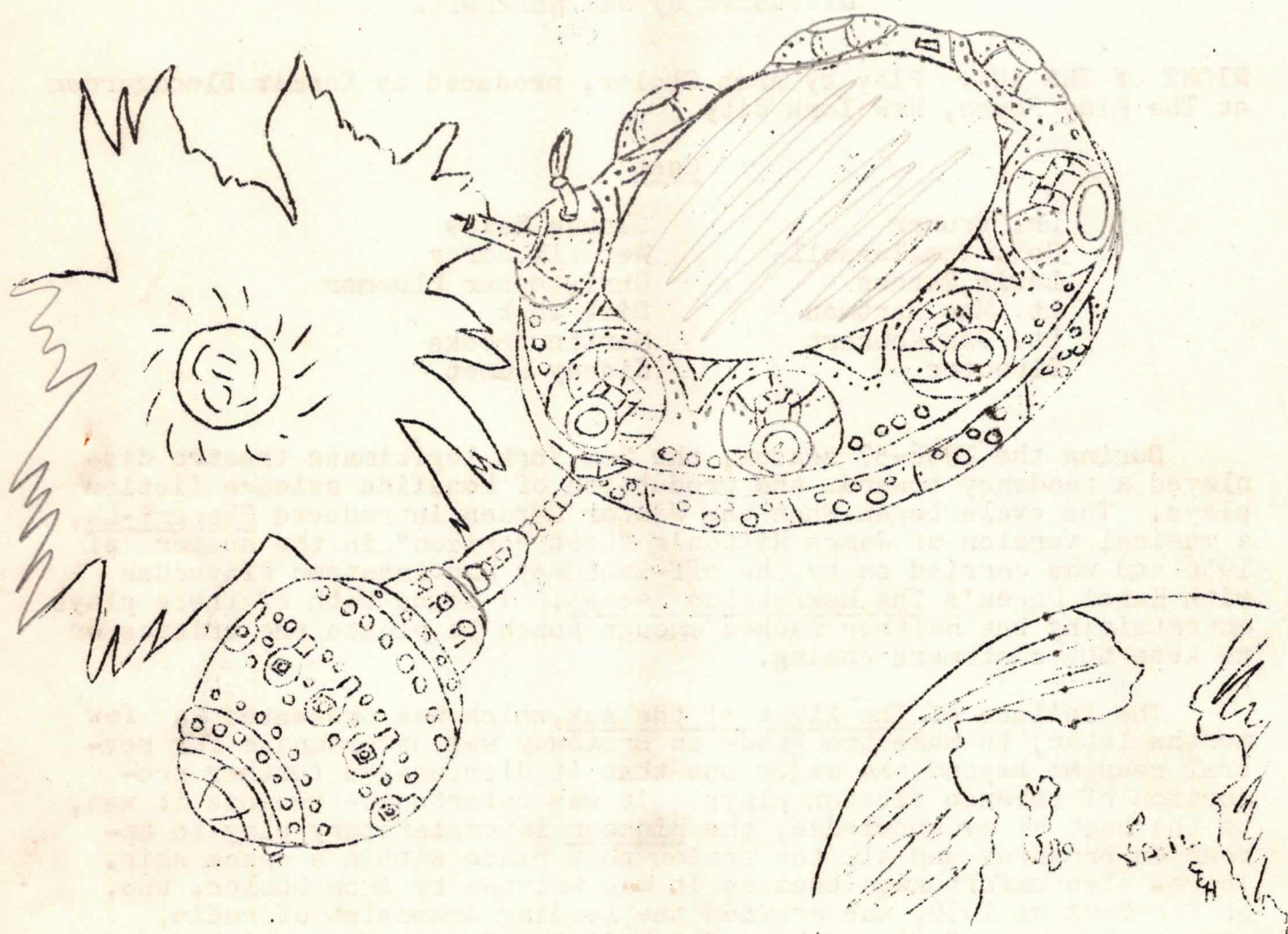


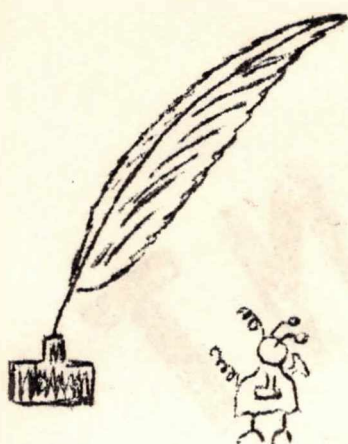
DIFFERENT



VOLUME 2

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TWO SCIENCE FICTION PLAYS



Discussed by Sam Moskowitz

NIGHT OF THE AUK. Play by Arch Oboler, produced by Kermit Bloomgarden at The Play House, New York City.

Cast

Dr. Bruner
Col. Tom Russell
Lewis Rohnen
Lt. Mac Hartman
Lt. Jan Kephart
Director

Claude Rains
Wendell Corey
Christopher Plummer
Dick York
Martin Brooks
Sidney Lumet

During the 1956-57 season, the New York legitimate theatre displayed a tendency towards the production of bonafide science fiction plays. The cycle began when the Winter Garden introduced Shangri-La, a musical version of James Hilton's "Lost Horizon" in the summer of 1956 and was carried on by the off-Broadway Provincetown Playhouse with Karel Capek's The Makropulos Secret. I found both of these plays entertaining but neither packed enough punch to please the critics or to keep the customers coming.

The failure of The Night of the Auk, which was presented a few months later; to make the grade on Broadway was unfortunate for several reasons beyond the major one that it discouraged further production of science fiction plays. It was unfortunate because it was, to the best of my knowledge, the pioneer interplanetary play to appear on Broadway and all the action took place within a space ship. It was also unfortunate because it was written by Arch Oboler, who, as far back as 1939, was crowned the leading dramatist of radio, largely because of his work on "Light's Out," a program which featured many science fiction and fantasy plays. It was still further unfortunate because a lead role was performed by Claude Rains, an outstanding dramatic actor, who first won international attention by playing the part of an invisible man in H. G. Well's motion picture The Invisible Man.

The burden of guilt for the failure of the play, rests unexpectedly upon the shoulders of the playwright, Arch Oboler. The acting

