

FESTIVAL/STAGE II

Most of us have taken the opportunity, at one time or another, to immerse ourselves in the fantasy and delight, and sometimes sorrow, of classic drama—but for those who have held off from this unique birthing of emotion and growth, the time is ripe to become acquainted with some of drama's greatest writers.

By JOHN LOEBER

For forty years the Oregon Shakespearean Festival in Ashland has been bringing quality theatre to the Northwest, and next month will begin a new season of discovery by presenting four plays by four legendary playwrights: Britain's George Bernard Shaw, Norway's Henrik Ibsen, England's William Shakespeare, and America's great entertainer, George M. Cohan.

The true essence of a festival is celebration and entertainment, with the entertainment a surety with the inclusion of Shakespeare's "The Comedy of Errors" and Cohan's "The Tavern" in this year's Festival. Almost anything by Cohan is sure to please us in this year of Bicentennial hoopla, for he is, after all, the embodiment of American energy, and is sure to cut through any number of layers of cynicism we've acquired, to treat America and its myth as a bellyful of fun.

"A Comedy of Errors" is one of the Bard's earlier works, and while it doesn't show the strong characterizations of his later work, it does manage to draw an audience into the character of comedy and action. Taken together, these two plays will keep any audience, of any background, caught in the throes of full entertainment — something always to be thankful for.

But there is something more than entertainment involved in a festival. There is a sense of religious celebration. A sense of coming closer to yourself, of knowing more when it's over than when it began. For this purpose Ibsen's "Brand" and Shaw's "The Devil's Disciple" both fit as perfect counterpoint to the sheer humor of the first two plays, but even more, to each other.

"Brand" is not a funny play by anybody's definition. It is the story of an uncompromising Lutheran minister, set on the lonely, craggy coast of Norway in 1865. Brand is his name, and he has a soul harder than the land from which he springs, committed totally to his idea of God and religion. Unable to be either a man as other men, or

an apostle, he demands "all or nothing" from life.

Jerry Turner, the director of "Brand," says, "It is a call to courage and idealism and a rebuke to a soft and decadent generation."

Ibsen's Brand will suffer all, but give nothing—his unyielding stands force the needless death of his own son and later his wife. He tears down all that the people of his village hold holy, appearing as a raging spectre of commitment, but never showing an attainable goal. In the end Brand must face the consequences of his demands and finish his life alone.

In Shaw's "The Devil's Disciple," the antithesis of "Brand," the hero is Dick Dudgeon, described by his own mother as "...a bad man. He is a smuggler; and he lives with gypsies; and he has no love for his mother and his family; and he wrestles and plays games on Sunday instead of going to church."

He has passed by the love of his family and friends to follow his calling, saying "I knew from the first that the Devil was my natural master and captain and friend. I saw that he was in the right, and that the world cringed to his conqueror only through fear." Dick is a pitiless character, but one for whom we feel empathy. When his mother is on her deathbed she does not even call for him—and he doesn't even care to know her ailments: "Not I; he doesn't know; and I don't care. We shall know soon enough."

Like Brand, Dick Dudgeon will suffer all, but give nothing—but here the resemblance ends. Dudgeon's unyielding stand in the face of the English army saves the needless death of one he cares nothing for. He supports what others hold holy, without a dream. In the end Dick will win the love and admiration of his village.

There are differences here. Brand is not an apostle, despite

his holy garb he is a dreamer who offers nothing by ego; Dick Dudgeon appears a wastrel and dreamer, and is in truth an apostle who follows his beliefs to the end.

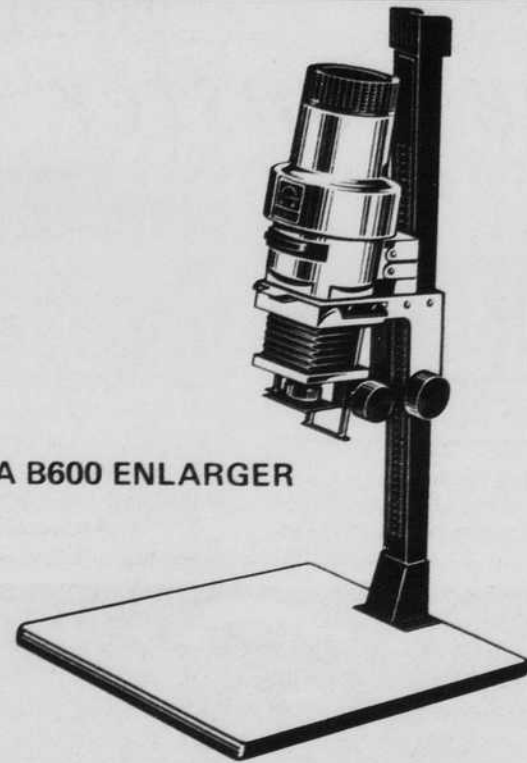
But there is more. Shaw's play is called a melodrama and Ibsen's a naturalistic tragedy. In 1873 Emile Zola, a founder of naturalism, bemoaned melodrama as the death of theatre, saying, "Drama is dying of its extravagances, its lies and its platitudes. If comedy still keeps on its feet in the collapse of our stage, that is because it contains more of real life, because it is often true."

And yet Zola, taken in another light, helps the melodrama of Shaw to explain the tragedy of Ibsen—if we look on "Brand" as drama and "The Devil's Disciple" as comedy. This is not too far to go, actually, when Shaw's play is closely observed. "The Devil's Disciple" is actually anti-melodramatic, with an abundance of counter-stereotypes: anti-heroes such as Dick Dudgeon, spiteful mothers, and role reversals.

We find Shaw handling comically what Ibsen handled dramatically. There is no disparaging comment on Shaw's part here, and Turner tells us, "In fact, as a psychologist and philosopher, Ibsen seemed to dwarf William Shakespeare so much, Shaw said, 'It became impossible for the moment to take him seriously as an intellectual force.'" So we find the comedy of Shaw following the logic of Emile Zola and actually lending greater life, and definition, to Ibsen—thanks to the Festival in Ashland.

This creates a powerful package indeed, with three of the greatest writers ever to publish coming together to make a point.

Tickets for Festival Stage II start at \$3.50 and can be purchased through the EMU Main Desk. The Festival will run from February 13 through April 10.*



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