

him AND the CRITICS

a collection of opinions on
e e cummings' play at the
provincetown playhouse

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INTRODUCTION

The Provincetown Playhouse asked me to write an introduction to the following collection of critical notices about "him," by E. E. Cummings. As a critic whose review of the production has not yet appeared and as a professional writer whose work from time to time is subjected to criticism I find my position peculiarly agreeable. I can at least make clear what the purpose of the pamphlet is.

The usual habit of experimenters in the arts is to assume that the critics come forearmed with prejudice and that in one way or another critics are not honest. In 99 cases out of 100 this is sheer rubbish. Reading the violent expressions used in the following pages one cannot for a moment doubt the impassioned honesty of the critics. It is, in fact, not their honesty but their intelligence that is in question.

In the present case it was almost impossible to discover the nature of the object discussed from reading most of the reviews of "him." The greatest of all critics put down as fundamental that the critic should keep his eye on the object—in this case what happened on the stage of the Provincetown Playhouse on April 18, 1928. Most of the critics let their eye wander to the peculiarly inept explanation of the play on the printed program and were so irritated by the absence of capital letters in the author's name that they failed to comprehend the actual nature of the play itself.

There is very little obscurity about the

essence of "him." It is a tragic fantasy. This is by way of being a novelty, for fantasies are generally comic or satiric; but novelty or not, the author states his theme and reiterates it throughout the play. The conflict is announced at the very beginning, when the girl says, "Why should we pretend to love each other?" and the man says that his life is based on three things—that he is a man, an artist, and a failure.

Perhaps the most fruitful cause of misunderstanding was the idea that "him" was intended to be a rollicking farce. Its elements are the tragic tension between a man and a woman and the tragic conflict in the soul of each. Perhaps the most astounding thing in the play is the fact that Cummings has expressed these tragic themes in the technique of the burlesque show and the circus. Anybody who has seen the National Winter Garden Burlesque would recognize that source of Cummings' form in "him." Some of the scenes were diagrams of burlesque jokes.

The contrasting element is, of course, lyricism, which again was recognized by those critics who either did not care about typography or knew that throughout continental Europe lower-case is frequently used in titles instead of upper, if only because it makes for a better looking page, and were, therefore, able to keep their ears open. This lyricism appears in its pure form in the scenes between the principal characters and appears in significant distortion in the scenes of fantasy. It is one of the rarest things on the contemporary stage.

There is one other element which may be mentioned—a philosophical one. The title of the play, the names of the principal characters and some of the action all point to the authors' consuming interest in the problem of identity. What is the essential thing I call myself? Am I myself or am I the image I see in the mirror—the mirror itself being a variable thing?

Am I in love with you or am I in love with the self which you create? It is an entirely legitimate theme in connection with the others.

THE HOWL

What can there be in all this to provoke the howl of derision which went up the next day? The play was obscure, perhaps a bit outspoken, not nearly so outspoken as some interesting contemporary novels. Why should the critics who on their own report sit night after night through perfectly conventional ineptitudes and stupidities be so outraged by one piece of dullness and obscenity which happens not to be cast in the traditional form? Thinking that I myself might have been prejudiced by my admiration of the play and my friendship for the author, I asked several people who have no contact with either what they thought of the reviews. In various ways they all suggested that there was something slightly hysterical in the tone which seemed to have nothing to do with the critics' judgment of the play. A howl of derision ought not to have this overtone unless something fundamental in the critics' make-up has been given a painful shock.

DIRTY WORDS AND DIRTY MINDS

If the critics will tear themselves away from the nasty innuendo of entirely polite musical shows long enough to read a few pages of Montaigne or go to a good burlesque show, they will probably forever get over the idea that reference to bodily functions is dirty. If they will read Cummings' "Enormous Room," which is legitimately crowded with such references, they will recognize the "great cleanness" which, as Paul Rosenfeld has said, distinguishes it. But if they want the American stage to go down to the level of those advertisements which supply you with a coupon to hand to the drug store clerk because you are

too modest to mention the name of the commodity you desire, they may keep on saying with Mr. Robert Littell that moments in the play are "exactly like stepping on something extremely nasty in the dark." For myself, that sentence brings me close to nausea as the play itself brings me to pure joy.

