

# NOT WHAT IT SEEMS

## Homosexual Motif Gets Heterosexual Guise

By HOWARD TAUBMAN

IT is time to speak openly and candidly of the increasing incidence and influence of homosexuality on New York's stage—and, indeed, in the other arts as well.

The subject is too important to be left forever to the sly whisperers and malicious gossips. Criticism, like playwriting, is crippled by a resort to evasions. The public is deluded and misled if polite pretenses are accepted at face value.

The infiltration of homosexual attitudes occurs in the theatre at many levels. It is noticeable when a male designer dresses the girls in a musical to make them unappealing and disrobes the boys so that more male skin is visible than art or illusion require. It is apparent in a vagrant bit of nasty dialogue thrown into a show or in a redundant touch like two unmistakably mannish females walking across a stage without a reason or a word of comment.

These intrusions are private jokes turned public in a spirit of defiance or in the fun-and-games exuberance of a mischievous student testing a teacher's patience and acumen. They may be nuisances, deserving the flick aimed at a pestiferous insect, but do not merit serious discussion.

What demands frank analysis is the indirection that distorts human values. Plays on adult themes are couched in terms and symbols that do not truly reflect the author's mind. Characters represent something different from what they purport to be. It is no wonder that they seem sicker than necessary and that the plays are more subtly disturbing than the playwright perhaps intended.

### Exaggeration

The unpleasant female of the species is exaggerated into a fantastically consuming monster or an incredibly pathetic drab. The male is turned into a ragingly lustful beast or into a limp, handsome neutral creature of otherworldly purity. No doubt there are such people, and it is the dramatist's business if he is fascinated by them. But when his emphases are persistently disproportionate, it is because he is treating a difficult, delicate problem in the guise of normality.

The insidious result of unspoken taboos is that sincere, searching writers feel they must state a homosexual theme in heterosexual situations. They convince themselves that what they wish to say will get through anyhow. But dissembling is unhealthy. The audience senses rot at the drama's core.

The taboos are not what they used to be. Homosexuality is not a forbidden topic. In "The Best Man" it was the dark secret used to destroy a ruthless, young politician, and in "Advise and Consent" it was a sympathetically described aberration of a Senator. In both cases it was a facile dramatic device, used without compelling force or overriding need.

As long ago as in "The Children's Hour" Lillian Hellman dealt honestly and powerfully with a lesbian theme. There have been a number of works in which problems of homosexuality were probed with directness and integrity. Tennessee Williams' "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof," Robert Anderson's "Tea and Sympathy" and Peter Shaffer's "Five Finger Exercise" did not dissimulate, and in "A Taste of Honey" a homosexual was portrayed without meanness or snickers.

Although these are examples of successful plays on delicate themes, there can be no blinking the fact that heterosexual audiences feel uncomfortable in the presence of truth-telling about sexual deviation. And there can be no denying that playwrights interested in such themes continue to attack them tangentially, even disagreeably and sneakily.

### Falsehood

That is why the work of some talented writers seems tainted. That is why students ostensibly devoted to the tensions between men and women carry an uneasy burden of falsehood. One suspects what is wrong. But how can one question a writer's professed intentions or impugn motivations hidden in his heart, if not his subconscious?

What, if anything, is to be done? A writer's way may be oblique. Art, in any case, is often an ordering and articulation of unknowable and indefinable pressures. But where the writer knows what is in his mind and would like to expose it uncompromisingly, it is a great pity if he fails to do so.

Homosexuality has been a fact of history for thousands of years. It is a fact of life, even if a generally concealed one, in our society. Nothing human should be alien to an enlightened theatre. But even such a theatre must face up to

the rules of commerce. Playwrights no doubt will continue to take what they regard as the safe way of smuggling a touchy subject onto the stage by heterosexual masquerade.

Hugh Wheeler is a playwright whose first plays have tried to speak out. In "Big Fish, Little Fish" he described at least one homosexual in rich, crotchety, affectionate detail. This was forthright writing. But the central character was ambiguous, and at least one other man posed questions. Rightly or wrongly, one felt that these two did not fully sum up the author's conception of them.

### Explicit

In "Look: We've Come Through" Mr. Wheeler was explicit. There was no doubt about the homosexual predilections of the boy, Bobby. His mother encouraged effeminacy and urged him to take up with an older man. A brutal sailor sought to abuse him. The boy admitted his impotence. He wanted only to be a friend of Belle, the girl with learning, culture and no sex appeal.

Why then find fault with a play that did not obfuscate? Why not acclaim without reservation a writer of humor, warmth and acute sensibility?

It is painful to mention flaws

in a work of aspiration while one approves a superficial, expertly made entertainment like "Write Me a Murder." But each type of play must be judged by its own laws.

The fundamental flaw of "Look: We've Come Through" was that one did not believe in the pivotal boy-and-girl relationship as the thing it looked to be. Bobby was revealed with sympathy as a sad, passive homosexual in spite of himself. It was suggested that he was changing, but everything about him said he would not. The girl was made to appear sexless. Her first joust with sex was an intellectual experiment. While the end was touching as the maimed youngsters found security in each other, one was sure that it would not last. It could not last while she remained a woman and he the sort of man he was.

For all its virtues, the play was lamed. For all his courage, had Mr. Wheeler dared enough? Did inhibitions imposed by the theme lead to a sense of troubling incompleteness?

Mr. Wheeler has been brave to go as far as he has in writing about homosexuality with probity. His way is infinitely preferable to the furtive, leering insinuations that have contaminated some of our arts.