

with both of those vital processes.

China's own scientific community is only too aware of the dangers, yet it must find a way to increase food production. Despite all efforts to limit the birth rate, China is expected realistically to add at least 200 million to its present population in less than two decades. At present, only 10-15 per cent of China's 9.6 million square kilometers is cultivated because much of the rest offers little hope of agricultural productivity.

Disruptions in agricultural production caused by recurring natural disasters regularly affect vast populations in China. In 1981 the worst drought in thirty-seven years in the north and northeast and extensive flooding in the south have affected tens and perhaps hundreds of millions of people, with heavy losses of agricultural productivity. Hence China's recent urgent appeal to the world community for help through the United Nations.

There is, therefore, no question of halting the land reclamation scheme. Indeed, the primary task of the U.N. University specialists is to contribute to the development of guidelines for future reclamation. The new monitoring and research stations are to gather the kind of scientific information about environmental changes essential for an agricultural development strategy. The studies are intended to enable specialists to stop and reverse the process of land degradation at the Sanjiang Plain and also to avert similar disasters in the wake of other ambitious land reclamation projects elsewhere in the world.

Thomas Land writes from Europe on global affairs.

EXCURSUS 3

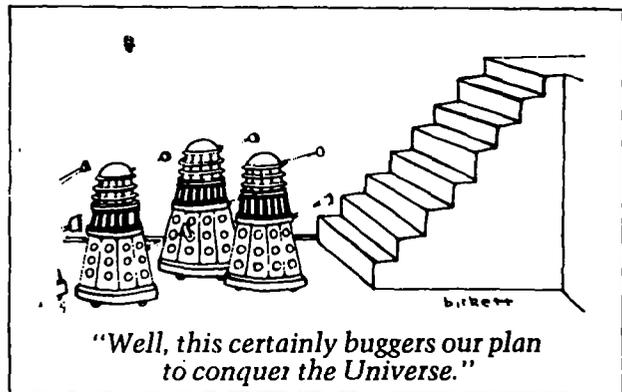
Sy Syna on GREAT ADAPTATIONS

The great excitement in the theatre this season has been generated by *The Life & Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby*, which The Royal Shakespeare Company brought to these shores for a limited run with seemingly limitless costumes, props, and scenery. Part of the excitement is artistic, part is controversy. Never before has the American public been asked to pay as much for a regular theatre ticket — \$100. Rarely has an audience been asked to sit through so much theatre in a day — nine hours.

Why transport such a monumental theatrical work? In a pointed article in the *Village Voice* the critic Robert Massa provides some answers. The production, budgeted at \$4.4 million, could generate a profit of as much as half a million dollars above and beyond the manager's fee and what the Shubert Organization, a co-producer, pays for theatre rental. More than likely, though, the show will just break even.

Massa shrewdly notes the side benefits for Broadway. Theatre-goers who have paid \$100 for a ticket hardly will quibble over a \$30 or even \$50 tab in the future. Then there is the matter of prestige: cover stories in national magazines, sophisticates picnicking on the theatre steps during the dinner break, etc.

Ironically, the production is based on the work of Charles Dickens, a writer keenly aware of social injustice and the gaps between the "haves" and "have-nots." (During its original London run it could be seen for as little as \$9.) Perhaps there is even subtler irony here, for the play takes as its theme the contrast between the givers and the takers of this world.



PUNCH

The production is staged as a Brechtian epic (e.g., stagehands dump buckets of confetti upon the actors who are miming a tramp through snowdrifts; the cast fashions a stagecoach out of trunks, boxes, and bales and then pulls it off stage to thunderous applause). The acting is a triumph of the British style — accent, mannerisms, and costume contribute to the rendering of sharp cameos. It should be noted that David Threlfall plays Smike superbly — not as the retarded boy Dickens intended, but as a cerebral palsy victim. It is a compelling portrayal and still demonstrates that Nicholas out of his innate goodness extends love and succor to this unfortunate.

David Edgar's adaptation of *Nicholas Nickleby* makes figures of fun out of the Crummies's theatrical troupe while they remain good-spirited souls. Though more Edgar than Dickens perhaps, their *Romeo and Juliet*, with its happy ending, is the funniest travesty I have ever seen performed on the stage. Here, at the close of the first portion, the entire cast sings an ode to Britain that is heavy with satire and includes the ample Mrs. Crummies as Britannia, wrapped in a Union Jack.

Most of the actors play several roles and, in keeping with the Brechtian epic style, mingle with the audience before and during the show. Some are called upon to sing an entire scene, in costume, from a Mozart opera while others pantomime another scene below.

Is all this worth \$100? Let's see. A two-hour Broadway show now costs \$20-30 a ticket. *Nicholas Nickleby* runs nearly nine hours. The price per hour works out to about the same. But if one feels, as I do, that the arts are not a luxury but a necessity, then the price of any Broadway show or opera is now too high; for those who no longer can afford to attend the theatre, it reduces the quality of life.

Nicholas Nickleby is part of yet another trend this New York season, which finds an unusual number of literary works adapted for the stage. Dean of this assemblage is William Shust and his one-man production of *Chekhov on the Lawn*, with which he has been touring since 1972 in the U.S. and abroad.

Sy Syna, a New York-based theatre and film critic, writes frequently for *Worldview*.

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