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Social conditions influencing the American stage

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Thesis

Social Conditions Influencing
the American Stage

Submitted by

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1925

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CHAPTER I.

ARGUMENT IN FAVOR OF THE DRAMA

In the history of the world there has never been a period where the strain and pressure upon mankind has been as great as it is at present. The human machine is taxed to the utmost. The nerves are keyed almost to the breaking point.

The question comes, how shall humanity do most work, support the greatest anxiety, face life with the most genuine seriousness. Experience has taught us that neither the body nor the mind can endure such a high pressure for a long time without serious consequences. The ambitions, the aspirations, even the conscience requires sleep and rest as well as the brain and body. To do the best work man must have a fair proportion of play. To bear the heaviest burdens of life he must have rest and relaxation. The heart that is gay for an hour is more sweetly serious for the rest of the day. The consciousness that rests for a while is more keenly alive and discriminating when it is active. The intellect that indulges in its full share of play works more efficiently and produces better results the rest of the day.

Of all the ancient contributors to our civilization the Greeks perhaps realized this the most, and made the provision of public amusement the business of the

state. They found the theatre to have a double value in the life of the people. It not only provided the amusement and relaxation, but in the days when books were not available to all it was the best means of educating the people.

"In Athens the superintendence of the annual dramatic performances was just as much a part of the public administration of affairs as was the repair of the dock yards, the equipment of fleets, or the dispatch of armies. Poets and actors were selected by the state....The cost of the performance was a tax upon the richer classes. Every wealthy citizen had in his turn to defray the expenses of a tragedy or a comedy, just as he had to pay for one of the ships of the fleet, or perform any other of the state burdens. The theatre was a public institution for the benefit of the whole people. Every Athenian citizen of whatever degree was entitled to be present at the annual dramatic performances; and if he was too poor to pay the entrance fee, he received the price of admission from the state. The audience consisted practically of the whole body of the people. The theatre of Dionysus at Athens was capable of containing nearly twenty thousand people." (1)

(1) A. E. Haigh--The Attic Theatre, page 2.

Today, when books are so plentiful and are so accessible to every one, it is hard for us to realize what these annual performances of the drama meant to the Greeks. The ordinary Athenian received his only literary pleasures from these public performances. This close contact of the author with the populace made the dramatic writer a man of great importance. The foremost tragic poets exercised a deep influence upon the minds and character of their countrymen. They were the teachers of the people in science and morality. This influence may be proved by many passages in Plato and Aristophanes, and there is probably no other instance in all history of a drama which was so generally popular and which exerted so deep an influence upon the national life of a people.

In contrast to this attitude of the Greeks, consider the stand taken upon this subject by the Puritans. They tabooed all forms of amusement. Instead of accepting pleasures in life as a gift of God they consigned it all to the Devil. They forbade bear-baiting, not because it hurt the bear but because it gave pleasure to the people. Is it going too far to say that if the people had been allowed to give expression to themselves, the burning of the witches would never have taken place?

The theatre is not only a place of amusement, it is a place of culture, a place where people learn to think, act, and feel. "Facts are diverse, unordered, only partially related. We become their masters not by fitting them into a classification, but by becoming conscious of them. A dramatic author becomes impressed with this or that fact, an anomaly in the marriage relation or in the war of labor and capital, and casts it into dramatic form in order that it may better come to consciousness. It may or may not accord with our view of what the world ought to be; he takes no responsibility for that. It is simply one of the influences that is shaping the world and must force itself on dramatists if they are alive and open-minded. It is the willingness to accept facts as their own authority, rather than a zeal for the general reformation of the world, which makes modern dramatic literature seem so wildly bent on changing things. The life about us is violently in process of changing and any art so close to life as the drama is bound to reflect its disordered violence." (1)

As an English playwright has said, "The theatre is literally making the minds of our urban population today. It is a huge factory of sentiment, of character, of points of honor, of concepts, of conduct, of every-

(1) Moderwell--The Theatre of Today, page 317.

thing that finally determines the destiny of a nation."

"When the company of players, newly arrived at Elsinore, appeared before Hamlet, he saw at once how they could be made the potent instrument to force his uncle into self-betrayal. He straight-way proceeded to coach the players in a scene which might reveal the king to himself more powerfully than his own deed had done. This is what the stage should do for the age it mirrors; it should draw its inspiration out of the life of the age, its glory out of the ideal.

"At its greatest periods, the drama has done just this. It did it in the Greece of Sophocles, the England of Shakespeare, the France of Moliere, the Spain of Calderon. Within recent years, the dry bones with which the Elizabethan drama strewed the English speaking world have felt the strange and quickening breath of a new epoch."⁽¹⁾

Fifty years ago a many-sided theatre such as we have today would have been impossible. But the inventions and discoveries of the last half century have to a great extent overcome time and space. The cheap newspapers, magazines and abundant translation of books has brought the whole world into very close companionship. These phenomena together with the internationalization of finance and credit have done much toward wiping

(1) Frances Squire--The Stage and Democracy.

out the national boundary lines, although the nations themselves fail to recognize the fact.

