

The Broadway Appearance of God

Three days of this past week I spent on Broadway - "the Great White Way" - of New York. Perhaps there is no more dazzling, sensuous and pagan place in all of the world. At midnight, on almost every day of the week, its streets and sidewalks are jammed and thronged with people bent on pleasure and in search of thrills. As I pushed my way through these milling millions I was curious to look into the faces of individuals. I wondered what they were <sup>doing</sup> there ~~for~~, what they ~~wanted~~ believed and felt about life, what they knew about themselves - their origin, their destiny, their circumstances. I wondered if any of them cared much about the world in which they lived, if they were blankly and blandly unaware that <sup>they live in a</sup> ~~their~~ world ~~is~~ so perilous that in the next instant they could be pulverized and poisoned in a hydrogen blast. One day in the hurrying mob I looked into the face of a woman as she brushed quickly by. From her <sup>eyes</sup>, and down across her cheeks, there flowed a stream of tears.

It might surprise you that in the midst of the most pagan of all fleshpots I felt the stirring of God's presence. <sup>Yes</sup>, in the midst of all that seems crass and callous I was led to think about God. As one who makes no apology for being a lover of the theatre, I saw on Broadway three plays. The first was "Sweet Bird of Youth" by Tennessee Williams, one of the most gifted playwrights of the American theatre. His play was another of his dreadful journeys into ~~xxx~~ depravity and corruption. Mr. Williams is a serious poet who has an obsession for horror and violence - an obsession which he confesses to be an expression of the hurts and sorrows of his own life. The second play I saw was by a brand-new playwright <sup>and</sup> called "A Raisin in the Sun." It is a story of the humiliations and hopes of a Negro family on Chicago's South Side seeking liberation from the material and spiritual <sup>ghettos</sup> ~~ghettos~~ of life. It was a play of such intense beauty and universal meaning, so powerful in its dramatic evocations, that I wept openly and without shame. And in the third play I saw the Broadway appearance of God.

That is not the ~~title~~ <sup>I saw</sup> of the play, but it is on Broadway and it all about God and his relationships to man. It is called simply "J.B." and it is written by the distinguished American poet and former Librarian of Congress, Archibald MacLeish. Indeed it is news of the most stunning importance when Almighty God is invited to appear on Broadway in a starring role of the American theatre. "J. B." has accomplished a great feat:



it has aroused the world of culture and intellect to a most exciting confrontation with God.

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Mr. MacLeish has ~~xxxxxx~~ his play on the massive frame of the story of Job in the Old Testament - the most adult and demanding book in the entire Bible. It is set in a corner of a gigantic circus tent. There is an upper platform which ~~xxxxxx~~ represents heaven, and a performing ring on the floor which represents earth. God and Satan are played by two old ~~broken~~ down actors, now reduced to peddling balloons and popcorn in the circus. The character of Job is presented in the modern dress of a successful business magnate and, after the current fashion, named "J.B." It is really a play within a play. In the circus ring is enacted a modern version of the story of Job. J. B., a virtuous and successful man, is ~~is~~ enjoying a Thanksgiving dinner with his lovely wife and ~~xxxxxx~~ five handsome children. At the table they remark ~~about~~ their great good fortune and it is obvious that *have a right to their fortune because they believe in themselves.* they believe they ~~are fortunate because they are good.~~ Then, as the two broken-down actors put on the masks of God and Satan, and as they watch from the sides, ~~xxxxxx~~ Job is visited by a series of sudden and unexplained *disasters* ~~tragedies.~~ Two drunken G.I.s appear to tell *him and his wife* ~~them~~ of the unnecessary death of their son just after the war. Then ~~Job and his wife Sarah~~ *they* are struck by the violent deaths of two more *of* ~~their~~ children in a bloody automobile accident. A fourth loss occurs when ~~his~~ *a* daughter is raped and murdered by a psychopath. ~~His~~ *The* fifth child dies in the ruins of a nuclear bombing ~~xxxx~~ at the same time ~~his~~ *J.B.'s* bank is destroyed. As a result of this poisonous bombing J.B. himself is afflicted with cancerous skin sores and reduced in spirit to a shambles of despair. The final agony occurs when his wife, refusing to accept the *injustice* ~~"justice"~~ of such suffering, deserts him. J.B., in a state of human devastation, is left to contemplate and search for the reasons for his overwhelming woes. J.B. becomes a man begging God for the answers to his plight, ~~as~~ *so* the conversations between God and ~~Satan~~ provide a running commentary on his situation as they watch in the wings. Like the biblical Job J.B. is visited by friends or "comforters" who seek to interpret ~~his~~ his situation for him. J.B.'s comforters appear in the representative figures of a political scientist, a psychiatrist and a priest. Each of these seeks to persuade J.B. that his extreme misfortunes are not due to any guilt on his part. They suggest a mechanistic *deterministic* interpretation of life in which such things are inevitable and beyond human control. Even the priest mouths pious platitudes which are completely ~~lacking~~ *in* feeling for the agony



