

Critic's Notebook

Clurman on the Theater, With Sweep and Passion

By MEL GUSSOW

Harold Clurman always had stage presence, whether he was teaching, talking or simply going to the theater. Wherever he went, he was accompanied by a sense of theatrical history, which was as endemic to his personality as his silver-tipped cane and black velvet hat.

His memoir, "All People Are Famous," was a step removed from autobiography. It was, he said, "about myself through others." One might suggest that the posthumous new book, "The Collected Works of Harold Clurman" (Applause Books), is about Clurman through the plays he saw. It is literally the story of his life in the theater.

Although the material is only a third of his journalistic output during 60 years, the book is as large and as heavy as an unabridged dictionary. Faced with such an immense tome, Clurman would have exclaimed, "Too big!" which is approximately what he wrote about the original Broadway production of the musical "Candide."

"The Collected Works of Harold Clurman" could have been called "The Collected Words of Harold Clurman": 1,101 pages of Clurman speaking out about theater and other arts. In contrast to other collections of criticism, the book sweeps across the 20th century, offering a panoply of theater in Clurman's time. As one might expect, the book resonates with passion. Here, as in the classroom, is Clurman agitated, with his almost messianic attitude. As he said: "I'm not interested in changing someone's opinion. I want to change people."

For most of his years as a critic, he reviewed theater in the obscurity of The Nation. Many of his friends did not read his reviews until they were anthologized, but they always knew what he thought; he told them, sometimes commenting on a play on the night of its performance. He would identify the Oedipal ancestry of a provocative drama by a black author, or reach back for a reference to Stanislavsky during a performance of a play by Chekhov. He would be so convincing in his creation of a dialogue between the two Russian artists that one would wonder if he had been the third party to the conversation. Despite his volubility, he was hesitant



The posthumous book "The Collected Works of Harold Clurman" is the story of the director and drama critic through the plays he saw.

A critic who was at home on both sides of the footlights.

about discussing a play with strangers. Once a theatergoer came up to him at intermission and asked what he thought of the show. "I haven't seen it yet," he said firmly.

Some of those who criticized him when he was alive thought he was too closely affiliated with the theater to be objective in his assessments of his colleagues. Actually he was highly subjective in his objectivity. As he said, "The fact that I am engaged in active stage work does not render me either timid and indulgent or resentful, malicious and vindictive," adjectives that he regarded as antithetical to the craft he practiced in print. "It makes me scrupulous and responsible." He criticized without fear or favoritism, even if it meant crossing swords with a friend like Elia Kazan.

Because he was a theater practitioner, Clurman was that rare critic who had no difficulty distinguishing between script and production, direction and performance. In a conversa-

tion at the end of the book, Kenneth Tynan declares that Clurman's single best review was of "A Streetcar Named Desire." To condense a career to one review seems foolhardy, but rereading his "Streetcar" notice, it is easy to agree with the assessment. What makes it such a brilliant review is that unlike his peers, he understood how Mr. Kazan's powerful production actually distorted the focus of the play. By tilting the drama in favor of Marlon Brando in the role of Stanley Kowalski, the director encouraged theatergoers to regard Blanche DuBois "as a deteriorated Southern belle" rather than "as the potential artist in all of us," as someone who is "defeated because everything in her environment conspires to degrade the meaning of her tragic situation."

Naturally, Clurman had blind spots. Although he had a fondness for vaudeville and in particular for the Marx Brothers ("absolute idiocy" as a "deliberate style"), his reviews of Broadway musicals were at least several beats less enthusiastic than those of other critics, as was the case with his response to "Brigadoon," "Kiss Me Kate," "West Side Story" and "Fiddler on the Roof." About

It's Jackie Mason on Being Incorrect (No Joke)

Continued From Page C13

do much that's new with subjects that have become enduring staples on late-night talk-show monologues: that "vicious yenta" Tonya Harding and the Menendez brothers, who inspire a spiel on the theme that you have to be "retarded" to get on a jury. When he steps off his self-serving soap box, he can still be an irresistibly funny stand-up artist. No other comic performer has quite the physical brio of Mr. Mason, who uses his arms the way a conductor uses a baton, to punctuate the rhythms of a routine.

Dealing with his stock-in-trade dissection of Jewish foibles, he is truly hilarious, imitating the contorted walk of a Jewish man rising from his seat at intermission and finding a whole anatomy of shifting aches and pains.