Just as in the evolution of social organization where clan loyalty gave way to national loyalty, so now with the rapid and radical modern social developments, national loyalty must give way to the greater and broader human loyalty. Culture and social life are now international and it is only the narrow minded and most provincial who refuse the cultural contributions of other nations. The highest achievement now is to be a citizen of the world--to be world minded. It is only from this broad outlook that great art can be created. The nearness of each nation to every other nation has brought the culture of every nation to the very door of every other nation. Any nation who refuses these contributions must suffer and become impoverished in its life. The theatre has now become a universal instrument and it can be efficient only when it draws upon this universal culture.

We have put before us in our theatres today the deepest thoughts and most beautiful fancies of France, Scandinavia, Russia, Italy, and England. Each can bring to us something which is peculiarly its own, something which we could perhaps get in no other way. Through this medium the races can be brought into a closer

understanding of each other and each nation can broaden its viewpoint of life. The theatre brings to us the treasures of the world and by our choice therefrom we pass judgment upon ourselves.

It is true that the theatre today is not making the impression upon the universal mind that it has made in some periods of the past. But this is a question of degree. The distress and conflict produced by the World War must be reflected here as elsewhere. We are all sick of a great sickness and we cannot hope to enjoy a healthy theatre until we as a people are healthy again.

"Drama is, of all the means of artistic expression, the one which most closely corresponds with the mental and spiritual state of the race. Pictures may be painted, music may be composed, statues may be made and poems may be written without the aid of the crowd, but plays can not."⁽¹⁾ No one knows exactly what it is "the crowd" has to offer, but we do know that the theatre can not offer the crowd anything unless there is that mysterious something to offer it to.

Man does not march on steadily upward from one stage to another; each generation to a great extent has to begin over again the business of making the world. And the quality of the world produced depends upon the

(1) St. John Ervine--The Organized Theatre, page 51.

quality of the generation. The renewing of a nation depends upon the welfare of the common people. The men of genius will take care of themselves, but the racial spirit depends upon the common mind. What better education for the common mind is there than an uplifted drama?

CHAPTER II.

HISTORY--1767 to 1850

The drama was delayed in getting a foothold on American soil. There was strong feeling of dependence on the mother country for anything along literary lines. This was not, however, the only reason for the slow development of the American Drama. There was not so much opposition to the drama as there was to the stage and of course as there could be no drama without the stage, there was no drama.

It is a fallacy to attribute the antipathy of the colonist toward the stage to religious reasons. It is true that probably those creeds, such as the Catholic and Episcopal, out of whose protection the English Drama had flourished, would be inclined to protect it here in America, while those who held that the mother church was wrong would not foster or protect the progeny thereof.

But the greatest objections were not religious, but social and economic. It is true in any age that the man accustomed to abstract thinking finds the symbolic rather repulsive if not altogether unnecessary.

The Puritans of Massachusetts, the Quakers of Philadelphia and the Huguenots of New York had left their homes across the sea dissatisfied with conditions there, at swords with the mother church and one could hardly expect to have them "honor, cherish and obey" the off-

spring of this same church.

The same people were very thrifty. The theatre was an expense. Another very obvious reason why it should not be sanctioned.

I think one wonders, when he considers all the handicaps under which the drama labored that it should have lived through it all. It was ten years after the first regularly organized company of actors performed in this country until the first American play was written.

"Unlike the novel, the first American drama had a respectable ancestry and inspiration. It was the study of Shakespeare, of Beaumont and Fletcher, of Dryden, of Ambrose Philips and Nicholas Rowe that inspired Thomas Godfrey to write "The Prince of Parthis". But it must not be forgotten that it was as an actable play that Godfrey planned his work, and it was definitely for the company of players whom he had seen in Philadelphia that he wrote it. He was prompted also by his association with the amateur production of masques, odes and dialogues in the College of Philadelphia."⁽¹⁾

Among some of the leading names in drama during the Early Colonial Period are: Cornelius Walkinson, Lewis Hallam, David Douglass, and Thomas Godfrey.

(1) A. H. Quinn--History of the American Drama, page 4.

During the Revolutionary period the drama that was written expressed the patriotism of the people. It either expressed resentment against the mother country or loyalty to King George. It would be impossible to give the names of the authors of these satires as they were published anonymously.

Among the leading dramas of this period were "The Adulater" and "The Group" by Mrs. Mercy Otis Warren of Massachusetts. No key to the characters in these satires was needed as she most mercilessly flayed public men of the day.

"Viewed from an absolute standard the artistic quality of these dramas of the Revolution may not be high, but it is noteworthy that the more closely they are studied in relation to their inner meaning, the greater their significance becomes. In them not figments of the fancy but real people live and move. Being drama they represent the feeling of the time in its most intense moods, and the hopes, fears, and agonies of that great period are mirrored in a glass that is most interesting when it reflects the nature of human beings who are emotionally under stress. The great strife that separated families, brought ruin to a few and liberty to all who believed in freedom, lives again in a peculiarly vigorous form in these few rare old volumes which pre-

serve all that is left of the drama of the Revolution. Of their significance, therefore, as social history there can be no shadow of doubt."⁽¹⁾

The first native comedy to be produced by a professional company was "The Contrast" by Royall Tyler. It was first played in New York, April 16, 1787. Tyler tells us that Sheridan's "The School for Scandal" was one of his models, and the influence is clearly to be seen. In this play he creates as its chief comic character a caricature of the New England Yankee that has been a prototype for over a century.

The influence of "The Contrast" both as a book and a play was widespread. It is told how the book was memorized by an inhabitant of New Lebanon, New York. Probably its present rarity is due to its wide popularity at the time it was written. Most important, however, was the influence of the play upon the first author-manager, William Dunlap.

