

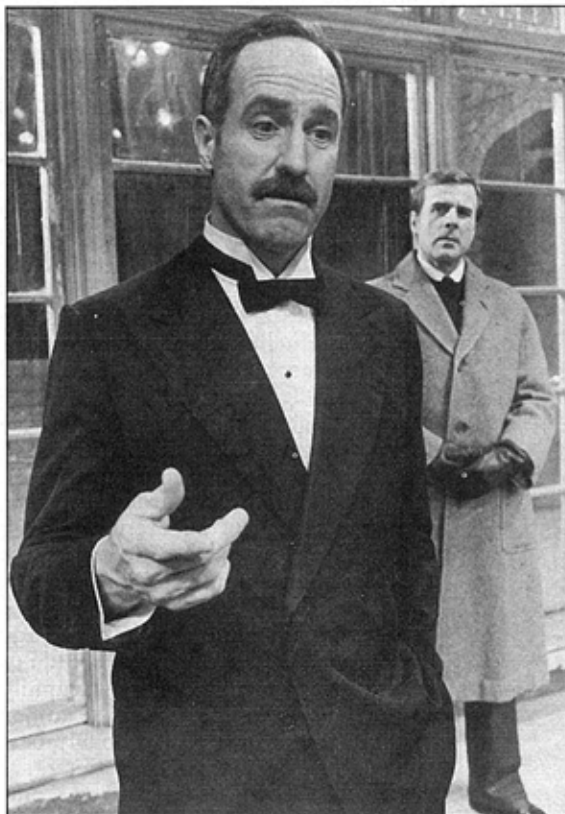
EXTREMITIES

"...*Quartermaine's Terms* is a treasure only a fool would miss. The imbecile *Moose Murders* was an all-time low..."

I HAVE WRITTEN ABOUT *Quartermaine's Terms* (January 24), when it was at the Long Wharf; let me add a few reflections, now that the production has been transferred intact to the nice new Playhouse 91, where it and the play continue to be a treasure only fools would pass by. Here is the view from the staff room of a small Cambridge school of English for foreigners, where the staff are observed disporting themselves in five scenes spread over some three years. Simon Gray has captured his seven characters, as it were, stroboscopically, at five fairly typical, fairly consistent, and yet extraordinary moments of their lives. He has done what Muybridge did for our understanding of a horse's running, only this is about how *people* run, climb, crawl, stagger, and fall through their lives. Even where lives seem to be in stasis, things are changing or collapsing around them, and against a different backdrop, or with the rug pulled out from under it, even sameness is no longer the same. Though superficially a reckless comedy, *Quartermaine's Terms* is also terribly incisive, terribly wise, and terribly terrible. It only hurts when we laugh, but we laugh often and tragically.

And this staff room is really a most ingenious prism through which to view the entire world. It is a kind of transitory resting place between the grimly ludicrous little realities of teaching an odd assortment of unsortable-out students and the grim and ludicrous and not so little realities of living. And in this ostensibly safe, neutral zone, one realizes how ludicrous and grim and oddly unsorted-out it all is, oneself included. With a mere seven characters and five sudden, flash photos wrested from the surrounding dark, Gray has created a *theatrum mundi*, a passing parade of wistful grotesques, letting their hair down or trying to keep their chins up, heading toward or away from awareness, and always, as they think they sail through disasters, coming a little closer to their own final reckonings.

As for *Quartermaine* himself, what an original and touching portrait he is of a slow-witted but enormously decent man, enabling us to see the complexities, subtleties, poignancies even in what we have tended—crassly—to perceive as impervious, monolithic, be-



End of term: Ramsay and Cunningham in *Quartermaine*.

nightedness. Under Kenneth Frankel's fine direction, immersed in and further revealed by David Jenkins's scenery, Pat Collins's lighting, and Bill Walker's costumes—all good—Remak Ramsay, Caroline Lagerfelt, Dana Ivey, Anthony Heald, and John Cunningham continue to be first-rate. If only Roy Poole and Kelsey Grammer were up to them; but at least they are not so poor as to be unduly distracting.

THE THEATER BEING IN THE SAD SHAPE it is in (and I don't mean this season only), selective patrons cannot even imagine what horrors reviewers are exposed to, night after nightmarish night. St. John of the Cross may have had an inkling when he wrote of the dark night of the soul, but even that was, for him, a *noche dichosa*; there was nothing lucky about the night (actually afternoon) on which I saw *Moose Murders*, which is as close as I ever hope to get to the bottomless pit. We critics tend to console

ourselves during what seems less and less aptly named the intermission—"remission" would be nearer the mark—by bringing up (so to speak) the titles of earlier all-time lows. On this occasion, such previous contenders as *Marlowe* and *Cleavage* were cited, but the few hardy survivors of those disasters pronounced them painless compared to even the first act of *Moose Murders*. And none of us then had a notion of what the second act held in store.

