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## BOOKS

# THREE PLAYS

**CLUTTERBUCK:** Three Acts. By Benn Levy. William Heinemann Ltd.

**THE QUEST:** A play for Mime and Verse. By Charles Brasch. This copy from Caxton Press.

**AN INSPECTOR CALLS:** Three Acts. By J. B. Priestley. William Heinemann Ltd.

(Reviewed by Isobel Andrews)

**P**LAYS, in the main, should be seen and not read. There are, of course, exceptions. Shaw, let's confess it, can sometimes be boring over the footlights, but can prove a delight when read quietly by the fire. There are others—the Elizabethans come easily to mind—who should be read and re-read if the full flavour of the lines is to be appreciated. But in general, and especially with modern plays, the dramatist writes with one ear cocked for that most unpredictable of emotions, audience reaction, and the degree of this emotion he achieves is the yardstick measuring his success. Without the barrier of the proscenium arch the reader is at a disadvantage. The protagonists become at once more intimate and less real. The reader has to project sufficient of his own personality into the play in order to make the characters live. By so doing he can colour with prejudice a figure which under other circumstances might take on another form.

WITH all this in mind it is still difficult to find much enthusiasm for *Clutterbuck* by Benn Levy. This play depicts a group of people the like of which has been portrayed *ad nauseum* on the Broadway and London stage in the late 'twenties and early 'thirties. There are three women, all beautiful, two men, and the shadowy but apparently effective *Clutterbuck*. There are a number of references to beds not wholly matrimonial and the word *tomcat* is used with what seemed fair justification. One of the men is, save the mark, a highbrow novelist, and to show us just how high his brow is, he refers to Cicero, telling us that Cicero never did have an Aunt called Minnie, and he also mentions Trilby to the complete mystification of the other man on the stage at the time.

Benn Levy's knowledge of the theatre is not denied and his situations, although contrived, are contrived in a workmanlike manner, but the long arm of coincidence is stretched almost to dislocation point and the whole is not leavened with sufficient real wit to make it truly palatable.

**THE QUEST**, by Charles Brasch, described as "an experiment in combining the drama of words and the drama of movement" is more easily acceptable because there is an idea behind it and it is written with sincerity. T. S. Eliot has left his mark in places but the play goes smoothly enough and, given the right lighting and an imaginative producer, could be effective though perhaps some of the script might be cut without doing much harm to the performance.

**J. B. PRIESTLEY** in *An Inspector Calls*, gives us a play treated in the same way as *Dangerous Corner*, with its continuous action and the gradual unravelling of plot which in the long run

involves everyone on the stage. *An Inspector Calls* has a deeper significance than its predecessor, with the Inspector symbolising conscience incarnate.

This play shows us the Birling family in the Birling dining-room celebrating the engagement of Sheila Birling to Gerald Croft. The characters are all fairly stock size. There is Arthur Birling, the tough business man whose toughness rarely manifests itself towards his family, there is his wife, unimaginative, given to good works, whose theories fail miserably when put to a test, there's Eric, the pleasant, spoilt, rich-man's-son, and Gerald Croft, the accepted young man about town. We are given time to meet them all, understand them a little and then—an Inspector calls. He is investigating the death of a girl who was once dismissed by Birling Senior because she led a strikers' demand for more wages (the scene is set in 1912). What happened to this girl from the time of her dismissal to the time of her suicide is outlined as the play unfolds and in the end it is found that each member of the Birling family, including the fiancé, has in some way contributed towards her death. This unfolding is brought about by the Inspector's ruthless cross-examination, and the final curtain is interesting.

*An Inspector Calls* was first produced in Moscow and later at the Old Vic with Ralph (now Sir Ralph) Richardson as the Inspector. The play is good Priestley, which means good theatre and good entertainment with a nice little jab at our social consciences summed up by the Inspector when he says "We don't live alone. We are members of one body. We are responsible for one another."

In this play Priestley does not say anything that is very new or very original but his message is one which can bear innumerable repeats.

## PEOPLE'S ART

**THE PASSAGE.** By Vance Palmer, and **FLESH IN ARMOUR.** By Leonard Mann. Both published by Robertson and Mullens Ltd., Melbourne.

**THE** blurb on the jacket of Vance Palmer's book describes it as "powerful" and "full of the surge of the sea and elemental passions," so that it is a relief to find it a slow-moving story of family life in a Queensland fishing village. The village itself as much as the Callaway family is the theme of the book, but its characters are faithfully drawn, and the beauty of the natural setting in which they are placed has evidently stirred the imagination of the writer.

Leonard Mann's novel traces the adventures of a typical handful of the A.I.F. in the 1914-18 war, on leave in England and in action in France. The idiom of the Australian soldier, so far as it is printable, is recapitulated, and the book might fairly be described as the biography of the Unknown Soldier rather than the separate stories of individuals. The writing is often curiously old-fashioned: "... pushing aside her blouse he had kissed her at the commencement of her breast." But it manages to tell a plain tale plainly. The women characters do come off rather badly; they are simply made conveniences, for the soldiers and for the author.

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