"During the last decade of the eighteenth century and the first of the nineteenth, the dominating force in the American Drama was the interesting figure of William Dunlap. From the pages of his "History of the American Theatre" and his "Arts of Design" emerges a real personality, an artist to his finger tips--enthusiastic, temperamental, and proud of his craft, whether it be that of the

(1) A. H. Quinn--History of the American Drama, page 60.

dramatist, or the painter, yet capable of smiling even at his own performances, which never reached the shining level of his desires. Especially keen was his sense of the impertinence of patronage, and in his sojourn in England he had seen a good deal of it. Therefore, to him America was the hope of the artist of the future, where, unhampered by caste or the dead hand of prestige, the painter, the writer, the musician could develop on the firm basis of his intrinsic worth. His belief in democracy as a stimulant of art is expressed with a hopefulness that not even the bitter experience of years could quite disillusion, for he saw, beyond the accomplishment of democracy, the great principle that survives even the hard disappointments of fact."⁽¹⁾

The first attempt at native tragedy was "Andre" presented by him March 30, 1798. The play was one of his best. Its structure is admirable especially from the point of view of unity.

Dunlap produced more than fifty identified plays, twenty-nine of which were entirely or partly his own. He was very well acquainted with the drama of England. He was well informed as to the French and German drama and it was with careful discrimination that he chose material for his adaptations.

(1) A. H. Quinn--History of the American Drama, page 60.

He was versatile, ranging from the comedy of social life in "The Father" to romantic tragedy in "Leicester", to the melodrama in "Ribbemont", to the heights of dignified and sombre tragedy of American history in "Andre".

"He was willing, and even anxious, to give other American playwrights a chance at production. At a time when no copyright laws protected foreign playwrights and gave an opening for native talent, and also at a time when the rewards of the dramatist were limited usually to the receipts of the third night, William Dunlap had that overpowering desire for expression which inspired him to match his strength against foreign reputation and to endure native neglect of native talent, hardest of all to bear. He saw, too, the evils of the commercial standards of the theatre, and in his History more than once he points to a stage supported by the state or the nation as the only solution for the conditions which rendered success so dubious. He inveighs also against a custom borrowed from the British stage, which then seemed deep-rooted in ours, of the women of the town being allowed a section of the theatre as their province.

"In short, William Dunlap had the soul of an artist and the intrepidity of the pioneer, and his place in our dramatic literature will remain secure." (1)

(1) A. H. Quinn--History of the American Drama, page 112.

During the twenty years after Dunlap's retirement in 1805, two names stand out prominently. The first is James Nelson Barker, the sponsor of the native drama, and John Howard Payne, the proponent of foreign plays.

Barker was not a dramatist by profession and it is sometimes wondered, after examining the five plays left out of the ten plays that he wrote, what the result would have been had he devoted his entire time to the drama. Barker's choice of American themes was not accidental. He knew there was a lack of a native drama and although he knew other literatures and made us of them he did his best to fill the lack. "Tears and Smiles" was his first play to be acted. It was a comedy of manners laid in Philadelphia at the time of writing, 1805.

In 1812 Barker dramatized Scott's "Marmion", and it was in this that he reached his heights. "Marmion" fully deserved the popularity it received. It was not an imitation of Scott's poem, for Barker even went back before Scott's time to get facts and characters to add to the vigor of the play. In fact, the ability of Barker is best shown in the way he arranged and altered the episodes of the story.

"In sharp contrast with the author of "Tears and Smiles", "Marmion", "Superstition", and the "Indian Princess",

John Howard Payne represents in our dramatic history the actor-playwright, the man of the theatre living the precarious existence of the author of that time who depended upon the fickle favor of the public, as interpreted by the none too able judgment of the professional managers of Drury Lane and Covent Garden. For it was not only that Payne wrote mostly on foreign themes; his life for many years was spent in London or Paris, and his plays were usually first performed in London. He becomes, then, the representative of foreign influence in our playwriting.⁽¹⁾"

The position of Payne in our dramatic history is peculiar. Not only was his inspiration foreign, but his writing was done abroad. Offsetting this we find that his theatrical training was received in America and his attitude toward America was unchanged throughout his stay in Europe. His themes were universal rather than belonging to one environment. It is uncertain just how many plays he wrote, but we do know that over sixty plays are attributed to him. He adapted plays from both the French and the English drama and was not afraid to point out his sources, so clearly in fact, that he was charged with plagiarism.

He was not original. He knew, however, what would be theatrically effective and reshaped the drama that he

(1) A. H. Quinn--History of American Drama, page 163.

borrowed into a new life and form. Three of his plays stamp him as a genius at adaptation: "Brutus", "Charles the Second", "Therese". Washington Irving collaborated on more than one play with John Howard Payne, but insisted on his share being concealed.

Another dramatist of this type, writing at the same time, was Sheridan Knowles, but he lacked the vigor of Payne. Knowles made history domestic, Payne made it heroic and at the same time romantic.

About 1830 the social, political, and economical condition of the country forced a change in the nature of the drama. Boston was now only three days from Washington. This enlarging of the neighborhood revolutionized industry and brought to the front people who heretofore had been outside the interests of the drama. New York became the leading theatrical centre of the United States, due to its geographical position as a port of entry. To her came the foreign stars, and their influence upon our drama was great. The American stage lacked the artist, and the dramatist turned as Payne turned, to foreign inspiration.

