

STRUGGLE FOR DETACHMENT: A NOTE ON S.N. BEHRMAN'S NO TIME FOR COMEDY

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ABSTRACT

S.N Behrman, one of the foremost American writers of high comedy in our century, was constantly engaged in a kind of struggle with himself. The struggle that persisted throughout the early and successful years of his dramatic career consisted of a tension between his objective comic detachment and his concern for the major issues of his times. While a number of playwrights of the twenties and thirties openly committed themselves to the communist ideology, Behrman viewed the contemporary scene with a strangely mixed feeling of concern and amusement. Charles Kaplan calls it the 'quandary' of Behrman's Comic spirit, and observes that his attempt to show an "awareness of social problems" through non-satirical comedy was detrimental to his "ultimate artistic success". But it is rather unfair to claim that Behrman did not succeed as an artist on this ground.

Keywords: *Dramatic Career, Comic Detachment, Playwrights, Communist Ideology.*

Introduction

After making some attempts at radical fiction-writing during his long years of apprenticeship, he came to realize soon that it was much better to be a hack writer than to starve on socialistic idealism. This opinion expressed by Behrman through Clark Storey, a second rate short story writer, in his first independent play *The Second Man* (1927), is of great significance in understanding his own attitude to the burning issues of the period. Some of his contemporaries like Elmer Rice, John Howard Lawson and Clifford Odets focused attention on the economic inequalities born out of the industrial revolution. They dramatized the wretched lives of the poor with passionate anger toward unjust economic system. Some other wrote anti-war plays, or social and political satire. They also depicted the changing social mores or the loosening of the old moral code. O'Neill, towering above all his contemporaries, was concerned, on the other hand, with the inner agony of the individual or his involvement with guilt. He "glared balefully down the scene of American posterity with tragic perturbation and refused to be comforted." But S.N. Behrman developed a high comedy style of his own. He often peopled his plays with suave, refined human being having a tolerant outlook on life. These civilized people with a liberal approach to the problems of life are often confronted by another class of individuals who are mostly committed to the radical or Fascist ideology. It is this latter category of individuals who testify to Shaw's argument "that society is founded on intolerance."

From the early days of dramatic career Behrman was keenly aware of a threat to individual freedom which he valued above all else. This threat, he felt, came from totalitarian forces of the radical leftist or the militant rightists. But whatever ideologies seemed to make an assault on the private life of the individual what is contrary to the principles which Behrman held sacred. He believed in a society of civilized, about accommodating human beings. Through his plays he seems to give a message of a general human understanding and kindness. He rejects any ideology that leads to strife and conflict. His playful entertaining comedies are but an expression of his optimistic attitude to things and his unshakable faith in the values of laughter. In his very first play *The Second Man*, he stated his Premise through his witty fiction-writer-hero Clark Storey. Like storey he realized the fact quite early that "Life is sad..... But it is gallant to pretend that isn't." This realization of life's sadness and an effort to cover it with the potential of laughter is the key to all Behrman's dramatic writing. His dilemma, in fact, resulted from his constant efforts to fuse together the sensitive and the sophisticated aspect of his personality. These two aspects

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were a curious mixture of the real Behrman and his other self, the second man within him. This is real shelf of Behrman consisted of "sensitive, a secretively observing boy nearly always on the verge of sobbing over the spectacles he beheld of which one of the saddest phenomena was his oven discomfort and inability to speak freely."

As time passed on, Behrman begin to realize more family that the world was showing no sign of becoming any better, and it was nearly impossible to wipe out from the world either injustice for cruelty. He began to feel that the best way was to accept human society as it is with all its cruelty. Those who defied society and the established system came to be known as revolutionaries. But Behrman wondered whether these so-called revolutionaries, were able to achieve anything significant towards the betterment of human society. He noticed it too, that communism or radicalism was not a panacea for the world's ills. It perhaps led to greater persecution and more cruelty although it guaranteed the basic human needs. He, therefore, choose the safer role of a civilized gentleman politely expressing his inability to share the views of the radicals and retire to the comfort of a sophisticated society. This attitude of Behrman, in fact, "represents the comic pathos of so many of us." Behrman consistently maintained this attitude of non-involvement and comic detachment in all his plays from *The Second Man* onwards.