of the stricken hero. J.B. still begs God for justice and an explanation of his troubles.

~~xxxxxxxx~~ The full force of theatrical art has been employed to duplicate the climax of the biblical story in which, after the hero is nearly exhausted in his agonized questioning, the great silence of God is broken by His voice spoken out of the whirlwind. In this modern play that voice comes through in the resounding, highly magnified tones of an ~~amplifying~~ electronic amplifying system. Overwhelmed by the voice of God, Job bows, accepts his fate, and when his wife creeps back out of the rubble of their life to offer him once again her love, they declare their willingness to begin life again where it began milleniums ago. In the last moments of the play J. B. asks his wife, "Why did you leave me alone?" Sarah replies:

I loved you.

I couldn't help you any more.

You wanted justice and there was none --

Only love.

J.B. replies:

He (God) does not love. He

is.

And Sarah says:

But we do. That's the wonder.

They cling to each other. Then she rises, drawing him up, peering at the darkness inside the door. J.B. says: "It's too dark to see" She turns, pulls his head down between her hands and kisses him, and says: "Then blow on the coal of the heart, my darling." ~~And~~

~~J.B. replies: "The coal of the heart . . ."~~ "It's all the light now," says Sarah. She

continues:

Blow on the coal of the heart.

The candles in churches are out.

The lights have gone out in the sky.

Blow on the coal of the heart

And we'll see by and by . . .

. . . . .

We'll see where we are.

The wit won't burn and the wet soul smoulders.

Blow on the coal of the heart and we'll know . . .

We'll know . . .



[illegible]

in the Hebrew poem, Job, unlike the legendary model of resignation, shouts his pride, shrieks his blasphemy and fights with a God who eludes his attacks. He knows much more than physical and moral pain or intellectual bewilderment. He also tastes - and this is his real torture - the cup of bitterness and solitude: estrangement not only from men but also from Deity. At times he almost succumbs to the fascination of the void. He penetrates alive into the lower circles of the hell of being and nonbeing. At other times he rises to the stature of a titan, trying to outreach the limits of humanity, believing himself to be more than a man, the incarnation of an anti-God. He accuses God, his enemy, of caprice, sadism, inhuman cruelty. He compares the Deity to a wild beast, a drunken brute, a monster of irresponsibility. ~~XXXXXXXX~~ . . . . The Job of the biblical poem is no longer the exemplar of resignation and faith who blesses the name of the Lord (1:21); he demands justice, with a bloody forehead but unbowed knees. He hurls his accusations at his Creator, forgetting that he is a creature, and his last word, at the end of the discussion with his comforters, shows an attitude of unmitigated defiance. (Christian Century, Jan. 7, 1959, p. 9, 10)

The comforters of the biblical Job ~~diff~~ differ radically from those of MacLeish's "J.B." Whereas J.B.'s comforters came to convince him that he could not help his misfortunes, the comforters of Job ~~seeks to~~ seek to convince him that he suffers because of guilt and that he ought to make such a confession. Against these suggestions Job bitterly complains.