BOOKS AND PLAYS

A second division of this pamphlet is composed of excerpts of reviews of "him" when it appeared in book form. The authors are as distinguished in their field as the dramatic critics are in theirs, and the book reviews are extraordinarily favorable. Why this is so would be an interesting subject for analysis. But passing it I only note that intellectually—that is, in its ideas—the stage has always been a generation or two behind the printed page. The oldest ideas of Freud are the newest of O'Neill, and the oldest of Nietzsche the newest of Shaw,—this is a commonplace of criticism. All I can add to it is a suggestion that perhaps the comparative intelligence of the critics has something to do with it.

I could suggest the names of half a dozen people to whom the Provincetown Playhouse ought to dedicate this pamphlet. For example, the critics who tried to howl down O'Neill when he was produced at the Provincetown Playhouse; or the late William Winter; or that group of notable proper Britons whose reception of Ibsen is recorded in "Ghosts and Gibberings," or the Parisian critics of Wagner—or perhaps the New York critics of our own time.

But my own part of it I dedicate in all seriousness to Mr. John Anderson, who wrote for the New York *Evening Journal* an extremely intelligent, penetrating, appreciative, *unfavorable* review of "him." It will perhaps be one of the pleasantest circumstances of the production of "him" that its only illuminating review should have been addressed not to the

super- but to the substandard audience, and that no critic addressing an audience supposedly intelligent and sophisticated should have given them one-tenth as accurate an account.

GILBERT SELDES.

CRITICS

Conrad Aiken, in *The New Republic*:

For that the play is brilliant, and full of brilliance there cannot be the smallest doubt. Mr. Cummings has an amazingly fertile mind. His wit and his sense of the ridiculous are delicious. His use of symbols, in the extraordinarily shadowy limbo of feeling-tone is sometimes miraculously sure. He knows, as Mr. Joyce knows (and Mr. Cummings, it is clear, owes the dramatic interlude in *Ulysses* a tremendous debt) how to make a single line of the poetic nonsense express a whole state of mind. It is not for nothing that he is a poet. On the evidence of "him" alone one would guess him to have an all-round equipment for the writing of plays at present unmatched in America.

Wm. Rose Benét:

That the press of the United States of America seems to be unaware of the exact status of Mr. E. Estlin Cummings, author of the new Provincetown Players' dramatic production "him," is one of the most gorgeous pieces of idiocy we have recently snickered at.

His play "him" both infuriates and puzzles me. And if his audiences have any sense, they will be just as infuriated and puzzled. But they will, we will hope, recognize the rockets of phrase—the roman-candle implications that shoot up ever and anon and burst into galaxies of stars. For God's sake, be a little glad for such a Fourth of July.

Richard Lockridge, in *N. Y. Sun*:

There are enough strikingly theatrical scenes to make half a dozen plays—things which might play beautifully if one would persuade actors not to try to understand them. Some of them have that meaningful intangibility of music.

Frank Crowninshield, Editor, *Vanity Fair*:

I admire E. E. Cummings tremendously. I do hope that the play will succeed and that all will go well with you.

Edmund Wilson, in *The New Republic*:

"Him" is the outpouring of an intelligence, a sensibility and an imagination of the very first distinction. There are comic ideas which would be enough to make Cummings' fortune. He reveals an astonishing faculty for reproducing and caricaturing the way different sorts of people talk: his soap-box orator, his barker and his American ladies in Paris all speak with the true lifelike relief of comic genius. A book which should be read by all persons who prefer genuine literature, no matter how drunk and disorderly, to the imitation, no matter how well-dressed.

Our American expressionist dramas have too often been deficient in precisely those elements in which Cummings' is rich: they have commended themselves to our attention on the basis of their artistic merits, and then have turned out to suffer from the primary disadvantage of being written by persons who could not write. Cummings may lack theatrical expertness, but he is equipped with a vivid dramatic sense, and—what is equally important—with the poet's pen.

