

DRAMA

C R I T I C I S M

V O L U M E

36

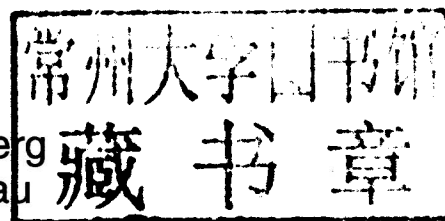
DRAMA

C R I T I C I S M

Criticism of the Most Significant and Widely Studied
Dramatic Works from All the World's Literatures

VOLUME 36

Thomas J. Schoenberg
Lawrence J. Trudeau
Project Editors



Drama Criticism, Vol. 36

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Preface

D*rama Criticism (DC)* is principally intended for beginning students of literature and theater as well as the average playgoer. The series is therefore designed to introduce readers to the most frequently studied playwrights of all time periods and nationalities and to present discerning commentary on dramatic works of enduring interest. Furthermore, *DC* seeks to acquaint the reader with the uses and functions of criticism itself. Selected from a diverse body of commentary, the essays in *DC* offer insights into the authors and their works but do not require that the reader possess a wide background in literary studies. Where appropriate, reviews of important productions of the plays discussed are also included to give students a heightened awareness of drama as a dynamic art form, one that many claim is fully realized only in performance.

DC was created in response to suggestions by the staffs of high school, college, and public libraries. These librarians observed a need for a series that assembles critical commentary on the world's most renowned dramatists in the same manner as Gale's *Short Story Criticism (SSC)* and *Poetry Criticism (PC)*, which present material on writers of short fiction and poetry. Although playwrights are covered in such Gale literary criticism series as *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)*, *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism (TCLC)*, *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism (NCLC)*, *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800 (LC)*, and *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism (CMLC)*, *DC* directs more concentrated attention on individual dramatists than is possible in the broader, survey-oriented entries in these Gale series. Commentary on the works of William Shakespeare may be found in *Shakespearean Criticism (SC)*.

Scope of the Series

By collecting and organizing commentary on dramatists, *DC* assists students in their efforts to gain insight into literature, achieve better understanding of the texts, and formulate ideas for papers and assignments. A variety of interpretations and assessments is offered, allowing students to pursue their own interests and promoting awareness that literature is dynamic and responsive to many different opinions.

Approximately five to ten authors are included in each volume, and each entry presents a historical survey of the critical response to that playwright's work. The length of an entry is intended to reflect the amount of critical attention the author has received from critics writing in English and from foreign critics in translation. Every attempt has been made to identify and include the most significant essays on each author's work. In order to provide these important critical pieces, the editors sometimes reprint essays that have appeared elsewhere in Gale's literary criticism series. Such duplication, however, never exceeds twenty percent of a *DC* volume.

Organization of the Book

A *DC* entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** consists of the playwright's most commonly used name, followed by birth and death dates. If an author consistently wrote under a pseudonym, the pseudonym is listed in the author heading and the real name given in parentheses on the first line of the introduction. Also located at the beginning of the introduction are any name variations under which the dramatist wrote, including transliterated forms of the names of authors whose languages use nonroman alphabets.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author and the critical debates surrounding his or her work.

- The list of **Principal Works** is divided into two sections. The first section contains the author's dramatic pieces and is organized chronologically by date of first performance. If this has not been conclusively determined, the composition or publication date is used. The second section provides information on the author's major works in other genres.
- Essays offering **overviews of the dramatist's entire literary career** give the student broad perspectives on the writer's artistic development, themes, and concerns that recur in several of his or her works, the author's place in literary history, and other wide-ranging topics.
- **Criticism** of individual plays offers the reader in-depth discussions of a select number of the author's most important works. In some cases, the criticism is divided into two sections, each arranged chronologically. When a significant performance of a play can be identified (typically, the premier of a twentieth-century work), the first section of criticism will feature **production reviews** of this staging. Most entries include sections devoted to **critical commentary** that assesses the literary merit of the selected plays. When necessary, essays are carefully excerpted to focus on the work under consideration; often, however, essays and reviews are reprinted in their entirety. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
- A complete **Bibliographic Citation**, designed to help the interested reader locate the original essay or book, precedes each piece of criticism. Source citations in the Literary Criticism Series follow University of Chicago Press style, as outlined in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 14th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993).
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

Cumulative Indexes

A **Cumulative Author Index** lists all of the authors that appear in a wide variety of reference sources published by Gale, including *DC*. A complete list of these sources is found facing the first page of the Author Index. The index also includes birth and death dates and cross references between pseudonyms and actual names.