Job and J.B. share, of course, a similar fate of circumstances which leaves them devastated with disasters.

The Job of the Old Testament comes to a quite different kind of salvation, and for a quite different reason, from that of J.B. After an utterly exhausting experience of protesting his case against God, Job too beholds God in the whirlwind:

Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind, and said,

Who is this that darkeneth counsel

by words without knowledge?

Gird up now thy loins like a man:

for I will demand of thee, and answer thou me.

. . . . .

Wilt thou reduce to nought my righteousness?

Wilt thou condemn me, that thou mayest be justified?

Hast thou an arm like God?

or canst thou thunder with a voice like him?

Deck thyself now with majesty and excellency;

and array thyself with glory and beauty.

Cast abroad the rage of thy wrath:

and behold every one that is proud, and abase him.

Look on every one that is proud, and bring him low;

and tread down the wicked in their place.

Hide them in the dust together;

and bind their faces in the secret place.

Then will I also confess unto thee

that thine own right hand ~~xxxxx~~ can save thee.

And after God had spoken to Job out of the whirlwind, "Job answered the Lord and said,

I know that thou canst do every thing,

and that no purpose of thine can be thwarted.

(Thou saidst,) Who is this that hideth counsel without knowledge?

Therefore, have I uttered that I understand not;

things too wonderful for me, which I knew not.



(Again, thou saidst,) Hear and I will speak;

I will demand of thee, and declare thou unto me.

I had heard of thee by the hearing of the ear;

but now mine eye seeth thee.

Wherefore I abhor myself,

and repent in dust and ashes.

In the ~~end~~ Job receives no rational explanation for his suffering. According to his human terms, there is no justice. Job's salvation is realized when he repents of the sin of condemning and questioning God. In awe and worship he bows before God, beholding his awful majesty and grace. He realizes that he has in his questionings, in his demanding <sup>for</sup> of justice, in his complaints and rebellions against God, trespassed the limits of his humanity. In the end he has to learn that before the Creator he is a creature, a man, not a god. After the exhaustion of his search God speaks to him out of the whirlwind, Job beholds the love and grace of God, and repenting his sins of presumption, ~~he~~ he is able to receive <sup>love and grace</sup> these and be healed. Before he had heard of God only by the hearing of the ear: now he sees God with his eye, not in the sense of physical seeing, but in the sense of the <sup>active</sup> inmost vision. Terrien says ~~xxxx~~ of Job's <sup>active</sup> contemplation of God's creativity: "He becomes alive with the mover of the world." (Job: Post of Existence, p.249)

Though MacLeish has attempted only to mount his dramatic play on the frame of the biblical story of Job, ~~xxxxxx~~ filling in the details with the material of modernity, his Broadway portrayal of God has stirred up a storm of controversy. The Broadway theatre critics have unanimously acclaimed it, Brooks Atkinson hailing it as "One of the memorable works of the century." Considering the theological nature of its theme it is an astonishing "hit" on Broadway at the present time.

In a single issue of the Christian Century in January two outstanding scholars gave it careful attention. Dr. Samuel Terrien, the aforementioned Biblical scholar and author of one of the best volumes on Job, in addition to being the author of the excellent exegesis on Job in the Interpreter's Bible, paid "high tribute . . . to Archibald MacLeish for his audacity in bringing to the stage a subject of biblical magnitude." Still Dr. Terrien enters these sharp criticisms:



The matter at hand is merely the need to recognize the differences. The Joban poet deals with the problem of faith in an evil world, while the author of "J.B." presents modern man's reaction to the problem of evil without the category of faith in a loving God.

By comparison, the J.B. of the modern play is a Job emasculated. Throughout his ordeal J.B. appears as the type of pious convention. His character remains as dormant as the water of a pond, with green scum on its surface. J.B. is merely the diseased victim of fate, who hardly, ~~xxxxxxx~~ if ever at all, rises above the level of intellectual stupor and spiritual impassibility.

