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JOHN HOWARD LAWSON'S LAST PRODUCED  
PLAY, *PARLOR MAGIC* (1963)

By Le Roy Robinson

When John Howard Lawson died in August 1977, the Los Angeles *Times* stated (August 15, 1977, p. 20) that Lawson "never wrote another play" after 1951. This statement, though probably generally accepted, is not correct. After 1951, when he finished *In Praise of Learning*, Lawson wrote at least two plays. *Thunder Morning* (1953), a black liberation drama, has not been produced or published. *Parlor Magic* was produced and published in Europe.

In *Twentieth Century American Authors* (1942) Stanley J. Kunitz and Howard Haycraft report that Lawson's copyrighted *Parlor Magic*, "has been underway for two years." In *The Fervent Years* (1945) Harold Clurman summarizes this play<sup>1)</sup> of the early 1940's which was neither produced nor published, which was abandoned by Lawson, and which should not be confused with the later play of the same

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1) "Three brothers of a once stable New England family are confronted with a local situation in which evidence of a home-grown fascism might be discovered. One brother, in politics, slowly edges toward the astute racketeering that often produces the fascist's training ground. Another is an aging Bohemian poet weary of his wanderings. The third is a liberal lawyer motivated by a long tradition of idealism but now being crowded into doubtful practices by the compulsions of a merciless epoch. In the end, the situation leads the politician into making the lawyer conspire against the life of their poet brother. Two other characters, a boy and a girl, represent the younger generation in whom the hope of the future resides. The boy is an intelligent worker, the girl a still uncontaminated member of the stricken household. It is the poet who acts as the young people's father confessor, bidding them go forward fearlessly to create a better life." *The Fervent Years*, pp. 243-244.

name, although both plays are based on the idea expressed by Lawson in *Theory and Technique of Playwriting* (1936): on the modern stage, the middle-class family is the "microcosm of the social system."

Lawson began the second *Parlor Magic*, on board ship to Europe in 1961 when he was about 67 years old. This *Parlor Magic*, was performed in the German language (Lily Leder, translator) at the Staatstheater, Schwerin, G. D. R., in March 1963. This performance was part of a celebration throughout Europe and Great Britain of "Welttheatertag 1963."<sup>2)</sup>

The following summary of *Parlor Magic*, the first (lengthy) account in the English language, is based upon the author's manuscript which Lawson allowed me to read in 1964. This summary will permit historians of American drama to bring the history of John Howard Lawson's career as a playwright more up to date.

The title suggests experimentation, and as he does in almost every one of his plays Lawson experiments in *Parlor Magic*<sup>3)</sup> with the theatrical possibilities of the theater. The basic setting, a living room in a house belonging to well-to-do people, is constructed on a platform covering most of the stage. The exterior of the house is represented by the forestage in front of the proscenium and on steps left and right. Most of the visible magic in the parlor emanates from the television set: some of the major events of the midtwentieth century, the historical reality through which the Merton family lives, are brought directly into their living room.<sup>4)</sup>

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2) *Theater der Zeit*, Vol. XVIII, March 1, 1963, P. 16. The G.D.R. Minister of Culture set the theme "dass das Theater mit seinen Mitteln zur Verständigung unter dem Volkern und zur Erhaltung des Friedens beiträgt."

3) "Theatrical concepts are profoundly, and at best *magically*, theatrical..." *Theory and Technique of Playwriting*, 1960, vii.

4) The television newsreel is projected upon screens above the setting by multiple projectors to give an "impression of great scope." Manfred Zett says: "Den Gefahren dieser Technik, der Vordergrundigkeit, der gelegentlich blossen Andeutung, einem Expose-stil, ist Lawson nicht immer entgangen." *Theater der Zeit*, Vol. XVIII, May 1, 1963, p. 12.

The play begins with a roar of sound: airplanes soar and guns boom in a filmed montage extending across the whole proscenium. Combat rises to greater and greater violence, then is suddenly finished. "Cinematic fury contracts to one point... where the flicker of a television set shines on /Mathew Merton's/ face as he watches the small screen."

A tough businessman who has fought hard to achieve success, Mat, outwardly confident, has nightmares (unspecified) indicating his lack of inner security. Mat is consciously worrying about his two brothers in the second world war.

