

# THE VIRGINIA TEACHER

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## SOME NOTES ON THE STATE OF THE DRAMA

WITHIN the last ten or fifteen years there has been a profound change in the connotation of the word drama in this country. I do not refer merely to the influences of stage design nor to the extravagance of the recurrent periods of prosperity nor to the growth of little theatres and professional repertory groups nor even to the effect of the talking pictures. Most of these things are the products of inevitable evolution. I am thinking about the changes in our entire social structure which have rearranged many of our artistic standards.

Alexander Meikeljohn, in his recent *What Does America Mean*, deplors the fact that "our current institutions, our current beliefs, our current practices, fail to give recognition to old ideals which are still the essential and fundamental cravings of the American spirit." He thinks that much of the muddle in which we find ourselves is the result of spiritual confusion due to our denial of ideals in which we still really believe. He says, for example, that our legal, political, and social organizations deny the principles of equality which deep within us we still uphold.

However accurate an analysis of contemporary social philosophy this idea may be, I feel that it does not at all explain the Babel of the arts. Indeed, I believe that the present snarl of opinions about the state of the theatre, about modern music and modern art and modern poetry, has been directly the outgrowth of changes that appear to be the reverse of those Dr. Meikeljohn discusses. That is to say, we are more than ever before applying the principle of equal-

ity in the arts, whatever may be true of our politics.

It is futile to argue that any social group, however liberally guided, has ever had any considerable measure of equality within the group. Our democratic form of government has assumed that all men are created equal and then gone on more or less vaguely towards the eventual socialism which will be conducted under the logical assurance that of course men are not created equal. Yet in government and business, in this country, the old theory of equality functioned for a long time and, in some measure, is still functioning. Men could be elected to Congress and make fortunes in drygoods or oilwells on the strength of personal enterprise alone, whether honest or dishonest. Only in cultural things men were not considered equal. The builders of democracy and the captains and lieutenants and privates of industry, in the main, left the cultivation of the arts to the comparatively few people who by education and instinct could be expected to understand and appreciate them. These few formed a strict aristocracy, with centers in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia. Within it there was no question of equality.

To be sure, there were fine actors touring the country with more or less mediocre supporting companies; there were concerts; there were Browning clubs; there were art galleries. Presumably art was open to all comers. Those who aspired towards culture had only to read Ruskin and Matthew Arnold and Walter Pater, or join a literary society, either in or out of college, or acquire a taste for Shakespeare, or subscribe for the more expensive lyceum programs. Nevertheless, the mass of the people making up the middle class for which a country

is supposed to be run under democracy remained happily unaware of the best that has been thought and said and sung and played and painted in the world. Some of them went to see Booth and Jefferson; some of them bought prints of "The Madonna della Sedia"; some of them sent blue plush-covered volumes of Tennyson and William Cullen Bryant as Christmas presents; some of them became familiar with the "Moonlight" Sonata and "Die Lorelei" through their daughters' music lessons. But in general no one expected to share with all his fellows a college education, the acquiring of cultivated taste in literature and music, or a voice in selecting the nation's poets and painters and musicians; the exponents of universal equality were satisfied with life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Today, however, conditions have changed. The middle class, gradually losing its grasp on economic and political equality, is catching up in artistic equality. Never before have so many people (in this country) participated in the progress of the arts. Almost unrestricted opportunities for college education, the tremendous importance of the radio, the maturing of the movies, governmental stimulation of impecunious artists, the popularization of symphony concerts, science, and galleries, and the new pseudo-literacy of discussion groups, book clubs, and lecture series—have all led to a sort of democracy of culture. As a result, the general public knows and values actors like Charles Laughton, Leslie Howard, and Helen Hayes; it selects Sibelius as the greatest living composer, not Irving Berlin; it begins to know the great arias and to recognize Tchaikowsky and Gilbert and Sullivan; it has heard of Thomas Benton and Grant Wood, and though it selects innocuous sea-scapes as its favorite new paintings and continues to decorate its homes with poster paintings, it has been exposed to El Greco and van Gogh and Renoir; it reads quite a good deal, even though

chiefly under pressure of popular reviewers; it has increasing opportunities to see good plays done by competent amateur actors. In short, there is a kind of revolution in popular taste.

