

With The Contributing Editor

HUBERT H. HARRISON

THE EMPEROR, JONES.

It was on the last day of its long run at the Princess Theatre that I went to see "The Emperor Jones," joint production of the genius of Eugene O'Neill and Charles Gilpin. Not that I had undervalued the memory of its excellence that had reached my ears in Harlem, but having plotted Mr. Gilpin's curve as early as 1917 in The Voice and knowing that his abilities as an actor placed him in Class A, (the pull of the white critic's praise was not so strong on me as on many others of the colored fraternity. But now that I have seen the play I would not have missed it for a trip to France.

I am still at a loss to understand how this play could ever have become a Broadway success. For its character, quality and excellence are far above the Broadway level. It is a work of genius, a masterpiece in its technique as to be lightly clasped in any of the world dramas, and like a work of genius it stands on its own feet and requires no aid. I am speaking, of course, of the play as acted; of Mr. Gilpin's part I shall speak further on. The book by Beni and Liveright, which contains the text of this and other plays by Eugene O'Neill, is recommended as "a study of the psychology of fear and of race superstition." A censorious critic might cavil at the brevity of the last four words, but the rest of the statement is quite correct. It is pre-eminently a psychological study. (The word "psychology" and its derivatives are so much misused nowadays that I must apologize for using it—especially in The Negro World.)

The play was written about eight or ten years ago. It presents the spiritual journey which takes place in the soul of Brutus Jones when four stripes from his belt are by one his success, bravado, and confidence, and the accumulated stock of restraints and supports which "civilization" had supplied. It is necessary to resort to a figure to help the reader to see how this journey takes the old-fashioned spy-glass which he is shut, that is, as short as possible, into a "telescope" which back the most advanced scientific theories, thus adding one into the other, thus reducing its total length to the length of the "original" section. It is a method used by the dramatist in stripping the soul of "the Emperor" down to its bare essentials. It is why the play does not follow the conventional European order of time and scene. Besides, it is a one-act play, mostly monolog.

It is to be seen that the extreme brevity of the drama is really of no consequence. Instead of the "telescope" in the West Indies, the "telescope" is explained by the "telescope" it could just as readily be explained by the "telescope" of Africa or South Carolina. It is within the man, not the man's purpose to give the question of the question of the question, or even probability of the question.

presented in eight acts. The first of these we see in the first act, the Emperor's father, a group of his people, an Emperor. From an African land who had done time as a convict in a prison more than a hundred miles from the primitive state of intelligence of the superior cunning, and cool nerve supplied by the Emperor, he was "brought" to the Emperor in two years.

is a man of considerable ability. By appeals to the supernatural and the far away he manages to fool and cow the people while he sucks up every dollar in sight. And this is how he justifies his methods to the cringing cooney who serves as foil to "his majesty."

"De, a little stealin' like you does, and dere a big stealin' like I does. For de little stealin' dey gets you in jail soon or late. For de big stealin' dey makes you emperor and puts you in de hall of fame when you croaks."

Smithers—And I bet you got yer pile o' money in some safe place. Jones—I sho has! And it's in a foreign bank, where no pusion don't ever git it out but me, no matter what come. You didn't s'pose I was holdin' down dis Emperor job for de glory in it, did you? Sho! De fuss and glory part of it, dat's only to turn de heads o' de. Dey wants de big circus show for deir money. I gives it to 'em, an' gits de money. De long green, dat's me every time.

But the people "get wise" in time to the Emperor's graft, and under the leadership of Lem set out to "get" him. First, they desert the palace and take to the woods, whence the coughing boom of the tom-tom warns Jones of the beginning of the end of his imperial job, then they begin to make powerful "medicine" to offset the might of the Emperor's charm—a silver bullet. Jones in the meanwhile has made the necessary preparations for ascending (i. e., his "get away") and sets out for the edge of the forest through which he must pass. He finds that the food which he has hidden there against just such an emergency has been removed and he must face the awful ordeal of crossing the dark forest at night, worn, weary and hungry. With splendid courage and grim determination he sets out to do this. But fate is against him. The forest is full of specters which haunt him, and as the visions of his past life appear, he throws the shots from his pistol, including the silver bullet, which was his "charm," reserved for himself.