Beginning in a light vein of playful humour, somewhat after the fashion of Oscar Wilde, Somerset Maugham and Noel Coward, Behrman proceeded next to write a satire on egomania and the mad pursuit of money and power. The miraculous rise to power and prosperity of Raphael Lord, the egoistic heroes of his character comedy *Meteor* (1929), and his subsequent failure and desertion by all his friends, including his wife, is obviously and expression of Behrman's disagreement with the Fascist concentration of power and money and the rise of totalitarian trends. *Meteor* is different from the earlier dramatic work of Behrman in respect of its satirical vein and its prophetic indication of the economic disaster of the thirties, and yet it is not without his usual hi comedy touch.

In the thirties the economic crisis deepened, the leftist writers of the period grew more and more vociferous. But S. N Behrman was faced with the delicate and difficult task of maintaining objective detachment, without ignoring the problems of his time. He, therefore, developed the rare gift of showing an awareness of his age without any deep involvement in its troubles. In his plays of the thirties from *Brief Moment* (1931) to *Wine of Choice* (1938), Behrman discussed the implications of the struggle for power between the Fascists and the Marxists. There are references to the rise of radicalism and Fascism in Europe, people's plight in the concentration camps, mass execution of the Jews, and the efforts of the Capitalist-Fascists to capture power. Behrman referred to all these matters without committing himself whole-heartedly to them. Instead he made these issues the topics of a disinterested discussion in the luxurious and elegant drawing room of the rich. The temporary seriousness that is provoked by references to the serious issues of the time often melts into the intelligent laughter of comedy. The radical idealist or the militant Fascists in his plays, nearly export themselves at the end when their faith in revolution appears ridiculous, and their plans to capture power, hollow.

They feel uncomfortable or the calm detachment of the tolerant, liberal individuals with whom they come into and ideological clash. Richard Kurt's complaint against Marion Froude, the tolerant and emancipated heroine of *Biography* (1932), is their usual complaint. Kurt says to Marion: ".....you expect to go through life as if it were a beautifully lit drawing room with modulated voices making polite chatter. Life is not a drawing room....." This complaint holds well in respect of Lady Lael Wyngate in *Rain from Heaven* (1934). She finds a more kindred soul in the Jewish art-critic Hugo Willens than in her lover, but aviator hero Rand Eldridge, who represents hate and bitterness. But she simply offers to wait for Hugo's return and do nothing more when he goes to join the underground forces against Hitler's Nazism. Not with standing this passivity of the liberal individuals in Behrman plays, there is between these good people silent communion. Their faith in tolerance and a sympathetic understanding of their fellow beings is a kind of light of positive human virtues shining through the darkness of an age which was otherwise dominated by strife, hostility and negativism. Some people criticized Behrman for his attachment and said that he was trying to sit on the fence. But Behrman felt is reassuring to choose for him such a position. According to critic:

Behrman's drawing room comedy war a compromise between a certain yesterday and uncertain today. This resulted in a philosophical tentativeness, a feeling of bewilderment in the face of the weighty problems is social conscience conjured up time and again. He was very close to the comedy of ideas. How much phase Behrman held in the value of laughter age demonstrated by the fact that some of the radical characters in his play who represent the revolutionaries of the period, also possess and excellent sense of humour. Sometimes these characters speak a fine comic dialogue, though at times the dialogue

tends to be a little rough. Dennis McCarthy and his colleagues Will Dexter, for example, have a dig at Freudian psychiatrist Dr. Kenneth Rice in *End of Summer* (1936). McCarthy says: "A significant moment, ladies and gentleman the magician of science meets the magician of sex. The flirting libido bumps the absolute." And later Will Dexter carries the joke further saying: "Depression or no depression-war or peace-revolution or reaction-- Kenneth will reign supreme". These radical also delight in light hearted witticism. Dennis McCarthy greets Paula Frothing ham on his return from New York: "We come to surprise you. Now that we have surprised you, we can go home." There are numerous instances of this kind in Behrman's plays.

