

ONE MAN MERTON

Review of

WINTER RAIN:

Six Images of Thomas Merton

A Play by Anthony T. Padovano

—Reviewed by **Thomas A. Greenfield**

One-character shows are trickier than they look. In order to succeed as dramas (rather than small pageant scenes or even lectures) they have to reach beyond the central character and make a cogent statement about something: society, life, ideas — anything that links the internal crises of the character to the external world of the audience. It is precisely this quality that makes *The Belle of Amherst* the best of the more familiar “one man” shows. It is the absence of this quality that makes Anthony Padovano’s *Winter Rain: Six Images of Thomas Merton*, despite some genuinely effective moments, ultimately disappointing.

This videotaped teleplay starring Michael Moriarty is broken up into six uneven scenes spanning the adult life of Merton, from 1941 and his entry into Gethsemani to the late 1960’s. Moriarty is skillful at reining in some of the runaway, overly self-conscious monologues to which this play more than occasionally falls victim. Merton’s aging from young adulthood to late middle age (mercifully unaided by elaborate “old man” make-up) is carried off by subtle and sure modulations in voice pitch and range as well as finely controlled body movement. Moriarty’s Merton is a wise-

Thomas A. Greenfield, Dean of the College of Arts & Sciences and Associate Professor of English at Bellarmine College, received his B.A. from Grinnell College and his M.A. and Ph.D. (in Dramatic Literature) from the University of Minnesota. He is the author of *Work and the Work Ethic in American Drama, 1920-1970* (University of Missouri Press, 1982). The book was nominated for the George Fridley Award as the outstanding book in theater arts of 1982. His poems and articles have appeared in *South Atlantic Bulletin*, *Virginia English Bulletin*, *Hopkins Poetry Review*, *The Crisis* and other journals and he is currently at work on a book on radio for Greenwood Press.



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innocent growing older with grace if not always gracefully.

Two of the scenes succeed on dramatic and literary terms. Early on, Merton struggles to accept his fame after the success of *The Seven Story Mountain*. Padovano's monologue is an effective and incisive examination of the conflict between noble ideals and fierce ambition. Equally compelling is the epistolary resignation from the monastery. As Merton reads aloud his letter to his Abbot, we see an uncompromisingly independent man accepting with deep sadness his incompatibility with the structure of the monastery he so adores. For the moment, Padovano, Moriarty, and Merton all prove to be worthy of each other. But the other scenes are often little more than loosely tied together introspections and mini-lectures. Here Padovano has made the error of relying too heavily on the talent and mystique of his subject to prop up the script in which he appears. The effect is to dissipate the overall effect of the play if, indeed, Padovano and director Jacquie Plews ever had one clearly in mind.

Plews has given Moriarty abstract, minimalist sets which underscore the theme of asceticism as nicely as they accommodate the production budget. The sets and blocking are harmless in that they rarely get in Moriarty's way. But somewhere along the line, Plews made a preposterous decision to have the actor pantomime his handling of small personal objects: a newspaper, a pen, his eyeglasses, etc. These brief pantomimes (which Moriarty does not perform comfortably) are very distracting.

Moriarty's struggle to get mileage out of his material saves the piece from being an industrial film for Merton enthusiasts. It is most satisfying when viewed as an exercise in acting performed by a skilled actor who can work brilliantly with solid material and not-too-badly with weak material. But even at his best, Moriarty cannot prevent the play from turning away from its audience as it turns inward toward its character.