A **Cumulative Topic Index** lists the literary themes and topics treated in *DC* as well as other Literature Criticism series.

A **Cumulative Nationality Index** lists all authors featured in *DC* by nationality, followed by the number of the *DC* volume in which their entry appears.

A **Cumulative Title Index** lists in alphabetical order the individual plays discussed in the criticism contained in *DC*. Each title is followed by the author's last name and corresponding volume and page numbers where commentary on the work is located. English-language translations of original foreign-language titles are cross-referenced to the foreign titles so that all references to discussion of a work are combined in one listing.

Citing Drama Criticism

When citing criticism reprinted in the Literary Criticism Series, students should provide complete bibliographic information so that the cited essay can be located in the original print or electronic source. Students who quote directly from reprinted criticism may use any accepted bibliographic format, such as University of Chicago Press style or Modern Language As-

sociation (MLA) style. Both the MLA and the University of Chicago formats are acceptable and recognized as being the current standards for citations. It is important, however, to choose one format for all citations; do not mix the two formats within a list of citations.

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Rocha, Mark William. "Black Madness in August Wilson's 'Down the Line' Cycle." In *Madness in Drama*, edited by James Redmond, 191-201. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993. Reprinted in *Drama Criticism*. Vol. 31, edited by Thomas J. Schoenberg and Lawrence J. Trudeau, 229-35. Detroit: Gale, 2008.

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Suggestions are Welcome

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Contents

Preface vii

Acknowledgments xi

Literary Criticism Series Advisory Board xiii

Christopher Fry 1907-2005	1
<i>English playwright and screenwriter</i>	
Jean Giraudoux 1882-1944	90
<i>French playwright, novelist, short story writer, and essayist</i>	
Robert E. Sherwood 1896-1955	171
<i>American playwright, screenwriter, nonfiction writer, and novelist</i>	
Peter Weiss 1916-1982	206
<i>German-born Swedish playwright, novelist, essayist, and poet</i>	

Literary Criticism Series Cumulative Author Index 329

Literary Criticism Series Cumulative Topic Index 443

DC Cumulative Nationality Index 459

DC Cumulative Title Index 461

Christopher Fry

1907-2005

(Born Christopher Fry Harris) English playwright and screenwriter.

INTRODUCTION

Fry was hailed as a great talent in the London theater of the 1940s to 1960s for his comic and religious plays that explored the often paradoxical human condition in blank verse. At the height of his career his plays were compared favorably with those of T. S. Eliot, Christopher Marlowe, and even William Shakespeare, and productions featured such acting luminaries as John Gielgud, Richard Burton, and Laurence Olivier. Both audiences and critics were enchanted by his elegant and witty verse dialogue, which served as a marked and, at the time, welcome contrast to the realist drama that had been popular since the late nineteenth century. Following the 1961 production of the historical drama *Curtmantle*, however, Fry wrote few original plays. Literary trends led critics to reconsider his body of work, and the resulting evaluation was not as favorable as it had been in previous decades. Later in his career he focused primarily on adaptations and screenplays, many of them for BBC television. Fry's best-known plays—*A Phoenix Too Frequent* (1946), *The Lady's Not for Burning* (1948), and *A Sleep of Prisoners* (1951)—are revived on occasion for short runs, with *The Lady's Not for Burning* considered the most accomplished both thematically and linguistically.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Fry was born Christopher Fry Harris in Bristol, England, on December 18, 1907. His father, Charles John Harris, was a master builder and lay preacher who died when Fry was three years old. In 1913 his mother, Emma Marguerite Fry Harris, moved the family to Bedford, where she and her sister took in boarders to earn enough money to pay for Fry's schooling. From 1918 to 1926 Fry attended Bedford Modern School, where he developed a fascination with the theater and began writing plays of his own. After graduating Fry became a teacher at Bedford Froebel Kindergarten. He briefly worked as an actor and office worker at Citizens House Theatre in Bath in 1927 before returning to the field of education, this time as headmaster of Hazelwood Preparatory School in Limpsfield, from 1928 to 1931.

