

The author concludes that since private industry has failed to reabsorb this uprooted citizenry, federal agencies should undertake the job, substituting national-scale planning for the haphazard, clumsy efforts of state and local agencies. And greater effort should be made to provide the wanderers with some means of rehabilitation now denied them in most states because of stringent residential qualifications.

Mr. Anderson's copious data testifies to the fact that the profit motive can continue to operate only at a steadily increasing cost in terms of community welfare and stability. The author, however, does not mention that only socialism—the creation of an economy based on production for the common use and enjoyment of all instead of for the privileged few—can really solve the social problem which his useful book attempts to diagnose.

ED FALKOWSKI.

Sights & Sounds

"Big White Fog"

Ralph Ellison reviews an outstanding play of Negro Playwrights.

TO REVIEW the recently organized Negro Playwrights Company's production of Theodore Ward's *Big White Fog* is to do more than say a few words about a vital and entertaining play. For with this presentation a fresh source of incalculable possibilities has begun to pour its strength into the stream of the American theater.

The Playwrights Company was formed to probe that neglected area of American life occupied by Negroes. Negro actors have been appearing upon the American stage for many years, but usually in stereotyped roles which ignore Negro problems and Negro reality. As a rule they are cast in parts which burlesque the Negro people and present them either as clowns, brutes, or blundering children. Even the range of emotions allowed Negro actors is strictly limited; it was long a Broadway tradition that the Negro should never be shown as capable of the universal emotion of love. On the other hand, Negro playwrights, who might have written plays in which the Negro could have appeared in a more dignified light, have been rigidly denied an opportunity to secure that working knowledge of their craft, which until recently was only to be acquired through contact with the commercial stage. Their plays were also ignored by producers and most critics have shown no concern with the role which Negro writing should play in American culture.

Clearly, the creation of a Negro theater was indispensable for the solution of the problem of Negroes and the stage. This has long been recognized by Negro intellectuals; now at last, with the help of men like Richard

Wright and Paul Robeson, a group of young playwrights has launched in Harlem the most advanced attempt yet made to establish a Negro theater. *Big White Fog* testifies to the soundness of their efforts and makes a fine start in the direction in which such a theater will have to go. Its theme is the Negro people's striving for a world in which they can exist as a nation, with the full freedom which this concept implies. It is also a rejection of any utopian attempts to fulfill these strivings. Victor Mason, the play's chief protagonist, has lived through the agony of the war. By 1922 he is disgusted with the condition of Negroes in the United States and, unable to see a solution, becomes an ardent follower of Marcus Garvey and his dream of an African empire. An idealist, he has given up the struggle for freedom in this country to the extent that he is willing to endanger the welfare of his family by investing his life savings in Garvey's fleet of obsolete ships. He sees this enterprise fail; Garvey is arrested for fraud and deported. Mason's wife turns against him because he persists in following his idealistic path in face of the bitter economic pressure of 1929. In 1933, after watching the steady disintegration of his family, Mason is wounded by policemen while resisting an eviction and he dies, seeing life as "just a big white fog."

In his study of Victor Mason, Theodore Ward reveals greater social insight than has been shown by any previous Negro dramatist. Against the main action of Victor's story, Ward has counterposed the problems of members of Victor's family: that of his son, whose scholastic career is blighted because of his color; that of his daughter, who leaves school and slips into prostitution; of his brother, who takes to night-life and alcoholism because he cannot come to grips with his environment; and that of his middle-class brother-in-law who seeks to grow rich off the brutal exploitation of his people. Through these counter motifs, Ward attempts to develop his theme in a larger perspective than that offered by the story of a single individual. The decade encompassed by the action, the most trying in Negro experience since slavery, was a time when, out of the lynching and rioting which preceded and ended the war, the Negro people were seeking to devise new means of struggle. Out of this period came the growth of the Negro reform movements, of which the Garvey movement was the most important. It was during this period too that more advanced groups among the Negro people began to turn toward Communism. Despite the impracticality of the Garvey movement, most of the people attracted to it were sincere and regarded it as an answer to their most profound yearnings; some held to the plan even after Garvey had been shipped to Jamaica.

Victor Mason is one of these. Not even the steady decline of his family can make him see the error of his position. And symbolically, when 1933 brings him a notice of eviction, the sole garment he possesses to wear to court is the jacket of his old Garvey uniform; ironically, the jacket causes the judge to call him

a trouble maker and order him out of his home.

