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*Robert E. Sherwood* by Baird R. Shuman (review)

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that there is nothing left elsewhere? Emmett Parker's announced book on Camus as a journalist may contribute greatly to our understanding of Camus' intellectual career.

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ROBERT E. SHERWOOD, by Baird R. Shuman, Twayne Publishers, Inc., New York, 1964, 160 pp. Price \$3.50.

Mr. Shuman's study of the plays of Robert Emmet Sherwood is a very useful handbook which analyzes in some detail his successful major plays as well as his failures. It contains a bibliography of his plays, miscellaneous works, and his many articles in periodicals. There is also an index and a critical bibliography of the secondary source material including some unpublished doctoral dissertations that have direct bearing on Sherwood's development as a dramatist of ideas.

There is very little mention of some important aspects of his career as a writer and journalist. Only passing mention is made of the fact that he was one of the first really perceptive American motion picture critics and was the author of many screen plays; there is nothing of his friendships and professional associations in the literary and theater world; little is written of his career in Washington during the war when he lived at the White House and wrote some of President Roosevelt's "fireside chats." All of this will be dealt with, no doubt, by John Mason Brown in his long awaited biography of Sherwood.

What Shuman does with some thoroughness is to examine Sherwood's development as a dramatist from the tremendous success of his first professionally produced play, through the next plays which were consistently failures, through the unprecedented success of his next five plays and to the important failures of his last two productions. This means that he traces, as other critics have done, the theme of pacifism and a protagonist's relation to the meaningless violence of war which occurs directly or indirectly in all of his dramatic work.

In fact, Mr. Shuman's first chapter on the plays is called "Alpha and Omega" and compares Sherwood's first success *The Road to Rome* with his last, posthumously produced failure, *Small War on Murray Hill*. Not only the theme but also the plot of these two plays is identical: both are historical plays in which a charming and clever woman engages in a flirtation with an invading general in order to persuade him to re-evaluate his plan for the conquest of her country.

Subsequently, Shuman treats the intervening plays in three chapters beginning with what he calls "Sherwood's universal microcosm." In these plays Shuman feels that the author was deliberately creating little worlds in which he could reveal "representative social types." This is certainly true of a play like *The Petrified Forest* wherein Sherwood examined some of the wanderers of T. S. Eliot's wasteland; the protagonist even says he shares Eliot's fear of what modern science has made of the modern world.

However, *Idiot's Delight*, which is included in this chapter, might more logically have been included in the next chapter, "Of Men and their Wars." For in this play in 1936 Sherwood predicted with frightening accuracy the holocaust that was to begin in 1939. It is true he uses a resort hotel near the borders of France, Italy, and Switzerland where many refugees are gathered, but he is primarily interested in the effect of the coming war on these refugees.

In particular, the problem facing many of the characters considered in this chapter is that of the one-time pacifist who realizes that he must forego non-

violence for what Mr. Shuman calls "conditional pacifism." This is certainly the problem confronting Lincoln in what will probably be the most durable of these plays, *Abraham Lincoln in Illinois* (1938). Sherwood's Lincoln is a lonely, peace-loving man who gradually realizes that it is his tragic destiny to lead his country into the worst of all wars, a civil war. Similarly, Dr. Valkonen in *There Shall Be No Night* (1940) realizes that peace and freedom are two very different things. Dr. Valkonen (and Sherwood) are fond of quoting Jung: "There is no coming to consciousness without pain"; and in this he finds a justification for putting his scientific skill at the service of his country in a field hospital.

Some of Mr. Shuman's most interesting pages are those dealing with the last of these liberal-pacifist-in-wartime protagonists, Morey Vinion, in Sherwood's unsuccessful play *The Rugged Path* (1945). This play reflects some of the doubts which must have assailed Sherwood as he remembered his night-long conferences with Roosevelt, Hopkins, and others of the nation's leaders. Mr. Shuman thinks that by this time Sherwood had come to doubt that what he had been writing was true and representative, just as had his journalist-protagonist, Morey Vinion.

. . . by this time, fear of truth lurked in Sherwood's fine mind. His essential pacifism had been killed by the international events which had precipitated the war, and he had found no convincing substitute for an outmoded pacifism. (p. 106)

And this is compounded by Sherwood's doubts that the statesmen of our time would have the courage and the wisdom to be as great in peace as they had been at war. Whether the confusion and doubt in the mind of the author are the reasons that the play failed or not, they are probably the reasons that Sherwood, in spite of spending more time with its composition than with any previous play, simply had not produced the clear-cut and lucid eloquence of the four successes that had preceded this play.

It is easy to understand why Mr. Shuman ranks Sherwood well below O'Neill. It is harder to understand why he ranks him below William Inge, Tennessee Williams, and Arthur Miller. Sherwood should not really be compared to any of these dramatists save perhaps Miller. He is a playwright of ideas and when working within the framework of the comedy of ideas holds a unique place in the American theater.

Sherwood once confessed that he always started with a very serious idea but ended up with mere entertainment—"hokum of the highest type" Mr. Shuman calls it. But Sherwood is more than this. He frequently did illuminate our minds with hilarious illustrations of our follies. And when he wished to be eloquent he produced some of the best writing in our theater. He was at times the journalist but at other times he transcended this and became something rare in the theater, a first rate poet.

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*THE ART OF THE PUPPET*, by Bil Baird, The Macmillan Company, New York, 1965, 251 pp. Price, \$19.95.

As its price suggests, this book was designed to impress. Everything about it speaks quality and the loving care with which it was put together. If any publication could stimulate American interest in—and support for—puppetry, surely this is it.