

AN ANALYSIS AND PRODUCTION RECORD OF

A CLEARING IN THE WOODS

BY

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PART I

CHAPTER I

THE AUTHOR'S POINT OF VIEW

A Clearing in the Woods, a play by Arthur Laurents, was produced on Broadway, January, 1957. The play received mixed reviews and closed thirty-six days after it opened. A year later, Laurents wrote a Preface to the play in which he analyzed the problems of producing it and made suggestions for solving these problems.

Among the problems he discussed were the liberties the producers took in allowing actors to express feelings and attitudes which he, as author, had not intended. According to Laurents' Preface, producers felt that the play was a fantasy and, thus, eliminated the very real thoughts, happenings, places, and deeds which Laurents felt were the essence of the play.

Laurents emphasized the fact that when the theme he had postulated was eliminated the play became untrue and without meaning because the characters portrayed became flimsy shadows of what he wanted them to represent.

Laurents meant that Virginia, the heroine of the play, is aware of reality and that her fantasies are not figments

of her imagination. Her perception is still keen, sharp, and direct, although limited by her inability to face the forces which are threatening her emotional stability. In the very outset of the play we are aware of her need for a love that was denied her by the death of her mother and by rejection from her father; her craving for recognition as a form of compensation for feelings of inadequacy; her expressed fears caused by her inability to form deep and lasting relationships.

The critical reviews of the play prove the very points that Laurents made in his Preface: when the producer takes liberties, the playwright's intentions may become distorted and his meaning misconstrued.

John Chapman of the New York Daily News wrote that he "couldn't make any sense out of it."¹ Robert Coleman of the New York Daily Mirror titled his review, "Clearing in the Woods is a Bore at Belasco."² John McClain writing for the New York Journal-American described A Clearing in the Woods as "an evening of pretentious and consistently oblique play structure from the pen of Arthur Laurents.

¹John Chapman, "Clearing in the Woods, Fraught with Freud or Something Else," New York Daily News, January 11, 1957, p. 48.

²Robert Coleman, "Theatre: Clearing in the Woods is a Bore at Belasco," New York Daily Mirror, January 11, 1957, p. 32.

Why must a simple and searing play be told with such in-direction?"¹ Time magazine summed up A Clearing in the Woods as being "choked with method and starved for substance, the play offered only a predicament, not a situation, while the situations that led to the predicament rarely individualized the heroine or galvanized the story."²

Tom Donnelly, representing the New York World-Telegram and Sun, suggested that the play's main weakness was a common one: "Our playwrights and novelists, with few exceptions, are dismayingly incapable of creating recognizable flesh-and-blood characters."³

The review of Jerry Gaghan of the New York Daily News was alone in the speculation that "it was probably not intended to mystify." His conclusion on the other hand was representative of the majority opinion: "Laurents' exercise in do-it-yourself mental therapy had the audience baffled right up to the first-act curtain. The second act resolution left them further confused."⁴

In his Preface, Laurents emphasized that A Clearing in the Woods is not a fantasy nor a dramatization of a woman's psychoanalysis:

¹John McClain, Review of A Clearing in the Woods, New York Journal American, January 11, 1957, p. 16.

²Review of A Clearing in the Woods, Time, January 2, 1957, p. 97.

³Tom Donnelly, Review of A Clearing in the Woods, New York World-Telegram and Sun, January 11, 1957, p. 18.

⁴Jerry Gaghan, "'Clearing' A Foray into Mental Wonderland," New York Daily News, December 27, 1956, p. 63.