The professional theatre has been shaken to its foundation by these changes, even though the effects are still not very apparent. Broadway after its bath of depression fire seems very much the same place it was in 1928. There is little chastening of producers who speculate in vulgarity, pretentiousness, and triviality. The bulk of current productions, about seventy per cent of which are failures, is still made up of frothy, bawdy, or hackneyed plays like *Strip Act*, *The Night of January 16*, *Fresh Fields*, and *One Good Year*. The Pulitzer prize continues to be awarded to mediocre plays like *Alison's House*, *Both Your Houses*, *Men in White*, and *The Old Maid*, though this year's choice of Sherwood's *Idiot's Delight* seems to be an intelligent one. But there is a difference.

In the first place, the theatre is being hard pressed by the movies. Some critics even venture to declare that eventually the professional stage will be overwhelmed. For a time, indeed, during the lean years, when the precincts sacred to Melpomene and Thalia were deserted, the altar fires extinguished, it looked as if the overwhelming had already taken place. During that same period, the moving picture industry did not noticeably suffer. Then came revival, and the altar fires were relighted. Still Hollywood threatened. Broadway's practical monopoly of American drama (ignoring for the moment the growing importance of the little theatre) is too limited. The movies can show a first-rate picture like *The Informer* or *The Thirty-Nine Steps* or *Mutiny on the Bounty* or *Romeo and Juliet*, with acting and direction far better than that of most Times Square productions, all over the country at the same time. The New York theatre actually reaches a very

few people, and most of those from within two or three hundred miles of the metropolitan district. It begins to look as if our professional theatre were a mere local manifestation, subordinate to the national institution of the talking pictures. The condition becomes increasingly serious when we realize that today between fifty and seventy-five per cent of current Broadway plays are backed by moving-picture money, including such important productions as *Winterset*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Ethan Frome*.

Elmer Rice, perpetual stormy petrel of American playwrights, in an article written last season, explaining the aims of the new WPA drama project, holds out little hope for the drama as it has been permitted to develop in this country. "Almost every playwright and actor of my acquaintance who is seriously interested in the art of the theatre," he says, "views the present situation with despair. It has become more and more apparent each year that the theatre as an art cannot be self-supporting. In fact, strictly speaking, it is no longer self-supporting as an individual enterprise. Trustification is rapidly taking place in the theatre, as in every other form of business or industry. The independent manager has practically ceased to exist. In other words, the theatre is rapidly becoming an adjunct of Hollywood." He goes on to declare that for the theatre there are only two possible alternatives: either to become "a relatively unimportant subsidiary of a gigantic industry," or to accept governmental subsidy and, without economic pressure, "serve the needs of the community and . . . play a part of some importance in the cultural life of the nation."

How much effect the ambitious plans of the Federal Theatre Project will have on American drama it is of course impossible to tell at this time. It has already stirred up violent controversy over its "Leftist" tendency. But it cannot fail to set in motion

some tumultuous waves that will crash against the seemingly crumbling headlands of the professional theatre. The project includes such widespread dramatic activities as "The Living Newspaper," "The Popular Price Theatre," "The Experimental Theatre," "The Negro Theatre," and "The Try-out Theatre," with many ramifying small producing units such as a "Children's Theatre," a "One-Act Play Unit," a "Classical Repertory Unit," a "Poetic Drama Unit," and so forth. Its production of T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* has earned serious and deserved attention.

In the second place, there is a general feeling that the drama as represented by Broadway no longer significantly holds the mirror up to nature (if it ever did!), that in spite of the activities of the very earnest young sociologists and radicals, the professional theatre tends to ignore vital dramatic experimentation, especially in the direction of truly indigenous drama. Archibald MacLeish, for example, writing in the February issue of *Stage*, declares that the writers today refuse to describe in terms of the theatre the most important aspect of the period, Industrialism. "The playwrights of an industrial civilization in an age of industrial crisis," he says, speaking from an imagined future, "failed to present the industrial scene because they were incapable of presenting it. They did not know enough."

