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The Substance of Fire

Jon Robin Baitz
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“You are able to be the fairest man I know occasionally,” Martin Geldhart tells his father during a meeting at the family publishing business. In King Lear fashion the three Geldhart children, all stockholders, gather to discuss the future of the company. Aaron, the eldest Geldhart works in the family business, Martin teaches landscape architecture at Vasser, and Sarah is an actress on a children’s TV show. The decision making of the father, Isaac, is called into question.

Isaac, a haunted Holocaust survivor, watched his family taken by the Nazis. He dedicated his life to publishing serious literature. Most titles published by Kreeger/Geldhart are based on the Holocaust, and its legacy. This specialization with no regard to current market trends brought the company to the brink of bankruptcy. Aaron stands ready with a manuscript that will attract a mainstream audience. Isaac is unwilling to change his standards no matter the cost.

Martin and Sarah, both “out-of-towners,” are in Isaac’s office waiting for the remaining two family members. They discuss the summons received from their brother Aaron. Martin asks Sarah what she’s reading. She sighs, “Something Dad’s thinking of publishing. God only knows what he’s thinking. Hobson-Jobson’s a Glossary of Colloquial Anglo-Indian Words and Phrases… Will two people buy this?”

Isaac played by Ron Rifkin lends a huge presence. His sharp retorts are intellectually comical if one is not the intended target. Sarah moans about one of her father’s latest poison darts, “Sarah how do you actresses remember your lines? Because none of you are, let’s face it now, all that bright. Really. Are you?”

The most implicitly engaging theme of the play focuses on Isaac’s guilt and how it has molded his life. The Substance of Fire takes a look at evil’s outstretched arm as it extends nebulously into the next generation.
VYVYAN LYNN (May / June 2001)

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