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PATRICK WHITE AS PLAYWRIGHT

Miss Dyce's book *Patrick White as Playwright** is mainly concerned with looking at the structure and themes of White's plays, with discussing various theatrical techniques and the problems of the plays that might arise in production, and with reflecting upon the major critical material that has been written on the plays.

However, the book doesn't deal only with the above.

Dyce places White in many traditions of literary as well as dramatic work. She observes that he has developed from the expressionistic plays of Kaiser and Toller, that he has connections with the Americans O'Neill, Tennessee Williams and Elmer Rice. She also notes parallels between some of White's themes and techniques and those of, *inter alia*, Henry James, Brecht, Virginia Woolf, Joyce, Eliot, Shaw, Shakespeare, Dylan Thomas, Arthur Miller, Chekhov, Wilder, Albee, Pinter, Ben Jonson, Genet, Jarry, Beckett, Strindberg, John Donne, Ibsen, and Synge. Although the connections of White to these figures are generally noted briefly, the connections are accurate and help assist the reader of White's plays to see White's place in literature; they also permit any reader to develop the similarities to other figures to the extent he/she may desire to do so.

As one would expect, Dyce makes many references to White as a novelist and tries to demonstrate how the techniques of his plays compare with those of his novels. The comparisons are achieved most successfully in the Introduction and in the discussion of *A Cheery Soul*, which is adopted from White's short story of the same title. Miss Dyce selects episodes that readily demonstrate the difference between the play and short story as is seen by her observation on p.76: "In scene 2, Miss Docker's rear emerging foremost from the hire-car is not dramatically appropriate; instead, the first impression we get of her is from the loud blast of a car horn off stage and her voice rending the air." That first impression is most appropriate.

Now to return to the main concerns of the book as mentioned in the opening paragraph. Dyce's conception of the themes of the plays is most perceptive. For example many critics have tended to ignore or to play down the significance of Act 1, Scene 7 of *The Ham Funeral*. By looking at the way parallelism operates in the structure of the play, Dyce is able to show that the scene is important in emphasizing the young man's grotesque quest for and attaining of death in life. Roy Child's role in *The Season at Sarsaparilla* is a further example of Dyce's perceptive analysis of the plays: pp.44-46 of her book lays waste the notion that Roy Child is the narrator of the play. Dyce argues that he speaks for himself, not for the playwright nor a group of characters, and that his reveries are an example of the use of the stream of consciousness technique.

The organization of the book is quite straightforward: a brief introduction is followed by the close analysis of White's four published plays, *The Ham Funeral* (first performed 1961), *The Season at Sarsaparilla* (1962), *A Cheery Soul* (1963), and *Night on Bald Mountain* (1964). The appendices which follow the main bulk of the book contain some very interesting information. Included are reproductions of the theatre programmes for *The Ham Funeral* and *Night on Bald Mountain*, and an account of Miss Dyce's unsuccessful search for a copy of an unpublished play *Return to Abyssinia* - the information here should save some people time that

would have been spent in a fruitless search for a copy of the play. An appendix is devoted to some comment of John Sumner, who was the director of *A Cheery Soul*; his statement that "a way has to be found of playing Patrick's dialogue, particularly the memory and poetic thought passages. And a way has to be found to encourage the audience to listen to and to accept these unique qualities, for they are qualities" applies to much contemporary drama that seems to confuse audiences.

In her introduction Dyce claims that White "has created a new environment for the Australian drama in his inner and outer suburban settings. He has made Australians rearrange their thinking about themselves in all phases of human existence: childhood, maturity and old age. He has brought to notice the unique nature of the Australian community of today." I think her claim is an accurate one. Certainly Dyce demonstrates how White makes his plays tick in working towards presenting those matters.

I believe the book has two faults. Firstly it contains no index and it is a very difficult matter if you are not familiar with the book (and White's plays) to locate, for example, references to *Voss* and *Death of a Saleman*. Perhaps an index could be managed for the second printing. Secondly, Miss Dyce doesn't include references in her book to some memorable White lines, instances of which are:

"She (the landlady) is a large woman in the dangerous forties, ripe and bursting" *The Ham Funeral*

"She turned into a shrew that no blouse could contain" *The Ham Funeral*

"Roy: Your policy as a councillor, Mr Erbage?"

Erbage: Policy?

Roy: Will you have the public interest at heart?

Erbage: Here, what do you mean to signify? I'm standing for councillor, aren't I?"

The Season at Sarsaparilla

"You can't be too careful! You can't call your teeth your own once you get inside a hospital." *The Season at Sarsaparilla*

Maybe I'm carping: probably the places for reading and appreciating these quotations are in the plays.

* Dyce, J.R., *Patrick White as Playwright*. St Lucia, University of Queensland Press, 1974 (\$7.75 hardback).