And in the show's second act, largely devoted to a mostly uninspired attack on the Clinton Administration, he is engaging on the subject of Presidential adultery (though he has done this routine before). And in the evening's high point, he examines the ways in which different Presidents, from Richard M. Nixon to Mr. Clin-

"Carousel," he said, "I am certainly not its best audience since clams that go 'This was a real nice clam bake' fail to melt me."

Whenever possible he would couch his most negative criticism in ironic humor. Early in Alfred Lunt's career, he praised him as "more subtly and richly endowed" than Laurence Olivier, but without Olivier's opportunity to explore his range. Years later he said about Lunt and his wife, Lynn Fontanne, that they had "retired to the stage," adding that "this superb couple have been gradually converting themselves into museum pieces." Explaining his curt dismissiveness of bad plays, he said: "There is little point in specifying exactly how rotten an egg is. It is enough to say that it is inedible."

As a critic in the contemporary theater, Clurman was always forward looking, even when a playwright's philosophy was different from his, as was the case with Samuel Beckett. He was an early champion of Edward Albee and an artful analyzer of Bertolt Brecht, whom he called a "kind of Gothic primitive, in whom a rude simplicity is coupled with a shrewd mentality." He could be instructive to other critics, as in his suggestion that they might "mistake a play's materials for its meaning." This was, he said, "as if an art critic were to say that Cézanne's painting is about apples." An enemy of the snap judgment, he resolutely took a longer view. He was extremely reluctant to use the word great, reserving it for masterpieces like "King Lear."

"The Collected Works" intentionally omits excerpts from several of his books, including "The Fervent Years" (his definitive history of the Group Theater), while finding room for discoveries: the diary of his trip to the Soviet Union in 1935, an account of a revealing visit to Charles Chaplin in Switzerland and a dialogue with Louis Sheaffer. In that wide-ranging conversation, he recalls that at 18 he cut a class at Columbia University to go to the first performance of Eugene O'Neill's "Beyond the Horizon." As the "first successful attempt to write an American tragedy," it was, he said, "the most important moment in the American theater."

Because of its bulk, the book is more suitable for browsing than for nonstop reading, but one is quickly recaptured by the nimbleness of Clurman's mind and the clarity with which he expressed himself. In reviewing a collection of Henry James's criticism, he said, "To serve as something beyond a privileged press agent with a fancy vocabulary, the theater critic must be an artist, a historian and a philosopher." Clurman was all three.

Jackie Mason Politically Incorrect

Written and created by Jackie Mason; production design and lighting by Neil Pfeil Jampolis; sound by Bruce Cameron; production stage manager, Don Myers. Presented by Jyll Rosenfeld. At the Golden Theater, 252 West 54th Street, Manhattan.

ton, tell lies, giving trenchant life to their self-betraying gestures. With Mr. Clinton, he adds, it's harder to tell the difference; Mr. Nixon, at least, "had the decency to twitch a little." Actually, in the age of Rush Limbaugh and Howard Stern, Mr. Mason is a relatively cautious avatar of political incorrectness. He has a loyal cult audience, who may find much to enjoy here. Still, the embracing spirit of acceptance that always seemed to underlie Mr. Mason's humor has been eclipsed this time by something that feels like real hostility.

He concludes the evening with a particularly sour diatribe against the incompetence of Indian taxi drivers, of whom he says, "There is nothing lower on earth." Riding home from the theater, I had an Indian taxi driver and I felt guilty as sin about what I'd just listened to. I cannot imagine that was Mr. Mason's intention.

Penguin Wins Bidding for Gates Book

A book to be written by William H. Gates on the future of the information revolution has been purchased by the Penguin Group for an advance in excess of \$2.5 million. The book is to be published in November as a Viking hard cover, it was announced yesterday by Peter Mayer, the chief executive officer of the Penguin Group.

Mr. Gates, who is the chairman of the Microsoft Corporation, had been asking publishers for an advance of \$2.5 million, a first printing of 500,000 copies and a guarantee that the publisher would set aside \$125,000 for marketing. Mr. Mayer declined to give financial details, but he said Mr. Gates's "minimal requirements" had been met. Jonathan Lazarus, a Microsoft vice president, conducted the negotiations for Mr. Gates.

Other people familiar with the negotiations said the Penguin Group purchased the worldwide English language rights for more than \$2.5 million, in a deal that included a higher marketing budget than \$125,000. Mr. Gates is to write the book with Dr. Nathan Myhrvold, a senior vice president for advanced technology at Microsoft, and Peter Rinearson, a Pulitzer Prize winner and a former reporter for The Seattle Times who has written four books published by Microsoft Press. Mr. Gates and Dr. Myhrvold will donate their proceeds from the book to charity.

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