tentative. We have seen Sherwood grow from the writing of the comedy

edy The Road to Rome. We have noted his tendency in the past six years

to write plays of more social consequence. Concerning the dramatic

matic development of Robert Sherwood we must therefore. There Shall Be

No Night might very likely be a cue for that theme. If so, the

American theater-goer will look to Sherwood for a new and more

See Behrman, "The Monotonous," I, p. 32.

CHAPTER VII

Simplicity is the keynote of Robert Sherwood's character. Thus an intimate friend describes him.¹ Simplicity is the outstanding merit of There Shall Be No Night. It is a play concerning the invasion of Finland, at the precise time the events were taking place. Robert Sherwood is an American with a profound love of his country and a concern for the present European chaos. The war in Finland ended while the play was in rehearsal. Yet, There Shall Be No Night is a simple story, quietly told, with a passion that is not unleashed, that is not flagrant, that is not self-conscious. Having watched Sherwood grow, we know why it is possible and, what is more, why it was logical that Robert Sherwood should write such a play.

But from the outset it is necessary that the point be made clear concerning the place of the play There Shall Be No Night in the study of the dramatic development of Robert Sherwood. It is Sherwood's latest play. It is perhaps his most widely publicized play. But it is not, let us hope, the last play that Robert Sherwood will write. For that reason, establishing it as a step toward any further development is tentative. We have seen Sherwood grow from the writing of the comedy The Road to Rome. We have noted his tendency in the past six years to write plays of more social consequence. Concerning the future dramatic development of Robert Sherwood we must theorize. There Shall Be No Night might very likely be a cue for that theory. If it is, the American theater public might well look to Sherwood for several plays

¹

See Behrman, "Old Monotonous, I," p. 33.

in the near future with obvious propaganda intent. If it is not, however, the same public might expect more plays of the nature of Abe Lincoln in Illinois or The Petrified Forest. At this moment, though, There Shall Be No Night must be regarded as a play of the moment, and its greater merits must be discovered by the student a few years hence.

For the sake of the records, it seems advisable that a few sample reviews be offered as evidence of the critical attitude toward Sherwood and his play in 1940. It is obvious that the critics are treating Robert Sherwood with more deference than they did in 1926.

Sherwood shows us the Valkonens in days of peace. Dr. Valkonen, a psychiatrist, hopes for man's sanity even in a rising tide of unreason. The wife, American born, believes in life. Their son, although he is working on the Mannerheim Line, believes that ideals still live in Russia and that the times still offer a chance for love and simple work. Then war sweeps over them, engulfing them all. The physician, who is profoundly aware of the insanity of war and of its futility, dies in a hopeless battle outside Vipurii. The son is killed with his troop in the north. The woman lays a fire for fighting in the basement of their house in Helsinki and loads a rifle to use if the invaders come.

This small plot is enriched by feeling and sympathy, so that the Valkonens are vivid and moving on the stage as gallant, suffering humans. But beyond them Sherwood lets us glimpse the larger world. A Nazi diplomat advances his, and the author's, theory that in Finland the Soviets were but a paw for the German wildcat, and that for the first time since all the surface of the world has been explored a nation seeks dominance and the enslavement of the world. Against this, Mr. Sherwood argues directly and by implication, all mankind must stand. Specifically, he is contemptuous of this country's refusal to take a stand against what one of the characters, and again probably the author, feels to be the anti-Christ.

And in all this Mr. Sherwood finds hope -- hope because men are grimly standing to arms, without thought of glory, to confront this newest exemplification of the beast in man; hope that mankind may be refined to human-

York Journal and American, April 30, 1940, p. 10, col. 1.

ity by this latest conflagration, set by these most recent pyromaniacs. Mr. Sherwood, it may be, whistles in the dark.

It is with this whistling that the play falters. When he seeks reassurance in the events he pictures, Mr. Sherwood slides into the tentative....

Mr. Sherwood has written beautifully and with intensity. I wish he had thought longer, and more slowly. The theater can, after all, safely give the headlines a long head start.²

"There Shall Be No Night" is not a tidy nor a consistent play. Yet it is a play of stature, dignity and high emotion, thoughtful, eloquent and heartfelt, and it is brilliantly acted by the Lunts and an admirable cast. It has something of great contemporary import to say to what we call our civilization, and it speaks from both the mind and the heart.³

His greatest strength is that he discusses the present world with courage and imagination, with full reliance on factual items for his dramatic effectiveness, but with the eloquence to make them deeply moving.⁴

The familiar Brooks Atkinson remains, for the most part, one of Robert Sherwood's most sympathetic reviewers.

As a play "There Shall Be No Night" is no masterpiece; it has a shiftless second act and less continuity of story than one likes to see. It does not hang together particularly well....

He is chronicling the experiences of an eminent Finnish scientist, Dr. Valkonen, who has just won the Nobel Prize for his study of the mind. He is married to an American woman; they have one son who is of military age.

