KINCORAN OPINION

IN SEARCH OF JOHNSTON

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I was interested to hear Hilton Edwards remark recently that although he used the word genius but rarely, it hovered close to his lips whenever he spoke of Denis Johnston. In Johnston, the playwright walks hand in hand with the philosopher. The former, whose innovative and stimulating influence on the theatre was considerable, is perhaps easier to analyse, but the genius to which Hilton Edwards alludes, is to be found in the philosophical deliberations of Johnston when his mind probes beyond the confines of conventional thought, searching as it were for that which is above and beyond the mere existence of today.

Many readers more fortunate than I will have experienced the sensational impact of *The Old Lady Says No* at the Peacock in 1929, and *The Moon in the Yellow River* at the Abbey in 1931. Why, then, was the recent production of *The Old Lady Says No* such a disappointment? Have 50 years been too much for the play, or was it the direction of Edwards and the acting of MacLiammoir that gave the first production the magic I am told was there? It might be unreasonable to expect the MacLiammoir-Edwards production to be surpassed, or even equalled, but I suspect that the play has simply dated, and herein lies, I suggest, the denial of genius to Johnston the playwright. Wonderful though his plays are, they have not, unlike the plays of Beckett, stood the test of time (although I hesitate over *The Moon in the Yellow River* which surely merits a modern production). This is a pity, because as a master of theatrical technique Johnston can have few equals. This was brought home to me again recently when I chanced upon one of his plays with which I was not familiar — *Blind Man's Buff.* Written with Ernest Toller, it was first performed in the Abbey on Boxing Day, 1936, with Arthur Fields, May Craig, F. J. McCormick and Eileen Crowe in the lead parts. I do not know how well this play was received (perhaps some readers will remember, the subject centred around the sister professions of law and medicine). A country doctor finds his wife dying from self-administered poison and, in panic, he calls a neighbouring "lady" doctor with whom he has been having an affair. Both realise that the wife, in death, has had the last macabre laugh. A bungled effort to falsify the death certificate, and the machinations of a scorned housekeeper are enough to put Doctor Chavasse on trial for the murder of his wife. Some of the medical technicalities are dealt with rather naively, but Johnston knows his own profession well, and the courtroom scenes are intriguing. He leaves to the imagination of the observer the depiction of the adultery, the poisoning, and the imposition of the death sentence, while on stage complex, shifting relationships slowly dissolve, and are ultimately destroyed in the charade which we call justice.

Johnston the genius, if he is that (and I suspect that he may be), is to be found in *Nine Rivers from Jordan* and the *Brazen Horn.* The former is the chronicle of a journey and a search, in the physical and temporal sense, whereas its sequel, the *Brazen Horn,* is a metaphysical odyssey written by an older and, perhaps, wiser man. In *Nine Rivers* the war correspondent makes his way from Alamein to Yugoslavia, and nonchalantly, almost unthinkingly, via Rome to *Buchenwald* where, for the first time, he sees the horror of what he had previously regarded as a game played by gentlemen obeying certain rules—"O Christ, we are betrayed. I have done my best to keep sane but there is no answer to this except bloody murder." At the Brenner Pass a spiritual catharsis changes Johnston utterly, and in the *Brazen Horn*—a work guaranteed to intrigue his biographers and to baffle many a Ph.D.-hunting American—he plunges into deep philosophical waters with but a cursory apology—"the fact that one sometimes may be in error in one's rapportage of the current verbiage of Science does not necessarily mean that one's general conclusions are nonsensical." Johnston takes to task the "experts who are all specialists" in his search for "any general picture of what is going on in the Universe." The book is a treatise on the awful predicament of existence, the influence of science and religion on that existence and Johnston spends some time pondering that final appointment which we must all keep—death. "Man would be frantic without the gift of death; as it is, he normally lives for something less than a century, and he does his best to make sure that this natural span is not enlarged into too long a senility, thanks to the efforts of his medical advisors." I am not sure if he has succeeded in convincing me that he has "some alternate Continuum", but he makes a valiant effort to do so, and does he not after all have the last say, albeit with tongue in cheek—"if this sounds like nonsense, make the most of it; but do not presume to contradict me until I have finished speaking, and you have heard what I have said. For mark this well—never once, when speaking *ex cathedra,* have I erred. All that you have to know is when I am speaking *ex cathedra,* and when I am not. And to assist you in coping with this problem, you may take it that whenever I am wrong, I am not so speaking."