Scope for drama

RADIO
JEREMY RUNDALL

THERE HAS BEEN a good deal of speculation recently in the serious-minded press—including The Listener—about the survival or otherwise of the single television play. The tone has generally been rather pessimistic, having in view on the one hand a paucity of new talent and on the other the powerful competition from dramatic series, "Softly, Softly" being the one most often quoted.

Radio seems to be in no such danger. Radio drama is cheaper and easier to produce than TV. The greater number of broadcasting hours and the different system of time-slotting; four channels instead of two, and last, and most important, the stringent disciplines imposed by lack of visual aids, all add up to a flourishing single-play atmosphere.

On the evidence, radio (because it can afford financially to be more experimental) offers greater scope for new writers at every level, and it is a matter of record that such playwrights as Harold Pinter, James Saunders and the late Giles Cooper have done much of their best work for sound.

Most weeks see the emergence of at least one new writer—usually on "Afternoon Theatre," "Saturday-Night Theatre" or "Midweek Theatre," and there are plentiful revivals of the classics—witness an excellent production of "The Seagull" recently, and the magnificent "King Lear" several months ago.

Figures are revealing. The BBC Handbook for 1968 shows that in the previous year BBC 1 and 2 combined, broadcast 647 hours of drama as opposed to radio's 1,290 hours. Admittedly this takes into account series and serials; but a quick check on the three latest issues of Radio Times shows eleven "single" plays on the two TV channels as opposed to twenty-five on radio—most of the latter, I am glad to see, on Radio 4.

I recently went as a guest to a seminar held by the BBC for new playwrights who had either had one or two works already produced on sound, or had had one accepted. These seminars, held at fairly regular intervals, are supervised by the Head of Radio Drama, Martin Esslin, and conducted with great efficiency and thoroughness by various resident or invited experts.

Theory and practice are fully discussed, and constructive advice given to writers. Such a scheme, well carried out, can only be for the best; and while I hope that the single TV play will survive, I am quite certain that the single radio play will.

Family entertainment

ENVIRONMENT □ NICHOLAS TAYLOR

WHILE Greater London counts the cost of individual snippets of culture, Billingham Urban District Council (pop.: 35,000) is building it comprehensively. When the theatre opens tomorrow with "Volpone," Billingham Forum will be the most convincing exposition of "one culture" anywhere in the country.

Here under one roof is an international standard ice rink convertible into a 2,500-seat concert hall, a 675-seat theatre convertible into a cinema, two swimming pools, restaurant and café, three squash courts, a club room, three sports halls, an indoor bowling hall (with green baize instead of green grass)—and, of course, a creche.

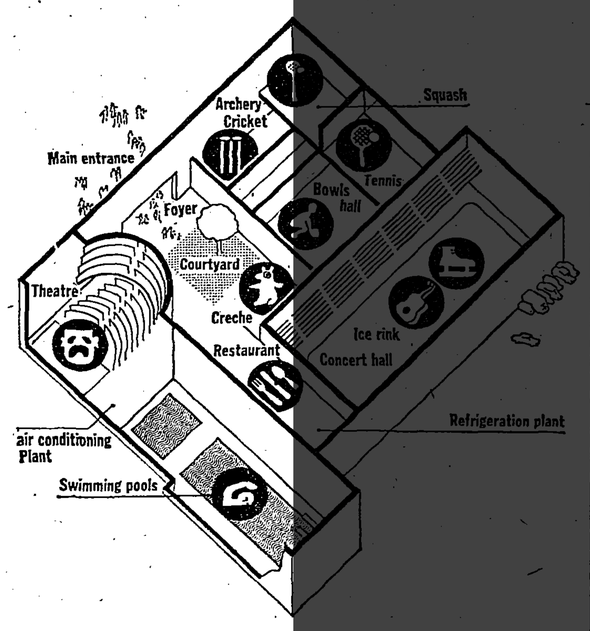
It is an unpuritaincal place of multiple enjoyment; Forum's theatre director has the appropriate name of George Roman (although the accent is on the second syllable).

The pivotal point of the whole building is the creche. It lies directly opposite the entrance, immediately next to the changing rooms and easily visible across the glass-walled inner court from the spacious ground and first-floor foyers. Family entertainment has a bad name among tastemakers, because it suggests Rix-sodden coach parties and Butlin-blazered bingo addicts, but the generous leisure hours of ICI-ville are frequently spent in a genuinely family way.