At the piano sits Mat's nervous, frustrated wife, Bettina. A pianist of considerable talent, Bettina gave up a career at Mat's insistence. Now she works her frustrations into a musical crescendo which merges into a pounding rhythm of battle.<sup>5)</sup>

The newsreel shows fighting in a South Pacific jungle. The film fades. As if coming out of the newsreel battle, two actors emerge on the stage.<sup>6)</sup> These are Mat's younger brothers. Jed, the older, has a leg wound. Owen is helping him to safety. Owen calls the war a "damn circus" and hopes for the "great day when peace comes." At this optimism, Jed sneers. Gunfire merges back into piano music.

In the Merton parlor Bettina is entertaining her younger sister, Abigail, who, finished with college (Mat supported her), wants to go to medical school to be a heart surgeon. She is unsure of herself, however, so Mat doubts her dedication to medicine and refuses to lend her money for her further education. We realize considerable time has elapsed when Jed enters on a crutch: he has lost a leg and uses an artificial limb.

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- 5) As he always does in his plays, Lawson here uses the technique of the brief scene, in this case based upon a modification of screenwriting technique. In Schwerin, *Parlor Magic* was performed without intermissions, and a reviewer on the *Demokrat* (April 2, 1963) says the performance was exciting from beginning to end.
- 6) There is a hint of magic here as the two figures move as it were between two dimensions.

Talk about the whereabouts of Owen, still at war, fades into film of pandemonious combat. The film action dwindles into a battle shown on the television set. Abigail thinks she sees Owen in the battle. Her nervous reaction is later clarified. She and Owen were once sweethearts, but they gave no promises to each other, and Owen has not written to her during the entire time he has been at war. Abigail now seems involved in some way with Jed.

A brief scene follows: Owen is writing to Abigail at last. He writes that she is his "hope" and his "life."

Then, Jed and Abigail alone, Jed forces himself upon Abigail. (While this is going on, "Owen is still sitting in the *ghostly*"<sup>7)</sup> light at right, his hand poised over the letter he is writing.") Abigail says of Jed and herself: "We don't know what we want." She admits being "true" to herself and false to many men. She behaved badly to "punish" Owen. Jed says: "We're all maimed by the war." He pleads: "Help me to be whole again." He is "hungry with a long hunger." The hunger of the flesh, because "love is a lie." For Jed, "everything is a lie."

Owen returns from war. Abigail and Jed, too guilty to go to the airport to greet him, wait for him in the parlor. They discuss what they consider Owen's illusions of a better world. The newsreel shows a flight of bombers on way to Hiroshima.

Owen gets home. He learns Abigail not only has burned his single love letter but also has let herself make love to Jed. She is pregnant.<sup>8)</sup> She says, for her, her pregnancy is the "only thing that's real."

Jed takes Owen outside. Inside the house, Jed says, "no one tells the truth."<sup>9)</sup> Outside the house, he says, "we can talk sense."

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7) My emphasis. L.R.

8) In *Standards* (1916) Sadie, the girl of the slums, becomes pregnant out of wedlock. So does Sadie Cohen, the teen-age heroine of *Processional* (1925). In *Gentlewoman* (1934) heroine Gwyn Ballantine finds herself in a similar situation.

9) Jed's statement foreshadows the house-of-lies theme later developed into a turning point.

Jed tells Owen why he got involved with Abigail: "I had to prove I'm stronger than you are." Owen accepts emotional defeat: "I don't want... personal emotions." He decides to dedicate himself to science.

Abigail says: "I'm responsible for myself." As for her child-to-be:

A baby is natural, even if it's born out of blindness and loneliness and pity and not caring. I want to take care of it and love it and I don't know...I want to wrap it in a blanket of peace...

As Abigail talks about a blanket of peace the television screen shows a U. S. Air Force plane dropping the atomic bomb on Hiroshima.

Mat considers the bombing justified, a "magnificent demonstration of American power," because it shortens the war. Jed assumes the "wise men in Washington" who "have it all fixed" dropped the bomb to begin another war. Owen calls the bomb and the bombing a "per-  
version of science."

At the end of the first act, as Abigail and Jed marry, the news-reel shows the aftermath of the bombing of Hiroshima, and a minister solemnizes their wedding ceremony with a sermon for "peace and goodwill... and brotherhood."<sup>10)</sup>

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The action of the second act begins two years later. The Merton family is watching television. A scene of violence and murder is followed by the news: the United States has developed a hydrogen bomb with enormous destructive power. Jed's sarcasm about this development requires Mat to complain Jed is giving Mat's two sons the impression their country wants war.

