

PROGRAMME PORTRAITS

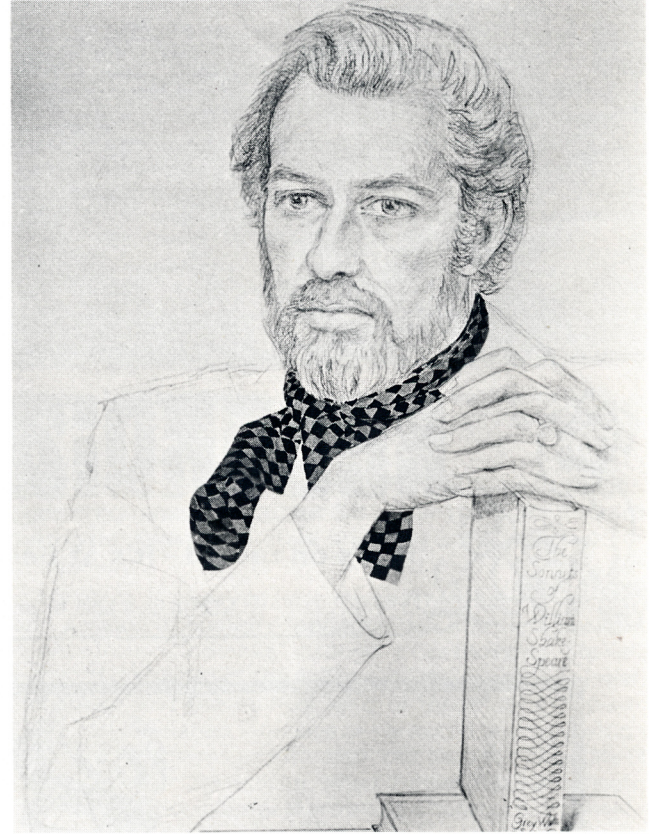


Ayn Rand's play "Night of January 16th" is an intriguing courtroom drama, a murder trial with a variation in the verdict. When the original script was written in 1935, Rand decided to use a climax based on either of the two verdicts, guilty or not guilty. The verdict was given by a jury chosen from the audience each night.

On March 12th, 1932 Ivan Kreuger, the Swedish "Match King" committed suicide. This event, and the subsequent ripples through his vast financial empire, was the springboard for the play. "Night of January 16th" is an autopsy into the life and death of Bjorn Faulkner, a fictitious parallel to Kreuger. Ayn Rand believed in this superman, the hero, who as a mysterious figure and a man of unswerving determination was able to create a personal greatness and a spectacular empire. Her philosophy led to an almost cult-like surge in American society, as she believed in the power of the individual and the social purpose of the 'superman'. "Night of January 16th" is her only play and it is not surprising that it should be set in a courtroom.

She was no stranger to the roles played by the characters in the courtroom, and had been personally involved in the "McCarthy Witch-hunts" for Communists during the fifties in America. Being the accuser in these trials rather than the accused, Ayn Rand was more than accustomed to the shallow 'evidence' set before the jury. She was fully acquainted with a verdict based on evidence that was factually more or less balanced. The question lodged with the jury was of a moral nature. It is not surprising then that in the 'research' Ayn Rand did for "Night of January 16th", the verdict was necessarily one of guilty.

Karen Andre, secretary and mistress to Bjorn Faulkner, is accused of murder. She is the woman who adored Faulkner and seduced him into the arms of self-destruction. As a kept woman she sojourned in the lap of luxury, consorting with con-men and gangsters. Her relationship with Faulkner transcends the apathy



of respectable living. She ritualises their love-making with special effects. The jury are told how Magda Svenson, the puritanical housekeeper, watched one evening as Faulkner heated a platinum dress for Karen Andre to wear. "As it cooled it clung to her body." She is one of many fascinated with the couple's actions.

On the other hand John Graham Whitfield and his daughter, Nancy Lee Faulkner stand as people of wealth, stature and respectability, all of which lies heavily upon their shoulders. Their evidence is one of selfappraisal and apparent honesty.

From the evidence led by the witnesses, the case for and against the accused is approximately balanced. The issue at stake is of a moral nature. It is not surprising that although the play remains unchanged, the attitude of the jury has altered considerably over the last two decades. What seemed to be immoral, selfish and sometimes unmentionable has, in the 1977 production, resulted in an altogether different reaction. The verdict may be seen as a reflection of modern standards and our own critical sense of what may be considered "right".

As the director, Louis Burke concerned himself with a number of dramatic devices. He established the audience as the main body of the courtroom, positioning a number of the characters within the auditorium to determine an involvement and immediacy in the action on the stage. He used a flashback technique to accentuate some of the evidence necessary for the verdict. He positioned Karen Andre, the accused, close to the audience, facing the stage so as to maintain a certain amount of empathy between court and accused.

It is not surprising then that an alternative to the usual black and white photographs in the foyer of His Majesty's should have been decided upon. Stephanie Mitchell, for His Majesty's, commissioned Professor Fabio Barraclough to draw portraits of the leading characters. There was a very practical reason for this.

As the characters wore conventional garb, there was very little in terms of costume to accentuate the character role.

He has, through his artistic ability, introduced the audience to the characters before the play commences. To do this he had to understand the characters in "Night of January 16th" and note each actor's interpretation of his role. This interpretation was made possible through Barraclough's immense interest in people and their actions and through the discipline of sculpture — the relationship between the figure and its environment — the ballet dancer and the stage, the actor and the actress. The walls of his studio are hung with studies of the human figure.

It was, therefore, a natural interest in theatre which led him to examine, in his portraits, the stage character within its portrayed environment. A factor which developed this interest was a strict understanding of the ritual behind the Catholic Mass. "After all, I am a Catholic and I can say with respect that some High Mass I have seen is probably even more of a performance than conventional theatre. Here one has the most traditional of sets, the music, the costumes, and an atmosphere which underlines the importance of the action taking place within the church."

Because of his interest regarding the figure within the environment, Barraclough was fascinated with the roles in "Night of January 16th". He became totally engrossed. "To show the audience drawings instead of photographs, means that one can get to the essence of the person."

"After all, the most important parts of an actor's body are the face and hands. They are part of an actor's personality and expression."

Portraits of Heather Lloyd Jones, Joe Stewardson, Michael Mayer, Diane Appleby, Hugh Rouse, Anthony Fridjhon and John Hussey were exhibited during the run of "Night of January 16th" at His Majesty's Theatre.