The impression remains that the wonder of human love is unrelated to faith in a loving and suffering God. Man remains on his own. The play becomes in effect a song of praise for man's unconquerable will.

The love that MacLeish proposes appears to be noble, but it is noble only on the surface. For it cannot engender victory over the enigma of man's lonely last breath, the ultimate shudder before the open grave. It is a love that dies with the human flesh, for it knows nothing of eternity. It is a sentiment born of man, not of God, and man remains a speck lost in the infinity of space and time. The only God is man's feeling deified, which is a caricature of divinity.

(Christianity Century, Jan. 7, 1959, p. 9-11)

In the same issue, Dr. Tom F. Driver, also of Union Seminary, who is the Century's drama critic, and who preached from this pulpit just about a year ago, judges the play as a drama and comes to essentially the same conclusion. Though also hailing it as a masterpiece of theatricality, Driver asserted: "It begins by raising the most difficult of religious questions, the justification of the ways of God to man; and ~~xxxx~~ before it is through, it jumps down from that high religious plane to a purely humanistic one, with the result that the play seems to be divided against itself. . . As it turns out, J.B. rebuffs both God and ~~Satan~~ Satan. He does start all over again, but it is because he discovers within himself the courage and confidence to do so. He is made to assert that he will never bow to God again." (Ibid. p. 21)

Perhaps for the record it should be noted here that two other outstanding observers of the professional theatre render the same verdict against "J.B." They are Henry Hewes, <sup>drama</sup> theatre critic for the Saturday Review (May 10, 1958, p. 22 and Jan. 3, 1959, p. 22), and Robert Brustein, Professor of Dramatic Literature at Columbia University who writes his views in the March, 1959 issue of Harper's Magazine.

One of the most startling developments, however, has been the leaping into the fray of the eminent President of Union Theological Seminary, Henry Pitt Van Dusen who, three weeks after Terrien and Driver, takes his corner in the Christianity Century (Jan. 28, 1959, p. 106 ff.) to engage his two distinguished faculty members in combat. "I must confess,"



he wrote, "that I was led to very different conclusions, that both my colleagues' critiques strike me as strangely one-sided, perverse and unconvincing. . . It seems to me that on balance, in the Terrien and Driver vs. MacLeish dispute, that the latter comes off victor. " Dr. Van Dusen continues:

• Why should J.B. be expected to react to these calamities in slavish imitation of his biblical model? If I understand ~~Mr. MacLeish~~ him Mr. MacLeish authentically sets forth the response of a very modern man to substantially parallel adversities. And again, his J.B. is far more convincing, as he is certain vastly more moving, than the incredible Job.

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If MacLeish has recourse to human integrity and human love for the answer to J.B.'s need, it is, again, because the biblical Job offers him nothing beyond obeisance before an arbitrary and heartless Cosmic Power.

It is always a deep desire of mine to hear from ~~him~~ a writer himself concerning his work. Mr. MacLeish has written explicitly of his own play: he explains that he is following the ~~book~~ Bible itself in implying that after his suffering Job is restored to life and love again. This is the way the book of Job ends in our Bible. This is the <sup>prose</sup> ~~ending~~ ending tacked on by later redactors to the magnificent poem. Explains MacLeish: "

What love does is to affirm. It affirms the worth of life in spite of life. It affirms the wonder and the beauty of the human creature, mortal and insignificant and ignorant though he be. It answers life with life and so justifies that bravely tolling line of Shakespeare's that declares that love "bears it out even to the edge of doom." Love does: and for us no less than for that ancient man who took back his life again after all that wretchedness. J.B., like Job, covers his mouth with his hand; acquiesces in the vast indifference of the universe as all men must who truly face it; takes back his life again. In love. To live. (N.Y. Times, Dec. 7, 1958)

Now why do you suppose a preacher would go all of the way to New York City to see a play on Broadway, and then return to Ohio to preach a sermon summarizing what he has seen and thought? I must tell you that it is because of the astonishing fact that God is appearing there on Broadway. He is being discussed and considered and given an audience. To be sure it is in a secular setting without a Christian background. But in this age when modern man is so estranged from God, and when God seems so remote from "the Great White Way" I think it is of stunning significance that men like MacLeish, of the utmost seriousness of mind and purpose, are featuring God in their art and in their discussion. We back here in Ohio ought to be aware of the appearance of God on Broadway.