Among the dramatists it is seldom that we find a man who is so scholarly and versatile as Dr. Robert Montgomery Bird. Perhaps the play by which he is best remembered is "The Gladiator". It has the virtues and faults of romantic tragedy, but it must be judged by its effect

upon the stage. Durang says, "I never saw in my experience any theatrical applause so wildly and impulsively given."⁽¹⁾

"His life was a brave struggle for the right to create, and had he lived in a time when the American playwright received fair treatment, it is not easy to put a limit to his possible achievements. For he had a rare sense of dramatic effect, a power to visualize historic scenes and characters, to seize the spirit of the past out of the mass of facts and, in a few brief lines, to fuse these facts into life. Before he was thirty years old he had lifted romantic tragedy to a level higher than it had reached in English since Congreve, and had written plays which even today can be placed on the stage with effect."⁽²⁾

At the same time that romantic tragedy and comedy had such a hold upon the American stage, there were those playwrights who were seeking to place upon the stage the scenes and characters of their native land. It was natural that the dramatist should turn to the Indian for material, and here we find a long list of plays from this source. The influence of the rush to California in '49 had its effect upon the drama of this period.

And now we come to the time when social conditions

(1) and (2) A. H. Quinn--History of the American Drama,

find the stage a medium of great influence in reaching the minds of the people, and in spurring them into action. The question of slavery was being forced by the Abolitionists upon the conscience of the nation. Harriet Beecher Stowe's book, "Uncle Tom's Cabin" appeared in March, 1852, and in September, 1852, Aiken's dramatization of the story was first presented and was played for two hundred successive performances.

Owing to the comparatively small number of these national plays that have come down to us, it is impossible to form any comprehensive judgment on their merits. It is evident that they did not engage the efforts of the greatest dramatists of the period. Perhaps the range was still too short. Cooper and his followers had shown the value of the native material for use in fiction. But history is better suited to fiction than to drama. It is only safe material for the dramatists when it lies so far in the past that it may be shaped at will into universal motives.

CHAPTER III.

History--1850 to 1918

One of the most significant dramas of this period is "Fashion" by Mrs. Mowatt. Although this play is faulty in construction and is lacking in literary merit, it is one of the few native pieces which has stood the test of time. Only recently it was revived with considerable success by the Drama League.

The dialogue contains local allusions of the street and parlor of the time, introduces the conventional English dialect, makes use of the "parvenu" attempt to use French phrases, and of an exaggerated negro dialect.

"At the time this play was written all society drama seemed to know but one situation: the mad rush after money and social prestige at the moment when financial ruin threatened a family. It sought to be satire aimed particularly at the effort to be English, for the American is introduced breezily and roughly,--note "Adam Frueman", the farmer, in "Fashion". Lower Broadway was the promenade, with its busses, and carriages rolling out into the country--possibly to Central Park--carrying parties for recreation."⁽¹⁾

Edgar Allen Poe was not in accord with the "modern drama" of his day. He writes, "The day has at length arrived when men demand nationalities in place

(1) Montrose J. Moses--The American Dramatist, page 53.

of conventionalities. It will no longer do to copy, even with absolute accuracy, the whole tone of even so ingenious and real spirited a thing as the "School for Scandal". It was comparatively good in its day, but it would be positively bad at the present day, and imitations of it are inadmissible at any day."

"Bearing in mind the spirit of these observations, we may say that 'Fashion' is theatrical but not dramatic. It is a pretty well arranged selection from the usual routine of stage characters, and stage manoeuvres--but there is not one particle of any nature, beyond green-room nature, about it. No such events ever happened in fact or even could happen, as happen in 'Fashion'. Nor are we quarreling, now, with the mere exaggeration of character or incident; were this all, the play, although bad as comedy, might be good as farce, of which the exaggeration of possible incongruities is the chief element. Our fault-finding is on the score of deficiency in verisimilitude--in natural art--that is to say, in art based on the natural laws of man's heart and understanding." (1)

It is interesting to note here that according to his own confession (Broadway Journal, April 5, 1845) Poe attended every performance since its opening, in order to decide fully upon its merits and demerits.

The managers up to this time had done little to

(1) Montrose J. Moses--The American Dramatist, page 54.

encourage the native playwright. Popular opinion was led to value an importation, and to discount any serious treatment of American character or of American life. A. M. Palmer, one of the foremost managers of the time, says, "The prominent evil tendency of the American writer has been to look for his types among his countryment of the baser sort, who never by any possibility pronounce English words properly and who seem to take the greatest pains to speak slang and utter vulgarisms, and to act as if good manners were a reproach instead of an accomplishment."⁽¹⁾

Up to 1870 we cannot rank the American drama very high, but it had made a start and was struggling for existence. If the drama of this time is not of permanent value, the names of Booth and Barrett, of Jefferson and Holland, of Davenport, Gilbert, and Clarke, of Laura Keane and Charlotte Cushman, will always be revered, and make this period an important one in the history of the American stage.

When Bronson Howard, the dean of the American drama, entered the field he found the foreign models ruling the stage. He was always aware of the historical changes in drama, the shifting of social attitudes, and of moral conventionalities, but he accepted thea-

(1) Forum, 15:614-20.

trical conventions as he found them. In 1870, his one and only fight was for recognition of the American dramatist.