Stark Young, in *The New Republic*:

There was a strange verbal excitement always acting on me. There were fantastic combinations, a mad music of ideas, a real poet's intensification of the word, image and tone, a heightening of the beat, that seemed to me fresh and blessed in the theater.

The directing of "him," nothing if not difficult, with the twenty-one scenes, and the great diversity of ensemble problems and dramatic themes, was admirable, the best in Mr. James Light's career, I think.

You could not call "him" a success in any complete sense, as a play or a business venture, but the share of the Provincetown Playhouse in its fortunes must be highly commended. Picking a sure-fire piece, or taking a play and doctoring it up safely with the author, is one thing. What the Provincetown has done is quite another. What they have done is to allow an important poet to have his play go through as he wrote it, to hear his own poetry, to follow his imagination and his heart, freely and in good faith. What he will learn from it, nobody can say. But we can say that what he does learn, he could have learned no other way. This opportunity and this faith, available for the artist's use, is what most justifies and distinguishes the Provincetown's existence.

Theater Acts Monthly:

There are scenes of beauty and feeling, scenes humorous and grotesque, macabre and revolting. But in all there is a singular power and vitality—the same power that made Mr. Cummings' first book, a novel called "The Enormous Room," so memorable an experience. The author has satirized the whole of life in one hundred and forty-five pages.

Waldo Frank:

It's good news that Cummings' "him" is to be put on by the Provincetown Players. It's a play of fancy, imagination, pathos, passion. It will give our public a glimpse of what drama is, when it is freed of the dead rot, and becomes an art. The distance from Aristophanes to Cummings is not so great as one might think.

John Dos Passos, *New York Times*:

... And the result, particularly among professional writers, critics and the like who feel they know it all and that any use of words other than according to their own habits that they learned in high school is a personal insult to them, start snorting and blustering around and saying rubbish, nonsense. . . .

"him" seems to me to be a very direct and vivid presentation of the tangle of one man's consciousness in relation to his love for his girl. Tangle is not quite the right word because the artichoke that is fed leaf by leaf to the audience is fitted round its central theme with admirable logic. The tricks by which the successive discoveries are imparted to the audience are the tricks of a review rather than of a continuously plotted entertainment. How well it is done, how great a play it is cannot be decided until it is measured with others of its kind. I think, in the spring of this year 1928, that it's a pretty darn good play. At any rate it won't do you any good to curse at it for not being like "Broadway."

Genevieve Taggard, in the *N. Y. Herald-*

Tribune:

Mr. Cummings has an instantaneous and ineluctable thing to say to people (like Me), who don't quite follow. Because of the very hazard of his occupation his technique is flawless. . . .

It is always being said that Mr. Cummings' work is obscure and subjective, careless of the reader, and calculated in no way to get over to anybody. That the reader has difficulties is perfectly true. But the reader's difficulties come not from a lack of objectivity in Mr. Cummings' work, but because this is not vague feeling or vague thought, but very precise in its intensity, and therefore very new and strange. Those who have followed his poetry know that he has been at great and ingenious pains for years to do nothing more than to perfect a technique that will permit him to say minutely what he intends. Only a very objective artist could have so imperishably designed speech on a printed page or frozen and unfrozen at will his bits of cafés, streets, glimpses of girls, seasons, trees and moon. In many ways unknown to our slovenly time, Mr. Cummings has concerned himself with embodying his feeling in his verse. The ancient knew how to do this."

Muriel Draper:

Any one conscious of the waking dream of living will be excited, bored, embarrassed and moved by this play.

S. Foster Damon, *Saturday Review of Literature*:

Historically, "him" belongs in the tradition started by Strindberg's "Dream Play," adapted by Joyce for the Hell scene in "Ulysses," and again remodeled for the "Beggar on Horseback" and Dos Passos' unappreciated "Garbage Man"; yet so many other elements impinge (Dada and O'Neill, I believe), and the authorial personality is so strong, that the result is wholly new. One could discuss the play as another manifestation of the Literature of Nerves, established by T. S. Elliot's "Waste Land." But no one of any of these ancestors contains at once the raucous laughter, the realism brutal to the height of lyricism, the shameless and unexcused bawdry, the sudden symbolic vistas, and the profound poignancy of some scenes—especially the scene with the pistol and the other one after the balked love affair.