was a little short of magnificent. The set, with its realistic batteries of electronic light flashes was truly outstanding. The directing was excellent. Even the plot was sound. The entire trouble rested in the dialogue.

The playbill carries a quote by the late Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes which coincidentally or not conveys the exact air of the play's lines:

"I do not pin my dreams for the future to my country or even to my race. I think it probable that civilization somehow will last as long as I care to look ahead--perhaps with smaller numbers, but perhaps bred to greatness and splendor by science. I think it not improbable that man, like the grub that prepares a chamber for the winged thing it never has seen but is to be--that man may have cosmic destinies that he does not understand. And so beyond the vision of battling races and an impoverished earth I catch a dreaming glimpse of peace.

"The other day my dream was pictured in my mind. It was evening...I remembered the faith that I partly have expressed, faith in a universe not measured by our fears, a universe that has thought and more than thought inside of it, and as I gazed, after the sunset and above the electric lights there shone the stars."

Oboler appeared to have written the play in blank verse. The performers made an awe-inspiring effort to transform the ponderous masses of philosophy into the fluidity of natural speech. Their effort only underscored the trouble.

After the reviews appeared, Arch Oboler spent an hour on Jean Shephard's radio program, damning the critics. He said many things about them with which I heartily agree. I have seen fine plays, such as Toe Late, The Phalarope and The Lovers driven out of business by rather puzzling reviews and watched inconsequential nothings pandered into modest successes. This was not the case with Night of the Auk. The critics were fair. They credited the play with all its strong points and told no more than the honest truth about its weaknesses.