Yet, while Victor follows Garvey in pursuing the dead-end utopia of Africa, his son, Lester, finds his way to Communism and tries to teach him the techniques of realistic political struggle. Lester is unsuccessful until the eviction order angers Victor and he decides to resist with the aid of Lester's friends in the relief fight. When Victor resists, he is killed; he dies failing to see the unity of black and white forces upon which his first realistic action was based.

In its three-act attempt to probe the most vital problems of Negro experience, *Big White Fog* is like no other Negro play. The author takes a movement which has been passed off as a ludicrous effort by Negroes to ape British royalty and reveals in it that dignity of human groping which is characteristic of all oppressed peoples.

Big White Fog is not without its weaknesses. The play is too diffuse; Ward has sought to illustrate his theme with that variety of incidents which is better suited to the novel. The play form does not allow for the successful development of these many aspects of his problem and hence Ward sometimes throws his dramatic machine out of gear. Thus the play moves slowly and some aspects of the problem are left unresolved.

To some, the characterization of Victor will seem off key. Which is not to deny the existence of this type of Negro; certainly Negro people exhibit the emotion which fired Victor's idealism every day. But the impact of American life upon Negroes is so immediate and sustained that their expressed feelings are cloaked in quite graphic and realistic imagery—even their idealism. This imagery is missing from Victor's passionate and moving speeches, as it is missing from Ward's dialogue in general, and in Victor it comes across as a flaw of characterization. Its inclusion would have given *Big White Fog* a poetic shimmer similar to that of the best work of Odets.

Finally, Ward has left the solution of his play undramatized. While Victor Mason's sense of life is drawn in terms of his basic emotional drive—a confused Negro nationalism—the solution of his problem is presented in the character of his son, Lester, who has been formed by a different set of circumstances. Yet while we see Victor's struggle, Lester's transformation comes in the form of abstract speeches. In his failure to have Lester develop on stage, Ward misses one of his most easily accessible dramatic opportunities: that of contrasting the father with the son, the illusory with the realistic, the utopian with the scientific. Without this contrast, Ward runs the risk of having his theme, here projected mainly through Victor, seem a bit dated: the Negro people discarded long ago the utopianism of the Garvey movement. And when Victor's weaknesses are compared with Lester's strength and decision, it becomes plain that Lester's story, of how he evolved, is that which should have been in

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the foreground of the play. Nor is this to say that Victor's story is without vitality; it has vitality because the conditions which produced his tragedy still prevail (if this were not true *Big White Fog* would not possess its tremendous power). It is to say, however, that the Negro people's consciousness of these conditions has increased; increased to the point that they have produced a writer who can objectify those elements once shrouded in a big white fog.

What is valid about this play among other things is its sincere emotion; it offers an evening of theater wherein satisfaction comes not only from viewing a gripping drama, but from the contemplation of what the very existence of this theater means to American cultural history as well. *Big White Fog* cannot be accepted without accepting the things for which it stands, or the people from which it comes. Shadowing the actors upon the stage of the old theater named after Lincoln are the forces of American history, going resolutely through their paces. And if the play has certain flaws, these are forgotten during those gripping moments which bring that hush over the audience, followed by enthusiastic applause.

NEW TRADITION

With this fine start we can be sure that the Negro Playwrights Company will give us even more exciting plays in the future. For just as *Big White Fog* triumphs despite its flaws, the Playwrights have found the historically necessary means of overcoming their long exclusion from Broadway. Historical conditions have produced a group of white dramatists and theater technicians who, feeling no allegiance to the rulers of the commercial theater, and seeing themselves as stewards of culture dedicated to labor, will help these writers bridge any gap that might exist between their talents and their craftsmanship. Thus out of this collaboration a new theater tradition will emerge from the old.

The Playwrights have shown their willingness to accept the implications of Negro life and make them the stuff of their writings. How correct they are is witnessed by V. J. Jerome, who, in commenting on the play, stated that "Seldom in literature or on the stage has the inner dignity of an oppressed people struggling to affirm its nationhood risen so indestructibly, so magnificently, as in the Negro family portrayed in *Big White Fog*." All who know the play will agree with Jerome. To see the play, and to support the Playwrights Company is not just a privilege, it is a necessity.

RALPH ELLISON.



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