Still intrigued by the theater, in 1932 Fry helped found the Tunbridge Wells Repertory Players, where he served as an actor, writer, and director. In 1934 he directed and played male lead in the premiere English performance of George Bernard Shaw's *A Village Wooing*. The play was paired with Fry's own *Youth and the Peregrines*, which he had written during his teens, as curtain-raiser. Fry married Phyllis Hart, a journalist, in 1936. While living in the town of Steyning Fry was commissioned to write a play celebrating the jubilee year of a local church. The resulting work, *Boy with a Cart* (1938), was heavily influenced by T. S. Eliot's dramatic works, and Eliot befriended Fry after the play's successful production.

After moving to a cottage in Oxfordshire in 1939, Fry served as artistic director of the Oxford Playhouse until he was called up for World War II military service in 1940. A committed pacifist, Fry served as a sewer cleaner in a noncombatant army unit for four years. He returned to the Oxford Playhouse as visiting director and in 1945 became director of London's Arts Theatre Club as well. Then in 1946 Fry's first major play, *A Phoenix Too Frequent*, was produced, making Fry something of an overnight sensation.

By the time *The Lady's Not for Burning* was staged in 1948 Fry was credited with revitalizing the flagging postwar theater. In 1949 John Gielgud revived the play and cast himself in the lead; Gielgud also cast a young Richard Burton in one of his first roles. In 1950 Laurence Olivier played the lead in Fry's *Venus Observed* in London, and *The Lady's Not for Burning* opened on Broadway, with Burton reprising his role. Not long after, Fry was accused by less mainstream critics of representing the establishment theater—especially because many of his works were commissioned pieces—and being overly concerned with wordplay at the expense of plot and action. His plays fell out of favor, but he experienced considerable success in the later 1950s and 1960s writing screenplays for major Hollywood productions, including the epic 1959 film *Ben Hur*. Fry's last significant work for the stage was *A Yard of Sun* (1970).

In his last three decades Fry concentrated on translating and adapting works for both print and the English stage, as well as writing screenplays for BBC films. In 2001

his retrospective of the preceding one hundred years of history, *A Ringing of Bells*, was staged as a dramatic reading in London. Fry died in Chichester on June 30, 2005.

MAJOR DRAMATIC WORKS

Fry's theatrical canon is punctuated by four works that he conceived as a seasonal tetralogy: *The Lady's Not for Burning*, representing spring; *A Yard of Sun*, summer; *Venus Observed*, autumn; and *The Dark Is Light Enough* (1954) winter. *The Lady's Not for Burning* is a historical comedy set in the early fifteenth century. A cynical, embittered soldier named Thomas, returning to his village after fighting in the Hundred Years' War, claims he has murdered the town vagabond and insists on being executed. Meanwhile, a beautiful, wealthy, and unconventional young woman who loves life, Jen-net, has been accused of witchcraft—of turning the same vagabond into a dog—and is slated to be burned at the stake so that the town can inherit her money. A metaphor for the stagnation, despair, and disillusionment in postwar Europe, the play juxtaposes Thomas's desire to die with Jen-net's will to live. The townspeople are portrayed as hypocritical buffoons, and the social order is upended as Thomas and Jen-net fall in love despite their existential differences, both escaping death willingly, and the missing vagabond turns up alive and well.

A Yard of Sun, produced twenty-two years after *The Lady's Not for Burning*, concerns an Italian family's involvement in Sienna's first Palio horse race after the end of World War II. Sibling and class resentment come into play when it is revealed the new owners of the Palazzo del Traguardo are the long-absent son and daughter-in-law of the Palazzo's caretaker. In the meantime, rival jockeys come to town and begin competing with each other before the race even begins. In *Venus Observed* an elderly and emotionally distant duke in search of a wife falls in love with his son's intended. The resulting tension between generations is depicted as both comic and tragic. *The Dark Is Light Enough* concerns an elderly countess's attempt during the 1848 revolutions in Hungary to save the life of her former son-in-law after he deserts his post in the army and is subject to execution. Like *Venus Observed*, *The Dark Is Light Enough* offers no straightforward answers to life's complexities. Violence and death intermingle with farce and humor.

In 1946 Fry's play *A Phoenix Too Frequent* was a moderate success in London, and it continues to be one of his most discussed works. An adaptation of an ancient Roman story, *A Phoenix Too Frequent* deals with themes similar to those of *The Lady's Not for*

Burning and, like that play, it ultimately accepts that life is to be embraced despite its many complications. In the play, a young widow goes to her dead husband's tomb, determined to remain with his body until she dies. But she is quickly distracted by a handsome young soldier who happens by. He has lost a body he was charged with protecting and is now in danger of being put to death. The widow is taken with the soldier and soon forgets her devotion to her husband, even suggesting that the soldier use her husband's corpse to save himself.

