

EAST MAGAZINE

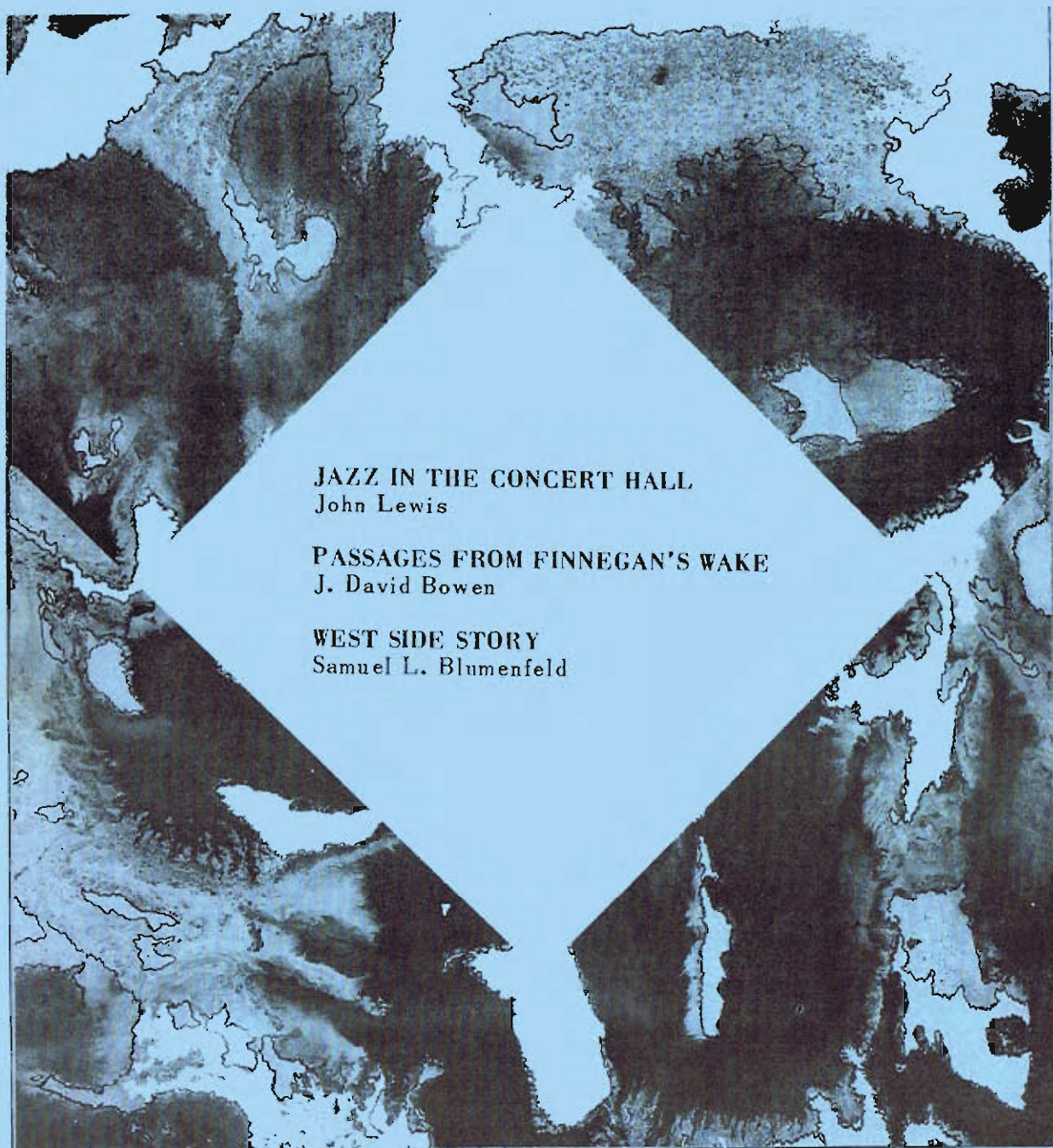
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JAZZ IN THE CONCERT HALL
John Lewis

PASSAGES FROM FINNEGAN'S WAKE
J. David Bowen

WEST SIDE STORY
Samuel L. Blumenfeld

Literary Outlook

by Samuel L. Blumenfeld

THE WEST SIDE STORY

When one leaves the theatre after a performance of "The West Side Story" one asks, "What is it?" It is not a musical comedy. It is not an opera. A friend of mine called it a "folk opera". I'm inclined to call it a musical tragedy.

At the same time, while overhearing the comments of the audience, I could detect a note of uncertainty. The audience had been moved, it had been shocked. It had not expected so unvarnished and blunt an expression. It had not expected to leave the theatre with feelings of profound pessimism. The spectators had expected some sugar coating, a "show", something romantic and satisfying. In fact, what they had probably expected was a sort of romantic sociology about street gangs and juvenile delinquents, with lots of local color and a plea for better understanding.

MIDDLE-CLASS AUDIENCE

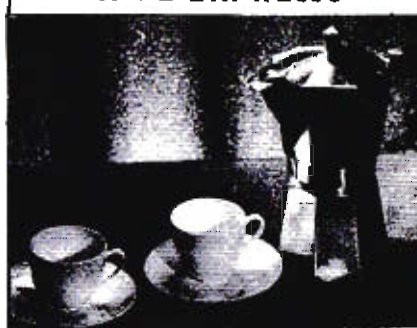
But oddly enough, in spite of the fact that this is a story about New York, the events that take place on stage are quite far removed from the experiences of the generally well-to-do middle-class audience. One hopelessly watches two street gangs hate one another with the intensity expected of enemy nations. The Jets (the white gang) hate the Sharks (the Puerto Rican gang). The hate of the two groups is so all-consuming as to be even obscene. This hate, of course, leads to tragedy.

Nowhere in the play is there any indication that a third force - with whom the audience alone can identify - can do anything about this hate. The third force - represented on stage by the policeman, the detective, and the candy-store proprietor - is the link between these two juvenile gangs and the rest of American society. The link is a pitiful one. Police officer Krupke is a moron, Detective Schrank has as much hostility in him as any of the delinquents, and the meek candy-store owner is merely a voice in the wind with problems of his own. He is a kind of weak Jewish father, kindhearted but impotent. There is a song the Jets sing, which tells of other members of the third force - the social workers and "head shrinkers". The song is very funny and very true. But for all its humor, it is the most pessimistic song of the play and it ends on a note of consummate obscenity.

COST OF CORRECTION

What can anyone do about the street gangs? What can one do about the hate? The only solution is a very costly one. It means tearing down slum areas, a better school system, more youth guidance, summer camps, job opportunities. Money for the poor to raise up the poor. Money for the underprivileged to give their life meaning. But this is a society where money must be spent profitably - especially large sums of it. Unfortunately, spending money to improve the lot of the poor is not a profitable way of spending money, although this reclamation of human lives would reap a profit of its own. But something has happened in America. There are too many of us now and life has become cheap. The American people don't care about the waste. One has a hard enough time caring for oneself, let alone caring for others. In a world of rugged individualism, those who aren't rugged enough to make the grade must fall by the wayside, those who can't fit in are left out. The struggle for personal success is hard, and self-interest is an all absorbing and intense business. We are a plural nation in which each group must care for its own. Woe to those who cannot take care of themselves.

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