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A BRODERLINE CASE

by B. A. Young

The fifteenth New Plays Festival at the Questors Theatre Ealing—that Parnassus of the amateur stage—happened while I was on holiday; but I was glad to be able to catch Harry Barton's **A Borderline Case**, the third of the three plays presented, because his book of reprinted radio talks **Yours Till Ireland Explodes, Mr. Mooney** (published in Belfast) strikes me as at once the funniest and the sanest commentary on the Irish situation that I have encountered.

The author, a former Captain RN, lives in Derry where the grim farce of the political and sectarian confrontation explodes daily on his doorstep. The main story of his play is quite trivial: in 1944, during what is known in the Irish Republic as "the emergency," a naval officer visits his father, an Anglican Dean, in Dublin, taking with him the uncompromisingly honest Scots girl with whom he is living. His mother insists on their taking back, against regulations, a pram for their baby; and into this pram a time-bomb is surreptitiously slipped by an Irish patriot.

This tale is adumbrated at every absurd step by a volley of footnotes from two exegetists, a Belfast man and a Dublin man, in a variety of parts—narrator, stage-hand, gardener, customs officer, assassin, what you will.

They start as comic characters ("Isn't there any Ireland that isn't stage Ireland?" asks the girl impatiently) and they end as agents of the thoughtless fractricide that is tearing Ulster apart. The transition from joking to killing is subtly contrived; and the last steep plummet into murder from which all the good temper has been finally expelled provides a heart-rending end which the author's cool observant neutrality makes desperately trenchant.

The acting, as always with this company, is admirable and Carol Wiseman's direction inventive and firm, though insufficiently compact.