This abysmally imbecile comedy-thriller takes place (took place—it closed after one supererogatory performance) at the Wild Moose Lodge, in a part of the Adirondacks located somewhere between the Himalayas and Patagonia, on a furibundly thunderstormy night with all bridges down and all communication with the civilized world, or mere sanity, severed. The lodge is run by one solitary Indian, Joe Buffalo Dance, who

speaks pure Tonto, except when he takes off his braided Indian wig, at which times he lapses into his allegedly natural speech, a brogue so thick that the Gate Theatre wouldn't wish it on the Abbey. Stranded here is a husband-and-wife musical act: Snooks Keene, short of stature, skirt, and talent, who sings and wisecracks, and her blind husband, Howie, who accompanies her on the hand organ. They are strident, out of tune, and totally inept, but at least they didn't write *Moose Murders*. She jokes ("Go peel a scab!" she'll tell Nurse Dagmar, but I'm anticipating) while he falls all over the furniture. There being no trace of guests at the lodge, the act must have been hired to entertain the stuffed moose heads, which proliferate in all sizes from deer to elephant. There is also a non-eponymous stuffed goose, but then "*Goose Murders*" would read less well on a marquee.

The lodge has been acquired by the millionaire Hedda Holloway, who ar-

“...*Living Quarters* is a mediocre drama by an uneven playwright...”

rives with her entourage. Her husband, Sidney, who, since a fall from the roof, has become a total paralytic, swathed, mummylike, in bandages from top to toe, and pushed about in a wheelchair when not forgotten outside in the pouring rain; his nurse, Dagmar, a huge, Nazi-style virago, in audacious front-and-rear décolletage; son Stinky, a brain-damaged dope fiend, whose one aim is to sleep with his mother, at whom he keeps lunging; Lauraine, the fluttery and anorectic elder daughter, accompanied by Nelson, her sad-sack, chip-on-the-shoulder husband; and, lastly, little daughter Gay, who, when she can briefly be prevented from tap-dancing, is told that her father is a vegetable (what did she think he was, blancmange?) and exclaims, “Like a lima bean? Gross me out!” It gradually emerges that there are three different cabals among these good folks, each hell-bent on liquidating the others for the sake of the Holloway fortune. And in mid-storm, the dismissed Buffalo Dance returns disguised as a moose, to join in the murderous fun.

In the course of an evening during which blind Howie gets a gun and shoots to kill and the mummy rises from the wheelchair to kick the moose in the privates, where two others have already kicked him, I naturally turned sleuth; to track down the perpetrators, I cannily scanned the program credits. The author is one Arthur Bicknell, “probably best known for *My Great Dead Sister* . . . produced . . . by The Production Company and directed by Norman René.” That was a potent clue: Over the years, there has been a steady stream of malodorous junk emanating from The Production Company and its artistic director, Norman René. *My Great Dead Sister* was a flop, but *Masterpieces*, a play for which Mr. Bicknell is probably less well known, will soon be revived by his alma mater, Ithaca College, and those of you who missed his work here might well consider catching that one, there.

Moose Murders, which featured Lillie Robertson, was directed by her husband, John Roach, rather the way a blind director repeatedly kicked in the groin might stage it. Mr. Roach, who is president of The Production Company, looms equally large in Force Ten Productions, which, besides producing *Moose Murders*, claims among its previous ventures *Paradise Alley* (a dog for which it did receive screen credit even though its contribution was tenuous and Sylvester Stallone had banned Roach and his partner from the premises) and a film with Karen Black no one I know has heard of. And so on through the program notes

(and behind them), in dizzyingly incestuous spirals. Backing all this, I learn, is Texas oil money; and sitting in front, on the afternoon I attended, were creatures if not from the black lagoon, surely from the neighboring gutters. One enormous, pear-shaped individual, arriving late with vomit down his shirtfront, smelled so bad that he sent three nearby critics and their companions scurrying for the back of the theater, and, by intermission, had emptied out several rows around him. *Moose Murders* is the only stage play I ever saw in stereo-odoriferous Smellorama. So what is ailing Broadway? Rank stupidity.

THE IRISH PLAYWRIGHT BRIAN FRIEL IS A strikingly uneven artist. He can write plays as good (or, at least, as challenging) as *Philadelphia, Here I Come!*, *Faith Healer*, and *Translations*, but also such mediocrities or worse as . . . well, as the current *Living Quarters* (1977), which, though performed at the Vineyard Theatre, is far from vintage Friel. Be it said, though, that the space, a converted boiler room (or whatever), is about as inhospitable to theater as a space can be, and that the cast, under Susan Einhorn's less than inspired direction, is even more wildly uneven than Friel's output. *Living Quarters*, moreover, has one of those omniscient narrators of whom Friel, in his weaker moments, is inordinately fond; they—this one, certainly—must be taken for God and an excuse for the sort of metaphysicizing and Pirandellianizing that no longer holds any dramatic or philosophical interest.

An Irish officer in the U.N. peace-keeping forces returns from five months in the Near East, where he performed an act of supreme heroism. Back home in Ballybeg, he is about to receive celebrations, honors, a promotion; also the affectionate tribute of his scattered, but now respectfully reunited, family; and, best of all, the love of his much younger second wife, a bride of ten days when he had to ship out. During his absence, she betrayed him with his rebellious son, which leads to an obvious, portentously telescoped tragedy, about which Friel has nothing new to say, though he keeps crouching and posturing as if he were about to leap to a previously unattained ledge of high awareness.

There is an absolutely right performance from Robin Bartlett, who does improve by leaps and bounds and manages accents expertly. Two others (Vince O'Brien and Anne O'Sullivan) can pass muster, but the rest range from spurious to bad (Michael Butler) and downright appalling (Tony Pasquolini). ■