Despite his patriotic annoyance with Jed, Mat wants him and Abigail to buy the house next door. However, in the two years Abigail and Jed were in Europe, where Jed was writing a novel,

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10) This marriage scene was omitted from the Schwerin production because it was technically impossible for the actors to change costumes so quickly after the immediately preceding scene. Professor Martin Hellberg, Generalintendent, Staatstheater, in letter to John Howard Lawson, April 7, 1963.

Abigail became sure she does not want the life Jed gives her, a life of parties and hangovers. She does not want the house next door, which she considers a "trap." She does not want to live like her sister Bettina, frustrated because she gave up what she really wanted to do. Abigail still wants to be a heart surgeon and help people. She also wants a "chance" for her son Andrew.

Martha Merton, the mother of the three Merton brothers, to whose heart ailment the members of the family often cater, resists Abigail's return to school. She orders Abigail to fulfill her duty as a mother. To this command, Abigail says she wants to give her child her "living self."<sup>11)</sup> If she cannot give her living self to her child, whatever else she gives him may not be good enough. Martha Merton's certainty wavers. She rationalizes<sup>12)</sup>. She says: "I'm just too old to understand."<sup>13)</sup>

The newsreel shows a montage of events from 1947 to 1950. These events show the "growing strength of the socialist world," the "growing tension" in the United States, the rise of "McCarthyism," the "intensification of war propaganda" in the United States, the war in Korea.

Mat angers at Jed's "unpatriotic" suggestion the United States started the war. Jed's rhetorical question about American foreign policy is: "Where are we going to stop?"<sup>14)</sup>

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- 11) In *Standards* the dramatist comments that many young middle-class men doing relief work in New York slums give money but do not really give of themselves.
  - 12) Martha Merton, it turns out later, has not given her "living self" to her children.
  - 13) In *Roger Bloomer* (1923) Mrs. Bloomer says much the same thing.
  - 14) The strongest political attitudes in *Parlor Magic* are expressed by Jed, who believes the foreign policy of the United States is aimed at conquering the world. One German reviewer noted (*Demokrat*, April 2, 1963) Jed at times "seems to understand." Another explains Jed's understanding by saying (*Volkzeitung*, March 29, 1963) Lawson wants to show war and its causes are not eliminated by the "intellectual protest of those who cannot make up their mind." (In *Theory and Technique of Playwriting* Lawson says in drama cynicism sometimes exposes the "deeper moral issues of the time.")

Jed's anti-war novel is successful. He sells it to Hollywood for \$200,000. Hollywood will make the novel into a pro-war movie. For an additional \$70,000 Jed will write the film script.

Mat Jr. now receives his military draft notice. Bettina pleads with Mat Sr. to use his influence on his son's behalf. Mat's peculiar integrity has permitted him (through an influential general) to arrange Owen's appointment as a government scientist in Washington, D. C. But his patriotism (Freedom needs his son) does not permit him to intercede with the "right people" on behalf of Mat Jr., who will probably be sent to the war in Korea. The newsreel shows refugees left in the wake of the war.

At a birthday party for Martha Merton,<sup>15)</sup> Owen says Washington, D. C. is "crazy."<sup>16)</sup> He is disturbed so much of his work as a scientist is "tied in with the military." Yet when Mat Jr. asks him if the war in Korea is right or wrong, Owen only says he is not sure. When Mat Jr. questions the need for the war, Owen only says he is not sure if the scientific work he is doing for the military is right or not. The issues are complicated, Owen says, and he suggests Mat Jr. find out the truth for himself.

While this discussion goes on, Jed is trying to write: "Wherever people are oppressed, wherever they live in blood and dirt, under whips and guns, these are my brothers." But drunk, Jed tears up the paper on which he has written these words.

Time elapses. Owen quits his job in Washington. He can no longer give himself even in part to (he quotes Eisenhower) the military-industrial complex. Jed admires the kind of action he himself is becoming increasingly unable to take, because, he says, he is afraid of Mat and because he cannot hurt his sick mother's feelings<sup>17)</sup>.