²

Richard Lockridge, "'There Shall Be No Night,' With the Lunts, Opens at the Alvin," New York Sun, April 30, 1940, p. 26, col. 1.

³

Richard Watts, Jr., "The Theaters," New York Herald-Tribune, April 30, 1940, p. 16, col. 1.

⁴

John Anderson, "Lunts in Play Based on Finnish Invasion," New York Journal and American, April 30, 1940, p. 10, col. 1.

An uncommonly civilized person with enormous Christian faith, Dr. Valkonen is optimistic in general and immune to the common hysterias. He does not believe that the Russians will fight. Even if they did, he believes that resistance would be reckless and stupid. But the war closes in about him. His son goes into the army. Faced with a practical situation he has hardly bothered to contemplate he plunges in with his countrymen. In the last act Mr. Sherwood gives him an opportunity to justify himself and to bring his faith up to the fighting front. For men who fight barbarism, not for glory, but humbly to preserve the tradition of freedom, carry the world one step further, he says, and help to fulfill the destiny of civilization.

* * *

The topic is a big one. Moreover Mr. Sherwood plunged into it a few months ago when the story of the Finnish resistance was hot in his mind. Those are generally not the circumstances in which perfect works of art are created, and "There Shall Be No Night" is no exception. But Mr. Sherwood has admirably created the atmosphere of a wholesome family, which is the basis of the play. Part of it is humorous; all of it is affectionate. The whole thing has the feeling of modern times. When the war begins Mr. Sherwood has more difficulty in revealing character from the inside rather than by external circumstances, and the play loses the direction of the splendid first act. But the events are too poignantly true to be resisted by the usual cant of criticism. In the last act Mr. Sherwood twice pulls the whole thing together with magnificent statements of what goes on in the mind of an enlightened man confronted with the destruction of his aspirations. Although the Finnish campaign is now over, Denmark and Norway are part of the same story.⁵

John Mason Brown has provided us two remarkably pertinent essays on There Shall Be No Night and its dubious literary merit. Brown raises the point that will no doubt be raised in the future when There Shall Be No Night is observed as a piece of writing. Can a play with such topical limitations be a really good play? In the first essay Brown reviews the play, beginning his point.

⁵ Brooks Atkinson, "Robert E. Sherwood's 'There Shall Be No Night' Brings Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne Back to Town in a Drama About Finland's Resistance," New York Times, April 30, 1940, p. 24, col. 3.

The whole point, and often the theatrical effectiveness, of his play is derived from the way in which it manages to make grease paint and the recent barkings of our radios one and the same thing....

In writing of the destruction by the Russians of a cultivated Finnish home, and in describing how a distinguished man of science, a Nobel Prize winner, loses his son, his charming New England wife, and his own life, after having been forced to abandon reason for a gun, Mr. Sherwood unquestionably continues a familiar dramatic practice of his. Intelligent and capable as he is, Mr. Sherwood has often been more of a journalist than a playwright in the creation of his dramatic emotions. He has depended as heavily on outside events to complete his writing for him as he has on music to furnish him with ready-made climaxes of debatable integrity, though of undeniable effectiveness, for some of his bigger scenes....

If he is functioning as a propagandist, if he has turned sickening headlines into dialogue, and stated the tragedy of a nation in terms of a single family, it cannot be overstressed that, as a pamphleteer, he has succeeded, as no other dramatist heard from in this country has succeeded, in dealing with the topical alarms and abiding implications of Europe's fever chart....

If at times it is static, it is at least becalmed in the interest of good talk. If its ultimate optimism is hard to swallow; if it gets lost in the scenes between its young lovers; if it suffers toward the end by the introduction of too many new characters; if it indulges in such stale tricks as those employed in the episode during which the scientist tries to frighten his wife into leaving Finland; and if it does not hesitate to do its preaching straight into a loud-speaker or in an abandoned classroom, There Shall Be No Night nonetheless proves absorbing for by far the better portion of one of the season's most arresting and moving evenings....

No one can complain about the theatre's being an escapist institution when it conducts a class in current events at once as touching, intelligent, and compassionate as There Shall Be No Night.⁶

The second essay was written in answer to Robert Sherwood's statement that criticism of his play for its use of journalistic material

⁶ New York Times, May 12, 1940, sect. IX, p. 1, col. 2.

Brown, Broadway in Review, p. 155.

was "academic twaddle."⁷ Although the essay is vastly interesting, only a few of Brown's arguments are pertinent to this study.

As a man Mr. Sherwood is one of the finest, most fearless, and intelligent forces in the modern theatre. As a playwright he is a vigorous, usually entertaining, sometimes eloquent contributor, possessed of commendable ideals and often a no less commendable technical dexterity. When he has taken advantage of headlines or relied upon such public emotions as his audiences may have brought with them into the theatre to do their collaborative service in his playwriting, he has been entirely within his rights. If in his work he has often used the passing moment as so much dramatic capital, he has no less often served the moment well. Certainly the fact that *There Shall Be No Night* is a dramatization, written at white heat, of the invasion of Finland and the present-day plight of decent people everywhere has (as from the first I have rejoiced in trying to state) resulted in one of the most moving and effective examples of dramatic editorializing our stage has known....