So when the smallest children have been left among the luxuriant toys of the creche, the rest of the family can disperse to their multifarious activities or hang together in the foyers. In the free-flowing circulation spaces every major function makes itself visibly felt as part of the total equipment of recreation.

Given the right social mix, the architecture of leisure can be taken as part of relaxation itself. As purveyed by A. J. Ward of the local Middlesbrough firm of Elder, Lester and Partners, it is an acceptably eclectic parade of the fashionable motifs of the last ten years, which one can identify from the foyers as a kind of architectural loco spotter.

The most ambitious space is the ice rink with its half-acre of ceiling on slim steel cables and its Lowry-like throng of skaters on white ice. The curved plum brick wall of the back of the theatre auditorium cuts a firm outline in the foyer, and the scale of the wood-slatted interior is good, with (typically) "family boxes" instead of continuous galleries as in an eighteenth century Italian theatre.



The Forum is only part of a remarkably lively town's centre which has been missed out by the architectural glossies because it is not one of the officially "planned" new towns. ICI came in 1923 and built acceptable neo-Georgian cottages; but their own later buildings are so monstrously timid, compared with those of almost any major American corporation, that it is just as well that the firm gave up the idea of creating a "company town" like the Rowntree's New Earswick or Dorman Long's Dormanstown. ICI pay 70 per cent. of Billingham's rate and a penny rate yields £12,000. This certainly results in lavish equipment compared with the planned new town: for example the coal-fired district heating system which proudly exhibits its boiler house at the entrance to the town.

But the important aspect of the cruciform shopping centre of which the Forum closes the eastern arm, is that it works: it is frequently thronged and attracts people from miles around. Apart from two sad shopping parades of the early Fifties, the UDC has been its own developer with the Town Clerk, Mr Fred Dawson, as a public enterprise Jack Cotton or, to do him justice, Max Rayne.

He has throughout combined the flair of the impresario with the common sense of the store keeper. The new two-level Western Precinct, unlike almost any other such design, has quickly let its shops and established a thriving street life, not only because the pedestrians are brought in front outside from the upper level and have to descend gradually, but also because of such subtle touches as the restriction of all the betting shops to the upper level, so as to give it an indispensable hum of activity.

In this Western Precinct, Elder Lester and Partners once again exploit the architecture of cliché (which is, after all, what John Nash did): ridge-backed concrete from Paul Rudolph's Yale School of Architecture, an upswept concrete entrance canopy imported from Maekawa's Japan, and incurving entrances to the Astronaut Pub which are suspiciously similar to those in a church by Denys Hinton at Rugby.

Scattered at random are other attractions of the socialist good life: a circular night club, a substantial hotel, a hostel for the Forum's sportsmen and actors and—perhaps unfortunately—a separate little Arts Centre tacked on to the council offices.

That all these goodies have been dashed off in the last two years is partly the result of intelligent planning, but it is also not unconnected with the introduction on March 31 of the new Tees-side County Borough into which Billingham will be swallowed.

Waiting for Charlie

FILMS □ DEREK PROUSE

MORE THAN ever nowadays, when moods and modes change with such rapidity, a film belongs to its time. If the film-maker is a genuine creator, he is almost certain to bring to his work, even unwittingly, an ineffably contemporary feeling. Of course one can, and does re-see certain films with undiminishing pleasure; but a year's delay waiting in the wings is a cruel fate to inflict on any bright, new work. It is equally harsh on the director who, having finally delivered his film after the months of conception, shooting and editing, now feels edgy and vulnerable as he awaits the public reaction to his endeavours.

In some cases, no doubt, the distributors may find themselves with what the French call "a turnip" on their hands: the kind the public in their millions can generally be relied on to ignore instinctively. But this is far from always the case, and great was my surprise to find that Albert Finney's "Charlie Bubbles"—a film, which, for months, has been quietly building up a Wardour Street reputation as "difficult" and "hard to release"—is, in fact, vastly entertaining: a film of considerable stature and the product of a rare, virile integrity. It is a dazzling achievement for the actor, who not only plays the leading part but makes a most accomplished debut as a director.

At long last, doubtless due to Mr Finney's recent Broadway success in "A Day in the Death of Joe Egg," the film has been shown in New York to the acclaim of both critics and public—and presumably to the astonishment of the exhibitors and distributors and more bouts of insomnia among the ranks of the circuit bookers. Perhaps, now, New York will prove to be the back door to London for this British, strongly contemporary film.