In spite of the prejudice against American dramatists and American themes, he anticipated many of our present-day dramatic workers in the selection of his themes.

"The Young Mrs. Winthrop" (1882) is a strong domestic play, and Alfred Sutro's "The Walls of Jericho" is no more powerful in its argument against the forces of society which are drawing husband and wife apart. "The Henrietta" (1887), which is one of his most American plays, forecasts Klein's "The Lion and the Mouse", and Frank Norris's "The Pit". While Mr. Howard's claim as a writer of native drama was harmed by his foreign form of construction, he nevertheless reflected the conventional phases of contemporary society.

W. D. Howells in his book on "Criticism and Fiction" says, "Now we are beginning to see and to say that no author is an authority except in those moments when he held his ear close to Nature's lips and caught her very accents." No one can lay better claim to having faithfully interpreted the environment with which he is most familiar than James A. Hearne. It is true he often uses conventional situations which are detrimental

to his stagecraft. His comedy is often low comedy, but his humor is of the kindest type.

At the time "when romantic, melodramatic, and old-fashioned tragic conceptions found favor in the eyes of the American public, he put his ear close to the heart of the common life, and drew from the most ordinary experiences the poetry of a simple, fundamental existence."⁽¹⁾

"Shore Acres" and "Sag Harbor" are the best examples of his rural drama and "Margaret Fleming" and "The Rev. Griffith Davenport" are examples of his realism.

Steele MacKaye belongs to the transition period from the older theatrical tradition to the modern realism. While he was by no means free from the methods of the old school, he made a decided advance in the naturalness of his characters and expression. He has to his credit some nineteen plays, all of which were more or less successful. "Hazel Kirke" was produced at the Madison Square Theatre in 1880 and ran consecutively for two years. This play held a place on the American stage for thirty years, and has been acted at the same time by ten companies. It has a deep human quality, and a strong appeal to the primary instincts. There is

(1) Montrose J. Moses--The American Dramatist, page 92.

no "state villain" in this play. The incidents develop naturally, and it takes a decided step forward in technique.

His son, Percy MacKaye, grew up in the atmosphere of the theatre, and has followed in the footsteps of his father. His standards for dramatic writing are the highest. He is active in the movement to establish a civic and national theatre, free from commercial considerations, and he has recently brought the idea of the community masque or pageant into prominence. This has become a significant element in the dramatic evolution of the time. However, he is more than a theorist, for he has proved his ability to write actable plays dealing with serious subjects. One of these, "This Fine Pretty World", a comedy of the Kentucky mountains, was produced in New York in 1923.

Augustus Thomas in his early plays, "Alabama" (1891), "In Mizzoura" (1893), and "Arizona" (1900), got near to real American life. Later he was drawn away from this, and in his broad comedy, his plays became more clever and effervescent. The work of the dramatist is "To sum up and present dramatically all that the crowd has been thinking for some time on any subject of importance."⁽¹⁾ This Mr. Thomas did in "The Witching Hour". His theme is that every thought is an act, there-

(1) Clayton Hamilton--The Theory of the Theatre, page 46.

fore, thinking has to a great extent the power of action. Every character and every incident in the play serve to set forth concretely this abstract truth. "Alabama" was produced at a time when the country was tired of sectional strife, and when it was believed there should be a reconciliation. Colonel Henry Watterson said in two public speeches and also editorially, that up to the time of the production of "Alabama" he had had no assistance of any kind to bring about this reconciliation between the sections, and that "Alabama" did more in one night than he (1) had been able to do in ten years.

William Gillette has done much to prove the legitimacy of the melodrama. He believed the fundamental purpose of the theatre was to amuse, that life had worries and troubles enough. He appealed to the thirst for excitement which is inherent in both child and adult. In "Sherlock Holmes" he made melodrama acceptable to the best audiences through his excellent workmanship, and peculiarly individualistic acting.

The most prolific writer of his time was Clyde Fitch. Though he died at the age of forty-four, he has to his credit some forty or fifty plays. "Mr. Fitch was a born playwright, in the double sense that in expressing himself he perforce had to use dialogue, and in viewing life he invariably felt compelled to estimate it in terms

(1) Montrose J. Moses--The American Dramatist, page 162.

of situation. His undoing was that he lacked the consuming idea."⁽¹⁾

He was more of a New York dramatist than an American dramatist. The conventions running through his plays are those of the society of New York City. He appealed to the local sense of New Yorkers even in his scenic indications.

"His position in American drama is one which has afforded a large amount of healthy enjoyment, and to have done this is to do a good deal."⁽²⁾ He was simple, direct, tender, and humorous. There is nothing old-fashioned in his attitude or style, and his plays will not become out-of-date for some time.

Taken as a whole, it is this lack of conviction as to our national aims, and as to our moral standards that seems to be the weakness of our American drama at this time. Many believe that William Vaughn Moody, in "The Great Divide", reached the highest point that has yet been touched in the American drama.

Eugene Walters struck his highest note in "The Easiest Way". Charles Kenyon has given us a play called "Kindling", which treats with the tenement problem most sincerely. Yet it failed until through the help of the Drama League, it met with a measure of success in Chicago.

(1) Montrose J. Moses--The American Dramatist, page 173.
 (2) " " " " " " " 181.