This virtue of immediacy is, as I see it, not only the point of Mr. Sherwood's most recent script, but gives it distinguishing qualities which more than compensate for its technical shortcomings....

Most plays worthy of the name and of respect are expressions, direct or indirect, of the issues (by protest or acceptance) of the age which contributed to their birth. Scores of dramas, much needed and much admired, have served their welcome journalistic purpose by saying intelligently and provocatively in dramatic form what the forums, the coffeehouses, or the newspapers have been full of. They have had their day and more than justified themselves by perhaps reshaping the days to come.

But from the Greeks through Shakespeare right down to Mr. O'Neill, the plays which have remained contemporary with audiences through time have not been those which speak, however eloquently, only of public events contemporary with their writing....

My sole and simple point is that it is possible to swear by the eternal without underestimating the values of the topical. The main thing, for the theatre's well-being,

⁷ See Jack Gould, "The Broadway Stage Has its First War Play," *New York Times*, May 12, 1940, sect. IX, p. 1, col. 2.

Brown, *Broadway in Review*, p. 162.

is not to forget how seldom they are one.⁸

Again John Mason Brown has argued so clearly that no further explanation need be furnished. Certainly Brown is qualified to speak thus, and his point is well taken.

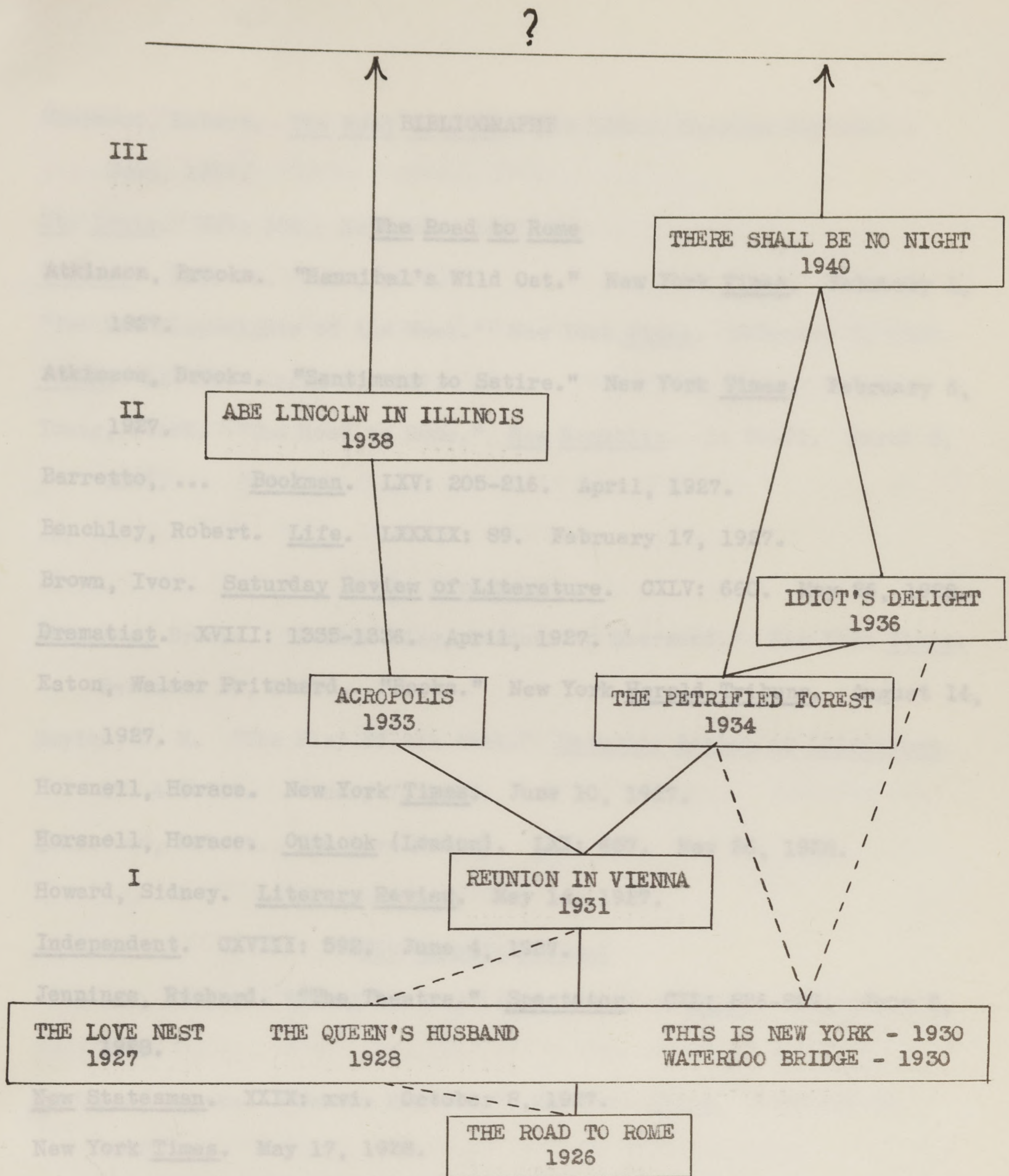
Upon rereading the play, the writer has found it impossible to divorce it from the performance given it by the Lunts. The play is not a piece of writing, but an experience in the theater. It is therefore difficult, if not impossible, to argue with Brown. What is more, John Mason Brown is no doubt right, but we cannot accept all of his implications. Granted that forty years from now There Shall Be No Night will not move its audiences as it has moved the audiences of 1940 and 1941, granted that There Shall Be No Night is technically as faulty a play as Robert Sherwood has written, it cannot be denied that moments in There Shall Be No Night reveal writing of a quality that has never before appeared in Robert Sherwood's plays. It is of great importance that this consideration not be ignored; for if to There Shall Be No Night can be attributed any hint of the future writing of Robert Sherwood, it is the fact that within this play at one moment he has written more beautifully than he has ever written before. Out of his feeling for the subject, his honesty, his thinking has come this speech. It occurs at the end of the play, but taken out of its context, it retains a poetical quality that makes it not only the high moment in this play, but the high moment of all of Sherwood's plays.

