

FOUR CASES OF CLYDE GRIFFITHS

By THEODORE DREISER.

IT has been said of my novel "An American Tragedy" that in it the idea of economic stratification, the wealthy members of society superimposed upon the poor, and the tragic results of the

same to the less fortunate were more implied than argued, and with this I agree, since it was what I intended. None the less I hold that any class-conscious person who reads the book will see clearly and effectively the determining social and economic forces surrounding the individuals of all classes, and within which they move to their comfort and destruction. I am also satisfied that in "Case of Clyde Griffiths" the directing and controlling forces there presented fully account for Clyde's conduct and its results.

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It has been said recently that my novel is by now a legend of sorts, symbolizing, the world over, the class antipathies of the present day; and, judging from the four dramatizations that have already sprung from it, here, in Germany, in France and in Russia, I am inclined to believe it. Very forcefully, and even though they spring from the same book, they present four definitely different ways of looking at the external economic forces which move the individual of any land to a tragic destiny.

In the case of the first version, offered by Patrick Kearney, the approach was, unfortunately, semi-melodramatic, for it concerned itself with the from-rags-to-riches-and-back formula, really dear to the American heart, and at that time, if not now, much more agreeable to the American taste for tragedy. For it accorded exactly with the national desire for speedy wealth and happiness this side of the gallows. It was exceedingly easy to impress upon the American public the pathos of being poor and struggling to become rich. Kearney, closely in touch, as he was, with the American mood of the hour, succeeded admirably enough, holding closely, as he did, to the scenes which emphasized the joys of wealth and the horrors of lacking a high-priced suitcase or an individually tailored suit.

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Erwin Piscator's version, the above-mentioned "Case of Clyde Griffiths," which was translated from the German by Louise Campbell, avoids this approach entirely. Let me say, by the way, that Mr. Piscator is obviously a creative dramatist, keenly interested in the economic and social ills of the world, and also a stage director of the first order, as the structural arrangement of this version proves. Clyde, while still the weakling that he was in the book, is also a somewhat automatic vehicle for a social criticism that is different, sound and devastating, and, at the same time, tragic. For, by word as well as by arbitrarily arranged situa-

tions and juxtapositions, Mr. Piscator has brilliantly emphasized the economic inequities that exist in America and throughout the world. Those who "moil and toil" confront, in an esthetically devised No Man's Land, those who "toil not, neither do they spin."

As opposed to my book, his dramatization is not tempered with resignation but, on the contrary, it is assertive, at times almost violently so, of the cruelties and brutalities inherent in what Mr. Piscator feels to be a remediable social mechanism.

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While the characters work out their "mathematical theorem that today a destiny or fate leads and governs mankind as inexorably and absolutely as fate in a Greek tragedy," the audience is more or less compelled to make its own social analysis. An improvised character, the "Speaker" who is apparently an embodiment of a superior, unbiased social consciousness, which is able to foresee and interpret such ills as the unaware protagonist must suffer in the circumstances of the tragedy, stands between the stage and the audience. And he counsels, interprets and consistently places the most kindly and humane construction on the actions not only of all of the characters but of the classes themselves. In fact, Piscator himself asserts him to be "an indispensable dramatic medium through which the development of the theme of the drama is made possible." I was enormously impressed by this version, which I saw produced at Jasper Deeter's Hedgerow Theatre near Philadelphia,

Continued on Page Two.

CASE OF CLYDE GRIFFITHS

Continued From Page One.

after I had arranged with him for a try-out.

It was from this try-out that Milton Shubert, the youngest producer in a theatrical dynasty, among whose traditions is that of avoiding social problems in the theatre, became interested in the play. To his credit, I will say that he has endeavored in every step taken in the production to preserve not only the theatrical values of Piscator's work but has jealously safeguarded the social significance of my work. To this end he has engaged for this production the Group Theatre, which I consider a very fine social and esthetic force in the American theatre.

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As to the other versions of "An American Tragedy" for the stage, that of Georges Jamin and Jean Servais made in France, with my consent, is an independent dramatization of the book which, in contrast to Piscator's version, concerns itself, and very poetically, with the

moving human relations of the protagonists of both worlds, the rich and the poor, in a way that makes the heart and not the reason the arbiter. It is beautiful.

In Russia, on the other hand, H. Basilevsky seizes on the communistic moral system as a basis for evaluating the tragedy of Clyde Griffiths in his "Law of Lycurgus." Clyde, as there drawn, is the victim of the failure of societies everywhere to enforce the law that should give him the right to work and to receive a just return for his labor. The dramatist emphasizes the divine authority and duty of labor, or of the right to work, and the godlike respect and honor in which he thinks it should be held. Unfortunately, this dramatization is not nearly as well done as one might have hoped. This is especially unfortunate because Basilevsky seems to have an idea that has more latent possibilities for powerful and moving presentation than any other of the dramatic versions of "An American Tragedy."

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