

CHRISTMAS AND KURT YAGHIJIAN

Sitting here, listening to Menotti's "Amahl and The Night Visitors," I remember the first time I heard the music.

Emily, Emily,
Michael, Bartholomew,
How are your children
and how are your sheep?

I was spending a postgrad year at a prep school, Williston Academy, in Massachusetts, and I had been encouraged to join the chorus and was having a grand time. (Formerly I thought such things were for sissies, cream-puffs, as we used to say.) For the Christmas concert we sang the chorus from "Amahl", and I was struck by the clear, simple beauty of the music and lyrics which made my skin tingle like the sting of cold, crystal snowdrops on my face when I looked up into a heavy downpour and let myself be carried by the swirling gusts.

The next year I came home for Christmas from Columbia, and, while watching for my annual production of A Christmas Carol, the presentation of "Amahl and The Night Visitors" appeared. I sat enraptured, my body swelled by constant waves of different emotions. First there was the haunting, lovely tune of the shepherd's pipe, followed by the mother's voice, high and piercing like the frozen cold. She was a pathetic figure, capable of great warmth, but haggard and slightly hysterical, beset by poverty and her child's flights of fancy.

What shall I do with this boy,
What shall I do, what shall I do?

And there was Amahl, a cripple whose imagination gives him the freedom to experience that which his body and poverty do not allow. He was alternately humorous and touching, his facial expressions revealing at times a great sense of loss at times a willingness to accept his condition with good-natured stoicism and a strength which is bred only in naive idealists.

I was a shepherd, I had a flock of sheep.
But my mother sold them.
Now there are no sheep left.

When left with the three Kings, Amahl acts as a boy should; he is more curious than awed, and immediately becomes familiar enough to become a pest.

Amahl: Have you regal blood?

Balthazar: Yes.

Amahl: Can I see it?

Of the three Kings, Kaspar was my favorite. With his deafness, his tendency to ramble, his diffidence, and his idiosyncrasies he keeps licorice in a box among his magic stones), Kaspar is an ingratiating figure, as are the two other kings.

While watching "Amahl", I never sensed that I was watching a production. These were the original kings, each very human, who happen upon a boy who represented all of suffering humanity waiting for a savior.

Yes, Amahl is touching sentimental - actually an offering to a concept of Christmas which probably lies dormant in most of us, like a cherished childhood memory.

For a few years after I watched the Production faithfully every Christmas, then, somehow, I lost track of it, though I would often hum the words during the season.

Imagine my surprise this year when talking about Amahl to one of my students that I found out that the boy who played Amahl was right here, and his name was Kurt Yaghjian.

(continued on page 5)

By Anthony N. Fragola

IS THE THEATRE REALLY DEAD?

by Tony Sparger

Is the theatre really dead? Or is it merely emerging from a long seclusion resulting from lack of nourishment?

Leonard Melfi, in his introduction to his ENCOUNTERS, states:

"Off-Off-Broadway had to happen because nothing else was happening. The new anxious American playwrights had no audience to write for; they had no backers to turn to; there was no place to go. You had to be a European (an impossible requirement that was deeply perplexing to a young American playwright) with an established hit across the ocean in order to have your play presented on Broadway, and even Off Broadway.

...The miracle drug has become Off-Off-Broadway, but the weary patient is still that same old dying invalid: the commercial, expense-account, scared-stiff-of-the-new-brand-of-playwrighting guys, Broadway theatre."

Today's playwright is not the same man who conjured ghosts on his parchment several hundred years ago; nor is he the man who brought down the deus-ex-machina to get out of impossible fixes several thousand years ago. Theatre of this generation deals with Right Now. Writers want reality to break through the morass of lilted poetry, hundred year wars fought within the bounds of the proscenium in ten minutes, castles rising out of the mist right on stage. And in their efforts to get away from the fantasy, these same writers are coming up with people who live in trash cans, miniature houses that reflect the actuality of larger houses, and other fantastic circumstances. Yet somehow contemporary audiences can stretch their minds to the point where they can comprehend such extravagances. Writers have to employ such unrealistic gimmicks in order to reveal the reality of human nature. With abstract dialogue, abstract sets, abstract lighting, and any other abstracts, contemporary theatre mirrors the chaos of modern sophistication. Ionesco's gibberish and three-nosed brides are completely beyond the realm of credibility, yet they are absorbed and understood -- or rather interpreted --- because they are a reality in their absurdity.

But theatre is not necessarily the downfall of a king or the rise to glory of a blind girl. A single gesture -- a little too brazen, a little too restrained -- can grow into a play. Laughter that rings false or crowds the room develops

(con't. on page 5)