"In this time of our own grief it is not easy to sum-

mon up the philosophy which has been formed from long study of the sufferings of others. But I must do it, and you must help me." You see -- he wanted to make me feel that I'm stronger -- wiser. "I have often read the words which Pericles spoke over the bodies of the dead, in the dark hour when the light of Athenian democracy was being extinguished by the Spartans. He told the mourning people that he could not give them any of the old words which tell how fair and noble it is to die in battle. Those empty words were old, even then, twenty-four centuries ago. But he urged them to find revival in the memory of the commonwealth which they together had achieved; and he promised them that the story of their commonwealth would never die, but would live on, far away, woven into the fabric of other men's lives. I believe that these words can be said now of our own dead, and our own commonwealth. I have always believed in the mystic truth of the resurrection. The great leaders of the mind and the spirit -- Socrates, Christ, Lincoln -- were all done to death that the full measure of their contribution to human experience might never be lost. Now -- the death of our son is only a fragment in the death of our country. But Erik and the others who give their lives are also giving to mankind a symbol -- a little symbol, to be sure, but a clear one -- of man's unconquerable aspiration to dignity and freedom and purity in the sight of God. When I made that radio speech" -- you remember? ... "I quoted from St. Paul. I repeat those words to you now, darling: 'We glory in tribulations; knowing that tribulation worketh patience; and patience, experience; and experience, hope.' There are men here from all different countries. Fine men. Those Americans who were at our house on New Year's Day -- and that nice Polish officer, Major Rutkowski -- they are all here. They are waiting for me now, so I must close this, with all my love."⁹

If this be promise for Sherwood's future, we welcome it readily. But a single speech is not enough. It is, as we have said, only a hint.

The greater promise is found in the full view of Robert Sherwood's plays and his growth in and through them.



HIERARCHY OF ROBERT SHERWOOD'S FIRST ELEVEN PLAYS

Sherwood, Robert. The Road BIBLIOGRAPHY New York: Charles Scribner's
Sons, 1927.

St. Louis. XXV: 358. No The Road to Rome

Atkinson, Brooks. "Hannibal's Wild Oat." New York Times. February 1,
1927. "Playwrights of the Week." New York Times. February 6, 1927.

Atkinson, Brooks. "Sentiment to Satire." New York Times. February 6,
1927. "The Road to Rome." New Republic. L: 70-71. March 9,

Barretto, ... Bookman. LXV: 205-216. April, 1927.

Benchley, Robert. Life. LXXXIX: 89. February 17, 1927.

Brown, Ivor. Saturday Review of Literature. CXLV: 660. May 26, 1928.

Dramatist. XVIII: 1335-1336. April, 1927. Sherwood." New York Times.

Eaton, Walter Pritchard. "Books." New York Herald-Tribune. August 14,

Sayle 1927. M. "The Play of the Week." Saturday Review of Literature.

Horsnell, Horace. New York Times. June 10, 1927.

Horsnell, Horace. Outlook (London). LXI: 657. May 26, 1928.

Howard, Sidney. Literary Review. May 14, 1927.

Independent. CXVIII: 592. June 4, 1927.

Jennings, Richard. "The Theatre." Spectator. CXL: 826-827. June 2,
1928.

New Statesman. XXIX: xvi. October 8, 1927. Times. February 12,

New York Times. May 17, 1928.

New York Times. May 22, 1928. 1928.

New York Times. June 3, 1928. Review of Literature. VI: 1043. June 3,

Norgate, W... M... Nation (London). XLIII: 251-252. May 26, 1928.

Pearson, Edmund. "Carthage Goes Democratic." Outlook. CXLVI: 546.

August 24, 1927.