It was never a success from the box-office point of view. Bayard Veiller's "Within the Law" is a splendid example of the newspaper type of play, dealing with the police and gang problem. It is effective theatrically, but it comes so far from solving its problem that it upholds evasion of the law by the strong sympathy it creates for its characters.

"It is an unfortunate circumstance that the younger American playwright is developing in an atmosphere of external influences rather than of intellectual stimulation."⁽¹⁾

The genuine play contains not only manner and legitimate trickery, but personal conviction as well. The American dramatist needs to approach his subject with authority or with personal conviction.

(1) Montrose J. Moses--The American Dramatist, page 300.

Chapter IV.

History--Present Day

Thirty years ago there was little American drama on the stage. Play writing as a profession is a very new thing in this country. Bronson Howard was the first author who depended upon his plays for a living. His first play, "Saratoga", was produced in 1870 and his career continued until his death in 1908. Toward the end of the nineteenth century a few other authors became established as professional playwrights: James A. Herne, Steele MacKaye, Charles H. Hoyt, William Gillette, H. C. de Mille, and David Belasco. Augustus Thomas and Clyde Fitch arrived soon after. "There were a few others that might be mentioned, but it is safe to say that there were not more than ten or a dozen recognized professional dramatists in America at the end of the nineteenth century. At the present time, however, there are two hundred members of the Dramatists' Guild of the Authors' League of America, each of whom has had at least one play produced professionally."⁽¹⁾

America is producing a great quantity of plays today, but the quality of these plays is another matter. The American stage is prolific of new ideas, novel twists, which give a playwright enormous success with one play. But very often we never hear of him again. We have today many playwrights but few dramatists. "A dramatist is a

(1) Clayton Hamilton--Contemporary Drama, page 176.

playwright who teaches while he entertains, and adds to the sum total of national thought by evolving, formulating, and expounding truths which theretofore have lain latent in the national consciousness. He must be, not merely an imitator of life, but an interpreter of life, not an artist only but a seer as well."⁽¹⁾

Of drama and its significance to social progress, Bernard Shaw says through the character of Shakespeare in "The Dark Lady of the Sonnets", "For this writing of plays is a great matter forming as it does the minds and affections of men in such a way that whatsoever they see done in show on the stage, they will presently be doing in earnest in the world, which is but a larger stage." Shaw holds the stage to be the most effective means of putting forth moral propaganda, and his theory is supported by Brieux who says in regard to his purpose in writing plays, "I want to bring the problems before them, and I want them to think about some of the problems of life. I have tried to show how wrong it is to shirk responsibility. All evil comes from a lack of feeling of responsibility of the individual and of the classes for each other."

And so we find the Theatre Guild, the so-called Art Theatre, producing not American plays, but the plays of the European dramatists. They feel that the American drama is not good enough to meet the standard set by Shaw,

(1) Clayton Hamilton--Contemporary Drama, page 181.

Tolstoi, Masfield, Ervine, Ibsen, Molnar and so on. These plays are all marked by two merits, -theatrical effectiveness or playwriting skill, and intellectual significance.

Many plays have been written in America during the six years since the organization of the Guild. How many could meet both of these tests? Walter Pritchard Eaton says, "It may almost be stated as a law, that at present the American plays which have the theatrical effectiveness, have little or no intellectual significance, and the plays which are intellectually distinguished are not written by men and women sufficiently gifted with knowledge of, or instinct for, the theatre."

The shining exception to this rule of course is Eugene O'Neill. All of the critics agree that his writing is peculiarly powerful. He has not written any comedy as yet, and what humor there is in his plays is of a grim and sardonic type. He knows one phase of life, and knows it intimately. Most of us wish that he would investigate other phases of society with equal thoroughness. For the drama is to be found in all classes of life, and not merely in the life of the seaman and the poverty stricken. I think the best thing he has given us as yet is his first full length play, "Beyond the Horizon". Mr.

O'Neill wrote this without regard to whether or not his audience would be pleased. He has written a story of sheer misery, of dreams denied, and love unrequited, of love that wanes, and poverty, death, and disease, and of people who grow old. It is a story in which every character ages and every character changes. It is a reflection of life, but of a side of life that most people avoid seeing, though they know it exists.

His latest play, "Desire Under the Elms", has caused much discussion, and has received considerable condemnation. Again, as in "Beyond the Horizon", he deals with the farmer characters, the very narrowness of whose life intensifies the desires of human nature. Desire is the key note of the play; desire for gold, for the farm; the desire of Eben for his father's wife; the desire of the aged Cabot for an heir. A play that is ruthless and bitter, without humor, without a suggestion of pity or gentleness, it has the rigor and pace of the Greek tragedies, and at times their dignity.

Of course there are those, a very few to be sure, who look upon the play as immoral, and refrain from discussing it.

Here arises the question, where should the playwright draw the line in his portrayal of human life and human passions? Human nature is so constituted that it has inherent the natural elements of logic, an under-

standing of the laws of cause and effect; and when once the premises are set forth, the result is pretty sure to be adequately arrived at. Experience is largely the teacher of complex matters; and, as the opportunities of civilization and the serenity of domestic life do not usually allow of the experience of the more rugged and dominating passions of our nature, which are nevertheless latently existing, it is wise in the economy of things that a fitting knowledge of evil potentialities as well as good should be afforded. Warning-posts have their place as well as sign-posts in the many cross-roaded highways of life. Nevertheless, questions of passion should in all imaginative work be very carefully dealt with; and it is here that we may fear for the effects of that luxuriant and reckless quasi-realism at which certain imaginative writers, both for the stage and library, aim.

