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Fun and despair in theatre

AN UNNATURAL PURSUIT AND OTHER PIECES

BY SIMON GRAY
Penguin, 244 pages, \$25.95

REVIEW BY ALAN PEARSON

In *An Unnatural Pursuit*, a chatty read about the contemporary English theatre, playwright Simon Gray tells us about the fun and despair associated with staging one of his plays, *The Common Pursuit*, at the Lyric Theatre in London. Gray, best known for his play *Butley* (1971), has the conversational style of a talented man of the world talking in a Fleet Street pub.

The Common Pursuit, the subject of this diary, had the good fortune to be directed by Gray's friend Harold Pinter, so the diary provides an interesting light on this celebrated English playwright. Pinter, we learn, habitually dresses in black, is courteous and firm with actors, and proves to have excellent judgment of producers' celebrations, actors' vanities and an audience's responses.

Gray reveals himself as a likeable chap, but yields to no man in his possession of legitimate artistic self-doubts, which he freely expresses, usually obliquely, in the form of a hunger for praise.

He says after Pinter had initially read his script, "I kept him lingering around the compliments for as long as I decently could." At a literary cocktail party Gray refers to a journalist as a "humble-looking, grey-haired woman with a squint who's probably ruined more reputations than I've had hot dinners." He is miffed at a producer who fails to report back quickly with his response to a script, saying, "Surely people understand that when one hands them a script, one expects them to read it within minutes, and comment on it both profoundly and favorably for weeks afterward."

An interesting sidelight to Gray's character is that he takes things seriously and is not afraid button-hole a reviewer at a party or call him at home, and "call the fellow to account." This trait is revealed in his amusing encounter with The

Times' theatre critic, Irving Wardle. At one point he expresses the fear that "I unmask myself to Irving as a dangerous paranoid desperate to turn friendly encounters into conversational brawls." Wardle, however, handles Gray's polemic vigor with daunting and implacable courtesy, "for which," says Ward, "I do not forgive him."

Throughout the diary Pinter chews gum incessantly in his attempt to kick the cigaret habit, while Gray continues callously to smoke like a chimney. The two drive off in Pinter's Mercedes to wine bars to discuss, among other things, an actor who has begun to lisp gaily in a non-gay role. The diary is rounded out with other prose pieces on Cambridge University, literary critic F. R. Leavis, TV playwrighting and cricket.


For those who like the theatre and things wry and English, this book will provide amusement and instruction that's none the worse for being unpretentious.

Alan Pearson is a Toronto writer.

Publishers Choice

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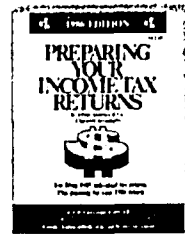
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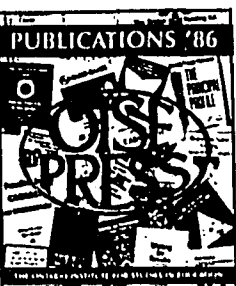
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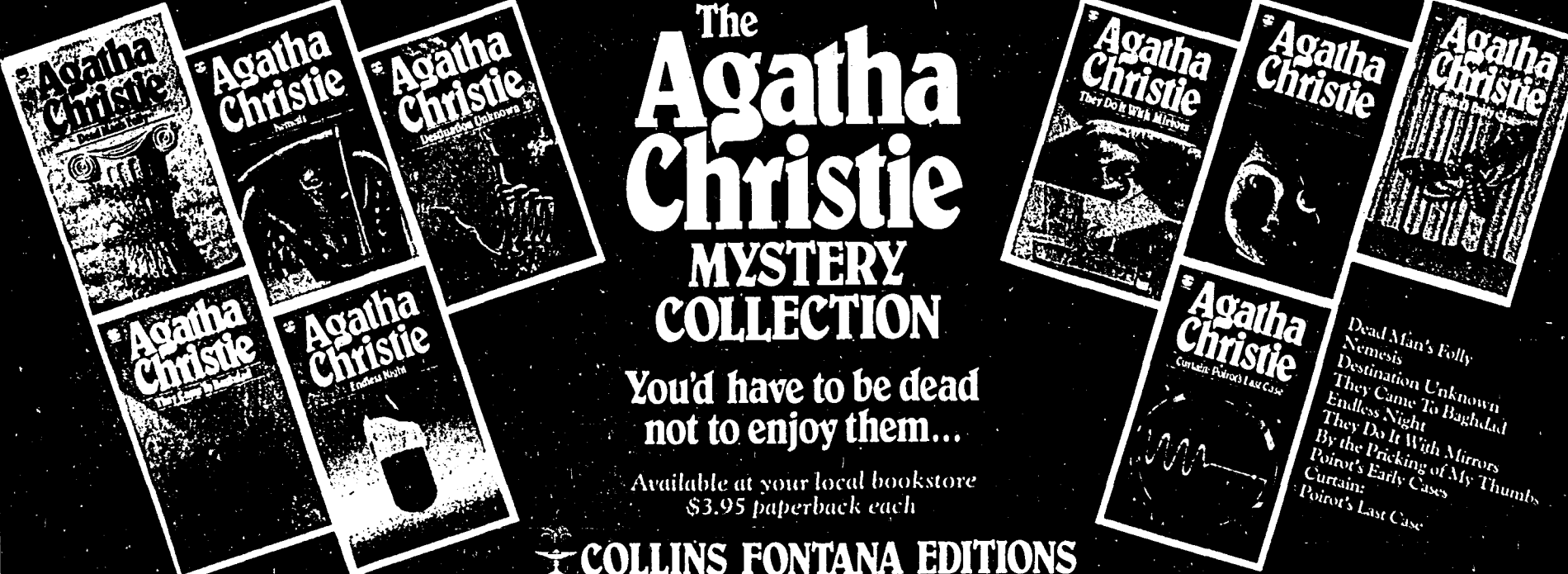
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