Sherwood, Robert. The Road to Rome. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1927.

St. Louis. XXV: 358. November, 1927.

Theatre. XLV: 28. June, 1927.

"Two New Playwrights of the Week." New York Times. February 6, 1927.

Vogue. LX: 84. April 1, 1927.

Young, Stark. "The Road to Rome." New Republic. L: 70-71. March 9, 1927.

St. Louis. XXVI: 286. December, 1927.

Theatre Arts Monthly. XI: The Love Nest

Atkinson, Brooks. "Double Play, Lardner to Sherwood." New York Times. December 24, 1927.

Saylor, O. M. "The Play of the Week." Saturday Review of Literature.

Atk. IV: 499-500. January 7, 1928.

[Sherwood, Robert. The Love Nest.]

Booklist. XXVII: 366. April, 1931.

Bookman. LXXII: 516. The Queen's Husband

Atkinson, Brooks. "Among the Royalty." New York Times. January 27,

1928.

Atkinson, Brooks. "Tender Reproof." New York Times. February 12,

1928.

Booklist. XXV: 65. November, 1928.

Brown, John Mason. Saturday Review of Literature. V: 1093. June 8,

1929.

Eaton, Walter Pritchard. "Books." New York Herald-Tribune. Decem-

ber 30, 1928.

Sons, 1930.

Knight, Marion A., and Others, editors. Book Review Digest. New York. H. W. Wilson Company, 1930.

New York Evening Post. November 10, 1928.

New York Times. January 23, 1928.

"Revolutionists in 48th Street." New York Times. April 15, 1928.

Sherwood, Robert. The Queen's Husband. New York: Longmans, Green and Company, 1932.

Sifton, Paul. New York World. December 16, 1928.

St. Louis. XXVI: 286. December, 1928.

Theatre Arts Monthly. XIII. May, 1929.

Wakefield, G... Saturday Review. CLII: 498. October 17, 1931.

This Is New York

Atkinson, Brooks. "Gotham Gayeties." New York Times. November 29, 1930.

Booklist. XXVII: 356. April, 1931.

Bookman. LXXII: 516. January, 1931.

Catholic World. CXXXII: 464. January, 1931.

Chatfield-Taylor, Otis. Outlook. CLVI: 629. December 17, 1930.

Drama. XXI: 13. January, 1931.

Eaton, Walter Pritchard. "Books." New York Herald-Tribune. June 21, 1931.

H..., H... Nation. CXXXI: 716. December 24, 1930.

Knight, Marion A., and Others, editors. Book Review Digest. New York: H. W. Wilson Company, 1932.

Sherwood, Robert. This Is New York. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1930.

- De Casseres, Benjamin. Waterloo Bridge. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1930.
- Atkinson, Brooks. "Love Will Tell." New York Times. January 7, 1930.
- Bellamy, F. R. Outlook. CLIV: 152. January 22, 1930.
- Eaton, Walter Pritchard. "Books." New York Herald-Tribune. May 4, 1930.
- Knight, Marion A., and Others, editors. Book Review Digest. New York: H. W. Wilson Company, 1931.
- Krutch, Joseph Wood. "Magdalene." Nation. CXXX: 106. January 22, 1930.
- Seaver, Edwin. New York Evening Post. March 1, 1930.
- Sherwood, Robert. Waterloo Bridge. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1930.
- Springfield Republican. May 28, 1930.
- Times (London). May 15, 1930.
- Young, Stark. "Mostly the Actors." New Republic. LXI: 251. January 22, 1930.
- Pittsburgh Monthly Bulletin. XXVII: 50. July, 1932.
- "Plays of Some Importance." Reunion in Vienna. CXXXIV: 467-468. January 22, 1930.
- Atkinson, Brooks. "Lunt and Fontanne, Comedians." New York Times. November 29, 1931.
- Booklist. XXVIII: 469. July, 1932.
- Canadian Forum. XIV: 366-367, 410-411. June-July, 1934.
- Chatfield-Taylor, Otis. "The Latest Plays." Outlook. CLIX: 438. December 2, 1931.
- Colbourne, M. "Mittens and Mud." Canadian Forum. XIV: 300-301. May, 1934.

De Casseres, Benjamin. "Broadway to Date." Arts and Decorations.

XXXVI: 68. January, 1932.

Dickinson, Thomas H. "The Angle of Incidence." Saturday Review of Literature. VIII: 728. May 14, 1932.

Fergusson, Francis. "A Month of the Theatre." Bookman. LXXIV: 564. January, 1932.

Field, L. M. "The Drama Catches Up." North American Review. CCXXXIV: 174. August, 1932.

Griffith, R. H. English 323 Class Lecture. Austin: The University of Texas, 1940.

Knight, Marion A., and Others, editors. Book Review Digest. New York: H. W. Wilson Company, 1933.

Krutch, Joseph Wood. "Sham Battle of the Sexes." Nation. CXXXIII: 650. December 9, 1931.

MacCarthy, D. "Reunion in Vienna." New Statesman and Nation. VII: 41. January 13, 1934.

