



UNDER MILK WOOD

With Dylan Thomas & the New York Cast

DYLAN THOMAS, acclaimed by some as the finest poet of his generation, was a master of words, both spoken and written. W. R. Rodgers, in a broadcast appreciation of Thomas shortly after his early death in 1953, said: "His one care was for words—the living, relieving, revealing word. In poetry or prose he could use words with an abandon like nobody else. He could throw them about and toss them up to the dizzy sky in a great red-roaring, blackfoaming race and rush and tumble-down of thistleblown words. Usually that is a dangerous thing, usually it lands a writer in a mess. But Dylan never missed or dropped a word, no more than he would a child." His voice has been described as a "matchless speaking instrument," so to hear him reading his own work, and in particular his final, perhaps most important, work, *Under Milk Wood*, is an experience of unusual interest and enjoyment.

The première performance of *Under Milk Wood* with Thomas, a cast of five American actors and an audience, will be heard next week (November 11) in *ZB Sunday Showcase*. It is the only recording ever made with Thomas in the cast, and it owes its existence to the chance thought someone had just before curtain time of setting up a little tape recorder that was at hand and laying a microphone on the floor at the centre of the stage. That this recording was not erased or lost or thrown away remains some kind of a miracle.

Thomas once said that in England he was an actor, although only on the Third Programme, and that what he wanted terribly was to be a real actor. But it has been said that though his voice was golden and his look cherubic, his stance bagged and he could not move on stage—his feet always seemed to precede his roly-poly body, as if a plumb dropped from his centre of gravity might strike the ground behind his heels. If he was going to be in a play he would have to write it himself, for his rolling, honeyed tongue and with a lectern as a prop.

Under Milk Wood had its beginnings when the BBC commissioned a radio

script; it took further shape when John Malcolm Brinnin invited Thomas to put on a play at the YMHA Poetry Centre in New York; it seemed for hours to be doomed after Thomas left the manuscript in a taxicab; it was prodded along as rehearsals progressed. On the afternoon before the first performance it was still not completed, and in fact Thomas beat curtain time by only a few minutes. The final scene was being typed as the audience was being seated.

Because the play was slated for production long before it was written, decisions had to be made before there was any basis on which to make them. The Centre had to know how many supporting actors would be needed, and Thomas had no idea. In the end he decided on five and it just happened that the office staff of the Centre at the time consisted of five experienced and talented actors, so the cast of *Under Milk Wood* was Thomas, Nancy Wickwire, Roy Poole, Dion Allen, Sada Thompson and Allen F. Collins.

Thomas said little to direct the actors except "love the words." Parts were divided in a very orderly fashion, the actors simply took turns. Thomas himself took the part of the narrator, who sets the scene and introduces each character, and of Reverend Eli Jenkins. It is believed by many people that this last character was the author himself. Thomas read the part with such emotion that the other actors suggested he step forward to deliver it. He did, and it was the only movement in the play.

Under Milk Wood is a narrative, not a dramatic play. It is a panorama, a series of close-ups such as a fertile, glib imagination called upon to objectify the ridiculous, might freely improvise. The piece tells of a day of spring in the small Welsh village of Llareggub, that lies beneath Milk Wood. The audience is introduced to some of the five hundred inhabitants of the town by means mainly of the narrator—to the retired sea dog, Captain Cat; to the little love-sick draper, Mr. Edwards; to the twice widowed Mrs. Ogmores Pritchard; to P.C. Atilia Rees; to Mr. and Mrs. Pugh, and

the vicar, and the schoolmistress, and the lads at the Sailors' Arms and to the children. The motley crew of various henpecked, overbearing, drunken, promiscuous townspeople are presented to the audience, and they find them funny.

Douglas Cleverdon, who produced the BBC version of the work, which was awarded the coveted Italia Prize, said: "One may admire the vigour and richness of the narrative, the brilliant verbal play, the fertility of the imagination, the easy simplicity of the poems and the songs; but the quality that, to my mind, distinguishes it above all others is the warm and noble humanity that

pervades it. To quote Dylan Thomas's own memorable phrase from the *Collected Poems*, it was written 'for the love of Man and in praise of God.'

When the performance was all over and the audience had its say is somehow the most moving scene of the play. One imagines Thomas at this point, prepared with a dozen good reasons for failure, greeting the stormy ovation. The waves of applause must follow his bows—the shy and stammered "Thank you, Thank you very much," is lost in the shouts of the audience.

Under Milk Wood was Thomas's valedictory, and he probably knew it. One has but to hear his reading of *Poem on His Birthday*, ending "And my shining men no more alone, as I sail out to die," recorded at about this time, to realise it.

Thomas was accustomed to say that he was the Swinburne of this generation. It may seem far from Swinburne's flowing melody to Thomas's involved lines, but it has been said that what he meant was that he had a similar facility. Poetry came naturally to him, and he thought in images where lesser mortals were content with phrases. Although there will be few who will agree with what he himself never doubted—that he was the peer of English poets, both contemporary and of the past—there will be many who will place him among the great.

DYLAN THOMAS—"His voice was golden but his stance bagged." AT TOP OF PAGE: The New York cast of "Milk Wood"—from left, Dion Allen, Nancy Wickwire, Ray Poole, Dylan Thomas, Sada Thompson, Allen Collins.

