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FASHIONS IN HISSING

THEATRE-GOERS nowadays, at least in English and American theatres, are an undemonstrative lot. They are, indeed, sedately handicapped by allowing themselves only a positive means of expression, within which they must form all degrees of approval, disapproval, or indifference. That is, they make known their opinions of the play only by applause or the lack of it, so that the actor is aware of audience-responses chiefly in the volume of clapping. Many lovers of the drama believe that the negative audience-response, the hiss, should be revived, as well as the more vocal forms of pleasure, such as are still common at presentations of music.

The hiss has fallen into disrepute, except under special conditions and in such primitive communities as college towns. The special conditions might be the showing of a newsreel picture of Hitler to a Brooklyn audience or a flash of Mussolini in Harlem. The prerogative of college students to howl and whistle and make certain familiar derisive noises during moving pictures or vaudeville performances of which they disapprove is an old one. Saturday night at the theatres in almost any college town small enough to be dominated by students is likely to see barbarous exhibitions. A curious qualification may be noted here. Students have a tacit, materialistic respect for theatrical performances based on the price of tickets. They do not, in the main, express themselves in any but the conventional way at shows which cost more than a dollar. Under that price, however, all stage and screen productions are fair game for them.

The psychological soundness of this last point was tested a few years ago at Cornell University. During one season the baseball

team made an unusually poor showing, and student spectators began to hiss the erring players. As the season advanced, the playing became worse, and the hissing increased. The manager, deeply troubled, wondered what he could do to put a stop to the noises from the bleachers, which made his team steadily more clumsy. Finally, he solved the problem very neatly: he raised the price of admission. After that time, and not, as it might be supposed, because the attendance noticeably diminished, the hissing completely ceased. The reasoning involved, doubtless, is that one is not ordinarily willing to disparage that for which he has smartly paid. In other words, a man good-naturedly leads the teasing of himself when he buys a box of candy or a cigar that turns out to be bad, but if he is cheated in his purchase of a house or an automobile, he conceals the fact from everybody, even from himself, if he can.

Perhaps the high scale of ticket-prices has had something to do with the absence of hissing in our more respectable theatres. People have probably felt that the show for which they were willing to pay seven dollars (and seventy cents more, these days!) must be good, and if by any overt manifestations they made it known that they thought it bad, they might be admitting original bad taste or gullibility. Whatever the reason, hissing in theatres is today considered vulgar, and the result has been that a very important means of communication has been given over almost entirely to audiences on amateur nights at burlesque shows and to hecklers at political meetings.

The honorable antiquity of the hiss is beyond question. In China, which disputes with India the claim of being the mother-country of dramatic art, the hiss has been significant in the theatre since 2000 B. C. Glen Hughes, in his *Story of the Theatre*,

explaining that the Chinese actor has always had to "look to the temper of his audience," comments with regret on the disappearance from Western theatres of "the right of the spectator to express himself freely in regard to the actor or the play at the very moment his emotion is aroused. . . . Although a modern sense of decorum has prohibited this natural display of feeling in our own theater, there are persons who believe that artistic standards have been lowered by the banishment of the hiss."

Æschylus, acting in one of his own plays, made reference to the goddess Demeter. The audience, with all the fury that a group of modern Shriners might show if they suspected some fellow-member of revealing the dread secrets of their initiation, were afraid that the dramatist was making known the inviolable mysteries of their religion, and arose in murderous wrath. Hisses were accompanied by stones, which drove the poor actor from the stage and forced him to take sanctuary at the altar of Dionysus. Later he was tried before the Areopagus and acquitted after a plea that he did not know that what he had said was secret.

Shakespeare bears ample witness that in his time the audiences were completely candid about their opinions. In *Julius Cæsar* Casca says to Brutus, speaking of Cæsar, "If the tag-rag people did not clap him and hiss him, according as he pleased and displeased them, as they use to do the players in the theatre, I am no true man." At the end of *Love's Labor Lost*, one of the men planning a royal entertainment, in which is to be represented the infant Hercules strangling a serpent, says, "An excellent device! so, if any of the audience hiss, you may cry, 'Well done, Hercules! now thou crushest the snake!' That is the way to make an offence gracious." Mrs. Page, rehearsing with Mrs. Ford a scene with Falstaff in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, says, "If I do not act it, hiss me."