The play concerned a crew of space voyagers returning from the first successful trip to the moon. One of their members died on the moon under hard-to-explain circumstances. The onus of guilt flits from man to man of the crew in a series of superbly delineated character sketches. Unfortunate wording of an announcement to earth by the crew of the ship frightens Russia and sparks off an atomic war. The space station upon which they are to land is blown up. The ship is not fueled sufficiently to land on earth. A series of accidental deaths coupled with suicides make it possible for the old scientist (Claude Rains) and the young radio man (Wendell Corey) to attempt a landing.

The play ends with the same spectacular and impressive rocket glare and overwhelming roar with which it began. You do not know if the two ever make it back to earth. You do not know if the earth will be livable if they succeed in safely landing. You do know that man never ceases to try or to hope, no matter how bleak his destiny.

The acting was splendid, but nothing could rescue the play from the long, florid monologues, written in blank verse and suited for recitation in the Shakespeare manner.

The dialogue did not fit the mood of the play or the requirements of the theme. The subject matter was crisp, modern and called for a fast-paced exchange which the author did not provide. It may be that the play will read well in print. I intend to buy it and find out.

When the play was over I went back stage and clambered over the set with two of the play's actors, Wendell Corey and Martin Brooks. From the audience one would never have dreamed that the slick spaceship interior was painted balsa wood. The set has since been taken to Palisades Amusement Park, Palisades Park, N. J. and there is an admission charge to see it.

Afterward, I waited at the dressing room door for Claude Rains to emerge. There were several children waiting with me and no one else. The theatre had been crowded with youngsters. Evidently, the news that this play was about space travel had prompted parents to make it open night for the small fry. They got their autographs and I got mine. While he was signing my program, I attempted to ferret out his personal interest in science fiction but he replied to me with something absentmindedly irrelevant and then, he theatrically wrapped himself in an actor's cape and looking very old and very tired left through the stage door. Outside it was raining.

VISIT TO A SMALL PLANET. Play by Gore Vidal, produced by George Axelrod and Clinto Wilder at the Booth Theatre, New York City.

Cast

Gen. Tom Powers	Eddie Mayehoff
Roger Spelding	Philip Coolidge
Reba Spelding	Sibyl Bowan
Ellen Spelding	Sarah Marshall
Conrad Mayberry	Conrad Janis
Kreton	Cyril Ritchard
Aide	Bob Gothie
Rosemary	Grenadier Saadi
Cameraman	Earl Montgomery
Sound Man	John Hallow
A Friend	Francis Bethencourt

A week after A Visit to a Small Planet opened, William Peper of The New York World-Telegram and Sun said: "A Visit to a Small Planet has restored the good name of science fiction after it had been placed

under a cloud by Night of the Auk."

A Visit to a Small Planet was a hit May 8, 1955 as an hour show on television presented by the Goodyear Television Playhouse. I saw it on TV and found it only mildly entertaining. Therefore, I attended the theatre version of the play more out of a sense of duty than with the expectancy of entertainment. I spent a delightful evening in the theatre.

On stage the play took on a new light. The addition of lines more pointed than those that could be used on television; the presentation in full color and three dimensions; the delightfully pointed shafts driven home into the body of artificial patriotism and sacrifices at the altar of hucksterism, all combined to give the production much more substance than it previously boasted.

After the fate of Night of the Auk, total, hopeless, complete and utter failure had been predicted for Visit to a Small Planet. Even the usherettes (so the story goes), asked to be transferred to another theatre after watching several rehearsals.

Superb acting on the part of the two leading performers is rightly credited with putting the play over so solidly. Cyril Ritchard (who also directed the play) as Kreton, the alien from out of time and out of space and Eddie Mayehoff as Gen. Tom Powers, displayed so many acting tricks, subtle nuances and well-timed inflections as to keep the laughter going almost continuously throughout the performance.

The critics unanimously praised the effort. The strongest fault to be found saw the performance as more of a vaudeville act than a play, but despite all, a marvelously funny job.