It is in the selection of these six episodes (scenes 2 to 7) that the skill of the playwright is put to evidence. The first shot drives off "the little formless fears," which indicate the origin of the specter of Jeff, the man whom he had killed in a game of craps, while the third dispels the horrors of the convict-camp of his earlier days in which he had killed a prison guard who haunts him. So far it is his own personal "telescope" which "telescope" back. But the soul of the individual is a bud on the stem of his ancestry; the base of the individual's mind is bedded in the roots of his race, which is moulded of that race's experience. And in the succeeding scenes the specters are the past horrors of a racial experience, which rise from the roots of Jones's subconscious mind. Dogged by these "haunts" he finds himself put up for sale as a slave on a spectral auction block, then on a ghostly slave ship in the dreaded "middle passage," and, finally, he is about to be offered by a Congo witch-doctor as a human sacrifice to a phantom crocodile-god on the banks of the Congo. From each agony he frees himself by a shot from his pistol, until, in the seventh scene his last shot is spent.

In the meanwhile the beat of the tom-tom grows at each shot louder, nearer, more rapid and menacing, and

the man's soul is stripped by his increasing terror down to its primitive essentials in the grip of this terror. Instead of getting through the forest, he loses his way turns in a circle and comes back to the point at which he first entered it. There, led by Lem, a chief whom he had injured and who waits there with a sublime confidence that the power of his "charm" will bring the Emperor back. He is shot by the soldiers of his own Negro army. And that is the end of "The Emperor Jones." If the tale has any moral, it might be this: That the good Lord watches over the poor and ignorant to protect them even from clever sharpers of their own tribe.

Such is the play as written. The play as produced was a marvel of stage-acting and stage effects. In fact its great success depends as much on the effective handling of the stage director's part as on anything else. The play was originally billed for a run of two weeks at the Princess Theatre, but the genius of Charles Gilpin in the title-role made it a six months' sensation. Mr. Gilpin's acting is creative acting. It shows comprehension, power, mastery. In the character of an inflated mount-bank with a ballast of shrewd common sense and a cargo of cool confidence, he plays up to, but never overplays, the part. And when the naked soul is stripped by terror of all its trappings, we see the terror, yet cannot blink the courage which carries Brutus Jones through to the awful end of his ordeal. Gilpin acts with taste and discrimination. He holds his reserves of dramatic vigor well in hand, and doesn't use them until he has need of them. Then, in the third, fourth, fifth and sixth scenes, he turns them loose" and results in "irresistible effectiveness" and intensity. And in this, as in other things, it can truly be said that no white actor on Broadway during recent years has surpassed this Negro actor. And it may be fairly questioned whether any has equalled him. His genius in his line is a credit to the dramatic powers of the race to which the great Ira Aldridge belonged.

Among our own writers a previous study of the technique of the drama is not considered a necessary prerequisite to the uttering of opinions on things dramatic; and we find that while some of them, unable to form any qualified judgments of their own, simply re-echo the encomiums of the white writers without understanding the whys and wherefores; a few others with commendable racial pride, but unfortunate misunderstanding, object that the play "does not elevate the Negro." It is necessary to explain, therefore, that the drama is intended to mirror life, either in realistic outward terms, or, as in this case, in the imaginative terms of inner experience. Mr. O'Neill in portraying the soul-of-an-ignorant and superstitious person of any race could not be so silly as to put in that person's mouth the language of a different sort of person. He did the best he could—and he did it very well. And Mr. Gilpin, in acting the play, had to act what was in the play. He couldn't act anything else. When the forms of expression now current among our illiterates shall have died out, then, and not till then, will be unseemly in a play of contemporary character to reproduce these terms.