Thus balancing drawing room comedy with the grave issue of the period, Behrman finally decided to tender an apology for writing entertaining drawing room comedies in an age of crisis. So in 1931, he set out to give an explanation for choosing the role of a detached hi comedian whereas the time demanded a more committed and serious approach. He argued the pros and cons of his case in his new play which he appropriately called *No Time for Comedy*, because the title of the play rightly summarizes the period. But ironically enough and quite in agreement with Behrman's comic temperament, the play was once again a drawing room comedy, tacking up for discussion the question of the propriety or otherwise of writing light entertaining comedies in a trouble- ridden era. *No time for Comedy*, thus, is the dramatization of Behrman's own dilemma which he faced all along in the troubled decade of the thirties. His playwright hero Gaylord Esterbrook, like Behrman, is a successful writer of comedies with fine witty dialogues and interesting situations. But suddenly he begins to lose faith in genial laughter of his entertaining comedies which he now considered mere trivialities. He calls them " an over-drown bank account". He declares that he is through with that sort of thing, because the age demands something more serious. He therefore, decides to write play which suited the grim climate of the period. Against the suggestion of his wife, Linda, who has been starring as a heroine in his delightful comedies, improvises the plot of serious play which would suit the temper of the times. The play refers to the horrors of war, the crisis in Spain, and the large scale killing and disfigurement of promising youngmen and the innocent civilian population. He gets the inspiration for writing such a play from Amanda Smith whose charming companionship he has now begin to seek as an escape from the drudgery of his home. Amanda, it is understood, has a knack bringing out the unrealized potentialities in men of genius or writers like Gaylord Esterbrook.

The play, which Gaylord is planning to write, is about a famous man of science and his only son who goes to fight in the Spanish war. There his body is blown to bits by a bombshell. The message reaches his father who simply cannot face the fact of his son's death. Finds it unbearable, but he now goes to his research laboratory more often and works harder than before. One night his dead son which eats in his sleeps and talks to him. The scientist wakes up thinking it a dream, but this communication with his son continues even when he is awake. The man of science begins researches in a parapsychology and life hereafter. He begins to believe in the immortality of the human soul and the possibility of communion with the dead. He publishes his researches supporting them with his own experience of communicating with his son's soul. A complete metamorphosis takes place in him. Movie the man of science becomes a district and a convert to occultism. He becomes something of a saint as Tolstoy had become in his old age. Then there is a complication. The young man believed to be dead is insect alive though completely disfigured. He returns home only to find that nobody recognize him. Assuming another identity, that of a close friend wrongly supposed to be alive, he begins to live with his parents and move in the society of his old friends. He even meets his former fiancée, the girl he was going to marry before he went to the war. She too doesn't recognize him at first. But gradually she comes to know the truth about him, although she doesn't disclose it to anyone not even to the young man. But he able to read her thoughts and understand what has happened. He too, however, doesn't speak to her about it. In the final act of the proposed serious play Gaylord intends to show the young man killing himself and revisiting his father and fiancée after death. This he does to prove the truth of his father's belief in psychic phenomena and communication with the dead. Unwanted and unrecognized by all, and hating his ghostly existence, the young man prefers himself dead than alive.

This, in brief, is the plot of the proposed serious play of Gaylord Easterbrook who is a projection of Behrman's own self. The play which Gaylord intends to call "*Dilemma*," is hailed as a masterpiece by Amanda who initially inspires Gaylord to write it. She believes that the play would be a turning point in his dramatic career because it would be his first serious play befitting the turbulent times. Even Linda, the actress wife of Esterbrook, praises the merits of this play, although she has always preferred and appreciated his elegant and charming drawing room comedy. She, however, criticizes the proposed new play for its macabre quality and it's preoccupation with death. But Esterbrook argues that death is the

predominant characteristic of the age. It is there chief protagonist and hero, because people's lives are ruled by war and death. Linda's argument however, is weightier than Gaylord's. Linda argues further that it is much more difficult to live than to die. Millions of people, mostly stoics and fanatics, I know how to die, but the really "admirable thing," forming "the index of civilization," is "the ability to live, and not the ability to die." She therefore, asks Gay to avoid "fantasies of death," and imagine instead, the "variations of life" Gaylord himself has begun to realize that his proposed serious play is "inadequate to its idea," possessing "indignation without form--passion without authority" and ultimately it might become "not tragic, but thin, petulant."

Of late Esterbrook has shown a kind of wayward behaviour. He has been struggling hard to write a play that would suit the serious mood of the times. But he succeeds in thinking of nothing better than the play "Dilemma" which takes shape in his mind with Amanda's help. He feels strangely towards Amanda. He finds a special charm in her Amanda; too, find a welcome change in Gaylord because her life with her husband Philo Smith has been quite empty. Gaylord wants to marry Amanda, and go with her to Spain to experience the sufferings of the people at close quarters. If possible, he even wants to enlist in the fighting forces. He is seized with the temporary passion of being unfaithful to his wife Linda. Leander meets Amanda. A sympathetic understanding develops between them as between two civilized human beings. Amanda, however, is not very keen on marrying Gaylord. Her objective of inspiring Gaylord having been achieved, she is even persuaded him to go back to his wife. But at the same time she does not say 'no'. She seems to show her silent acquiescence through her passivity. Land and Amanda's husband Philo Smith, on the other hand, find each other quite interesting. Linda's first meeting with Philo is 'provocative', while the middle aged Philo, after two unsuccessful marriages, experiencing something like the emotions of love for Linda, and proposes to her. Linda is not at all in hurry to accept the proposal, but it never the less feeds her ego and vanity. So, Linda refers the matter of Philo's interest in her to her husband Gaylord who, out of spite and to tease her, advises her to accept Philo's proposal without delay.