Another of Fry's well-regarded works is *A Sleep of Prisoners*, a religious drama in verse that Fry stipulated be staged in churches, although it has also been produced in traditional theaters. *A Sleep of Prisoners* uses stories from the Old Testament to illustrate the effects of violence on the lives of four soldiers being held prisoner in a church during war. This work employs a play-within-a-play structure, embedding the biblical stories into the prisoners' dreams, which are acted out over the course of the play.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Fry's contribution to midcentury theater is now considered minor, but during his time he was credited with reviving English theater with his appeals to the human need for mystery and magic in life. His lifelong interest in spiritual matters led him to declare himself a pacifist, and he at one time dabbled in the Quaker religious philosophy. These religious perambulations strongly informed his writing, and throughout his career he strove to explore the human experience through the prism of spirituality, despite not being a strictly Christian writer. Derek Stanford has written of Fry: "In a universe often viewed as mechanistic, he has posited the principle of mystery; in an age of necessitarian ethics, he has stood unequivocally for ideas of free-will. In theater technique, he has gaily ignored the sacrosanct conventions of naturalistic drama; and in terms of speech, he has brought back poetry on the stage with undoctored abandon."

Fry's decision to write his plays in blank verse has also been the subject of critical scrutiny. From the start of his career Fry was compared with T. S. Eliot, who also wrote plays in verse. According to Len Ring, Fry's comedies *A Phoenix Too Frequent*, *The Lady's Not for Burning*, and *Venus Observed* succeed where Eliot's do not: "Of the plays Fry wrote for the commercial stage, [these three plays] were the most successful and have in common that exuberant, lyrical quality for which he is chiefly noted, and which makes him far more interesting than Eliot as a challenge to the prose convention of

today." In Ring's view "the most striking characteristic" of Fry's verse is "the self-consciousness with which the words and phrases are generated. The language is not a passive tool, but capable of a life of its own." Later critical opinion has held that Fry's works lack the philosophical underpinnings that Eliot's do, and that they are largely aesthetically and linguistically pleasing trifles but not great works of drama.

In general American audiences were not as impressed with Fry's plays as English ones were. The first New York production of *A Phoenix Too Frequent* ran for just five days. In his review of that production, theater critic Joseph Wood Krutch upheld the opinion that Fry's talents were mainly as a wordsmith: "The author's very special and undeniable gift is not so much intellectual as verbal, and what makes the play—that is, if you think it is made at all—is his way with words." Expectations were high when *The Lady's Not for Burning* was brought to the United States, and most critics found that the play did meet them. However, Margaret Marshall, while admiring Fry's writing, thought *The Lady's Not for Burning* failed to exude a sense of purpose or meaning beyond its wit and wordplay, stating that Fry's "control of his instrument, the play in verse, is remarkable. He displays great wit, and there are hints of wisdom. But he has not yet hit upon a theme which would demonstrate the extent and depth of the wisdom at his command."

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Plays

Youth and the Peregrines 1934
To Sea in a Sieve 1935
Open Door 1936
The Boy with a Cart 1938
Thursday's Child 1939
The Tower 1939
A Phoenix Too Frequent 1946
The Firstborn 1947
The Lady's Not for Burning 1948
Thor, with Angels 1948
Ring round the Moon [adaptor; from *L'Invitation au château* by Jean Anouilh] 1950
Venus Observed 1950
A Sleep of Prisoners 1951
The Dark Is Light Enough 1954
The Lark [adaptor; from *L'Alouette* by Jean Anouilh] 1955
Tiger at the Gates [adaptor; from *La guerre de Troie n'aura pas lieu* by Jean Giraudoux] 1955

Duel of Angels [adaptor; from *Pour Lucrèce* by Jean Giraudoux] 1958
Curtmantle 1961
Judith [adaptor; from the play of the same name by Jean Giraudoux] 1962
Peer Gynt [adaptor; from the play of the same name by Henrik Ibsen] 1970
A Yard of Sun 1970
Cyrano de Bergerac [adaptor; from the play of the same name by Edmond Rostand] 1975
One Thing More; or, Caedmon Construed 1986
A Journey into Light 1992
A Ringing of Bells 2001

Other Major Works

The Beggar's Opera [adaptor, with Denis Cannan; from the play of the same name by John Gay] (screenplay) 1953
A Queen Is Crowned (screenplay) 1953
Ben Hur (screenplay) 1959
Barabbas [adaptor; from the novel of the same name by Pär Lagerkvist] (screenplay) 1962
The Bible: In the Beginning [with Jonathan Griffin, Ivo Perilli, and Vittorio Bonicelli] (screenplay) 1966

AUTHOR COMMENTARY

Christopher Fry (essay date 1950)

SOURCE: Fry, Christopher. "Comedy." In *Theatre in the Twentieth Century*, edited by Robert W. Corrigan, pp. 111-13. New York: Grove Press, 1963.