Lindsay Anderson's "The White Bus" is another example. Originally planned as part of a trilogy, it is a mordant, often hilarious film that most imaginatively mocks provincial officialdom. The trilogy was completed last August and if, as is possible, Mr Anderson's episode refuses to nestle down docilely with its fellow-films by Tony Richardson and Peter Brook, why in heaven's name can it not be booked into a double bill? Forty-five minutes is a convenient running time and the film could hardly fail to delight audiences numbed by a steady diet of American rubbish in the guise of "supporting programme."

It is hard to pin down where precisely the trouble lies, but I strongly suspect that the major stumbling-blocks are the bookers (not the American financing companies) controlling our split-monopoly system of releases. These nebulous figures behind the scenes, who currently govern the all-important general release deals, without which a film can be automatically dismissed as a flop, are wary of anything that evades the "safe" categories; the current passport to a circuit release seems to be American formula films or ludicrous violence and an obligatory trip to the abortionist. "Charlie Bubbles" and "The White Bus" are both, in their different ways, sane, healthy and hard-headed looks at our modern scene. The crime they are guilty of is that of rejecting all glib associations with any third-rate fashionable myths.

The Scalphunters (London Pavilion; director Sydney Pollack; A.) is a Western with a contemporary slant. The central relationship is between an eloquent Negro runaway slave (Ossie Davis) and an illiterate fur-trapper (Burt Lancaster). By the time they have fought their way to mutual appreciation their faces are (symbolically?) the same colour, being both caked with dried mud. Meanwhile there have been some hair-raising skirmishes with white scalp-hunters shot in a quite exceptionally beautiful landscape and some good performances—particularly by Shelley Winters in fine form as the leading scalphunter's blowsy doxy.

An Idiot in Paris (Cinephone, Oxford St., director Serge Korber. X.) depicts an idyll between a country half-wit and a Parisian tart who finds that a decent discourse about beet-roots and general farm produce is what is lacking in her life. If you can accept this basic situation then you may be able to take the film's relentless determination to be winsome, tender, funny and wise at all costs.

Correction

In publishing last week in the Arts section extracts from, and paraphrases of, a tape-recording of a talk I gave at the Sunday Times Universities Drama Festival, you made me say, "To me the representative attitude is 'I am a human nothing'." What I said was (in reference to the work of Samuel Beckett) that the representative attitude was: "I am assuming nothing."

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JULIAN SYMONS

CONFRONTED by a novel about the struggle for power inside the trade union movement, such as Dudley Barker's **The Ladder**, I snap at once to attention. Few British novelists write about the pattern of living today as it concerns most people. Just as Dickens shied away from actually describing men at work (see Orwell's essay), so too many contemporary novelists lack the inclination or the knowledge to deal with trade unions, business mergers, the growth of bureaucracy.

A cheer for Mr Barker, then, who tackles the narrowly opportunistic power game of trade union politics head on. Charles Lyell is secretary of NUELAW, a small union of skilled electrical workers occupying a powerful position on the commanding heights of the economy. Bring out the NUELAW men, and power stations, airports and the biggest factories would close down. Lyell, a lightweight in the union hierarchy, uses his union power to work for a vacant seat on the TUC General Council.

The subject is right at the heart of current British life, and a lot of the detail is convincing and absorbingly interesting. The lobbying for support on Lyell's side and against him, his careful nursing of a promising airport strike, the adroit double-talk carried on by management and unions when they get round a table, the whiff of reality coming through the ozone at the TUC Brighton conference, these are excellently managed.

Unfortunately Mr Barker hasn't felt able to accept the fact that modern trade unionists, Frank Cousins and Clive Jenkins excepted, are important as public faces but not interesting as private characters. Reluctant to present them in full mediocrity he has cluttered up the narrative line with a most improbable sub-plot about a witches' coven in Sussex connected with Lyell's wife.

It was a sad mistake to make Lyell's fate dependent upon this rather than upon his political machinations, but pleasure in seeing an important subject so knowledgeably handled comes through to make this an unusually interesting novel.