Pittsburgh Monthly Bulletin. XXXVII: 50. July, 1932.

"Plays of Some Importance." Catholic World. CXXXIV: 467-468. January, 1932.

Ruhl, Arthur. New York Herald-Tribune. November 17, 1931.

Sherwood, Robert. Reunion in Vienna. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932.

Skinner, Richard Dana. "The Play." Commonweal. XV: 160. December 9, 1931.

Springfield Republican. June 8, 1932.

Verchoyle, D. Spectator. CLII: 46. January 12, 1934.

- Young, Stark. "Three More Plays." New Republic. LXIX: 70. December 2, 1931. "Heartbreak House." Editor. CXII: 111. January 23, 1935.
- M... F... "A Couple Acropolis Matters." New York Times.
- "'Acropolis' Closes in London." New York Times. December 7, 1933.
- Morgan, Charles. "Elegy on a London 'Acropolis,'" New York Times. December 10, 1933.
- Saturday Review. CLVI: 587. December 2, 1933.
- [Sherwood, Robert. Acropolis.] XI: 572. March 23, 1935.
- Verschoye, D. Spectator. CLI: 801. December 1, 1931. Scribner's Sons, 1936.
- Vernon, Grenville. The Petrified Forest. XXI: 375. January 23, 1935.
- Atkinson, Brooks. "Pistols, Bullets and Ideas." New York Times. January 13, 1935. Seller. "The Drama." Catholic World. CXI: 193.
- Atkinson, Brooks. "The Play." New York Times. January 9, 1935.
- Atkinson, Brooks. "Pulitzer Drama Honors." New York Times. May 12, 1935. March, 1935.
- Brown, Ivor. Manchester Guardian. January 2, 1936. LXXXIII: 21.
- Canadian Forum. CXL: 601-602. February, 1935.
- "A Customer Writes a Letter." New York Times. January 20, 1935.
- Eaton, Walter Pritchard. "Books." New York Herald-Tribune. June 30, 1935.
- Gilder, Rosamond. Theatre Arts Monthly. XIX. May, 1935.
- Hopkins, Arthur. "Gorki and Berger and Robert Sherwood." New York Times. January 20, 1935.
- Isaacs, Edith J. R. "When the Actor is Bored." Theatre Arts Monthly.

Brown XIX: 169-170. March, 1935.

Krutch, Joseph Wood. "Heartbreak House." Nation. CXL: 111. January 23, 1935.

M..., E... F... "A Couple of Back Bay Matters." New York Times. December 30, 1934.

Nichols, Lewis. New York Times. July 28, 1935.

"The Petrified Novelist." Literary Digest. CXIX: 19. January 19, 1935.

Saturday Review of Literature. XI: 572. March 23, 1935.

Sherwood, Robert. The Petrified Forest. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936.

Vernon, Grenville. "The Play." Commonweal. XXI: 375. January 25, 1935.

Wyatt, Euphemia Van Rensellaer. "The Drama." Catholic World. CXL: 601. February, 1935.

Wyatt, Euphemia Van Rensellaer. "The Drama." Catholic World. CXL: 726. March, 1935.

Young, Stark. "Particular and General." New Republic. LXXXII: 21. February 13, 1935.

Moses, Montrose J., and B. Idiot's Delight

Atkinson, Brooks. "Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne Appearing in Sherwood's 'Idiot's Delight.'" New York Times. March 26, 1936.

Atkinson, Brooks. "Dancing Before the Cannon." New York Times. April 12, 1936.

Booklist. XXXII: 286. June, 1936.

Brown, John Mason. Two on the Aisle. New York: W. W. Norton and
 Pull Company, Inc., 1938. XXVII: 89. May 11, 1936.

Catholic World. CXLIII: 212. May, 1936.

Colum, Mary M. "The Best American Comedy." Forum. XCV: 348-349.
 June, 1936.

Dukes, Ashley. "The English Scene." Theatre Arts Monthly. XXII:
 410-411. June, 1938.

Eaton, Walter Pritchard. "Books." New York Herald-Tribune. July 12,
 1936.

"Indicting War as 'Idiot's Delight.'" Literary Digest. CXXI: 20.
 March 28, 1936.

Isaacs, Edith J. R. "Broadway in Review." Theatre Arts Monthly.
 XX: 340-341. May, 1936.

Krutch, Joseph Wood. "Idiot's Delight." Nation. CXLII: 490-492.
 April 15, 1936.

Lockridge, Richard. "'Idiot's Delight,' With the Lunts Opens at the
 Shubert Theatre." New York Sun. (Quoted in Theatre Arts Monthly.
 XX: 466. June, 1936.)

Morgan, Charles. "London on 'Idiot's Delight.'" New York Times.
 April 10, 1938.

Moses, Montrose J., and Brown, John Mason, editors. The American The-
 atre as Seen by its Critics. New York: W. W. Norton and Com-
 pany, Inc., 1934.