To seek some such explanation [to A Clearing in the Woods] is to seek a realistic approach, to cling to naturalism because it is familiar and, thus, safe. But the action occurs only in the clearing in the woods and precisely in the sequence related.¹

On January 2, 1970, I met with Mr. Laurents and questioned him regarding the first production of A Clearing in the Woods. He declared that the first time the play was produced he was displeased with the set design and the performance because he felt that his intentions had been misrepresented.²

Mr. Laurents claimed that he had written a play that was not part of the realistic nor naturalistic theatres. He stated that his play adheres to two classic tenets: that content determines form and that unity of time, place, and action is observed.³

However, the play does not, in its entirety, follow the classical model. The heroine, Virginia, relates to three persons who are herself at different stages of her development. This is not a true-to-life situation and, at least to this extent, the play does not fit the classical model.

¹Arthur Laurents, "Preface," A Clearing in the Woods (New York: Random House, 1957), p. ix.

²Arthur Laurents, private interview held at his New York City residence, January 2, 1970.

³Laurents, "Preface," pp. vii-ix.

According to Mr. Laurents, A Clearing in the Woods was his first effort to go beyond usual dramaturgy. He said that all his plays share "one underlying theme; namely, the difficulty we all have accepting ourselves as the imperfect, two-headed human beings we are."¹ It is interesting that Gerald Weales in his book, American Drama Since World War II, observed that Mr. Laurents' plays embody the suggestion that the acceptance of human limitations is not choice between being an ant or being a giant, but the recognition of being a man and the possibility of a new beginning.² In an unpublished article, Mr. Laurents said,

I wanted to find a setting that would be theatrical, lyrical even fantastic, a setting that would permit a play to break some of the rules of dramaturgy which I, like many others, feel have been tying the theatre with a death knot. This path led me to a woods, a clearing in the woods, perhaps. And not too literal, for literal outdoor settings are a mockery on the stage.³

Mr. Laurents insisted, in his Preface, that A Clearing in the Woods "does not have flashbacks; it is not a dream nor a nightmare nor an hallucination; it does not take place in the mind of a woman."⁴ Thus, when he suggested that the

¹Arthur Laurents, interview, Bulletin, December 30, 1956, p. 59.

²Gerald Weales, American Drama Since World War II (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1962), p. 53.

³Arthur Laurents, "A Clearing in the Mind's Eye" (unpublished document, in the Library and Museum of the Performing Arts, The New York Public Library at Lincoln Center).

⁴Laurents, "Preface," p. ix.

setting be "not too literal" he did not exclude a literal setting but warned the interpreter against overindulging in the literal. At the same time, Mr. Laurents' expressed desire for a "theatrical, lyrical, even fantastic" setting must be understood to allow for some departure from the realistic but not too much. To plunge A Clearing in the Woods into fantasy, is not the author's intention. It is for this reason that Oliver Smith's design for the 1957 Broadway production of A Clearing in the Woods was, in Mr. Laurents' words, "too literal and yet airy-fairy."¹ Mr. Smith's set, the production's first comment to the audience, led some critics to believe that the play was expressionistic, and others to believe it was a fantasy.

I agree with the author's interpretation of his play. The characters must be given the opportunity to express themselves as living persons hemmed in by individual problems and needs. It is interesting that when I spoke with Mr. Laurents he said: "I beg you not to play for psychological meaning."² This warning is explicated in his Preface:

The play is written on two levels. The first is the simple telling of the story, the events that happen, the emotions that are felt. This level

¹Laurents, interview of January 2, 1970.

²Ibid.

is for both actors and audience. The second is the meaning and importance of each event and relationship in the total life of the woman. This is for the audience alone, to be grasped partially as the play unfolds, perhaps more during the intermissions, perhaps not completely until after the final curtain. It is the first level, the simple level only, which is to be performed.¹

¹Laurents, "Preface," p. xi.

CHAPTER II

A CLEARING IN THE WOODS: A VERY SPECIAL SORT OF PLAY

Mr. Laurents called A Clearing in the Woods a "melodramatic love story,"¹ during my interview with him. He also stated that the play could not be categorized as a tragedy. An examination of several views of tragic form substantiates Laurents' statement. Robert B. Heilman wrote that "tragedy should be used only to describe the situation in which the divided human being faces basic conflicts, perhaps rationally insoluble, of obligations and passions; makes choices, for good or for evil; errs knowingly or involuntarily; accepts consequences; comes into a new, larger awareness; suffers or dies, yet with a larger wisdom."²

¹Laurents, interview of January 2, 1970.