BETTINA BALSER, the heroine in **Diary of a Mad Housewife**, writes away in the small hours to relieve the strain of life in a New York apartment, compounded by fears of being raped in Central Park, mugged in the subway, stranded between floors in an elevator, etcetera. Her more humdrum troubles are genteel baby-sitters, thieving laundresses, a doctor who refuses to visit her sick child, and her nervously with-it husband Jonathan who has 23 suits, seven

Dudley Barker

sports jackets, 11 pairs of pyjamas, and keeps urging her to see a psychiatrist.

Enough to drive anybody round the bend, you may think, and Sue Kaufman's hectic book, overcrowded with detail but often very funny, soon brings you round to the idea that Bettina is distinctly more sane than her corporation lawyer husband. No wonder that in desperate refuge from his determination to be in all the right places at all the right times she starts an affair with an off-Broadway playwright who tells her, "Baby, you're a terrific piece of ass," instead of saying like her husband: "How about a little ole roll in the hay?" The whole thing is carried through with great verve, even though there is something slightly magazinish in the brave little woman coping with a sea of sophisticated troubles.

THREE OF the four stories in H. E. Bates's new collection are written in the coolly detached manner of his earlier work, while the fourth is Larkinesque comedy. The most effective of them is "The Simple Life," about a woman driven almost mad by her husband's insistence on week-ending in a marshland cottage.

She finds solace in the arrival of a teenage boy who comes to help out around the house. The affair (almost too strong a word) is depicted with characteristic skill in understatement. The woman makes advances, the boy timidly responds but eventually retreats, and in the end she is left alone with a frustration deeper than anything she felt before his arrival. The effect is precisely calculated, delicately achieved.

The other serious stories are less successful, but I liked "The Chords of Youth," the comedy in which Aunt Leonora discovers from a local newspaper photograph that Otto, an old German admirer, is staying in her small town. Can it really be her Otto, when his name is Untermeyer instead of Heimberger? Regardless of this she invites him, with the chairman of the local Urban District Council, to a super-English lunch. The air is thick with mistakes and mispronunciations, Otto is delighted, and the whole thing is as enjoyable as a Brian Rix farce.

Russell Braddon's **When The Enemy is Tired** is about the use of ultra-sophisticated techniques for breaking down emotional resistance. The time is the 1970s, the Chinese are preparing for an advance on Australia by way of Papua and New Guinea, and thanks to an error in Computer Command Canberra, Colonel Russell has been captured in Thailand. His interrogator makes Russell write his life story, partly to discover weaknesses in his personality and partly so that bits of it can be lifted, and copied in letters designed to show that he is a defector.

The eventual aim of the Chinese is to make Russell broadcast for them, and they force him to watch the execution of the seven men captured with him. At least, that is apparently what happens, but the plot springs as many surprises as a jumping cracker. I found the twists and turns absorbing, the Australian background of Russell's life story much less so.

Flannery O'Connor, who died in 1964, was the finest writer to come from the American South since Carson McCullers. **Wise Blood**, her first novel now reissued, is extraordinary not only because of her fine ear for dialogue and the imaginative power with which Georgia is described, but the controlled accuracy of her style. Too many Southern novelists are fanciful embroiderers. Flannery O'Connor saw nature tragic but she wrote it plain.

History in fiction

THE TOWER OF BABEL by Morris West/Heinemann 30s

DAVID HOLDEN

MORRIS WEST is the sort of writer that many a humble foreign correspondent like me would secretly like to be. Best-selling novels clatter from his typewriter in lucrative succession—and wouldn't we all like that? Literary respectability is conferred upon him by Sunday critics—and wouldn't that be agreeable, too?

And best, or worst, of all, he works this profitable magic with the foreign correspondent's own materials—the exotic places, the significant incidents and the world-shattering crises that in our hands serve merely to wrap up tomorrow's fish and chips are converted in his to a solid and instantly recognisable framework of fact within which to weave his inventions.

Last time it was Vietnam, with "The Ambassador." This time, it is the Middle East, with tension mounting—as we correspondents are unhappily apt to say—in the year or two directly preceding last June's war. Much of the surface incident is so authentic that I suspect Mr West of subscribing to a Middle East press cuttings agency, or at least of writing with Keeting's Archives ever open at his elbow.