Beneath this structure of man-woman relationship in the Play, runs a mild note of irony. The comedy writer seems to point out that after all, every woman at heart is another man's mistress. There is a frankness and freedom from inhibition in the sophisticated human beings of Behrman. The milieu of Behrman's comedy, however, is slightly different from that of Restoration comedy in the sense that it transcends the sexual amorous of some fashionable men and women of the leisured class, and includes the playwrights' concern for the larger issues about humanity. It refers, at least tangentially, to the comedy writers' moral dilemma to choose between the tragedy of the times and the light entertaining aspects of life as the central theme of his play. It does not merely concern itself with the question of manna and the ethical code of high society, but also compels us to think, besides providing us with entertainment. It makes us share, to some extent, the playwrights' concern for the woe of humanity.

Behrman's dramatic personages, like himself, are noted for their detachment and cool temperament. The meeting between Gaylord and Philo Smith, for example, is free from any bitterness. In spite of the difference between their attitudes to life, they find each other quite interesting. Gaylord is deeply impressed by the calm detachment of Philo, who regards Gaylord's desire for real experience of human suffering as a mere romantic nonsense. Nothing is secret between the different characters in Behrman's play. Their temporary anger melts into nothingness. The result is that each woman stays with her husband. This is the comic compromise that Behrman's characters achieve at the end.

Moving between two women characters in the play is a rather clumsy but interesting young man, make peace Lovell also called Pym, with whom both women flirt well humouredly. His frank humour, at times, reminds one of the brashness of Dennis McCarthy in *End of Summer*. Noticing the friendly argument going on between Linda and Amanda he declares jovially that he would marry the survivor. If, however, both of them die in combat, he proposes to "return to a nunnery". Towards the end of the play, when Gaylord is in a temporary fit of anger, and is thinking of going to Spain with Amanda, Lovell says to him: "One thing I am grateful to you for, Gay, it will be so easy to be your successor. I will seem to charming. Anybody would".

The comic compromise is achieved in Behrman's play not only in the sense that nothing significant happened and nothing stays as they were, but also in the sense that Gaylord's serious play "Dilemma" is never written. Gaylord's inspiration for it fades out, as does the temporary anger and fancy of the important character for each other. In writing the proposed play, Gaylord, at the suggestion of his wife, gets a new idea to write a comedy based on his relationship with his two women, Linda and Amanda. The play, Esterbrook hopes, would be a comedy refracting "the disturbance and the

agony of the times," and thus will have "some contemporary value". He proposes to call the play "No Time for Comedy". Gaylord and Linda thus reconciled with each other while Amanda and Philo returns to their usual life of mutual disenchantment. Lovell remains the funny bachelor he has always been, and Behrman's play No Time for Comedy comes to an end. With the new idea of a comedy framing in his mind, Gaylord's dilemma too is resolved.

No Time for Comedy, is the summing up of Behrman's dilemma and his justification for writing light entertaining comedy in "one of the most convulsive period in recent history, " as Gerald Rabkin puts it. It is an "esthetic dilemma" and an effort to "walk the tight rope between.... conflicting aims. The argument in the play is a debate between the two sides of Behrman's own personality in an effort to resolve his dilemma.

No Time for Comedy, more than his other plays of the decade, is a testimony to the appropriateness of such an analysis of the conflict between the two solves of Behrman. Of the two unwritten play of Gaylord Esterbrook, the second one, a comedy about an artist and two women comes close to Behrman's play No Time for Comedy.

Behrman's distinctively quality, in which lie both his strength and his limitation, is the creation of this beautifully detached world of elegant drawing room comedy. Knowing all and seeing everything around him, his mature wisdom and his civilized self persuaded him to be a high comedy writer at a time, which he very well realized, was "No Time for Comedy". This course he chose after a long debate with himself to assert the positive values of life. This was for him a better way to live in passion. His discrete intelligence advised him to go through life with a spirit of geniality though there are sufficient reasons for protest and anger.

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