The respectable place of hissing in the theatre was not doubted until the false niceties of recent civilization thrust it forth. Even the grave Milton accepted it as the established sign of public displeasure, though he and his fellow-Puritans had agreed to the closing of the theatres. In *Paradise Lost* he tells how Satan, after an address to his hosts,

stood, expecting
Their universal shout and high applause
To fill his ear, when contrary he hears
On all sides, from innumerable tongues,
A dismal universal hiss, the sound
Of public scorn.

During the very formal period of what is called "The Age of Reason," noted for its punctilious manners, Addison described the playhouses in which "thundering claps and dreadful hissings rise." Both Goldsmith and Lamb are said to have hissed their own plays when they saw them on the stage.

On the opening night of Racine's *Phédre* in Paris, his enemies packed the house with an anti-claque which cat-called and hissed the fine play from the stage. At the same time these enemies hired an inferior dramatist to write a play on the same theme, and on its opening night raised the roof with applause. Today, of course, *Phédre* is still known and admired. The rival play, though tumultuously praised by the critics over Racine's work, is mentioned today only in erudite footnotes.

Within our own time is the example of Pirandello's cryptic *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. It is said that on the opening night of this play, between the hearty, though defensive applause of Pirandello's friends and the boos and hisses of those who thought the play an unintelligible fraud, the actors could not make themselves heard. For more sentimental, pious reasons, the plays of contemporary Irish dramatists have occasionally been hissed from the boards by emotional Dubliners. Among these are Yeats's *Land of Heart's*

Desire, in which some business with a crucifix was disapproved of, and Sean O'Casey's *The Shadow of a Gunman*, in which extreme unction was granted on the floor of a pub.

For the restoration of that one important means by which spectators at a theater may

Cleanse the stuff'd bosom of that perilous stuff
Which weighs upon the heart,

especially when the perilous stuff is a fierce disgust or disappointment, then, there is much authoritative argument. Even against the inexorable march of pictures on a silver screen, hisses, if the manager of the theater can be made to hear them, may be of avail in improving the quality of the programs. Certainly, judicious hissing by intelligent audiences will tell even more quickly than gradually diminishing box-office receipts whether the playing or the play is disliked. Some form of direction is necessary, of course, in a time when theatre-goers think that hissing is applicable only against Simon Legree or the lecherous villain who forecloses the mortgage on Nell's father's farm, or that it is a coarse practice remotely related to bronx-cheering, properly confined to vulgar entertainment. If only the serious lovers of the drama would gently revive this fine, venerable indication of distaste, boredom, and comment on the in-artistic and unskilful, there is reason to believe that improvement in the theatre would follow. It is certainly worth trying.

ARGUS TRESIDDER

A NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM FOR VIRGINIA

WHEN asked to make a talk to science teachers I felt rather bewildered and at a loss. You see, I haven't worked in a museum which had a really active science department since 1928, when I spent the summer in the

A talk before the science section of the Virginia Education Association, Richmond, November 29, 1935.

Highlands Museum in North Carolina, catching snakes. We kept our snakes alive—and what with providing live food for them, and catching the snakes when periodically they escaped, we had a very active department.

Since my particular job is in a museum, I think I'm expected to talk to you about museums. I should like to talk about science museums in Virginia, but since there aren't any except those in the colleges—which confine their activities to the colleges—I can't. Of course, I could talk about my own museum, but it isn't (except in one department) a science museum, and besides I understand that you aren't prepared to stay all day listening to me.

So I will remind you of the remark made by a lady who used to live here, when she was cautioned by a member of her family to hold down her lively stories—"How can you have interesting conversation," she said, "if you stick to facts?"

So I shall abandon facts, and talk about something that is non-existent, namely: the ideal science museum for the State of Virginia.

I am taking it for granted that you are with me in thinking that a science museum in each community is as much a necessity to education, to balanced living, and to enjoyment of the world and nature as a good library is a necessity for free thinking. I am sure we all believe with the founders of the first museum in this country that:

"many Advantages and great Credit would result to this Province, from a full and accurate Natural History of the same."

Their idea of a full and accurate Natural History is so quaintly worded that I should like to give you all of it, just as it was written way back in 1773:

"The Society wishes every gentleman who wishes well to the undertaking to procure and send to them all the Natural Productions, either Animal, Vegetable, or Mineral that can be had in