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15) Lawson uses birthday parties in *Parlor Magic* as devices by means of which to gather together the members of the Merton family.

16) The central image of *Success Story* (1932) is that of the "craziness" of society in the United States.

17) It is not made clear in what way this adult but dependent man would hurt his mother's feelings, nor is it clear why Owen's quitting his job as a scientist does not hurt his mother's feelings.

As for his own feelings, Jed says, in his writing he tries to say what he feels but cannot<sup>18)</sup>. "What do I know about the poor and oppressed?" Jed extends his personal defeat to the nation: "The country is sick...we're a great people but our system is dying."<sup>19)</sup>

Jed's latest novel, *Christmas Eve*, is the story of a drunken party in a Hollywood film studio: motion picture executives and movie stars are "caught" in "frustration and dirt." As Jed puts it: "All the days of the bitter year dissolve in an orgy of impotence -- to celebrate the birth of Christ." Hollywood will buy this story, Jed says, because "they *like* the dirt in it." The "face of Hollywood" is the "face of America -- the baby face of total depravity."

As for himself, Jed says: "I'm not a writer. I'm a commercial hack. I want to write literature, but I can't. A book should be a golden statue. I'm making statues out of mud<sup>20)</sup>."

In a political discussion with Owen, Jed wonders if the Communists have *the* answer<sup>21)</sup>. Owen does not know about that, but he does know he cannot do honest work in an atmosphere of petty intrigue. Owen says scientists in the United States are afraid:

18) In *Nirvana* (1926) novelist Bill Weed says much the same thing about his problem in expressing what he feels.

19) Jed seems a radical without a cause, a prototype of liberals unable to integrate what Lawson considers their "split personalities" because of their psycho-social commitments to a "dying system." Jed's vision is distorted, Lawson suggests, because he fails to see the people and forces working for the living society of the future. Lawson deals mystically with this concept of a dying society in *Processional* (1925) and *The International* (1928), with the idea of regeneration out of degeneration, of life out of death, of good out of evil. In *Paylor Magic* he deals with these themes more concretely and in intention more "scienifically."

20) In *Nirvana* novelist Bill Weed says: "I want to genuinely create; being unable to, I write bunk...I believe passionately in honesty and I spend all my time lying." In the same play, Dr. Alonzo Weed calls himself "something of a Sunday supplement doctor" who makes more money talking about medical sensations than he does by the integrity of his work.

21) It is not made clear why Jed should wonder about this possibility.

"Everyone's afraid the same thing could happen to him that happened to the Rosenbergs," who, Owen thinks, are innocent of the charges against them. Owen now says the war in Korea is a "mistake." Mat angrily says Owen has "no right" to say these things. The newsreel shows American soldiers dying in Korean snow.

Time passes. Jed, subpoenaed to testify before the House of Representatives Un-American Activities Committee<sup>22)</sup>, asks Mat to intercede in Washington, D. C., to prevent Jed's being called as a witness. Mat says he cannot do that but he can try to make things "easy" for Jed and at the same time "protect" Owen (now teaching in a liberal arts college), whom Mat considers overly frank in the expression of political opinions. Owen, however, is not a "crusader" and appreciates being in a "quiet place."<sup>23)</sup>

Mat Jr. is killed in action in Korea. Bettina Merton expresses her grief and rage by playing wildly at the piano for her "lost son and her broken life." As the second act ends, she turns on Mat: You make money out of it. You've your blood money. We're living on blood money. You killed your son."<sup>24)</sup>

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The action of the third act begins in 1951. Bob, Mat's younger son, disillusioned with his father, runs away from home<sup>25)</sup>. Mat is deeply hurt: "He's all we have." Mat says: "We're all caught in

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22) It is not made clear why Jed should be subpoenaed.

23) Owen is in this somewhat like the cloistered college professor Peter Owens in Albert Maltz and George Sklar's *Peace on Earth* (1933), which depicts the political evolution of its professor hero during a wartime situation. See Lawson's comments on *Peace on Earth* in *Theory and Technique of Playwriting*.

24) This turn of plot is similar to one in Arthur Miller's *All My Sons* (1947) in which there is implausible coincidence: a dead son may have flown in a plane using a defective part supplied by his father's company with his father's knowledge. Lawson avoids improbability here by showing Mat, whose business is not specified, motivated by patriotism Miller's Joe Keller lacks.