[In the following essay, originally published in *Adelphi* in 1950, Fry maintains that comedy and tragedy are complementary genres and that comedy allows for a more palatable, and also more truthful, interpretation of reality.]

A friend once told me that when he was under the influence of ether he dreamed he was turning over the pages of a great book, in which he knew he would find, on the last page, the meaning of life. The pages of the book were alternately tragic and comic, and he turned page after page, his excitement growing, not only because he was approaching the answer but because he couldn't know, until he arrived, on which side of the book the final page would be. At last it came: the universe opened up to him in a hundred words: and they were uproariously funny. He came back to consciousness crying with laughter, remembering everything. He opened his lips to speak. It was then that the great and comic answer plunged back out of his reach.

If I had to draw a picture of the person of Comedy it is so I should like to draw it: the tears of laughter running down the face, one hand still lying on the tragic page which so nearly contained the answer, the lips about to frame the great revelation, only to find it had gone as disconcertingly as a chair twitched away when we went to sit down. Comedy is an escape, not from truth but from despair: a narrow escape into faith. It believes in a universal cause for delight, even though knowledge of the cause is always twitched away from under us, which leaves us to rest on our own buoyancy. In tragedy every moment is eternity; in comedy eternity is a moment. In tragedy we suffer pain; in comedy pain is a fool, suffered gladly.

Charles Williams once said to me—indeed it was the last thing he said to me: he died not long after: and it was shouted from the tailboard of a moving bus, over the heads of pedestrians and bicyclists outside the Midland Station, Oxford—“When we’re dead we shall have the sensation of having enjoyed life altogether, whatever has happened to us.” The distance between us widened, and he leaned out into the space so that his voice should reach me: “Even if we’ve been murdered, what a pleasure to have been capable of it!”; and, having spoken the words for comedy, away he went like the revelation which almost came out of the ether.

He was not at all saying that everything is for the best in the best of all possible worlds. He was saying—or so it seems to me—that there is an angle of experience where the dark is distilled into light: either here or hereafter, in or out of time: where our tragic fate finds itself with perfect pitch, and goes straight to the key which creation was composed in. And comedy senses and reaches out to this experience. It says, in effect, that, groaning as we may be, we move in the figure of a dance, and, so moving, we trace the outline of the mystery.

Laughter did not come by chance, but how or why it came is beyond comprehension, unless we think of it as a kind of perception. The human animal, beginning to feel his spiritual inches, broke in onto an unfamiliar tension of life, where laughter became inevitable. But how? Could he, in his first unlaughing condition, have contrived a comic view of life and then developed the strange rib-shaking response? Or is it not more likely that when he was able to grasp the tragic nature of time he was of a stature to sense its comic nature also; and, by the experience of tragedy and the intuition of comedy, to make his difficult way? The difference between tragedy and comedy is the difference between experience and intuition. In the experience we strive against every condition of our animal life: against death, against the frustration of ambition, against the instability of human love. In the intuition we trust the arduous eccentricities we’re born to, and see the oddness of a

creature who has never got acclimatized to being created. Laughter inclines me to know that man is essential spirit; his body, with its functions and accidents and frustrations, is endlessly quaint and remarkable to him; and though comedy accepts our position in time, it barely accepts our posture in space.

The bridge by which we cross from tragedy to comedy and back again is precarious and narrow. We find ourselves in one or the other by the turn of a thought; a turn such as we make when we turn from speaking to listening. I know that when I set about writing a comedy the idea presents itself to me first of all as tragedy. The characters press on to the theme with all their divisions and perplexities heavy about them; they are already entered for the race to doom, and good and evil are an infernal tangle skinning the fingers that try to unravel them. If the characters were not qualified for tragedy there would be no comedy, and to some extent I have to cross the one before I can light on the other. In a century less flayed and quivering we might reach it more directly; but not now, unless every word we write is going to mock us. A bridge has to be crossed, a thought has to be turned. Somehow the characters have to unmortify themselves: to affirm life and assimilate death and persevere in joy. Their hearts must be as determined as the phoenix; what burns must also light and renew: not by a vulnerable optimism but by a hard-won maturity of delight, by the intuition of comedy, an active patience declaring the solvency of good. The Book of Job is the great reservoir of comedy. “But there is a spirit in man . . . Fair weather cometh out of the north . . . The blessing of him that was ready to perish came upon me: And I caused the widow’s heart to sing for joy.”