Briefly, the play concerns a visitor from "a suburb in time," in a flying saucer, who, decides to visit the past and change history "just for fun." Possessing advanced mental powers, he plans to encourage a war, "since that is the thing which you people seem to do best," and the world is less than 25 minutes from an atomic holocaust when another member of his race shows up, explains that Kreton is emotionally immature and carts him off. All the action takes place in the living room of the Virginia home of a television commentator and the situations proved enormously funny.

It is ironice, that humor, one of the rarest things in science fiction and one of the hardest to do well, should have been instrumental in helping the science fiction medium score its greatest success on the stage.

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In 1938, as now, fan magazines had a tough time filling their pages. To help things along, I used to run a manuscript bureau which acted as a clearing house for material to fan magazines. This service was operated at no cost to "needy" fan editors. In most cases, I even absorbed the cost of postage myself.

When I quit the service, a few manuscripts remained undistributed. Among them was a short story by a 15-year old youngster named Cyril Kornbluth. The story has never been published, so now, after 20 years, I present it here for the first time anywhere, as a matter of fan interest. The influence of a variety of authors will be evident, Edgar Allan Poe and H.P. Lovecraft among them

Thil hunched his rickety body further over the fire; fierce winds waited in the darkness to sink icy teeth into the flesh of men. He crooned to himself vague measures born of the darkness and the cold and the despair. It was the death-chant of his race:

"From the south came the ice. From the south came the ice like a bitter god that would crush us from the happy godless plains we had always known. Flowers there were that blared their colors like the blasts of golden trumpets; stilled are the trumpets and stilled is their music. Birds there were that whistled about our heads like polychromed slivers of joy; gone are the birds, for they moved slower and were dashed to the frozen ground by the snarling winds. We, the masters of the fields that had smiled beneath a smiling sun, what were we to do when the sun frowned and turned aside? The few that were left, we moved to the north, with the stinking skins of dead animals bound about us. To the north, we dreamed, and prayed, and wept, where we might cast aside the stench of the garments, to the north, where the

sun would again smile. To the north we went and we had left hell for hell. Forests and jungles and swamps, where men, near madness from the heat, drank great gulps of water from muddy ponds, and swelled and died; where great necks lashed from fair green and snatched away in mighty jaws a screaming one of our number." His voice had grown louder; some figures stretched on the icy ground, gaunt and flat as shadows, twitched feebly, and one tried to drag itself to its feet, but collapsed with a sigh of pain.

Something vast and black stirred in the cold and darkness just beyond the dim fire; from the black thing came a ghastly sweet piping, while the prostrate figures moaned. "Tekeli-li...tekeli-li..." shrilled daintily from the darkness. Thil wanted to scream at the piper, but he knew that a violation of the silence would bring a penalty--and he was not yet prepared for it. There were yet drops of exquisite bitterness to be extracted. He picked a thorn-branch from a slender sheaf beside him, held it reluctantly over the fire, and, as it began to blacken, dropped it in. Nearly doubled over the flame, eager for the little extra warmth, he coughed harshly as he inhaled acrid smoke. His body rocked from side to side in misery, for the cold was sinking horribly into him...

(go on, old man...a race should not die without a death-song... go on...)

"Past the jungle, from hell to hell, was a desert where heat roared down on us from a baleful glaring face in the sky that not a one of us could recognize as the friend of the happy plains." The mournful chant had been resumed. "Past the jungles, and past the deserts are we now, and now in a hell beyond the hells. Around us a rim of mountains like black, rotted teeth, plains swooping in on our fire like nauseous gums seeking to mumble us horribly...ah, the blackness, and the cold, and the despair! No further can we go for the teeth, and we cannot return, for we know that death waits at the end of our journey. This is no way for a race to die, but what can we do beyond building the fire with thorn-branches until none are left, and then, while the fire turns blue and disappears, curse the cold and the dark and the pipers?"