In discussion of the type of play which is largely being forced upon the American public today, the following editorial appeared in the "Theatre Magazine", March, 1922:

"The drama today is a reflection of the condition of the world left as an aftermath of the Great War. In every field of human activity, in political, industrial, financial, and social orders, there is the same debacle. Why not in the theatre?"

"There are today no red lights in our side streets. But they burn even more brightly, more sinister than ever, on our stage. The prostitute, that is the character our rapid-fire, up-to-date dramatist prefers to exploit for the fattening of his bank account and the edification of American audiences, old and young. The youth just out of college, the virgin of blushing sixteen is shown the life of the harlot in all its unsavory hideous detail. These managers and authors say they give the public what it wants. What constitutes the theatre-going public? Is it the lobster-fed, hip-flask gentry who come to Broadway to have "a good time", and who besiege the ticket agencies, willing to pay any old price for something good, no matter what, as long as it is sporty and racy. Such people are the special public who patronize the undraped drama. But is there not another public, a more orderly, intelligent public, the same public that flocked to see "Abraham Lincoln", "The Circle", "Liliom", and "John Ferguson"? The only trouble is the manager professes to believe that there is a bigger public for the smutty play than for the descent one. In his pachydermous shortsightedness he does not realize that it is precisely these obscene plays, with their foul talk and vile innuendo, which are driving respectable patrons from our theatres.

"Is it true that we want suggestive plays? It is up to the real people to refute such a slander on its

intelligence, by a persistent and consistent boycott of those managers and those theatres that continue to offend against good taste and good morals. No manager can continually defy aroused public opinion and prosper. After all the vast majority of the people are clean and right thinking. If this were not true the world would have gone to the devil long ago.

As to the libidinally inclined minority, the less intelligent and less decent theatre-goers, he must be taught to stop thinking along prostitute lines, wantonness, prodigality, waste, jazz, gambling, drunkenness, all that is part of Satan's curriculum. A certain class of women play goers like to see the prostitute on the stage. Perhaps they see in the hectic heroine what they might have become in other circumstances. Themselves weak, unmoral, barren of principles, they let their empty headed flapper daughters imitate the harlot in dress and manner, and their sons go to ruin for her.

"The world is suffering from moral indigestion brought on by over-indulgence. The cure is a siege of hard times. We are feeling it now. The conditions are terrible, but the world won't go under. A change will come. There will be a wave of ideals of spirituality, and a wave of better living and better thinking. The playwrights will welcome the new era; the theatres

reflect it. The managers will float on the crest of it.
 (1)
 It will come."

Let us now consider what is being done toward developing a national drama, a drama that is truly and typically American.

Very little is done, outside of our universities, to teach our American public to take the drama seriously as an art. Walter Pritchard Eaton says that after the Equity Players announced that they were going to produce native plays the manuscripts "piled up". The one play discovered and produced was "Why Not?" by Jessie Lynch Williams. Two other plays were produced by Equity, both written by young Americans. The first was "Hospitality". The second was the much discussed expressionistic drama "Roger Bloomer". Neither play was ready for the stage technically, but both had intellectual solidity and meant something, and "Roger Bloomer" was strangely imaginative.

"The Rise of Silas Lapham", which was produced by the Guild, was a dramatization of a piece of historic realism, but it did not belong to the drama of our day. "Ambush" was a good modern play, but it was not American, it was more of an imitation of continental drama. "The Adding Machine" was obviously selected by the Guild, because it represented an effort toward a new and freer

(1) Theatre Magazine, March '22--Editorial.

technique of the stage, which is now the fashion. But it lacked the elevation of thought and dignity of purpose to redeem apparent coarseness or profanity. "At times it was irremediably vulgar, without the breath of fire that refines." It was coarse in a way that the kind of Americans who support the Theatre Guild find offensive.

Now if anything is plainer than another thing about the American drama, it is that its evolution has been along national lines, and our popular theatre has also been our most worthwhile theatre. To me the most interesting thing about O'Neill's "The Hairy Ape" was the fact that it so often reminded me of George Ade. Take the scene in the prison where a voice reads a New York Times editorial and the other prisoners howl derisively. The scene is bitter and biting, but it is a dramatized Ade fable, just the same, with O'Neill's sombre twist to it. What is "The Great Divide", which is surely one of our very best plays? Nothing in the world but the old American frontier drama written by a poet and a man of intellectual force. It is Davy Crockett with a college education.

I would rather see Craven's "The First Year", or "New Brooms", or George Ade's "The College Widow", or Cohan's "Seven Keys to Baldpate", than "Ambush" or

"The Adding Machine", not because they are funnier, but because I think them better American plays, far more truly reflecting American life, even if they make no attempt at conscious criticism of that life, or have
(1)
little intellectual body."

(1) Walter Pritchard Eaton--Theatre Magazine, Oct. '23.

Chapter V.

The Future of the Drama

As a medium of influence in the life of a nation the theatre stands high. Its appeal to the people is a very strong one. It is a scientific fact that ninety-five percent of the people remember what they see and hear, but only five percent what they read. The brain is tired and worn out after a strenuous day's work and the problem presented upon the stage and received through the eye is enjoyed with much less effort.

