

Dear Allan: there is a young woman in L.A. who is trying to put together a small production of my play WANNSEE, and I have given her yr name as someone who might give her at least advice, I hope you dont mind. Her name is Maria Hurtado, her phone is 213-469-3759 and her motivation is: to play the lead role of a 15 year old girl in WANNSEE.
love to you and Laura

Sali

July 14/92

NO news from HBO.

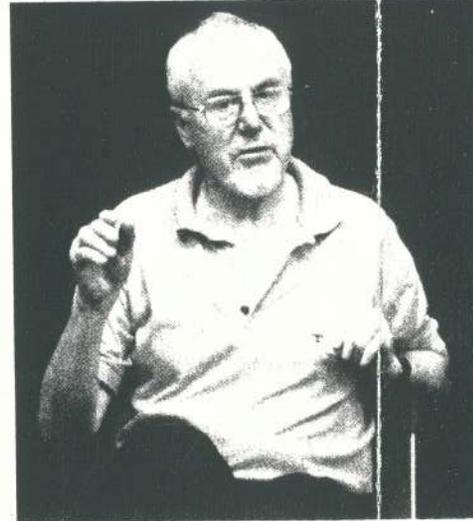
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ARTS

Beyond criticism

One of the great drama critics
has jumped over the footlights.
Irving Wardle follows him

IRELA VAZQUEZ



Eric Bentley: 'Life is not enriched by commentary'

converged on Miami for a Bentley Festival.

Against all my experience of theatre conferences, this turned out a treat. It had a clear purpose, and the debate was tied in with productions by the New World Repertory Company and the Alleyway Theatre of Buffalo. Bentley, a gangling, boyish 75, sat in on the events, chipping in and living up to legend as a spellbinding lecturer.

Day Two brought forth Mr Sheffer's agit-prop memories of the DMZ, where he and Bentley staged Brecht's *Elephant Calf* vaudeville as a protest against the Vietnam draft. Question from the floor: "What's the evidence that political satire has any effect at all?" Sheffer: "Well, we launched the DMZ on 26 March 1968, and three days later President Johnson resigned!"

Sheffer followed this up with a sharp little number on Bentley the translator, voiced by the departed spirits of Brecht and Pirandello: "We're very grateful for Eric Bentley's loyalty / We're even willing to see him share our royalty. / On one thing, though, we're really not so willing: / And that's the size of Eric Bentley's billing."

That lyric hits the target partly because its imaginary conversation is just the kind of thing that Bentley might have put in a play. "You were a playwright when you were a critic," Albert Bermel, the Molière translator, told him in Miami. Bentley's plays can be seen as a continuation of criticism by other means. As he said in reply:

"In discursive writing I was always wondering what I agreed with; and reality would slip through my fingers in reaching a critical conclusion. With plays, I don't have to bother about that."

Three of his plays appeared in Miami: *Concord*, *German Requiem*, and *Lord Alfred's Lover*. The first two belong to a sequence with the overall title *The Kleist Variations* — a "variation" differing from an "adaptation" in the sense that it implies a quarrel with the original text. That sounds very literary; but it could apply to most of Brecht (not to mention Shakespeare). The starting-point was the fact that Kleist published *Das Käthchen von Heilbronn* barely a year before his death. How could such a joyful work emerge in

the context of personal despair? To seek an answer Bentley wrote *Wannsee*, placing Kleist's love drama within the framework of his suicide pact. Three other Kleistian counter-plays followed. *German Requiem*, as mangled by the Buffalo company, came over as a Pythonesque send-up of *The Schroffenstein Family*. But *Concord*, based on one of the few great German comedies, *The Broken Jug*, is an engrossingly adventurous piece. Bentley transfers the story of small-town judicial corruption from Holland to eighteenth-century New England, with a radical displacement of the fable's moral centre. It starts by fooling the audience into misreading the courtroom farce as the unmasking of an obviously guilty buffoon, but soon the icy recognition dawns that the town is being taken over by a power-mad bigot.

Lord Alfred's Lover is Bentley's ironic title for a reworking of the Wilde biography; his point being that Wilde was telling the truth in denying a sexual relationship with Alfred Douglas. There is plenty of sex in the play, which becomes hilariously well-informed when the slumming aesthetes unwind among the gold-lamé rent-boys. For once, Queensberry, too, has a point, as his elder son had committed suicide in the service of an allegedly homosexual prime minister. Bentley elevates this detail to the dramatic centre by staging an imaginary interview between the convicted Wilde and the undetected PM (Roseberry) to draw a savage conclusion on the artifice of public virtue.

Bentley acknowledges that that idea came from the unhistorical meeting of the two queens in Schiller's *Maria Stuart*: "Not the facts, but the truth." These plays form a whispering gallery of theatrical echoes. They also echo with emotions that go beyond literary sources: especially guilt and recantation. The effect is extremely powerful.

"All theatre begins with Aeschylus," Bentley says. "That is to say with guilt and retribution; and it never moves very far from that." There speaks the man who wrote *The Life of the Drama*. I am glad that it was a new playwright, not an old critic, that I met in Miami. □

AMONG the crowd of hopefuls on the 1985 Edinburgh Fringe was a delicate old gentleman who filled the early-evening slot in the Lyceum Studio with a programme of cabaret songs — Prévert, Eisler, some of his own. His piano-playing was unathletic and his voice a bit hoarse, but there was no resisting the defiance and yearning; and for any theatre critics in the house, it made the heart turn over to see the revered figure of Eric Bentley putting himself on the line.

Not much has been seen of Bentley in this country since his pre-war emigration to the United States, but we still owe him ground-rent. As a university teacher, reviewer, director, translator, and author of the two most pillaged books in the business (*The Playwright as Thinker* and *The Life of the Drama*), he ranks as the most influential English-speaking drama critic since Shaw; more so, in that unlike Shaw's, his campaign for modern drama succeeded. No Manhattan bookstore was complete without his European theatre anthologies. He launched Brecht in the English language. He set up a one-man critical and translation industry to rescue drama from the monopoly of Broadway. In the mid-Sixties Bentley went

THEATRE

into a critical menopause from which he emerged with the conviction that "Life is enriched by the arts. I do not believe it is enriched by commentary on the arts". His own drama (again like Shaw) is that in mid-life he went from old hand to beginner, and set out to remake his career first as a political cabaret performer (in *The Demilitarized Zone*, a club he ran with Isaiah Sheffer during the Vietnam War), and then as a playwright.

Are You Now or Have You Ever Been?, a transcript of the McCarthy hearings, is the only Bentley piece to have reached the English stage; and in the US his work has been confined mainly to small arenas. But he is not short of ardent supporters, and last month a group of them