"Tekeli-li...tekeli-li..." shrilled sweetly from the blackness.

CYRIL KORNBLUTH

Levittown, N. Y., March 25--Cyril M. Kornbluth, 35, noted science fiction writer, died here of a heart attack. Mr. Kornbluth wrote many books with former ad-man Frederik Pohl, in which they satirized current social, business and political conditions by extending them into the future. One of the first of these was "The Space Merchants," a novel describing the 21st century, when advertising agencies were supposed to have taken over the world. Whole continents and planets are assigned to agencies over accounts. Mr. Kornbluth, who was born in New York and who graduated from the University of Chicago, served as Chicago editor of Trans-Radio Press from 1949 to 1951.

Advertising Age
March 31, 1958

(...think, old man, think...no way for a race to die...this is no way for a race to die...think..the fields...what of the fields...)

"They were happy fields," creaked Thil mournfully. "Such happy fields--" the cold sank deeper into him, and he began to cry. With hands that trembled he dropped two thorn-branches into the fire. "Such happy, happy fields--the birds like slivers of joy--"

(...yes, old man, they were happy fields...but what was not...what...)

"Such happy godless fields--"

(...godless, old man! godless!...)

"Such godless fields! We had no need for a god then; peace and joy and beauty were ours!...and warmth and brightness. We need a warm god now. It is not good for men to be without gods; men should worship a god and the god should aid the men...We need a warm bright god now to drive back the cold and the dark and the pipers..."

"Tekeli-li...tekeli-li..." Sweet notes runneled from some unimaginable organ of the vast slimy bulk just beyond the contracting shell of firelight.

"This is no way for a race to die," wept the old man. "Men should not die in dark and cold amidst the pipers...The fire is dimmer..." The last branch but one dropped from the shaking hands amidst the paling flames. Thil picked the last thorn-branch from the chill ground and clutched it to him with his skinny arms; the thorns bit him through his rags of leather, but he clutched it the more fiercely. He could not give it up to the fire...the fire...

(...old man...the fire...fire...)

Thil's eyes glazed out of focus as he stared at the fire, and his thoughts spun off into roaring, incomensurable distances...warm...bright...fire...and cold and pipers and DARK!

(...a god, old man...and the fire...a god...fire...god...fire...the fire and a god old man...the fire and a god...)

Thil who was once a wizard! Thil who once knew the black secrets of those slabs of stone that tower broodingly over the scuttling little brown apes that were their masters in aeons long past! Thil who descended six thousand steps to the Sabbath and read the images that those versed ones can see in the tiny ball of pith which men know as the DEORC CWUDU! Remember, Thil! Remember!

"The fire is going out," he whispered plaintively, "and I am cold and afraid of the dark!" He had forgotten that he clutched a branch that might prolong his life for a few minutes.

(...remember Thil...the steps...the little black ball of pith...what you saw therein...fire...warm and bright...a god...oh, remember, old man...)

"I could remember, but I don't want to!" he muttered to himself. "Soon the dark will take me and the cold will take me and I need fear no more, for I shall be dead."

Sweet and shrill and mocking from the darkness: "Tekeli-li...tekeli-li..."

Thil tried to scream. The cold had gone too far. It was the pipers that he could not bear...great black slimy abominations that would perform certain acts upon the bodies of men. And the men would wander, without sleep...without food...without rest...with only so much mind that they could realize horror and do the bidding of the pipers.

"Tekeli-li...tekeli-li..."

Thil moaned and desperately cast off the stupor of cold that sought to claim. His thoughts were tumbled masses without order or salvation, yet he knew that somewhere there was an answer, and it was known to him.

(...the pith ball...DEORC CWUDU...)

The CWUDU, thought Thil, the answer was there. An incantation...fire...god...but I forget it all...so long ago...so long ago...

(...AGA CWUDU YIG LOGGITH...)

