

History Comes to Life

The Summer Season Officially Opens with Emil Ludwig's *Reincarnation of the Versailles Conference*, **Peace Palace**, at the County Center, White Plains, New York



The camera, in the above photograph, catches the semblance rather than the illusion of some of the leading figures from Emil Ludwig's *Peace Palace*, recently staged by Herbert J. Biberman at the White Plains County Center. Standing (left to right): General Tasker Bliss, Sir Basil Zacharoff, Marshal Foch, Colonel House. Seated, Makino (Japanese delegate), Woodrow Wilson, Georges Clemenceau, Lloyd George, Orlando.

The summer theatre season opened early in June. Not indeed among friendly cows and alongside babbling brooks, as these pages have frequently suggested; for this time the theatre was the enormous County Center, in the midst of White Plains, boasting a stage broader than that of the Metropolitan Opera House. But although Herbert J. Biberman's project is exceptional in the location and architecture of his theatre, it is in all other respects typical. He is giving eight productions of new plays, with some of the best of New York's actors journeying out to rehearse and play, amid an atmosphere of eager adventure. Emil Ludwig's *Peace Palace*, played in Europe under the title *Versailles*, was the opening bill.

Herr Ludwig's scheme is simple. He takes the chief events of the Versailles peace conference and places them with all necessary license on the stage; and he seeks, by all the dramatic devices which he can contrive, to make his characters appear the frail human beings they were, rather than the wise and disinterested statesmen they pretended to be. There is a little trimming of imaginary characters to suggest the vast human background of the fateful conference. But the author has wisely refrained from multiplying the political implications. Only one is stressed—the conflict of nationalism with the humanitarian liberalism for which Woodrow Wilson ostensibly fought and for which Herr Ludwig is still a protagonist.

There is sure to be bite in a play which corrals so many historical characters, among them not a few still alive. Here are, besides President Wilson, Clemenceau, Lloyd George, Marshal Foch, Orlando, Smuts, Paderewski, Zacharoff, Nansen, Balfour, Colonel House, Mrs. Wilson, and General Bliss. The bite is the more incisive since these characters are pictured in the light of the author's violently held political and social convictions.

Emil Ludwig

In Herr Ludwig's view Wilson is the hero of the piece. Wilson is the unselfish idealist struggling with selfish and tricky politicians for the future welfare of mankind. He is tricked and overpowered, forced to sign a peace treaty which he profoundly disapproves, and his morale is shattered in the act. The view may seem a little naive at this distance, corresponding as it does so closely to the official legend. But it is a playwright's privilege to take such a view, and certainly there is potential drama in it. Where the characterization falters, and where the drama goes out of kilter, is when Wilson opens his mouth, uttering phrases from his public speeches.

Curiously, and against all this first-playwright's intention, it is Clemenceau who emerges as the hero of the piece. Clemenceau took part in the tragedy of 1870 and vowed that it must never happen again; that is all. At the age of seventy-seven he is still fighting with every weapon, and with the ardor of the youthful lover, for the one love which has dominated his life.

But the character gains a certain sturdiness by being set over against Lloyd George. The British premier has no will, but he can think twice as fast as Clemenceau and ten times as fast as Wilson. It is Lloyd George who finally presents the *aut aut* which finally crushes Wilson: sign on our dotted line or accept responsibility for world anarchy. While most of the characters are, in the author's intent, faithful portraits, this Lloyd George seems at moments to be a caricature.

The play is rich in minor portraits: blunt General Bliss who never got anything out of war but his wages, and at the moment of decision adjures Wilson not to sign; Fritjof Nansen, in charge of provisioning the enemy countries, treating the wrangling politicians like insects; Sir Basil Zacharoff signing a check for a million to feed the dependents of those whom his guns have destroyed; Colonel House, true to the legend rather than to the reality, rarely uttering a word; and Mrs. Wilson comforting her husband at the moment when he feels he has betrayed humanity.

Add to this a production which moved with speed and sureness, and you will see that the season has started with a flourish.