So many people seem to have been puzzled by this play that I offer these suggestions; but they are suggestions only, and nothing more. As for the reviewer's last remark: "So much for the man who once had the promise of an American Keats," I can merely add that one Keats is enough. He was so very great that his ghost has haunted poets now for a century, scaring them all into feeble imitation. It is ridiculous to compete with a genius on his own chosen field. That Cummings has staked out another field for himself is greatly to his credit, whatever crop it may bear.

John Sloan:

"Him" is about as thrilling an evening's entertainment as I have ever experienced—I liked it thoroughly. It seemed to me a glimpse inside an intelligent man's cranium. To those who cannot recognize such a head when they see it, the play is incomprehensible.

Paul Rosenfeld, in "Men Seen" (*Dial Press*):

The fresh and generous spirit possessed of his proper line of interest among the materials of the earth, and given an imperishable dream by Marlowe and Froissart, Swinburne and Keats, is the rarest of all aesthetic phenomena. Yet E. E. Cummings, we begin to observe, is such a one.

John Preston, *Saturday Review*:

Cummings has an extraordinary genius for language—it has the characteristics of a genius as fine as Keats' or Rimbaud's—side-splitting after the manner of a raging old drunk.

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L. W. Payne, Jr., *University of Texas*:

Some months ago I reviewed E. E. Cummings' "him" and predicted that it was too subtle, too advanced, too profound a piece of modern art to be put on the stage during the lifetime of the present generation.

"Him" is a drama *sui generis*. There is nothing else exactly like it anywhere. It is something new under the dramatic sun. It is, in fact, a work of genius. If it is rightly presented by the actors; if it is observed from the right angle and listened to with the proper imaginative sympathy by the spectators and auditors, it will undoubtedly be a memorable experience in the artistic life experience of every one concerned. . . .

The savage vulgarity of the satiric skits is relieved by the extraordinarily beautiful love scenes enacted between Him and Me. The third act is one of the most beautiful pieces of dramatic art conceived in this age. It is penetrating, profound, uniquely poetic and satisfying. It throws a great searchlight into the innermost recesses of the human heart. It is cathartic and rejuvenating.

John Anderson, in the *N. Y. Journal*:

Behind the eloquent delirium of such writing there is fierce sanity flaring out across parts of "him" and making them memorable . . . its babbling madness surges now and then through passages of astounding coherence and sensitive poetry. Against the struggle of an artist to find himself, Mr. Cummings sets a scalding mockery of the whole theater.

Since the hero proposes to write a play the middle section of "him" consists of some rowdy and often hilarious burlesques of the current dramas. Mr. O'Neill, a director of the Provincetown, is kidded cruelly in a sketch on "The Great God Brown," the Theater Guild and the New Playwrights for their negro folk plays, and the Messrs. Shaw and Sherwood for their up-to-the-minute versions of ancient history.

Though it can have little popular interest, "him" is a provocative event in the theater.

AND CRITICS

The New York *World*

Mr. Alexander Woolcott, having seen exactly six scenes of the twenty-one, finds "him" not up to the standard of "The Green Hat" and its fantasy not quite in the true Barrie tradition.

Fatiguing, pretentious and empty, a play called "him" was unfurled last evening on the patient stage of the Provincetown Playhouse.

I have a suspicion that the author of a piece like "him" spends a good deal of leisure idly thinking what odds and ends would be nice to have in a play some time and even, on great occasions, jotting them down. Then some fine day some one asks him just once too often how he is getting along with that play he is supposed to be writing, and in a burst of bravado he says it is finished. The next thing he knows it is being taken seriously in Macdougall Street.

I cannot otherwise account for such a farrago as the piece which was somehow performed last evening at the Provincetown—cannot otherwise impart to you one-half its disorder, its windiness, its humorless nonsense, its pathetic attempts to be striking. Its satire is accomplished by all the clichés of the day, and its black despair is that of the pimply faced schoolboy announcing (within earshot) that he means to end it all.