"New Plays in Manhattan." Time. XXVII: 38. April 6, 1936.

News Week. VII: 32. April 4, 1936.

Pictorial Review. XXXVII: 65. July, 1936.

- "The Play and Screen." Commonweal. XXIV: 104. May 22, 1936.
- "Pulitzer Prizes." Time. XXVII: 50. May 11, 1936.
- "Pulitzer Sweepstakes." Scholastic. XXVIII: 6. May 23, 1936.
- Sherwood, Robert. Idiot's Delight. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936.
- "Topics of the Times." New York Times. October 23, 1938.
- Vernon, Grenville. Commonweal. XXIII: 664. April 10, 1936.
- Young, Stark. "Idiot's Delight." New Republic. LXXXVI: 253. March 24, 1936.
- Saturday Review of Literature. XIX: 2. February 12, 1939.
- Scholastic. XXXVI: Abe Lincoln in Illinois.
- Angoff, Charles. "Drama." North American Review. CC: 373-374. December, 1938.
- Atkinson, Brooks. "Critics Lay an Egg." New York Times. April 23, 1939.
- Atkinson, Brooks. "Lincoln's Prairie Years." New York Times. October 23, 1938.
- Atkinson, Brooks. "Raymond Massey Appearing in Robert E. Sherwood's 'Abe Lincoln in Illinois,'" New York Times. October 17, 1938.
- Booklist. XXXV: 220. March 1, 1939.
- Brown, John Mason. Broadway in Review. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1940.
- Canadian Forum. XIX: 355-356. February, 1940.
- Eaton, Walter Pritchard. "Books." New York Herald-Tribune. February 12, 1939.
- Forum. CI: 72. February, 1939.

Gilder, Rosamond. "Welcome Masters, Welcome All." Theatre Arts
Monthly. XXII: 853-854. December, 1938.

"Hamlet and Abe." New York Times. October 22, 1938.

Independent Woman. XVII: 348. November, 1938.

Krutch, Joseph Wood. "A Good Beginning." Nation. CXLVII: 487-488.

November 5, 1938.

Lerner, Max. New Republic. XCVIII: 134. March 8, 1939.

Newsweek. XII: 29. October 31, 1938.

Nichols, Lewis. New York Times. February 26, 1939.

Saturday Review of Literature. XIX: 6. February 18, 1939.

Scholastic. XXXVI: 17-18. February 12, 1940.

Sherwood, Robert. Abe Lincoln in Illinois. New York: Charles Scrib-
ner's Sons, 1940.

Springfield Republican. March 8, 1939.

Strauss, Theodore. "Abe Lincoln of 45th Street." New York Times.

October 30, 1938.

T..., H... Boston Transcript. March 4, 1939.

Time. XXXII: 53. October 24, 1938.

Vernon, Grenville. "The Stage and Screen." Commonweal. XXIX: 20.

October 28, 1938.

Whitney, M. A. Christian Science Monitor. February 23, 1939.

Wyatt, Euphemia Van Rensellaer. "At Last a Great American Play."

Catholic World. CXLVIII: 340-341. December, 1938.

Young, Stark. "Lincoln and Houston." New Republic. XCVII: 18.

November 9, 1938.

May 11, 1940.

- Lockridge, Richard There Shall Be No Night
- Anderson, John. "Lunts in Play Based on Finnish Invasion." New York Journal and American. April 30, 1940.
- Atkinson, Brooks. "Robert E. Sherwood's 'There Shall Be No Night' Brings Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne Back to Town in a Drama About Finland's Resistance." New York Times. April 30, 1940.
- Booklist. XXXVII: 87. November 1, 1940.
- Brown, John Mason. Broadway in Review. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1940.
- Brown, John Mason. "'There Shall Be No Night' Opens with Lunts Heading Brilliant Cast." New York Post. April 30, 1940.
- Catholic World. CLI: 343-344. June, 1940.
- Commonweal. XXXII: 62. May 10, 1940.
- Eaton, Walter Pritchard. "Books." New York Herald-Tribune. December 8, 1940.
- Gibbs, Wolcott. "Hello to Arms." New Yorker. XVI: 28. May 11, 1940.
- Gilder, Rosamond. Theatre Arts Monthly. XXIV: 399. June, 1940.
- Gilder, Rosamond. Theatre Arts Monthly. XXIV: 548. August, 1940.
- Gould, Jack. "The Broadway Stage Has Its First War Play." New York Times. May 12, 1940.
- "In First Current War Play, 'There Shall Be No Night,' the Lunts Stir Broadway." Life. VIII: 48. May 13, 1940.
- Jenckes, E. N. Springfield Republican. January 4, 1940.
- Kernodle, G. R. Yale Review. XXX: 423. Winter, 1941.
- Krutch, Joseph Wood. "The Riddle of the Sphinx." Nation. CL: 605-606. May 11, 1940.

Lockridge, Richard. "'There Shall Be No Night,' With the Lunts, Opens at the Alvin." New York Sun. April 30, 1940.

