

London Also Has a Spate of Revivals This Season and Few New Plays

By W. A. DARLINGTON

THINGS here are getting so that the London drama critics pine for the sight of a set of characters on the stage dressed in modern clothes. In the past few weeks there have been only two plays produced which were not period pieces and, unhappily, those plays failed in other ways to give pleasure.

Working backward, the last ten productions I have seen in London have been "Mrs. Dane's Defense" (period 1900), "Tess D'Ubervilles" (late Victorian), "Lady Frederick" (Edwardian), "Caste" (mid-Victorian), "And No Birds Sing" (modern, thank God), "Day of Glory" (modern also), "There Are Crimes and Crimes" (Strindberg, the gloomy Swede, wrote this in 1899), "The Wisest Fool" (a piece about King James I, 1600 or thereabouts), "Family Reunion" (vaguely Edwardian), and "Vanity Fair" (Regency).

Taking this into consideration, you will no doubt conclude that when I say that out of all of the above list the most interesting occasion was the production, not very successful and for a trial trip only, of "The Day of Glory," you will conclude that I am letting a temporary prejudice against costume drama run away with me. Nevertheless, that's my story and I stick to it. "The Day of Glory" is a war play written while the war was still on. It is the first attempt of one of our most distinguished short-story writers, H. E. Bates, to use the theatre as his medium. It was produced for the first time a year ago at the opening of the Arts Theatre in Salisbury. It was seen for the first time in London at the Embassy for a trial run of a fortnight and, in spite of skilled direction by Basil Dean and the acting of a hand-picked cast, it had a chilly critical reception which discourages any hope that it will be revived shortly in the West End. But if it is to fail, it ranks among those failures which do more credit to the theatre than half a dozen slick successes. The theme is the psychological effect upon the mind of a fighter pilot of the strange mixture of exaltation and overstrain, mental and physical, to which his experiences subject him.

The Transformation

The pilot is seen at that stage where the first gay heroism of unthinking youth engaged on high adventure has left him, and the deeper heroism of the experienced man, who has learned to feel, to

face and to conquer fear, is taking its place. His situation is made more poignant by two facts—that he has a growing certainty (at which nobody, who has ever been a fighting man of any description, will dare to cavil) that he is shortly to die, and that he has fallen in love with a girl who understands everything that he is going through, and has faced, like him, the probability that they are to lose one another.

A Second Theme

In the last act Bates develops his second theme, the futility and wickedness of war and the hope that mankind will be able to brave its twice-enforced lesson before it is too late. The play takes no account of the atomic bomb or the other fearful engines of destruction which threaten to supersede it for the plain reason that Bates was writing in happy ignorance that such things existed.

His characters are not merely well handled, they are alive and original and each has its appointed place in the scheme of the play. Not since J. B. Priestley's "Dangerous Corner" have I seen a novelist's first play so technically admirable.

Then why, you will ask with good reason, do the critics fail to give a warm welcome to such a play even if, perhaps, it is too immediate, too painful for the general public to accept now that the war is over? The answer lies in the actual impact of the play upon its audience. Somehow, for all his skill, Bates has failed to bring his play over the footlights. The poignancy of the events which are happening and the emotions which are being felt is never for one moment in doubt, but does not transfer itself to the audience. Not all the critics felt this way about the play but most of them did and so did the majority of the other members of the audience with whom I have discussed the matter.

My guess is, therefore, that Bates did not just have that degree of knowledge of what he was about which would have enabled him to give to so difficult and delicate a play its full effect. An experienced dramatist would have known how to cut a few words in one place and add a phrase or two in another and so have got at the hearts of his audience instead of merely impressing their intellects. If my guess is right and Bates can learn that lesson, he is a major playwright in the making.