²Robert B. Heilman, "Tragedy and Melodrama: Speculations on Generic Form," in Tragedy, Vision and Form, ed. by Robert Corrigan (San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Co., 1965), p. 248.

The heroine of A Clearing in the Woods is "divided" in that she cannot accept herself as she is. The author makes it clear throughout the play's action that this state of mind could lead to her withdrawal from life either by suicide or by a complete mental breakdown.

Virginia, the play's heroine, is in conflict as she must make a decision to either accept or reject her past. In the process of making this choice, she comes to a "new, larger awareness," and during the last scene of the play she comprehends certain facets of her life "with a larger wisdom."

Virginia: "...I can't ever be what I dreamed....
But I don't want to be a groundling! I want
to rise in the air just a little, to climb,
to reach a branch, even the lowest -.....
.....
An end to dreams isn't an end to hope."¹

In this sense the play seems to fit Heilmann's specifications for tragedy. However, because Virginia accepts her past in the forms of Ginna, Nora, and Jigee, and overcomes her expressed need to be better than "ordinary," she ends her inner struggle and is able to face life directly. This ability to face life is the essential ingredient which takes the play out of the realm of tragedy.

Karl Jaspers stated that "the tragic -- man heightened and intensified -- is man himself in good and evil, fulfilling

¹Laurents, II, 168-170.

himself in goodness and canceling out his own identity in evil."¹

Jaspers notes that this implies both physical and spiritual, or mental, self-destruction.² This classically-based definition of the tragic hero does not apply to Virginia, for, although she contemplates such total self-destruction, she does not kill herself nor does she go mad.

Arthur Miller stated, "Tragedy...is the consequence of a man's total compulsion to evaluate himself justly."³ He defines the "tragic flaw" as the "inherent unwillingness to remain passive in the face of what he the protagonist/hero conceives to be a challenge to his dignity, his image of rightful status."⁴

In A Clearing in the Woods, Virginia partially fulfills this definition. She does not accept her lot in life and has always fought a battle for survival.

¹Karl Jaspers, "Basic Characteristics of the Tragic," in Tragedy, Vision and Form, ed. by Robert Corrigan (San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Co., 1965), p. 51.

²Ibid.

³Arthur Miller, "Tragedy and the Common Man," in Tragedy, Vision and Form, ed. Robert Corrigan (San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Co., 1965), p. 149.

⁴Ibid.

Miller concluded his essay, "Tragedy and the Common Man," by stating that "a [tragic] character has fought a battle he could not possibly have won."¹ However, Virginia is a winner since she leaves the "clearing" with a bright outlook. Therefore, even by Miller's definition, this play is not a tragedy. However, Susanne Langer, in her essay "The Tragic Rhythm," describes "a genre known as 'tragic-comedy,' which is a comic pattern playing with the tragic; its plot structure is averted tragedy."²

Such a structure exists in A Clearing in the Woods. Virginia is in deep despair over her inability to accept her life style. Her resultant depression causes her to contemplate suicide as a means of escape. However, inner strengths outweigh her death wishes. In the play, these strengths are revealed through people who love her. For the first time, Virginia is able to judge herself objectively and maturely.

A Clearing in the Woods is neither "tragedy" nor "comedy," Arthur Laurents revealed his awareness of this in my discussion with him. The play falls into the category of a tragicomedy. For the purpose of my production, I choose to call the form of the play "averted tragedy," in Susanne Langer's sense of the phrase.

¹Ibid., p. 150.

²Susanne Langer, "The Tragic Rhythm," in Tragedy, Vision and Form, ed. by Robert Corrigan (San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Co., 1965), p. 95, footnote 19.