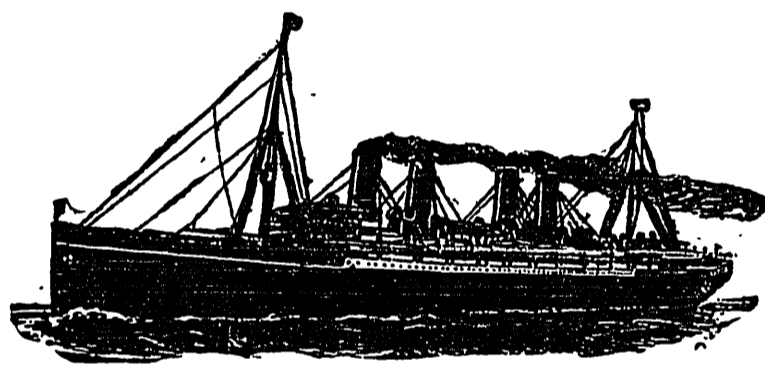
"The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, But in ourselves." To those who have an understanding of the drama and its laws, "The Emperor Jones," as written by O'Neill and acted by Gilpin, will be known for what it is: a great play acted by a great actor and in a noble manner.

HUBERT H. HARRISON.

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City

State

POETRY FOR THE PEOPLE

GOD FORBID!

After hearing Elder J. ... upon ... (that country.)

... drift apart ... together, ... and break my ...

... spring weather. ...

... twins, and ...

... nation!

... that has ...

... remember? ...

... storm ...

... their ...

... nation!

... storm ...

... their ...

... nation!

III
Oh! 'tis well that the future is hid from our sight.
That we walk in the sunshine nor dream of the cloud,
That we cherish a flower and think not of blight;
That we dance on the loam that may weave us a shroud.

IV
It was good, it was kind in the Wise One above
To throw Destiny's veil over the face of his love.
That we tread not the blow that shaft strike at our love
And expect not the beams that shall dry up our tears.

By Lucille Winifred Maraden,
128 West 128d street,
New York City.

REFLECTIONS OF A SLAVE.

(Selection XI.)
A TRIBUTE TO LINCOLN,
O Lincoln! couldst thy spirit speak,
Wert thou the nation's Christ,
Thou wouldst step nobly forward
And brook no slave's tread.

THE ROYALTY THAT SERVED CHAINS
WENT NOT TO FREEDOM'S GOAL
THE KING THAT GRASPED THE FUGITIVE'S
WOULD FREE THE BLOK-MAN'S SOUL.

... wouldst thou could return again
... wouldst thou could buy, wouldst
... wouldst thou could free.

... wouldst thou could buy, wouldst
... wouldst thou could free.

To help the slave in this!
(To be continued)
By Ethel Trew Dunlap,
2223 Wentworth Ave., Chicago, Ill.

MIDNIGHT
The mighty peaks in perfect silence stand.
The wayward winds breathe music in my ear;
The falling leaves in pity touch my hand,
A plaintive hush broods o'er the landscape drear.
The balmy dew bedecks the riverside,
A spicy smell is nestling in the glen,
A solemn peace and swelling glow abide,
And blessings lull the weary brow of men.

CHAS. H. ESTE,
U. N. L. A. Literary Club, Montreal.

THE NEW NEGRO WOMAN'S ATTITUDE TOWARD THE WHITE MAN
Laugh with your lustful eyes,
We will never bend our knees;
The shackles ne'er again shall bind,
The arms which now are free,
Some strike for hope of booty,
Some for the hope of pride,
We battle to defend our all,
For which our mothers died.
We loath you in our bosoms,
We scorn you with our eyes;
We despise you with our latest breath,
And fight you till we die;
We ne'er will ask you quarters,
And we ne'er will be your slave;
But we will swim the sea of virtue,
Till we sink beneath its waves.

Estelle Matthews,
1728 Montrose

WEAK WOMEN ATTENTION!
If you suffer with FEMALE TROUBLES, such as Ovarian Pains, Pains in the lower part of your stomach, Bearing-down Pains, Headache, Backache, Whites, Painful or Irregular Periods, If you have that tired, worn-out, Nervous and run-down feeling so common to women, if you have tried all kinds of medicine, and doctors, and even though you have been told that an operation was necessary, STOP! MAY BE MADE WELL AND STRONG AGAIN. Write for FREE booklet of information and advice today.
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