The New York *Herald Tribune*

Mr. Percy Hammond is honestly puzzled.

Consultation with Mr. Nathan, Mr. Mantle, Mr. Winchell and other keen clairvoyants of the drama revealed a similar state of bewilderment, though all of them have studied the play with their usual thoroughness.

I understood the singing of "Frankie and Johnnie" in a version less expurgated than that rendered by Miss Mae West in "Diamond Lil"; and there was a rational game of craps hard by the Coliseum in ancient Rome. But the rest of it was sheer delirium, as it was intended, with dozens of actors throwing fits and babbling the daffy outcries of idiots affected with rabies in its dullest form.

The New York *Evening Post*

Mr. Robert Littell, in his first year as a metropolitan dramatic critic, departs somewhat from the traditions of liberal journalism in which he was brought up. He expresses his regrets, but says he prefers a nice, clean play.

"Anything, Everything, Nothing and Something were looking for eels in a tree, when along came Sleep pushing a wheelbarrow full of green mice."

This is a pretty fair sample of Mr. Cummings' attempt, in twenty-one scenes swarming with 107 characters, to chew up Processional and Frank Sullivan and Ring Lardner and Mike Gold and Jean Cocteau into one great loony quid and squirt the juice at us. At rare intervals there are brief verbal gleams through the fog, but most of "him" is tired, willful nonsense, a feverish sort of dramatization of the curlicues people scrawl in telephone booths while they are waiting for a wrong number.

And every now and then it is exactly like stepping on something extremely nasty in the dark.

Mr. Cummings is neither a humorist, nor a satirist, nor an epigrammatist, nor a dramatist, nor is he, as so many of his admirers would have us believe, shrewdly and delightfully insane. He is simply a man whose most natural gesture is that of sticking out his tongue at the world, and the tongue is coated.

People would also have us believe that Mr. Cummings is a sort of revolutionary jester, who by standing on his head and mentioning February 30 ironically causes something or other to shake in its boots. But last night all the bent pins he stuck into the shins of the established order were not noticed by the audience, which laughed, when it did laugh, only at mention of bodily functions and some of those words, which small boys chalk up on blank walls.

The New York *Evening Sun*

Mr. Gabriel grows facetious at great length and so fills a column.

The program prints a warning about "him." It assures you "it's a PLAY, so let it PLAY." The directions grow almost gymnastic . . . "let it PLAY with you. Let it dart off and beckon to you from the distance, let it tiptoe back and snap its fingers under your nose, let it sweep up at you from below or pounce down on you from above, let it creep cautiously behind you and tap you on the back of the neck, let it go all around and over and under you and inside you and through you. . . ."

Well, let it. The present reporter testifies that he let it. He let it do all these cute, endearing things. With the beaming patience of a proud

granddaddy to let it PLAY all around him, fore and aft, and sweep and creep and pounce and even tweak his nose. He hates any one to tap the back of his neck on general principles, but he let it. He hadn't quite all the instruments along wherewith he could let it get inside him, but he did his best, his honest and ungrudging best. Nobody can say he didn't let.

But all the while—such is the bleak effect of years of theatergoing—he couldn't help thinking that "him" was really a nasty, cranky little urchin of a play which its parent, the author, ought long ago have washed and spanked and put to bed. Perhaps it suffered from a bloat of twenty-one scenes or from the scramble of its fifty-three uncombed characters. Perhaps it was just tired and wouldn't admit it. But it went on peevish and making rude noises and bawling out all those obscenities and impieties which little boys do manage to bring home from the street corner . . . and was, in short, a bloody nuisance. . . .

The panting playgoer, chased around the cosmos with the fourth dimension tied to his tail, insists on howling, all over again, how much he had wanted to play with "him."

The New York *American*

Mr. Alan Dale has wasted a few hours on an uncomfortable bench and hates the whole business.

Why is a mouse that spins? Because the higher the fewer. Also how far is up, and why? Because neither of them can climb a tree. I could continue in this bright and chatty way ad lib. and still give you no positive idea of the trend of the precious thing perpetrated at the Provincetown Playhouse last night under the succinct title of "him."