25) Roger Bloomer runs away from home. In *Processional* Sadie Cohen does. In *The Pure in Heart* (1934) so does Annabel Sparks.

the same net. It's a net of lies<sup>26)</sup>."

The net of lies Mat cries out against is pictured on the newsreel screen in scenes of "McCarthyism, witch hunts and Cold War." A television news commentator reports American writers in prison for contempt of Congress<sup>27)</sup>. American scientists for perjury, American Communists for advocacy of revolutionary ideas... the Hiss Case... the Rosenberg Case...

Mat arranges with the "right" people for Jed to be questioned by the Committee in secret session. Owen is angry with them for cooperating with the Committee, but even more so because of what he considers their dishonest attempt to protect him in the name of their ailing mother.

Owen says: "I will not be bound by lies."<sup>28)</sup> He refuses to stand behind any lies Jed tells the Committee to save the Merton family's face, Mat's fortune, and Jed's well-paid work in Hollywood. Owen soliloquizes. He is no hero. He has "no taste for a martyr's crown." If his brothers betray him<sup>29)</sup>, he "must ride the whirlwind alone." He asks: "Why am I called to bear witness." He answers: "It is the logic of my life."<sup>30)</sup>

I am one with all others, one with mankind. This unites me with the Rosenbergs in their death cells, with those who fight for freedom in lonely places...

It is June 19, 1953. The newsreel shows the execution of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg.

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- 26) Lawson has often used this net image with variations in particular meaning depending upon the dramatic context: the net of fate, the net of inner compulsion, the net of tradition, the net of social compulsion.
- 27) Lawson was imprisoned for ten months in 1950-1951 for his contempt of the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1947.
- 28) Roger Bloomer refuses to tell lies about American history in order to pass his college entrance examination, which he tears up.
- 29) A betrayal in that they cooperate with the Committee. Owen has done nothing to be betrayed.
- 30) This is a direct quotation from Theodore Dreiser's public declaration upon joining the C. P. U. S. A. in 1945.

Next, Owen, subpoenaed to testify before the Committee<sup>31)</sup>, has refused to cooperate with the Committee and has been found guilty of contempt of Congress, and is led away to prison. Mat, not happy this is happening to his brother, wants Owen to understand he, Mat, had "nothing to do with it." Owen tries to placate his older brother and at the same time enlighten him: "You're right, Mat. You're part of something much bigger and deadlier than you are. And you don't even know it. I'm sorry for you, Mat."

Three years later, the whole Merton family is together again to celebrate another of Martha Merton's birthdays. Bob, who ran away from home, returns a tough and bitter drifter.<sup>32)</sup> Bob feels the way people live "they're better off dead."<sup>33)</sup> He says: "If there's a way to live, I want to know." Owen only says there is no "easy answer."

Owen does not have all the answers, but he does have moral integrity. He rejects Abigail's offer to leave Jed for him, also saying he does not wish to hurt his mother's feelings.<sup>34)</sup> Jed, now drunk more often than not, says he will "raise Hell" about Abigail and Owen if she leaves him. (Actually, Abigail and Owen do not deceive Jed in any way.)

Jed now turns on Owen politically. He calls Owen a "fanatic." Jed denies his own will and personal responsibility. He says: "We

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31) It is not made clear why Owen is subpoenaed.

32) Bob is similar to Rosy Rosenbloom in *Marching Song* (1937), a young drifter who has seen the whole country "on the bum."

33) Roger Bloomer rebels against being one of the living dead.

34) Lawson's emphasis on the mother-son relationship, despite Martha Merton's being in the background, suggests an overdependence of the three brothers on their ailing mother, who took the place of their dead father. Lawson often draws in the mother in conversations about her heart trouble, trying to tie a dramaturgical knot to be unravelled later. The old woman's heart ailment has the second signification of lack of heart, of lack of courage, which she eventually overcomes and enheartens, encourages, her children to respect the rightful memory of their father, a memory she suppressed, perhaps contributing to her own illness.

are just victims." He says: "History played a joke on both of us." The joke History played on them, Jed says, is the revelation by Krushchev about Stalin: "The hero of our time turns out to be a killer."<sup>35)</sup> This historical joke, Jed says, proves one cannot trust ideals, proves people are unreliable, selfish brutes<sup>36)</sup>. Owen says this historical fact has nothing to do with the "real issues."<sup>37)</sup>

