

BRENDAN BEHAN: The Unmade Bed

Leonard Casper

The greatest mistake any reporter can make is to ask to have a few words with Brendan Behan, the Wild Irishman of the Theater. Behan is *not* a man of few words but of whole torrents. He has been called a scalawag and a buffoon, and there is constant talk of censoring his play, *The Hostage*. But no one really takes seriously their own threats to deny him free speech, especially since despite his love for profanity and savage talk, his tone is gentle and the look on his face deadpan. The clarity of his speech is not in the least affected by the absence of several upper front teeth.

The man is as controversial as his play which concerns the Irish rebellion against Britain, a never-ending subject for professional Irishmen. He is powerfully built but unkempt—like his work; and resembles nothing more than the term once applied to the late Heywood Broun, a drama critic, a man on the other side of the footlights: an unmade bed. He never wears one color but a rainbow: brown suit, gray shirt, blue tie. Fashions have changed so considerably that they were bound to catch up with Behan; and for a while, now that men are expected to wear unmatched textures and colors, he will be in fashion.

He has often made a living with his hands—at house painting, for example; yet those hands look strangely small and soft, although the nails are bitten back and rimmed with dirt. His complexion is florid, his jaw bold, his nose

many times broken and still front and center and asking for trouble. He has the looks of the man he is, a revolutionary who has spent his life at it. He fought long and hard in the Irish Republican Army, although now he laughs at the silly ways of those die-hard terrorists in the IRA; he even spent years in jail as a political prisoner—but the ideals, he says, were his alone and no party's, and he is not sharing the glory of that minor martyrdom with any man. Today he rebels more quietly (although roughly enough for New York City to refuse to let him march in their St. Patrick's Day Parade), through the lips of his actors.

He has been writing since boyhood. For awhile he was a newspaperman, working for several journals simultaneously, among them the Irish Press. In spite of the fact that he no longer is a terrorist, he takes pleasure from the fact that former President Eamon De Valera, a conservative, reads his articles constantly with disgust. His passport reads that his occupation is "journalist," not "playwright": but what journalist ever talked so torrentially in non-sequiturs and stayed on a payroll? A few years ago he was the author of a rowdy best-seller, *Borstal Boy*, which told of his time in prison. But besides the inside of a cell he knows Europe thoroughly, from 37 years of travel. He knows London, Stockholm and Paris, especially the alleys and gutters where the poor down-and-outer can sleep. Actually he believes that he can work well anywhere, provided it is a city; the country and its busybody people distract him.

There is a kind of primitive strength to the man which makes credible the story he tells that, although once he consumed alcohol prodigiously, on medical advice he gave up suddenly and thoroughly. He is a man of determination. "But even in the old days," he says, "I worked real office hours when I was writing. I pulled myself together—of course I may not have been cold sober, but I was in working shape." In shape enough to write *The Hostage*, a hilarious vaudeville of serious elements and brilliant, mocking intellect; of extreme novelty and drive and cutting wit. His next play is tentatively titled *Richard's Cork Leg*; and should be more of the same. Has such a man any choice?