

First presented by Howard Wyndham and Bronson Albery at the New Theatre, London, on Tuesday, 2nd July 1935, with the following cast:

NOAH	<i>John Gielgud</i>
MRS. NOAH	<i>Marjorie Fielding</i>
SHEM	<i>Harold Young</i>
HAM	<i>Colin Keith-Johnston</i>
JAPHETH	<i>Marius Goring</i>
NAOMI	<i>Ena Burrill</i>
SELLA	<i>Cicely Howland</i>
ADA	<i>Jessica Tandy</i>
THE BEAR	<i>George Devine</i>
THE LION	<i>Harry Andrews</i>
THE MONKEY	<i>Eric Wynn-Owen</i>
THE ELEPHANT	<i>Richard Sheridan</i>
THE COW	<i>Barbara Seymour</i>
THE LAMB	<i>Susan Salaman</i>
THE WOLF	<i>Alec Guinness</i>
THE TIGER	<i>Merula Salaman</i>
THE MAN	<i>George Devine</i>

The play produced by  
MICHEL SAINT-DENIS

## INTRODUCTION

By MICHEL SAINT-DENIS

Andre Obey wrote *Noah* during the years 1929 and 1930. How was it that a dramatist, keenly interested in the affairs of his own age, should look to the Bible for his inspiration?

Last year, Obey began to publish an edition of his complete plays; in his introduction to *Noah*, he writes: "Since 1940, I have received hundreds of letters, telling me that the world war has given such a topical meaning to the old story of the Flood, that it has become painful, almost cruel, to read; my correspondents go on to wonder that in 1929, a dramatist should have been able to predict the catastrophe of 1939, to foretell the ruins from which were born the spirit of hope, the desire to begin all over again, of which my ancient yet youthful patriach is the very incarnation. Hard as it is for me to disclaim such a flattering gift of prophecy, I must state quite plainly that never once when writing *Noah* did I feel either my country or the rest of Europe to be on the brink of an abyss, nor did I realise that to climb up the rough dusty sides of that abyss, it would need so much truly biblical courage".

Nobody reading the play to-day can fail to be struck by its topicality; it struck us in the same way when we first put on the play in 1931. For at that time, more than ten years after the first world war (in which Obey took part) we had been through experiences which had already shaken our belief in the security of human destiny. In *Noah*, Obey did not claim to have written a biblical play; he took his plot from a great theme, and gave it modern treatment to bring it nearer to us, using methods similar to those of the authors of the medieval mystery and miracle plays, when they made Noah and his wife talk to each other; he gave life and reality to a story which centuries had turned into a legend. The idiom of the play is modern: simple and direct, it is not afraid to risk an anachronism by using slang and by making allusion to ways and even to things which evidently did not exist in biblical times. Noah says, to the animals: "I'm only an old farmer after all", and in the same

speech he says : "All this happening at once, you know, it's taken me by surprise. It's worn me out, bowled me over"—a very colloquial way to express himself. Noah is then, an old peasant of to-day, his wife is a nice little woman tied to her home, a poor home, by the cares of looking after a family of five, and as for the children, well, they are just the same as any young people we might meet to-day—more or less respectful to their parents, always inclined to look upon them as being just a bit behind the times, and knowing quite surely that they will manage a good deal better when they are married ; in a hurry to experience life to the full, they fall in love as quickly as possible, and go off on their own the moment the great adventure they have been sharing together is over. But the subject of the play is the great adventure itself, and its interest and amusement lie in seeing how such an ordinary family will behave under such extraordinary conditions: the children revolt against their father, the best of them show themselves to be frivolous, lazy and ungrateful ; mother goes off her head, for life on board, with its quarrels and tempests, is too much for an old woman who can't help clinging to dreams of a little kitchen and a garden as she knew them before the flood swallowed them up ; Noah alone emerges a finer man from an adventure which he does not attempt to understand ; he is content to obey, to follow the commandments of a God whose purpose escapes him, but whom he fears and in whom he has placed a blind trust. The end of the play finds Noah quite alone : he begins to build up again, for such is the law of man ; he has become a hero, but is not aware of his own greatness :—a greatness born of his suffering, his humility and of his complete submission.

