

Theater News

Murder in the Cathedral

by EUPHEMIA WYATT

Murder in the Cathedral — For thirty years it has been for me the greatest play of the century. Written by T. S. Eliot for the Canterbury Festival in 1935, it was first played in the Chapter House of the ancient cathedral.

The play is based on a suggestion made to Eliot by E. Martin Browne who had collaborated with Eliot the year before in a pageant of London churches, after Eliot had become an Anglo-Catholic.

So eagerly did the British public hail the drama of St. Thomas Becket that when Ashley Dukes brought it to the London stage, it ran for 600 performances.

I remember vividly my own excitement over the first production here of "Murder" when the Federal Theatre Project obtained permission from Dukes to present it here for two weeks. There was much concern before it opened as to its reception.

My help was asked to make out a list of church leaders but apparently Eliot's former leftist admirers had not heard of his conversion and they flowed into the Manhattan Theatre (53rd and Broadway) where the entire audience was caught by the dynamic new rhythm of the verse and the intensity of the action.

Twice urgent messages to London brought an extension in time—the two weeks lengthened into six with packed houses. But, alas, British generosity paid off badly for itself when the small English company of nineteen—opened to a tepid welcome in Boston in 1938.

Audiences had just begun to increase when Gilbert Miller, co-producer with Dukes, decided abruptly to bring "Murder" down to New York. The publicity was scant; the Boston reviews unfavorable; the former enthusiasm forgotten and Lunt had just started. Although a tour of American universities had been booked, Mr. Miller announced that he had lost enough money and when a Catholic lady, whose liberality was commensurate with her income, offered a substantial loan, she was just too late. The British company sailed home.

But it must be admitted that their production seemed frail compared to the grand scale of the Federal Theatre Project whose director, Halsted Welles, had broken up Eliot's chorus of Canterbury Women into individual speeches instead of the small English Verse Choir.

In the Stratford production, John Houseman has followed the American tradition and when the Women of Canterbury ascend from the pit up the steps of the Cathedral, they speak as individuals which is far more exciting than a chorus. One of them, Olive Deering, was one of the Women in 1936. They all speak with force and clarity and the variety of their grouping on the steps is striking.

Eliot's drama with its thought-bitten verse is the struggle of a man with his soul's allegiance. It opens just as St. Thomas has been permitted by



TV's Crean Writes Religiously

Larchmont, N.Y.—In "Four Contemporary Religious Plays," one of them features a play-within-a-play. An "intruder" storms down the aisle, up onto the stage and berates the actors for foolishly trying to present religious drama by relying on the two "angels" who will come on near the end of the third act.

When the leading actress wants to know "how do we arrive at our theme . . . without the angels?" the intruder tells her:

"We explore. Without the angels, the writer must grope for words that will reveal the mystery of grace and prayer. Without the angels, these actors must dig deep into their souls

searching for reflections of God. Without the angels, we are forced to seek out divinity—in reality, in what we can see and touch—to look on life as it is."

The intruder in this play was really its author, Robert Crean, who has spent more than a decade not only preaching good religious drama, but writing it as well.

Crean—(pronounced "crane") has written about 25 TV scripts for "The Catholic Hour" and is currently polishing a three-part drama for the show. Titled "The Priest," the Crean script deals with the human and psychological effect of the Vatican Council on the priesthood and the seminaries. It will be tele-

cast on NBC-TV the last three Sundays of October.

Last year, a Crean "Catholic Hour" drama titled "The Prophet"—about a young man's decision to leave his comfortable middle-class life to help the civil rights cause—was selected as best religious drama by the International Catholic Association of Radio and Television.

But his craftsmanship is also attested by his status as one of the leading writers for prime-time television. The 42-year-old writer's work has appeared on such series as "The Virginian," "The Defenders," "Trials of O'Brien," and through the years on such quality showcases as "The U.S. Steel Hour," "Kraft Television

Theatre," "G.E. Theatre" and "Armstrong Circle Theatre," which presented a Crean dramatization of Maryknoll Bishop Walsh's experiences in Communist China.

In fact, much of Crean's prime-time scripts revolve around religious characters and situations: an intimate look at the life of a parish priest (which starred John Payne) on "G.E. Theatre"; a problem for lawyer Peter Falk when a group of boisterous showgirls move in next to a convent on "Trials of O'Brien." One of last season's few critically praised series.

And when "The Virginian" last season had to have Judge Garth's niece Betsy "written out of the show," it was Crean who did it: not by marrying her to a traveling doctor, as some one suggested, but to a minister. In the process, he built the episode around the cleric's dissatisfaction with "teacups and chitchat." By the time the last commercial rolled around, Betsy and the minister were off to do missionary work in the Orient.

"It's not that esoteric," Crean has remarked when asked about the religious bent of his TV output. "My artistic insights are my Catholic insights. I write religious dramas because no one else wants to."

Writing religious drama by introducing priests, ministers, nuns and so forth is the simplest way for Crean to present a religious idea in a medium that has made simplicity its byword. But, he suggests, there are other ways to write religious drama.

"Walter Kerr taught me that to write truthfully has its own spiritual value," Crean says. "His thinking has been the strongest influence on my development as a dramatist. His book, 'How Not to Write a Play' has been my Bible."

Crean met Kerr at Catholic University, where Crean had enrolled in the Drama Department after World War II and where Kerr was teaching before going on to become one of the country's leading drama critics. Crean also met at CU the girl he was to marry and who now lives with him and their nine children in a 13-room house built by the designer of the Civil War battleship "Monitor."