I have come, you may think, to the verge of saying that comedy is greater than tragedy. On the verge I stand and go no further. Tragedy’s experience hammers against the mystery to make a breach which would admit the whole triumphant answer. Intuition has no such potential. But there are times in the state of man when comedy has a special worth, and the present is one of them: a time when the loudest faith has been faith in a trampling materialism, when literature has been thought unrealistic which did not mark and remark our poverty and doom. Joy (of a kind) has been all on the devil’s side, and one of the necessities of our time is to redeem it. If not, we are in poor sort to meet the circumstances, the circumstances being the contention of death with life, which is to say evil with good, which is to say desolation with delight. Laughter may seem to be only like an exhalation of air, but out of that air we came; in the beginning we inhaled it; it is a truth, not a fantasy, a truth voluble of good which comedy stoutly maintains.

Christopher Fry and William B. Wahl (interview date 25 August 1976)

SOURCE: Fry, Christopher, and William B. Wahl. "A Visit at the Toft: Interview with Christopher Fry." *Salzburger Studien zur Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 10 (1980): 542-76.

[In the following interview, conducted August 25, 1976, Fry discusses his literary predecessors and influences, his career as a dramatist and screenwriter, and his major themes and philosophies.]

[Wahl]: *Mr. Fry, you come from stock not likely to produce a dramatist; how were you attracted to the stage?*

[Fry]: That's a very difficult question. I've often wondered that myself. It seemed to begin when I was at school. The only connection I can see in the family—I've just discovered one, a rather interesting one—my great grandmother was called Spratt and was descended from a Bishop Spratt¹ who appears in Johnson's *Lives of the Poets*. He was a friend of Abraham Cowley's.² When he was quite young, 22 I think, he went as Chaplain to the Duke of Buckingham (Cowley recommended him for the job) and Dr. Johnson says that he helped Buckingham write the play, *The Rehearsal*. That's the only connection to the theatre that I can see in the family at all.

Derek Stanford says that you knew early that you were going to be a writer.³

At school I was writing a good deal, yes. And then after I left school there was quite a long period when I was not writing at all.

Boy with a Cart (1938) was your first . . .

The first published, yes.

They did act something of yours, didn't they, in the school—while you were studying?

Yes—various things I did at school.

So, actually other than that, you don't recall a 'responsible' moment which caused you to become both actor and director, and finally playwright?

[Chuckles] One has to believe in things like 'the Call,' I suppose.

[Also laughing] Not necessarily. Margaret Rawlings⁴ explained her 'Call' to the stage: she also seemed to have no background, you know, that would lead her to

the stage. However, she did tell me that she was exposed to poetry early in life by the readings of her mother, or her aunt, and she herself learned to read poetry.

I think possibly that even as early as kindergarten it might have started. I went to a Froebel kindergarten, and there was a good deal of acting there, of course. I remember playing young Alfred the Great when he was a boy—before he became king—and acting in a play about the burghers of Calais. Apparently—I'd forgotten this, but I went back to see one of the teachers there at the end of her life—and she said I in fact wrote a play while I was there, when I was about six or seven, which I'd altogether forgotten.

You wrote a play at six or seven? [F. Yes.] And it was performed . . .

She quoted a line or two from it, but I didn't make a note of them, so now they be lost to posterity!

The next question was posed in part by my editor. From my point of view, most of your plays are religious or have a religious basis. The editor wanted to know how you got involved in the production of Cabaret—which is anything but a religious play. You directed the play and wrote sketches for it. What happened here?

Well, I was doing anything at the time which would earn a little money. I'd been teaching, you remember, in a prep school. And then found that I had saved up about ten pounds so that I could go out into the world. And that was when I began writing revue sketches.

You found no inconsistency though, or, you didn't have any difficulty directing Cabaret? There is some Quaker background in your family—you mentioned the bishop . . .