When I saw the play performed in Holland, the producer had used sets built so high that the forest and the ark in Scene I, the desert surrounding Mount Arrarat in Scene V, appeared enormous—the human beings were dwarfed in comparison ; Noah, especially, seemed like a plaything in the hands of God.

But to return to Obey's introduction : "Neither in this play, nor in any of the others which came after it", he writes, "did I bother with any idea of a thesis, of symbolism, or of pointing a moral. . . . I thought of the stage, and that was enough. My theory is that a play is a *thing* of the theatre so strictly—and yet at the same time, so freely-invented for the stage, composed and developed on the stage, subjected to the stage to such an extent

that the life, the reality and the rhythm of the drama are there before the words which express it : it requires a language, certainly, but no literature for its own sake".

In these lines, Obey gives us the secret of an attitude not very easy to understand for those unfamiliar with the mysteries of writing for the theatre. To Obey, a play exists in the author's imagination before he has it written down : the pattern of the action on the stage, its rhythm, the sequence of events form a tangible structure in his mind, and the moods and emotions of his characters are there before the actual text is on paper. I imagine that a choreographer who writes his own music must approach his composition in this way, both seeing and hearing in advance the steps of his dancers and the music which will bring them to life.

It must be remembered also that, when writing *Noah*, Obey was working for a definite company of actors whom he had seen playing in Lyons, and who were to become *La Compagnie des Quinze*.

This company was composed of three experienced actors and a dozen or so young people who for nine years had been working together before performing in the villages of Burgundy, and in large towns both in France and abroad.

What kind of training had these young people received, what kind of plays formed their repertoire?

They had served, so to speak, as subjects for an experiment by that great producer who since 1913 had been bringing fresh ideas to the French theatre—Jacques Copeau. It was he who had endued them with a thirst for inventing new things, and with a sincerity which found itself ill at ease in the French theatre at that time.

Turning his back on the theatre of the rationalists, of the psychologists who had made the stage into either a platform for discussing political, social and even medical problems, or into a laboratory for the study of special cases, Copeau had begun by putting a company of professional actors through the classical school, laying particular stress on Molière and Shakespeare. But he soon discovered that classical discipline alone was not enough to break experienced actors of their conventional habits. So he tried out new methods on a group of young people which he specially picked out for the purpose : it was not now a question of instruction, but rather of a search for the truth, in which



master and pupils shared, and which the pupils, away from the influence of their master, were one day to pursue even farther than he had.

The most important thing was to find out what attitude, what imaginative and physical training were needed to enable a group of actors to invent a simple dramatic sequence and to bring it to life on the stage, without having a text set down for them: the stage must be given back to the actors and to their guide, the producer, so that together they could find ways of portraying life by actions; the force and significance of gesture and of voice must be realised by the actors, while the dramatic action must get back its rhythm, its musical and choreographic quality. The author would be barred from this experimental stage until such time when the research team, having forged a method to bring their ideas to reality, had given shows, whose style would perhaps incite some writer to join the group and to work in strict collaboration with it.

Right in the country, in a tiny village of Burgundy, the chosen company retired to put their dangerous ideas into practice, after four years of preparatory work in Paris.

Every morning, beginning at nine o'clock, in a big open shed, which had been used for making wine, one could see a dozen young people busy at gym, fencing, and acrobatics. An hour later, rehearsals began: under the direction of one of the group, the actors prepared a mime on a given theme; for example, inspired by memories of 1914, they would show a French village, quiet and prosperous, where the daily round of activities would be going on: suddenly comes a noise, followed by an alarm bell, the beating of drums—declaration of war—men at the front—the ups and downs of the battle—women doing men's work—the war nearly lost—the final effort, and victory—the joys of the armistice, then the return of the survivors to their families.

This young company, of which I was a member, was trying to find the means of representing dramatically a vast theme of this kind, relying entirely on mime, rhythm, noises and music.

At first, the country people regarded us with suspicion, but as we accompanied our experimenting with regular visits to the villages, giving performances of the plays of La Fontaine and Molière, and some of the old farces, we were soon known throughout the district and accepted by everybody.