Crean's ambition—like most writers—is to be represented on the Broadway stage. One of his plays, "A Time to Laugh" was directed on the London stage several years ago by Tyrone Guthrie and starred Robert Morley as (you guessed it) a Catholic bishop. He is at work on several other possible Broadway entries.

"All I want to do before I die is write one really fine play," he says. "Not that I want to become famous for it. In fact, no one will really know if it's really good until long after I'm dead; it will have to stand the test of time. And to do that—to come up with that one play—the thing is to write an awful lot."—(Catholic Press Features).



TV writer, Robert Crean

Players Unit Ready for Performances

The Players Unit, a group of actors and actresses, is preparing for a series of performances. The group includes actors like Anthony Caputi, Emily Keast, and Marion Hodges.

The group is working on a production of "The Heiress" and other plays. They are currently in rehearsals and will begin performing soon.

The unit is also planning to perform "The Heiress" at the Nazareth Academy. The production is set in New York in the 1850s.

Nazareth Seniors List Drama, 'The Heiress'

Rehearsals for Nazareth Academy's senior play, "The Heiress," by Ruth and Augustus Goetz will begin early next month. The cast will be selected from the senior class. Men's roles are open to casting from the community.

The play offers drama and suspense through the romance of Catherine Sloper, a plain, shy girl, and her young fortune-hunting lover, Morris Townsend. Complications arise when a disarming father forbids the marriage, threatening disinheritance.

Production dates will be around the middle of November. The Broadway play opened with Wendy Hiller and Basil Rathbone. The motion picture starred Olivia DeHavilland, Montgomery Clift and Ralph Richardson.

William Andia will direct and produce the play. The performance can be staged in any area large enough to hold the cast and audience.

Thornton Wilder's **The Long Christmas Dinner** — Queens of France — **The Happy Journey** to Trento and Carden. The three short plays by Mr. Wilder are certainly old friends to all amateur producers. I have found that the group which chooses "Happy Journey" usually wins an award.

The trio of plays are now presented at the Cherry Lane by "Theatre 1967" (Edward Albee, Richard Baskin, Clinton Wilder) and eleven productions this season — each to run a month. In the present cast are John Beal, Leora Dana and Paula Trueman and if all productions are as charming as these, they must succeed. Mr. Wilder's plays have become an American tradition. "Queens of France" is about a New Orleans lawyer who tells four different women that she is a descendant of the lost Dauphin, Louis XVII. The plays are well directed by Michael Kahn.

Hooked Rugs

At Sibley's

Sibley's Uplstate Center, Rochester, has been transformed into an art gallery for the 11th Annual Exhibit of Hooked Rugs by the Monroe County Hooked Rug Guild. The exhibit is being co-sponsored by Sibley's and will be open to the public during store hours, September 20 through 22.

FILMS ABOUT TOWN

A MENTION OF MOTION PICTURES OF MORE THAN ROUTINE INTEREST

The Russians are Coming, the Russians are Coming — "Cold war humor crackles on an island off New England when a Russian submarine runs aground on a sand bar and its jittery crew, led by Broadway's Alan Arkin, inadvertently panic the populace in their hilarious efforts to get the tub launched again." — Time Mag.

Doctor Zhivago — "A lot of things have gone wrong with this expensive-looking version of the Pasternak novel. The notable, largely wasted cast includes Julie Christie, Omar Sharif, Tom Courtenay, Alec Guinness, Geraldine Chaplin, Rod Steiger, and Rita Tushingham." — New Yorker Mag.

Kharidum — "Laurence Olivier as the malevolent Mahdi and Charlton Heston as the mystic General 'Chinese' Gordon pit their gods against each other in an epic struggle for control of the Nile." — Time Mag.

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? — "Elizabeth Taylor, Richard Burton, George Segal and Sandy Dennis star in the screen version of Edward Albee's violently verbal shock treatment, subtly directed by Mike Nichols." — Time Mag.

Morgan! — "A troubled young man tears London apart in an attempt to make people love one another as much as he thinks great apes love other great apes. A very strange comedy indeed, marvelously acted by David Warner and Vanessa Redgrave, under the direction of Karel Reisz." — New Yorker Mag.

The Sound of Music — "The Austrian Alps are among the most beautiful places on earth. Majestic peaks, verdant meadows and deep blue lakes combine to provide an atmosphere of beauty and tranquility. They hold a special appeal for Maria (Julie Andrews), a postulant during the 1830s at the Abbey in Salzburg, who is often late for her duties because she has strayed to the mountains to wander, to indulge in grand daydreams, or to sing joyously of nature's beauty." — RCA.

Born Free — "Rather than send Elsa, her grown-up pet lion, to a zoo, a game warden's wife teaches it how to survive in the jungle. This is a beautiful nature film that fills the eye with its colorful African locale and satisfies the imagination with its animal photography. Directed by James Hill, it stars Virginia McKenna and Bill Travers from whom Elsa steals the picture." — Catholic Film Newsletter.

The Shop on Main Street — "A Czechoslovakian picture that is both tragic and comic and is wonderfully well acted by Josef Kroner and Ida Kaminska." — New Yorker Mag.

IN THE WINGS
The Wrong Box — "Bryan Forbes, who directed King Rat, is now plotting a furiously funny race to kill one of the two surviving members of the Victorian tonline, with John Mills and Ralph Richardson at the tender mercies of their loving heirs — Michael Caine, Nannette Newman, Peter Cook and Dudley Moore." — Time Mag.

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