

# Being Modern

By Horace Shipp

*Easy Virtue*, by Noel Coward. (Duke of York's.)

*The Mountain*, by C. K. Munro. (Stage Society.)

*Russian Ballet*. (His Majesty's.)

"BEING modern only means twisting things into different shapes," remarks one of the bright young people in Mr. Noel Coward's bright young play, and my mind twisted away to a recollection of the amazing Stravinsky Ballet which I had seen the evening before, and then ricocheted off to the production of Mr. Munro's interesting play recently by the Stage Society and to the discussion which had followed it. Mr. Coward himself, with his curious reputation as *enfant terrible* of the English theatre, contrives to be quite antiquated and Victorian. His young women curse, and his young men say things about the Lido which make one wonder why in the innocence of our hearts we found it only a pleasant bathing station; immature maidens murmur "Deauville" with Mephistophelean implications; and the audience shudders with vicarious daring as his heroine hurls the fulsome-sounding word "Cocotte" into her epigrammatical dialogue. Yet withal it was our old friend Mrs. Tanqueray who walked the stage for the thousandth time. The climax which sends her to the Ritz instead of to the grave might really have been designed *pour épater le bourgeois*, had Mr. Coward conceived it in the vein of cynical comedy; but presented as self-conscious tragedy it marks Mr. Coward as an angel of retribution.

Perhaps, to do him justice, Mr. Coward has never claimed to be modern. In his more unpleasant moments he has shown us middle-aged ladies tipsily evoking their dubious pasts and other evidences of the liberties which our age takes with good taste and virtue, but usually he has revealed himself finally as on the side of the angels.

His sense of the theatre causes him to write some magnificent scenes, and his actors and actresses must bless him for the ease he brings to their tasks. Miss Jane Cowl's big scene in *Easy Virtue* and many other moments of her part are so well conceived that it would require a thoroughly bad actress to miss them, and when we have a player of Miss Cowl's power the combination gives us

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something memorable. Alongside this capable dealing with big situations, and a command of dialogue which seldom fails (and if it does, it is usually on the side of making an epigram where we want an emotion) Mr. Coward in this play shows some signs of haste. The entries and exits are forced unpardonably, the husband is sketchy in the extreme, and when his wife appears among his mother's ultra-respectable guests in a costume calculated to confirm their worst intuitions of her past, he shows himself no more capable of dealing with the situation than by rushing immediately off stage to eat sandwiches. Not only does he lose his wife thereby, but he loses the opportunity for a first-class stage scene. Moreover, I confess, Mr. Coward's circles are easily shocked if a tinsel dress and a cigarette holder can so effectively stagger them.

Truth to tell, Mr. Coward's modernity is only cosmetics; it is not even skin deep. He dresses the "well-made" French play in Neo-Georgian slang and only departs from his model in that his plays since *The Vortex* are not well-made. The twist he has given lies only in changing the comedy of manners into a comedy of bad manners.

Meantime, Mr. C. K. Munro is writing dramas new in matter and manner, and the Stage Society is fulfilling its function splendidly by producing them. The theme of *The Mountain* is nothing less than the whole ethics of authority and revolt. It is packed with thought, and for over four hours kept our minds alert. It is a significant play, dealing with problems considerably more fundamental than the reception of ladies of easy virtue in families where long habit has made virtue easy. Wanting such plays in the public theatre I cannot help feeling distressed that the twist of Mr. Munro's modernity causes him to make his plays in an unmanageable shape. Four hours' length, sixteen scenes, and an army of actors and supers is asking too much of the theatre under present conditions, and although Mr. Munro's plays cannot be cut in the ordinary way, they should have been modelled or should be remodelled by him into practical form. His technique defeats his own end, and technique which does that is a failure. In art we are usually prepared to accept a new form when we have hurled our epithets against

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its novelty, if it speaks to us as clearly or as well as the old. But newness itself is no virtue, and at least should prove practical. Because Mr. Munro has an adult mind we want him in the theatre, and because we believe that he has something to say we are prepared for him to say it in an unusual way. To exile himself from the theatre he could serve—and to exile himself so unnecessarily as some of us think—is a policy of artistic *hara-kiri*. It adds to our indebtedness to the Stage Society, but justifies our annoyance with the intractable author.

The "different shape" of the Russian Ballet is, I assume, a matter of taste. At the risk of calling upon my head the scorn of the *cognoscenti* I found myself yearning for *Petroushka* whilst I listened to and watched the new Stravinsky *Les Noces*. In four black and white tableaux we saw the incidents of a primitive wedding which bore remarkable likeness to a double funeral. There was rhythm enough and geometry enough to satisfy the mind of a mathematician. Even the pianos formed four and burgeoned into two keyboards apiece, whilst the impersonal *corps de ballet* piled itself into black and white pyramids or gyrated like gymnasts at a drill display. Intellectually it held one. Music and movement and the wonderfully effective voice orchestration which is so important to the score made an organic whole of flawless rhythm. Emotionally it offered nothing. I wondered whether it was the logical French mind which had thus overlaid the patterned beauty of the earlier ballets or whether the machine-drama of their native land, concerning which such interesting reports drift through, was dictating this mass ballet, this impersonal ensemble, these abstract motives. When the ballet was followed by *Les Matelots* with its amazing solo dancing, it was like coming back to pleasant harbour after drear voyages in frozen seas. I confess to the feeling that I had got through task work in following the ballet season and could now look forward to wonderful evenings with the old favourites—the loveliest things the theatre knows. It is excellent for those of us who love the ballet "this side idolatry" that we have not to see it this year as a music-hall turn. We hope it will not too violently "twist to different shapes."