One day in 1927, we were asked by the authorities of Nuits

St. Georges to organise a show to celebrate the end of the wine harvest, and the safe gathering in of the crops.

We decided to put our experiment to the test in front of an audience; we would act, by mime, dancing and singing, by monologue and dialogue, the life of the men of the vineyards, the *vignerons*, from the beginning of spring to the first approach of winter. In particular, we mimed their work, for we had studied it in minute detail. At times, our mime would be accompanied by a song, or it would take on such a strong rhythm that we could only express it with a dance: we had one very strict rule—never to resort to gestures or movements of which the meaning was not absolutely clear: neither the action nor the words ever became abstract. From time to time, to break the monotony of the general effect, we would introduce a love scene, or perhaps a character would talk directly to the audience—a *vigneron* would tell of the crop, of the joys and tribulations of his trade.

We gave this show to two thousand *vignerons*, both owners and labourers. For two hours, we felt completely at one with the spectators, who told us that they would never have believed that their daily toil could be so enjoyable to watch, and yet they kept repeating: "But that's exactly as it is, that's just what does happen".

This may give you some idea of the company which Obey was to meet two years later.

He found fifteen actors, whose four years' training and five years' practical experience had moulded to that type of acting which did not lend itself easily to complex psychology, but which was able to animate a broadly-treated general theme. We were actors capable of showing life rather than explaining it, relying more on sound and physical movement than on talking, used to singing and dancing, able to build up from choral work to the invention of simple, clearly defined characters.

Admittedly, we had two or three experienced actors with us, but our principal virtue lay in our concerted strength; we were a team whose members were as used to acting together as they were used to living together: we were in fact a chorus, wonderfully united and trained.

Now do you see the connection between this company and the play called *Noah*? Can you deduce from it the right way to produce *Noah* if you want to respect the spirit in which it was written?

The play centres on the unique character of Noah himself. It needs a very good actor for this part—a man with weight and breath, for it is an exacting and tiring role which calls for generosity, friendliness and power : at times, as if almost in spite of himself, Noah attains greatness and authority. Then Mrs. Noah—however self-effacing she may be, her part demands a sensitive actress of wit and personality.

Apart from these characters, the play makes use of two choruses : a chorus of children, and a chorus of animals. True, Ham is wicked and Shem lazy, Ada is natural and sincere, whereas Naomi is vain and seductive : in the same way, the cow in her clumsy fashion differs from the tiger with his rather alarming affection ; these differences certainly count, but the important thing to remember in producing *Noah* is to make the children and animals act as choruses. There is nothing complex about their individual psychology—it is the movements which they do together which must be thought out and combined so that they give shape and rhythm to the action. For example, it is through their movements together that the children mime the rain as it begins to fall, that they make us feel the roll of the boat during the storm and mutiny of the fourth scene, that they enable us to follow the flight of the dove in the sky ; and finally, before going their separate ways, it is together they first set foot on dry land and fight to possess it. In all these scenes, the lines which the chorus speak are there simply to provoke the action ; the text is like music, and one must find the right tone and tempo to give it its full value.

When I produced the play for the first time in English, in 1934, with John Gielgud as Noah, I wanted to give the play by the sets and lighting I used, a size and an importance which were probably out of proportion to it. To-day, I am convinced that *Noah* does not lend itself to a spectacular production : its greatness lies in its simplicity, and, providing that the actors play their parts with the sincerity and conviction the story demands, there is no need for elaborate lighting and scenery.

We played *Noah* on all the principal stages of Europe, where every possible modern technical device was put at our disposal. Then one day, in the middle of summer, we were invited to perform the play in the open air, in a large park near Nancy. We built ourselves a platform under a big oak tree, at the foot of a sloping lawn. The performance began at three o'clock in the

afternoon, and finished at six. The sun behind the spectators was our only spot-light : as the play took its course, so the sun travelled slowly across the heavens to its setting. For scenery, we had the sky and the trees, in the midst of which we had put a ladder, a tent and one or two stools, roughly put together. The old Bible story has never touched the hearts of a present-day audience so surely as it did in this natural setting.