



THE TALK OF THE TOWN

Street Scene

ON a recent Saturday afternoon, we went to N.Y.U.'s Tisch School of the Arts along with some seventy senior citizens to attend a special performance of an undergraduate production of Elmer Rice's 1929 Pulitzer Prize-winning play "Street Scene." The matinee was the brainchild of Kay Matschullat, a busy young woman who was the show's guest director. "Street Scene" is set in the late nineteen-twenties, outside a lower-East Side tenement full of immigrants, but in a university situation you tend to get an audience of mostly students and parents," Ms. Matschullat had told us over the phone. She went on to say that when she came up with the idea of giving her actors an audience that had actually grown up in the time, and perhaps even at the site, of Rice's drama she got in touch with the Caring Community in the Village, St. Joseph's Church, on Monroe Street, and the lower-East Side office of the Jewish Association for Services for the Aged, and ended up with a packed house.

Red-cheeked, and muffled in thick coats (it was bitterly cold outside), the audience assembled at the theatre—a small, curtainless house called Mainstage 1—and carefully climbed the risers and took their seats. We sat next to Rose Silvan, who had come with the Caring Community group. Mrs. Silvan, a pretty, dainty woman old enough to murmur "Now, which war was that? Not the Second World one" in the course of an anecdote, has spent most of her life in the city. We asked if she'd grown up in a neighborhood like the one depicted by the grimly realistic set before us. "Near," she said. "Not in."

Ms. Matschullat came onstage and invited the audience to stay after the performance to talk about "what the production got right and what we got wrong." The lights went down. The roar of a train filled the auditorium. The lights came up, discovering the actors on the sidewalk in front of the tenement, fanning themselves, on "the hottest June 14 in forty-one years." Throughout the opening scene, they gossiped in German, Irish, Italian, Swedish, and Yiddish accents.

"Look at those old-fashioned shoes!" a woman in the front row exclaimed as a street person stumbled across the stage. (Ms. Matschullat said later that she found the presence of street people only one of many similarities between the twenties and the eighties.)

Jordan Hunt, playing a nerve-racked father-to-be, appeared in an

upstairs window. "I think the baby's coming!" he cried.

Waves of knowing laughter from the audience, which was largely female.

A bloodcurdling yell from the woman in labor offstage.

"Good screaming!" someone remarked.

The action progressed toward evening. "The Italians built New York, the Irish run it, and the Jews own it," Jim Corrieri, playing the Irishman George Jones, declared, to appreciative laughter.

Night fell. Two women, one in a tuxedo, entered, drank, flirted, and kissed. Whispers in the audience: Was the actress in the tux supposed to be a man, or what? There had been a certain amount of doubling already, to cover the play's forty-five roles, so it might just be that. Uncomfortable stirring nevertheless. (Ms. Matschullat told us afterward that the women were supposed to be lesbians. She was interested in the sexual explorations of the twenties, which seemed to her to parallel our own, she said, and had taken a liberty with the script.)

Blackout. End of Act I.

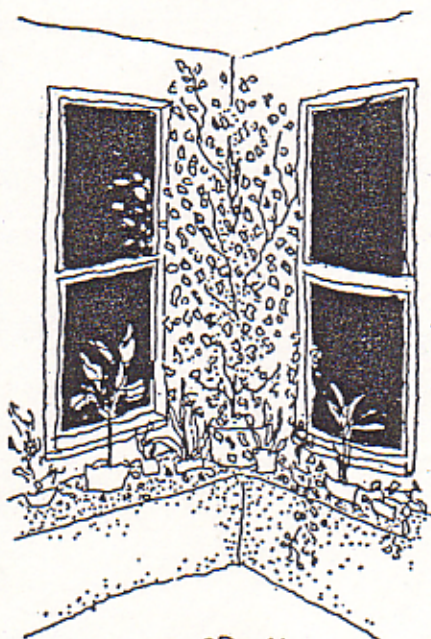
"Very good," pronounced a man behind us.

In the lobby, we talked to Leon and Gertrude Schop, who had seen not only King Vidor's 1931 film of "Street Scene" but the original stage production. How did this one compare so far?

"Terrific," said Mr. Schop.

"Too many Irish accents," said Mrs. Schop.

"I grew up in Yorkville in the twenties," said Mr. Schop. "Seventy-sixth between Second and Third was Irish, between First and Second Italian. Below Seventy-fifth were Bohemians and Czechs."



"The actors talk too fast," said Mrs. Schop. "They need to take their time. Every word should count."

Mr. Schop said, "I lived through such racial slurs when I was young."

"We're not interested in racial slurs," Mrs. Schop said. "We're talking about the play."

Act II began with the clapping of horses' hooves.

"Italy is beautiful, but is no money," James Miller, in the role of Filippo Fiorentino, said to Elizabeth Posella, who was cast as the ingénue, Rose Maurant. "Here is no beautiful, but is money."

Tasha Wenger, as Rose's mother, entered for a poignant scene in which she obliquely asked Rose's tolerance of her affair with the milk collector.

"That's her mother?" exclaimed a woman in the front row.

Urgent shushing.

Jordan Hunt entered and announced the birth of a daughter. In his joy, he sang a few bars of "Hard Hearted Hannah."

"He's very good, that boy," we heard Mrs. Schop say, some rows back.

"Sh-h-h," said Mr. Schop.

Jesse Kaye, as the cuckolded Mr. Maurant, entered suddenly and roared his outrage on discovering his wife with the milk collector.

Mrs. Silvan's hands flew from her lap and covered her mouth in horror as Mr. Maurant shot his wife and her lover.

A married man offered help to the newly homeless Rose.

Mrs. Silvan frowned deeply.

Rose refused.

Mrs. Silvan smiled and relaxed.

The penniless Jewish Sam, played by Daniel Doyle, proposed to the Catholic Rose.

Mrs. Silvan shook her head vehemently.

Rose said no, they were too young—she could even end up pregnant without meaning to.

Mrs. Silvan vigorously nodded approval.

Blackout. End of play.

"Very good," pronounced the man behind us, beginning to search for his coat.

Ms. Matschullat reappeared, and then the actors. "Did it seem like New York was then?" she asked the audience. "Did the different ethnic groups have trouble getting along in those days?"

Many voices said "Yes!"

"Is it better now?"

"It's different," a woman said.

Ms. Matschullat put her hand on Paul Urcioli's shoulder. As the patriarch Abraham Kaplan, Mr. Urcioli had had the difficult task of acting old in front of an audience that had no choice in the matter.

"Did you believe Mr. Kaplan was an old man?"

Smiling, everyone agreed that he was very good.

"Is New York tougher to live in now?"

"Yes! We didn't have murder then," a woman said.

"I saw a murder," a man said. "With an icepick."

"The city's worse now," a woman said. "It's the dope, and the nuclear war."

"We didn't have doctors, you know," someone volunteered. "We had midwives."

"That's Elmer Rice," Ms. Matschullat said.

"My mother had a doctor!" a woman called out.

"People had more of a sense of satisfaction in those days," Mrs. Silvan said. "People worked together."

"Really?" Ms. Matschullat asked.

"Really!" Mrs. Silvan replied emphatically.

"Thank you," Mrs. Schop said to the actors. "You gave us a lot of culture today."