There is a family tradition of a Quaker background, but recently I've been working on a book about my great-grandparents, grandparents, and parents, so that I've been looking into this, and I can't really find a connection, though there are a few records. I went down to Somerset where they came from and looked into the Somerset Record Office, and there are very brief references to the Quaker burial ground, and so on, but my great-grandfather is buried in the church in Axbridge. Which line of the family was Quaker I haven't been able to trace.

You yourself were led into—[F. Quakerism]—was it the family orientation?

I've never been a member of the Friends; only occasionally—at one time, during the War, I was an "attender," as they call it. It's something that I have certainly a great sympathy with—I mean, I feel it in the blood.

Could one say that it's perhaps one of the most 'Christian' of the Christian religions? [F. I think so, yes.] I find Quakers and Unitarians more 'Christian,' I believe, than most of the others.

Some of the plays were commissioned for church occasions. The first one, *The Boy with a Cart*, was at the invitation of the Vicar of the village where we first lived after we were married. He came round to see us and said, "Would you write a play for the Jubilee of the church?" And, I said, "What shall I write it about?" He produced a book called *Worthies of Sussex*,⁵ which had the story of Saint Cuthman in it, and so, that began that. Then, it was through *The Boy with a Cart* that I got to know Martin Browne,⁶ and he asked me to go down with him to Tewkesbury where every year at Tewkesbury Abbey they had a festival—plays performed outside the Abbey. He took me down there in 1938. They were doing two plays by James Bridie, *Tobias and the Angel* and *Jonah and the Whale*. Martin asked me if I'd do a play for the following year, 1939, which is when I started to write *The Firstborn*, thinking this would be for the Tewkesbury festival. And then, they decided at Tewkesbury that what they wanted was a pageant play of a kind, about the history of the abbey, so, I stopped writing *The Firstborn* and wrote—to Martin's scenario—a play called *The Tower*—a pageant play. I just followed the scenario . . . [W. That's not . . .] not published. No.

Later I would like to get back to The Firstborn, but at the moment I have a question about it which bothers me—an abstract or general question—Stanford calls The Firstborn your only tragedy, but why isn't it simply a drama—why would he call it a tragedy? First, it is historical, therefore it's your view of a historical period, and history is simply 'drama' rather than tragic—although perhaps more people think of history as tragic rather than comic . . .

I've never called it a tragedy, of course.

Do you think of it as a tragedy?

No, I don't really make a great differentiation, I think [chuckles], between the two—between tragedy and comedy. I called *The Dark Is Light Enough* a comedy, but some people seem to think it's tragic because the Countess dies . . .

I think she had to die—you know, what do you do with a personality you've developed like that, except kill her off?

[Laughs] I think the nearest I've written, probably, to tragedy, is *Curtmantle*.

The tragedy of King Henry II, yes. To continue, however, with The Boy with a Cart: that's pretty much a straight drama—not very much tragedy or comedy, either one—it's not pageantry, but what do we call it—historical drama, but over a period of time . . .

I think it could be called "the telling of a legend"; I followed the legend almost exactly as it appears in *The Worthies of Sussex*.

Yes. Nonetheless there is a touch of humour, when Mrs. Phipps is borne upward by the wind which carries her away, and her son says, "Mother's not used to traveling"—or something like that—or, "can't stand heights, I wonder how she came down"—which tickled the devil out of me, but at the same time it all seemed so human. However, are such humourous touches out of place in the straight run of the telling of a legend—you didn't have any difficulty with that? [F. No . . .] Quite consistent throughout? [F. I think so, yes.] It delights me.

A new line of questioning—how did you become involved in translating?

The first thing I did was for a revue, I think—what was the name of the Frenchman? There was a French sketch—somebody wanted to do in a revue in London, and they asked me if I'd translate it, which I did. And then Peter Brook who had seen it asked me if I'd translate the Anouilh play,⁷ which I did as *Ring Round the Moon*.

Stanford makes a clear-cut distinction between your own writing and your translation of Anouilh. He points out the fact that that book just shows how well you are oriented in the English tradition—or, something like that. [F. Ah . . .] The implication was a negative commentary about the French play—I should mention that—so, then you got into translation because of your experience in translating the first one; it was therefore . . .

. . . that Peter Brook⁸ asked me to do the other one. In fact, I think all the first translations—indeed, all the translations I've done—have been commissioned.