Thil stared at the fire, and slowly the disordered piles of thought came into alignment. He became suddenly aware of the branch he held. Its tip he thrust into the fire, then he roared it about his head in great curves while he chanted softly: "AGA CWUDU YIG LOGGITH..." and he stared at the fire. It grew less, while he chanted and chanted softly and roared his brand about his head, while the darkness and cold held its breath before swooping in and engulfing Thil and the few gaunt figures about him. Then the flame grew. Thil's soft chant died into nothing, and the brand he dropped into the growing fire. There was before him a great silent fan of purple flame. The gaunt figures rose, wondering, for there was no fuel, yet the fire gave light and heat.

Thil stood before them; he seemed taller and stronger than he had been for long. "Worship the flame," he cried, "for it is your god!"

Still, from the black, just beyond the shell of light, came the piping, "Tekeli-li...tekeli-li..." But it was nothing to the worshipers. This was their warm bright god...

A thin, nasal voice sang from the flame; the god was speaking: "I hunger. Who shall feed me and attain glory?" There was no sound save a terrified whisper from the men. "No matter. I choose that boy." A pseudopod of flame reached from the greater mass to encircle a young boy, who screamed shrilly once and struggled for a brief moment, and then was still. Along the tentacle flowed the life-stuff of the boy into the body of the god, who glowed a deeper purple.

Thil had watched, nearly unbelieving. Words and phrases formed

in his mind; then he said, quite calmly and dispassionately, "The god whom I have made is evil. He is evil as the pipers. We must flee him or he will destroy us all. He is evil."

"Evil," agreed the god. The men trembled between the evil darkness and the evil light; while they paused the god exploded in a purple flare, and engulfed them all. Then, when the bodies and the life-stuffs had been absorbed the flame-god began to dwindle. It brooded, near vanishing, "I should have thought. Without worshippers I cannot live. I should..." It flickered into nothing.

The darkness and cold again rushed in. Winds howled, and above the winds there was a sweet faint piping,

"Tekeli-li...tekeli-li...tekeli-li..."

EXCERPT DELETED FROM "THE PROPHETIC EDGAR ALLAN POE" PUBLISHED IN THE
DECEMBER, 1958 SATELLITE SCIENCE FICTION

Closely akin to it in mood and presentation is the tale, Some Words with a Mummy, which followed only two months later in The American Review for April, 1845. A mummy is brought to life and the achievements of the "modern world" compared to those of ancient Egypt, with the nod going consistently to the latter until it comes to patent medicines, where the mummy, embarrassed, decides to be rewrapped and returned to his sarcophagus.

As may be noted from a description of the preceding tale, a distinct element of humor pervades its relation. The fame of Poe's terror tales and the misery and suffering which attended his life have understandably given the impression that his demeanor and thought was eternally grim and devoid of hope. Actually, he wrote a substantial number of tales of pure humor and a jocular note is present in many of his works. Apart from tales intended to be satiric or facetious, Poe also wrote thing like The Angel of the Odd--an Extravaganza, appearing in Columbian Lady's and Gentleman's Magazine, October, 1844, which reads like and could easily have served as a model for a quite funny vaudeville skit, replete with phoenetic German accents and bottles bouncing off craniums and loss of breeches. This story in clude s as part of the plot, the use of a man-carrying balloon, which emphasizes again Poe's fascination with flying.

The Sphinx, presented to the world by Arthur's Ladies Magazine, Jan., 1846, tells of a man who sees a monstrous winged creature ascending a hill from the window of his cottage. The blasphemous thing, relative to the trees it passes, is an estimated 70 feet in length and bears markings like a death's head on its back. When its eerie call penetrates the room, the observer faints. Upon being revived, he finds that he has been viewing a Death's-head Sphinx, an insect crawling up a thread on the window, right in the line of vision, so that it appeared to be superimposed on the landscape. This insect is capable of issuing "A melancholy kind of a cry." While little more than an incident, the story is nonetheless masterfully told.