The theatre could be one of the greatest educational factors in the world. It is a wonderful medium through which to learn history, geography, music, painting, costuming, proper speech and deportment. The theatre can give you the best of literature and the best of music. The scenic artist can visualize for you and stir your imagination. The theatre, however, must not be thought of as belonging only to the serious minded. It must give entertainment to the masses of people and with the entertainment add all the art that it can.

Great progress is being made behind the footlights. Each year a higher type of young men and women are going into the profession. Preparation for the stage is now being recognized as essential to success.

All art and especially the drama depends not upon the small body of persons particularly interested in pro-

ducing that art, but upon the spiritual, mental and physical condition of the whole race. "When a nation is weakest, physically and spiritually, its people will not listen to tragedy, but demand what is called light entertainment, comic plays, spectacular pieces, trivial shows." (1) The works of four great Greek dramatists have come down to us. Three were tragedians, Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripedes. One, Aristophanes, was a comedian. The tragedy was preferred in the great Elizabethan age. The Romans in their decadent day would not look at a tragedy. Today it is almost impossible to get a tragedy produced. When the theatres of a nation are mainly occupied by comic and spectacular productions, it must mean that something is radically wrong in the life of that nation.

The condition of our theatre today was brought about by a number of things, "the chief of which were the decline in the spiritual and physical quality of the race, the difficulty of finance and the mental and social disturbances caused by the war." (2) This however, is only a question of time. In our schools today, or just out of them, is an army of boys and girls ready to take the reins in their fresh, young hands. They are a saner, more attractive generation, without the neurosis, triviality and sarcasm of the War. From this band will come

(1) St. John Ervine--The Organized Theatre, page 96.

(2) " " " " " " 126.

the new impetus. The tendency of the modern drama is toward realism. The putting upon the stage of photographic reproductions of sordid bits of modern life, realistic work, dealing often with the great captains of industry. Some of these are fine and have accomplished considerable good. However, in all this there is a danger of losing the real genius of the theatre,--imagination. Imagination is the highest form in any art.

"The aim and purpose of the drama is to cultivate the imagination and through this means to bring home to heart and mind the lessons which tend to advance the age and race. Imagination is one of the most potent factors of human progress. It stimulates effort, it enlarges the bounds of thought, it creates for the individual new realms of possibility, it clears away the intellectual mists of sordid reality, it harmonizes the seeming divergences in the great scheme of creation, it reconciles by its restful change poor humanity to the wearisome details of life, it brightens, invigorates and freshens the jaded faculties. To the suffering it brings anodyne to pain, for the weary it creates possibilities of rest and repose, to the vigorous it affords a healthy and noble stimulation."⁽¹⁾ Is not this something well

(1) Sir Henry Irving--The Theatre of Today, page 12.

worthwhile, worth fostering and stimulating? Life at its best is so hard, so full of dangers and competition, is so keen that it is hard to retain vision and idealism. Anything which adds beauty and harmony to the scheme of life is priceless.

"The drama of the present period is great in quantity and we have ample reason to believe that much of it is great in quality. At any rate it is unquestionably worthy of serious study; and we enjoy the rare and great advantage of living in the midst of it and being able to watch it come into existence."⁽¹⁾ It is hard to judge anything when we are so close to it. We lack perspective. Then, too, there has been such a great change in the outlook of the dramatic field. This is the first time in history that the drama has been international in character, and when the drama has flourished in many different countries at the same time. For the first time an interchange of plays between the different countries has been possible. For the first time the drama has been standardized, the form and physical equipment being much the same in the different countries. This internationalization was illustrated in the visit of the late Eleanor Duse to America when she presented "Ghosts", a play written by a Norwegian, who by preference lived in Germany, and trans-

(1) Clayton Hamilton--Contemporary Drama, page 51.

lated into the Italian language and acted by an Italian company before an audience of English speaking people.

A much broader appeal is demanded of the modern dramatist than was required of Sophocles who wrote merely for the Greek theatre. So it was with Shakespeare and Moliere, they knew just what their audience would be. Today the dramatist writes primarily for his own country, but if he rises to distinction he must meet the test of other nations as well. Many of our American plays are now being acted in several European languages, and we know how many European plays are produced in this country.

There is much in the theatre of today to decry, much to cause thought. It is easy to sit back and condemn, closing our eyes to the good, and to the great possibilities for good, which exist. It is easy to put the blame for existing conditions upon the dramatists and the producers. Do we not overlook our own responsibility? The manager is serving the public. He has his eye on the public taste and tries to give it the plays that will bring the money into the box office. He will give you what you demand. You can force him to give you the best. Much of the future of the theatre is in the hands of the public backed up by the newspapers and magazines. Condemn those things that are put into the

theatre by the mere money makers and seekers for notoriety. Condemn them not only in words but by refusing to support them.

"Do you ever consider when you say 'I wonder why so and so doesn't do so and so', that it is because when you have a holiday, you pay your money, and to gratify your wish to have a good time, you cast off your mind, and let your physical senses merely enjoy the inane, inapt 'show'; show, that abominable word has been coined the last decade, and which is used to designate anything from a 'leg show' to the symbolic, exquisite, 'Blue Bird' of Maeterlinck."⁽¹⁾

The history of civilization shows that the drama has its place in human life and its mission in the evolution of social life, and it rests with you to see that it attains that high position of permanent and genuine value to the human race of which it is capable.

(1) Faversham--The Theatre as a Power.

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