To be sure Mr. MacLeish is not a conforming Christian. He may not be a Christian at all. He is in fact a humanist and a secularist and the ending of his play is, as Dr.



Terrien alleges, secularist and humanist in its tone and understanding. But I went to Broadway to see if I thought that we as Christians have anything to say to those who are *deeply* engrossed in a discussion about God. MacLeish's J.B. is, as Van Dusen contends, believable, relevant, and real. He is someone we can identify *ourselves* with. In this sense the playwright has performed a most valuable service. He, a humanist, has taken a mighty page from the Bible, thrust it into the revealing light of the twentieth century, and made us think about our faith. Is it not both ironic and startling that a humanist has made us rediscover the Book of Job, one of the most precious treasures of the world's literature? Is it not astounding that he has made us - and thousands on Broadway - think about God?

Do we have any better answer to the perplexing, *aching*, ~~stabbing~~ questions raised in our own Book of Job? Do we have anything more to say about the bafflements and predicaments of modern men as they stand in awful contemplation of the staggering mystery and wonder of God? I think we do! Let me offer an answer by first recalling a most poignant and powerful line from the latest play of Tennessee Williams. In the midst of this sordid disclosure of human corruption, violence, sadism, and depravity, a mysterious character moves ~~xxx~~ us deeply with this statement: "I believe that the silence of God, the absolute speechlessness of Him is a long, long and awful thing that the whole world is lost because of. I think it is yet to be broken to any man living or any yet lived on earth." (quoted in Sat. Rev. March 28, 1959, p.26) There are ~~multitudes~~ of modern, tortured men who would say the same. But you see we Christians who stand in the tradition of the great history of Israel believe that God has spoken. ~~xxxx~~ To the twentieth century our's is a scandalous and *in*credible claim, but the Letter to the Hebrews in the New Testament opens by stating that claim: "In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature, upholding the universe by his word of power." (1:1-3) Yea, this is the God who has spoken to us through the burning bush which blazed in the eyes of Moses; *"the still small voice," which Elijah heard after* this is the God who has spoken to us through *"the earthquakes, wind and fire"* and *"in the still small voice"* which Elijah heard; indeed this is the God who has spoken to us through the whirlwind in Job, and through the mighty preachments of the prophets, - Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, and Jeremiah. And he has spoken to us through Jesus Christ our Lord.



This is the God who has ~~appeared~~ appeared to men on Mount Sinai, in ~~Bethlehem~~ Bethlehem, and on Golgotha's Hill. Today this same God is appearing to the uninitiated and the unbelieving on Broadway. It is our privilege to witness to what we know of him on Broadway, on Main Street, and on ~~Summit~~ <sup>Broad</sup> Street in Columbus.

One day in New York this week I stopped at the corner of 42nd Street and the Avenue of Americas. My eye was attracted to two huge signs painted on the top of a tall building on the corner. The topmost sign was an advertisement for the play "J.B." Directly beneath was another large advertisement for Miller High Life Beer. The juxtaposition of those two signs suggested something to me: multitudes of tortured, empty, pagan men throng our city streets today desperately imbibing what they think is "high life." They too know the sufferings, the sorrows, the desperate fears <sup>and questionings</sup> of Job. But all of the time we are the keepers of the highest life men can know in this world - the life which is lived ~~in~~ in worship before the majesty, the mystery, the wonder of our God and our Lord. The world will believe us only when His Way, His Truth and His Life, becomes our Way, our Truth and **Our Life**. The world will not believe in our God until we enact our faith in the drama of our lives on Broadway and ~~Summit~~ <sup>Broad</sup> Street in Columbus, Ohio.