

LETTER FROM AMERICA

NEW YORK ACCLAIMS A GREAT JEWISH DRAMA

*"The Eternal Road"—Written by Franz Werfel and
Produced by Max Reinhardt—Enthusiastically Received*

THE chief current event in American Jewry is the great Biblical drama at present showing to crowded houses at the Manhattan Opera House in New York—Franz Werfel's "The Eternal Road."

For over two years some of the leading Jewish figures in stage and literature have been engaged in the preparation of this great spectacle. The drama was written by Franz Werfel, the music composed by Kurt Weill, while the completed play was by Max Reinhardt.

"The Eternal Road" is a new departure in drama. It attempts something bigger than the stage is usually conceived as embracing. The curtain rises on a synagogue somewhere in Europe—no definite place, no definite age. It is evening. There is a feeling of fear, anguish, suspense. The head of the congregation did the rabbi seem unable to calm the trepidations of the people in the synagogue. There are terrifying outbursts of women, scoffing comments by the skeptic, who symbolises the eternal adversary. The qualms of the Rich man contrast strangely with the confidence of the Pious Man and the doubts, then penitence, of the prodigal. A boy of Barmitzvah age, symbolising the future, plays an important role throughout.

It is a day of fasting and expiation. There is impending doom in the prospects of a decree of expulsion. The community is terror-stricken, lest the villagers, inflamed by Jewish fanatics, make a raid upon the synagogue.

The only meagre hope left is the possibility of intervention by the tyrant who holds sway over the whole vicinity. Upon his caprice depends the fate of the community.

With this tormenting anxiety uppermost in the minds of all, they revert to prayer in agonised expectation of the Tyrant's ruling. The Torah is lifted from the Ark, and the rabbi—ostensibly the only soul unshaken—begins to recite from the scrolls of Law the wondrous tales of trials, tribulations, hopes and sombre struggles of our forefathers.

As the Rabbi begins to read, the lights of the synagogue are dimmed, the congregation disappears from view. High up above the synagogue, the highest of the five stages, the action begins. The incidents of which



Franz Werfel

the rabbi reads come to life. The uppermost stage is used only for certain intense, crucial points in the drama. It is the gateway of heaven.

Out of it streams the Divine Light; around it are grouped the Heavenly Hosts; from within it issues the Divine Voice which decrees the fate of the mortals who move and suffer on the stages below, whether in the Biblical scenes or in the synagogue. So, from time to time, the upper portals are illumined, as when Abraham is chosen to be father of a people, when Jacob dreams of his election, when Moses ascends to the All-Highest to receive the Tablets of the Law, or when a messenger is sent from on high to punish King David for his sin with the woman Bathsheba.

This scene is continuous and co-existent throughout the play with what goes on upon the larger area of the stage, with the conjuration of



Max Reinhardt

those Biblical episodes read from the Torah. The sweep and surge of these incidents, alternating now and then with tense moments in the synagogue of to-day, against the seemingly illimitable background reaching to the very heavens, are enthralling.

The bare outlines of this multiple action are described in the programme as follows: "The Rabbi is reading the story of the Book in the ancient East not merely to distract the attention of his congregation. He is reading in order that he may awaken in his congregants the strength which sustained the great Biblical heroes, by making them feel that they, watchers of the night, are one with those giants of the past. There is in fact neither past nor present. All Time is one. The congregants are not at a play representing the fate of others. They themselves are in a sense the actors of the past. And the same feeling is communicated to the spectators. They too are not watching a play. They are themselves watchers in the synagogue and the heroes of the Bible."

The music to which the whole drama is set is based on age-old traditional themes. For its composition Kurt Weill took all the Hebrew melodies he could collect and searched into their sources. He discarded those which were of recent origin and based his music solely upon those ancient songs and chants that his people had treasured for ages.

This vast Biblical pageant has been enthusiastically acclaimed by the New York dramatic critics, and many distinguished Gentile personalities have voiced the opinion that it will have great effect in bringing about a greater understanding between Gentile and Jew. A certain measure of disappointment with the production is voiced in an article which Marie Syrkin contributes to the "Jewish Frontier." She is of the opinion that the spectacle is glorified rather than glorious, and grandiose rather than majestic. The general opinion, however, is that this vast Biblical pageant is truly awe-inspiring and that there are few who can leave it unimpressed.

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