I see. Right, that does put a different light on it then. Were most of your translations pretty straight translations, or were they done in close collaboration with the French authors,⁹ or, did you make adaptations as did Duncan with The Eagle Has Two Heads?¹⁰

In *Ring Round the Moon*, I did a certain amount of adapting—for instance, Peter Brook said, "I want an extra little scene here because Claire Bloom hasn't got time to change her costume," but otherwise I've tried always to keep as close as possible to the original. I know that's what I should wish to happen when I'm translated into some other language.

You would prefer to give credit to the original author as you would want to be done for you . . .

Yes, as close to the 'voice' of the original as possible.

A Sleep of Prisoners is the only play of yours which I don't feel secure with, and I'm not sure how I feel about it. Later I'd like to talk to you about that if I may. Where did you get your knowledge of French?

Well, such as it is I got at school, to a certain extent. I had a very interesting, nice French master, Jean de Choisy. He was living near here at age 89 up to about 2 years ago—I used to go across to see him. But otherwise through my reading and, a certain amount of battling my way.

When you say you got a certain knowledge of French in school, how many years do you study a foreign language in the English public school?

About—oh, with me, I suppose it was about 5 years.

A pretty good basis—so that you can read novels without translating into English—you read in the French

...

Up to a point. I wouldn't say . . . Yes [he chuckles].

*After the period of your greatest triumph, you were heard of—and this is in quotes—only as a writer of films—of scripts. Now this is a statement which is of course not consistently valid because you did come out with **A Yard of Sun**: Did you become involved in film writing because of lush offers (the words of my editor) from films or because you sensed a falling away of audiences for poetic drama?*

No, not that. The first film I did was *A Beggar's Opera*, with Peter Brook [director], Laurence Olivier and Dorothy Tutin in 1952, and that again was because Peter Brook asked me if I'd do it. Then I did the coronation film, which I was asked to do. But after that, the reason I did the first big film was because William Wyler and producer Sam Zimbalist came to see me to ask if I'd write just the last portion of the film *Ben Hur*, which they were working on. I liked them very much—liked Willy Wyler's approach to it. There wasn't a question of a lush offer, exactly, except that they said, "It's being made in Rome, and we think it's time you came to see something of Rome." And as it happened at a time when I was having a bit of a battle with *Curtmantle*, I'd gotten to a point of despair where it seemed a good idea to do something else, and come back to it. And there was the thought of going to see Rome. It was to be only for six weeks, but, in fact, turned out to be a year and two months before I came back. Again I picked up *Curtmantle*, which was easier because I'd been having to write at some speed on the film—there were times [in Rome] when I'd come down to the studio at the end of the day to say to Wyler, "Well, I'm off," and he would say, "You've just come at the right moment because we need a line here for Charleton Heston;

they're waiting to do it, would you please give us a line . . .," so I'd have to get out an envelope from my pocket, write a line or two, and hand it over to Heston to do. So, when I got home again I thought, "well, if I can do that on the set, presumably I can sit at my typewriter and knock out a few words here too."

You just answered partly and indirectly one of the next questions: how did you like the conditions under which one writes scripts compared to playwriting?

It's quite a relief, I think, after working entirely alone to be able to work with other people, as it were in committee; there's always somebody there to talk it over with, and you're not taking the whole responsibility. So in that sense it's a relaxation.

The pressure of the demands—did you find that helpful rather than hindering?

Yes, helpful I think in writing a film. However, I don't think I would find it helpful in writing one of my own plays.

*No. Would such pressure create a method that you could then follow, a sort of self-discipline? You did mention that you found **Curtmantle** easier . . .*

The discipline is always there, of course; that is to say, I always sit down to the typewriter at more or less the same time of day, and write to the same time, whether anything comes of it or not. But it was, I suppose, because they were literally standing on the mat waiting to be handed something, and one had to make up the mind—to commit yourself to paper; this is one of the problems, isn't it, that you will sit for so long uncommitted to an exact sentence because there are twenty-five different possibilities in a way to approach it.

That's a question too: you mention the twenty-five different possibilities—Robert Graves revised one of his poems nine times, I believe. When you are writing the lines, the sections, the speeches, the poetry of your plays, do you do a good deal of revising, a good deal of editing, or does it often seem to flow and there it is?

A great deal of revising. I could show you the stack of paper which represents *Curtmantle* and the various versions it went through.

A pile of paper two feet high.

Or higher. I start on the typewriter—there's something about the hardness of it, the decision of the typewriter, which gives me a little comfort, and then I revise the script by hand, retype, and then again scribble all over it and retype again.