Martha Merton now plays a historical joke of her own, as she makes a somewhat magical revelation:

There's a shadow on this house. A terrible shadow that poisons the air. Love is trust; love is understanding; love is hope. There's none of these here—the house is empty.<sup>38)</sup>

Martha asks Mat: "Don't you *see* anything, Mathew?" She takes the blame for the emptiness of the house. She "carefully taught" the family the emptiness, "especially Mathew, he's what I taught him to be." When they were growing up, Martha told Mat and Jed and Owen their father was "glad to go to war, glad to die for his country." She lied. Their father was a "rebel and fighter" who had been "in and out" of prisons for being a rebel. He was a friend of Joe Hill and Big Bill Haywood. Martha Merton hid this "heritage" from her sons because she wanted a "respectable" life for the family.<sup>39)</sup> She loved Walter Merton but she could not bear the

35) It is not made clear what Stalin has meant to Jed or to Owen.

36) Jed thus uses the Krushchev report to justify behavior he himself has already exemplified in his distrust of ideals, his lack of reliability, his selfishness.

37) Owen does not say what the real issues are.

38) *Standards* begins in an empty house. When he runs away from home Roger Bloomer shakes his fist at his parent's "empty house." In *Gentlewoman* wealthy Gwyn Ballantine discovers her house is empty.

39) Walter Merton apparently died in 1917. Mat, 36 when the action begins in 1944, would have been born in 1908 and known his father for eight years before his father stopped being a rebel. Yet he has no inkling of the conflict between his parents, nor does he know his father was a rebel in and out of prisons. Jed, 28 when the action begins, would have been born in 1916 and would have been in the cradle during his father's last year or so at home. Owen, 25 when the action begins, would have been born in 1919, probably, after the death of his father in 1917. It is not clear when his conception might have taken place.

way they lived.<sup>40)</sup>

Walter Merton believed the first world war was a "rich man's war." He was ready and willing to go to prison instead of to the trenches, but Martha made him go to war: "I said it was for you, for the children... So he went and died, so you wouldn't be disgraced by a papa in Jail for being against war..."<sup>41)</sup>

Martha Merton ends her speech with an appeal to Mat's son Bob and Jed's son Andrew: "Perhaps it is not too late for them." She reminds the young men they have been taught "money's the only thing that makes you safe," but, she cautions them, they are not safe: "We can't be safe unless everybody else in the world is safe... safe from war. . . safe from hunger..."

Owen recovers from the shock of this revelation first. He says he will go on: "I am sure the people of this country want peace... If we all work together, we will have peace."<sup>42)</sup>

The members of the family re-arrange themselves on stage. Abigail goes to stand beside Owen. Andrew goes with her. Mat's son Bob joins them. Then Bettina does. Jed seems paralyzed. Mat "sinks down in a chair, head in his hands... broken and defeated."

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40) She does not specify the way they lived.

41) In the Schwerin production this entire last scene was altered. It was considered not wise to bring the dead father so abruptly into the situation. Martha's long speech was changed, its main points being given to Owen, who develops most in the course of the action and who, supported by Martha, tears up the web of lies. Professor Martin Hellberg, Generalintendant, Staatstheater, in letter to John Howard Lawson, April 7, 1963.

42) In an intendedly realistic play (with symbolic overtones), this emphasis on peace seems strained at a moment when a family in such circumstances would be otherwise concerned. As the Schwerin alterations indicate, an aura of improbability permeates the final scene. The last movement of the characters is akin to a formalized dance and, ritual-like, tends to move the characters out of their naturalistic environment. Martha Merton's decision to tear up the web of lies is neither adequately "caused" nor prepared.

Martha Merton apologizes to Mat and Jed, saying it is not going to be easy for the family, especially for Owen and those who stand with him. "It's not easy to stand up for what's right," she says, as *Parlor Magic* ends: "Yet, it's the only way for people to live."

Thus in his last produced play, *Parlor Magic*, John Howard Lawson returns to the morality of Socrates: "A man worth anything at all should take no account of whether he is to live or die or give consideration to anything but this: whether his conduct will be just or unjust..."<sup>43)</sup>

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43) *Apology* 28B.