There is the collapse of a famous Lebanese bank, with Saudis and Kuwaitis withdrawing their money for political reasons. There is the Israeli reprisal attack on an unnamed village on the Jordan border, there are Syrian Migs shot down over the Sea of Galilee, and an explosion at a Syrian-Jordan border post. President Nasser and King Hussein are heard off-stage, and the Israeli Prime Minister appears, unnamed, on-stage in a description I might have almost have coined myself for Mr Eshkol.

It is all immensely believable because it is all based so obviously on fact, and it is nice to be able to report that Mr West gets very few of his facts wrong. And yet—I hope it is not just envy that makes me say it—at the end of it all I can't help feeling I have read a scenario without the script. The fictional characters never quite come to life, and their motives and relationships are tainted throughout with an obstinate implausibility that is not at all removed by Mr West's habit of involving them, from time to time, in jejeune philosophical exchanges on little matters like Life and Death.

Mind you, it will make a lovely film, and offers a good and sometimes instructive read, and I still wish I could do it half as well myself. But essentially it remains tea bag fiction, with an instant flavour of reality but little after-taste of truth.

The Indian visitor

INSPECTOR GHOTE HUNTS THE PEACOCK by H R F Keating Collins 18s

EDMUND CRISPIN

TO the little Inspector from the Bombay CID, Britain seems the bravest of brave new worlds. What order, efficiency, drive, courtesy, calmness! True, after a few days' stay this impression suffers certain modifications. The Smith brothers, living in the Portobello Road district, are by no means the most agreeable type of Englishmen. Nor is the cowardly Robin, peddling amphetamines to teenagers in his garish coffee bar. Nor, even, is absolutely every London policeman. In the end, Ghote escapes with his Anglophilia undamaged. But only just.

Meanwhile, there has been this tiresome business of his wife's cousin's niece, a mini-skirted Indian seventeen-year-old whose disappearance, possibly into the unscrupulous arms of pop singer Johnny Bull, Ghote finds himself unwillingly investigating in the intervals of an international police conference on drugs. All the indications of what really happened to her are there, for him and for us to see. They are so cunningly placed, however, that Ghote's delay in reaching the right solution seems the most natural thing in the world.

So does much else in the story. Mr Keating uses his realism with great skill, not letting it either swamp the plot or be stifled under it. His achievement has been not just to create a specially likeable detective, but to avoid letting the likeability get out of hand, with inevitably disastrous effects on the narrative. He deserves his success.

Nightclimber by Jon Manchip White (Chatto 25s). A noted art critic has a compulsion—punished by nightmares—for climbing the outsides of buildings, a job he is very good at. His athleticism leads to his being employed by arch-millionaire Merganser, at a fee impossible to ignore, for a climb in a Grecian cave. That Merganser is unscrupulous goes without saying; that he will become the Thoth-figure of the nightmares (gnawed human bones on the white-tiled floor of the top executive's washroom) can also be anticipated, but is nevertheless wonderfully effective when it actually happens. The love interest fails to convince (conceivably because the opera-singer who supplies it is under heavy sedation almost all the time), and a certain amount of foreign-language-snobbery obtrudes. But the numerous action sequences are enthralling.

The Killing Season by John Redgate (Cape 21s). Plenty of action in this one, too, culminating in a fierce gun-fight on the Newcastle waterfront. Previously we have been in Berlin and in the States, watching how Guy Ramsey, who has murdered friends for sudden love of the USSR, is at first reluctantly, then relentlessly, hunted down by a former associate, the associate's revenge being complicated by the fact that for excellent reasons the CIA wants to keep Ramsey alive. Though cinematic in treatment and stylistically a shade monotonous, this is a distinguished thriller.

The Tower by P. M. Hubbard (Bles 18s). Another excursion into Blackwood-Machen country (something nasty not just in the woodshed, but in an entire English village) by the most effective living upholder of the tradition; one rather wishes, in fact, that Mr Hubbard would drop the crime element in his books and devote himself entirely to ancient sorceries. Here he nearly does. That spectral Vicar, that Earth-Mother Squiress, that nameless creature sobbing in the dark, even the giggling girls rehearsing for the torchlight procession and the pagan bonfire—these are all self-sustaining, needing no whodunitry to make them live. Recommended to connoisseurs of strangeness.

The Stylist by Guy Cullingford (Bles 21s). Clever variations on a familiar theme, the rich middle-aged woman bedevilled by an unprincipled young hairdresser. The admirable dove-tailing of characters and motives is underpinned by a clear narrative gift, technically like Trollope.

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