Having got us down there, however, and mewed us in past redemption, they most certainly had their fun with us. Perhaps the "E. E. Cummings"—thusly small-capped—alleged to be the sponsor of it all, is just some wag determined to get even with some of us. But no odder way of getting even could have been devised. . . .

People came on and said some says that were cryptic enough to have made even Eugene O'Neill feel sick and sallow.

There was all sorts of quaint repartee. One even heard that gem of humor: "Possolutely and absootively" trotted forth as though it were a gorgeous thought. The thing reeked with all that kind of stuff, until you began to wonder whether you were standing on your head or your heels, and not caring which.

But I feel that "E. E. Cummings" was there taking us all in and saying to himself, "Well, I got 'em here. I actually contrived to get those chaps to

come and listen to my piffle. I achieved something that many a brave man couldn't achieve. Ha! Ha! Ha!"

And the laugh WAS on us. There is no doubt at all about it.

Also I don't begrudge it to the poor chap. Why shouldn't I move from my fireside, if by doing so I can give some poor unfortunate a bright moment. Why shouldn't I suffer occasionally?

But, after all, why is a mouse that spins? Because the higher the fewer. Also how far is up and why? I'd like to know tremendously.

The New York *Telegram*

Mr. Leonard Hall catches the idea but knows too much about the facts of life to be taken in.

There is a serious story thread running through the theatrical jamboree—the frustrated romance of a boy playwright and a simple little girl.

The boy thinks and talks incessantly, and the girl but feels and listens. Oddly enough, even the kindergarten in the study of the human comedy knows that it is just the way round—the lad merely feels, while the girl child has an active intelligence that lands at its mark, while the boy is still wondering dimly whether it isn't time to start. But in "him" the lad gives off great gusts of woozy vaporings, and the lass pretends not to understand, and they are hampered and lost at every point.

The New York *Times*

Mr. Atkinson casts his vote for redder roses and more wine.

Sitting at one of the high stools in an abstract celestial realm, lower case e. e. cummings has written a facetious cerebration entitled "him" and played with spirit and vertigo at the Provincetown last evening. Apparently (though seeing is no longer believing) mr. cummings is portraying this mundane sphere as it looks to him, or to his central character "him," from his microcosm—his exalted, unqualified state of being. As he explains lucidly on the jacket of the neatly printed text, here speaks "the third voice of 'life,' which believes itself and which cannot mean because it is." To us sensual-minded playgoers, so unaccustomed to abstractions, the frigid chastity of such a metaphysical concept comes devilishly hard.

The New York *Graphic*

Mr. Winchell turns expert in typography, quotes the whole of the program preamble,

cracks wise about his colleagues, and let's it go at that.

E. E. Cummings, one of the stylists of the drama and the literary field, provided last evening's puzzle for the Provincetown Playhouse frequenters and the innocent passerby—the critic. The followers of this corner may have suspected already that the author of this report this morning will eagerly read what his confrères have chronicled about last night's proceedings, for it was all incoherent to him.

Mr. Cummings, who fathered the piece called "him," is better known for his tome "The Enormous Room," which was inspired by the war, and his contributions to the *Dial*. In the magazine, his specialty was the sort of prose and verse which was not punctuated, and was written on one of those typewriters which had capital-letter trouble. At any rate, Mr. Cummings is said to be popular with the alleged "thinkers" who enjoy their text in the so-called highbrow manner.

The New York *Telegraph*

Mr. Thomas Van Dycke:

It amounts to the aftermath of badly made whisky, gin and welsh rarebit, stirred up into a flagon and added to gobs of whipped cream and poured down the throat of a man who has just taken a dose of cod liver oil. . . .

All in all, this "him" is a lovely lulu. One night of this gives one a much greater appreciation of things one sees north of Forty-second street.

Women's Wear

And Mr. Kelcey Allen controls himself.

Lest we are wrathfully tempted to begin using invectives or making this a diatribe, we will mercifully cut this notice short.

The Provincetown Players thank Mr. S. A. Jacobs for his collaboration in the arrangement of this pamphlet.