

PROFESSIONAL THEATRE

FAMOUS PLAYS OF TODAY, Victor Gollancz, English price 12/6.

(Reviewed by Bruce Mason)

THE publisher claims that this volume will revive a famous series, which began in 1930 with *Journey's End*, *Young Woodley* and *The Lady with a Lamp*, and three lesser plays. It is hoped that the present volume will not be inferior in quality to the first distinctive collection, and I think the hope is justified. The four plays now collected include a psychological drama, a Chekhov pastiche, a psychological thriller, and a dramatic quartet.

Each is well done within the limits of its genre. *The Deep Blue Sea*, by Terence Rattigan, shows us a mésalliance between a middle-aged society woman and a young test pilot who has taken to drink. He has never grown up since 1940, which was the best year of his life. It is a relationship at once creative and destructive, the situation which Tolstoy has explored with incomparable power in *The Kreutzer Sonata*, and which Noël Coward on his own level brings off so deftly in *Private*

Lives. To escape from the agony of this relationship, Hester Collyer twice attempts suicide, but is persuaded at the end by a wry German doctor, who has been struck off the rolls for some unnamed offence, to "live on the other side of hope." Rattigan's development from sophisticated farce to psychological drama of the calibre of *The Browning Version* and *The Deep Blue Sea* makes him something of a phenomenon in the theatre. If his plays in this vein continue to be as good as *The Deep Blue Sea*, his claim to be the most accomplished English playwright now writing can hardly be disputed.

Waters of the Moon, by N. C. Hunter, ran for over two years on the London stage. I saw this production, and like thousands of others was so dazzled by the skill of those two *grandes dames* of the theatre, Edith Evans and Sybil Thorndike, that I hardly knew what the play was about, nor cared. In the script it seems of gossamer texture, a set of contrasting characters brought together for no purpose other than to tug gently at your heart, and to point the feeble lesson that riches must be accepted as much as genteel poverty. A moment of genuine Chekhovian feeling comes at the end of the second act, after a dis-



TERENCE RATTIGAN
"Something of a phenomenon in the theatre"

astrous New Year's party, when an old woman plays Chopin and an ageing spinster stares across a life of heart-break. It will doubtless be much in demand by our amateur groups, but I warn them that it will have to be played with the utmost finesse and style for it to succeed.

Dial M for Murder is, I suppose, a superior psychological thriller. I admit

its skill, but could take only the tiniest interest in whether the evil young husband will be brought to book or not. It should, however, be a very good play for our own theatres, with its taut development, clear if somewhat crude characterisation, and easy staging. *Dragon's Mouth*, by J. B. Priestley and Jacquetta Hawkes, might be described as a prose companion to Fry's *A Sleep of Prisoners*. Like that, it is a vocal quartet, and its issues are those of life and death. Two men and two women are sitting on a yacht moored off Venezuela awaiting the news from the shore that one of them has plague and will die. One man is an aesthete, the other a captain of industry; one woman a devoted but charming sensualist, the other a slightly disgruntled social worker. While they wait for the knowledge of certain death for one of them, they discuss with eloquence, asperity, warmth and wit the relations of men and women, their lives and their place in the universe. I liked the play very much. It is full of sense and heart. Critics have lamented that Mr. Priestley is not a poet, when he has so often seemed to need more eloquence than he could give, but the richness and wit of *Dragon's Mouth* seems to me something very near to poetry. Perhaps this is the influence of his colleague, Jacquetta Hawkes, who is now his wife.

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