Mantle, Burns. "'There Shall Be No Night,' With Lunt and Fontanne, Stirs Audience." New York Daily News. April 30, 1940.

"New Plays in Manhattan." Time. XXXV: 52. May 13, 1940. Newsweek. XV: 34. May 13, 1940.

Nichols, Lewis. New York Times. November 10, 1940. XXXIII: 305-306.

Sherwood, Robert. There Shall Be No Night. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1941. New York Times. March 6, 1927.

Theatre Arts Monthly. XXIV: 747-748. October, 1940. XV: 120-122.

Watts, Richard, Jr. "The Theaters." New York Herald-Tribune. April 30, 1940. Free 30, 1940. and Reeves, John A. A History of the Theatre. New

Whipple, Leon. Survey Graphic. XXIX: 408. July, 1940.

Whipple, Sidney B. "Lunts' New War Play a Deeply Moving Drama." Religious New York World-Telegram. April 30, 1940.

Winchell, Walter. "New Sherwood Play is Eloquent, Says Winchell." Religious New York Daily Mirror. April 30, 1940.

Woollcott, Alexander. "Perfectly Gone." Stage. November, 1940. The

Young, Stark. "There Shall Be No Night." New Republic. CII: 641. May 13, 1940. 1934.

Nathan, George Jean. "After-thoughts on Playwrights." The Morning after the First Robert E. Sherwood Alfred A. Knopf, 1938.

American Review of Reviews. XCVI: 46. July, 1937.

Anderson, John. The American Theater. New York: The Dial Press,

Read, 1938. "Playwrights Afield." Theatre Arts Monthly. XVIII: 451.

Behrman, S. N. "Old Monotonous, I." New Yorker. XVI: 33-36. June 1, 1940.

Behrman, S. N. "Old Monotonous, II." New Yorker. XVI: 23-26. April 1940.

June 8, 1940.

Brown, John Mason. Broadway in Review. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1940.

Brown, John Mason. Two on the Aisle. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1938.

"Dartmouth Drama Festival." Theatre Arts Monthly. XXIII: 305-306. April, 1939.

"Debates Against Censorship." New York Times. March 6, 1927.

"Dwelling Place of Wonder." Theatre Arts Monthly. XXV: 120-122. February, 1941.

Freedley, George and Reeves, John A. A History of the Theatre. New York: Crown Publishers, 1941.

Healey, R. C. "Anderson, Saroyan, Sherwood: New Directions." Catholic World. CLII: 174-180. November, 1940.

Isaacs, Edith J. R. "Man of the Hour." Theatre Arts Monthly. XXIII: 31-40. January, 1939.

Moses, Montrose J. and Brown, John Mason, editors. The American Theatre as Seen by its Critics. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1934.

Nathan, George Jean. "After-thoughts on Playwrights." The Morning after the First Night. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1938.

New York Times. December 10, 1928.

New York Times. December 6, 1931.

Reed, E. "Playwrights Afield." Theatre Arts Monthly. XVIII: 451. June, 1934.

"Renaissance in Hollywood." American Mercury. XVI: 431-437. April 29, 1929.

Review of Reviews. XCVI: 46. July, 1937.

Sherwood, Robert. Abe Lincoln in Illinois. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1940.

[Sherwood, Robert. Acropolis.]

Sherwood, Robert. Idiot's Delight. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936.

[Sherwood, Robert. The Love Nest]

Sherwood, Robert. The Petrified Forest. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1935.

Sherwood, Robert. "Plan for Union." Life. IX: 28. October 7, 1940.

Sherwood, Robert. The Queen's Husband. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932.

Sherwood, Robert. Reunion in Vienna. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932.

Sherwood, Robert. The Road to Rome. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1927.

Sherwood, Robert. "Rush all Possible Aid to Britain." Readers Digest. XXXVII: 12-17. September, 1940.

Sherwood, Robert. There Shall Be No Night. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1941.

Sherwood, Robert. This Is New York. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1930.

Sherwood, Robert. Waterloo Bridge. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1930.

"To Whom it May Concern." Good Housekeeping. CVIII: 17. February, 1939.

Allen Ludden, of Corpus Christi, Texas, was born October 5, 1917, at Mineral Point, Wisconsin. He attended the public schools of El-

"Vanishing American Playwright." Saturday Review of Literature. XXIII: 11. February 1, 1941.

Woolf, S. J. "Playwright Enlists in the War of Ideas." New York Times. July 7, 1940.

Having done under-graduate work at Corpus Christi Junior College during one semester in 1935, at Sul Ross State Teachers College, Alpine, Texas, during the years 1936-1938, Ludden came to The University of Texas in 1938 and received his Bachelor of Arts degree in English in 1940, with Phi Beta Kappa honors.

During the years from 1939 to 1941 he was Assistant in the Department of Drama at The University of Texas. During the summer of 1940 he worked with the Princeton Summer Theater Season, Princeton, New Jersey, as stage manager.

The vita has been removed from the digitized version of this document.

Typed by Coeta Terrel