Other critics complain of the rapacity of producers, of the superficiality of our conception of the drama, of acting and directing, as well as playwrighting. Elmer Rice last year took leave of Broadway in bitterness and contempt. Joseph Vernor Reed, idealistic young producer, had found out somewhat earlier that he could not cope with the venality of Broadway. In his "Apologia of a Producer" (*Theatre Arts Monthly*, February, 1934), he speaks of the theatre's "manifold chicaneries, its union outrages, its chiseling gyps, its insuperable

confusions and its self-destroying financial problems." More recently, another disgruntled former producer, Samuel Barron, writing in *Harpers Magazine* (December, 1935), calls it "The Dying Theatre." He says, "The drama in the form in which we best know it—the theatre—is dying because within that form no further growth is possible. Drama is making greater demands on the theatre than the theatre is able to satisfy." Barron believes that the future of the drama is in the more flexible medium of the cinema.

These are problems of the theatre, rather than indices of change. But their concentration during the past few years suggests the stirring of something like revolution within. It would be easy to answer some of the most obvious lamentations, saying that the theatre has always been the object of contemporary critical despair and that, as Allardyce Nicoll rebutted Reed's "Apologia," a stage art has flourished even though the theatre has always been a commercial institution. Nicoll, whose scholarly opinions about the theatre carry much weight, has sincere faith that "New York will always provide theatrical ground most fertile and most precious, and that from the commercial theatre will be raised the standards to be employed as touchstones for the appraisal and appreciation of all stage enterprise." (*Theatre Arts Monthly*, March, 1934). There is comfort in Brooks Atkinson's spirited reply to Mr. Barron's strictures on the theatre: "The Theatre is already in reduced circumstances, and is beset by many grave problems, most of them of a business nature. But so long as men like O'Neill, O'Casey, and Maxwell Anderson, poets, and actors like Alfred Lunt, Lynn Fontanne, Katharine Cornell, and Helen Hayes are restless with the desire to scream with rage or sing with rapture, the best of the theatre will not be dying, whatever becomes of the mediocre." (*New York*

*Times*, December 1, 1935). Nevertheless, there are deep rumblings of change.

Perhaps the revolution will be ushered in by the Little Theatre, constantly growing in strength and far-sightedness and artistic honesty. The regional theatre, as represented by such organizations as Koch's group in Chapel Hill, the Pasadena Community Playhouse under Gilmor Brown, Jasper Deeter's Hedgerow Theatre, Frederick McConnell's Cleveland Playhouse, and Alfred Arvold's Little Country Theatre in Fargo, North Dakota, has brought the greatness of drama to more millions of people than the commercial theatre ever dreamed of. Barrett Clark believes that "if we are ever to have a national theatre, something that is neither a museum nor a political football, it must be based on the nucleus of the Non-Professional Theatre." (*New York Times*, October 27, 1935.)

Perhaps the germ of change is in such fine theatrical bodies as The Theatre Guild, The Group Theatre, The Theatre Union, and the Civic Repertory Theatre in New York. Their courageous experimentation, their high-minded production of plays out of the past and out of the present, their earnest desire to make possible in this country theatres like those of Stanislavsky in Moscow and Copeau in Paris make them important factors in the building of a great American theatre.

Perhaps, in spite of fashionable mourning over the sad state of Broadway, a national theatre may grow out of what Edith Isaacs calls "a vital, enterprising, honest, successful business theatre."

These undercurrents of dissatisfaction with contemporary theatrical art, still, as I have said, without appreciable effect on the professional stage as a whole (Gilbert Seldes in the March *Esquire* boasted that Elmer Rice's prophecy of catastrophe in the commercial theatre has been disproved by the fact that *Jumbo* was playing to the tune of fifty or sixty thousand dollars a week!),

is accompanied by the first swells of a formidable surf of artistic rebellion. Playwrights are reaching out for more universal themes. The plays of Maxwell Anderson are illustrations in point: *Valley Forge*, *Mary of Scotland*, *Winterset*. Clifford Odets, in *Awake and Sing* and *Paradise Lost*, has gathered power for future great playwriting. *Peace on Earth, They Shall Not Die*, and *Stevedore* were authentic voices of protest, whatever may be said on both sides of the savagely debated question, "Is propaganda art?" The work of the stage designers, Bel Geddes, Gorelik, Robert Edmond Jones, Jo Mielziner, and Lee Simonson, is certainly not based on merely mercenary considerations. Broadway does not lack first-rate directors such as Guthrie McClintic, Alexander Dean, Lee Strasberg, and Rouben Mamoulian. And there seems to be no doubt even in the minds of the most chronic carpers that acting today is better than it has ever been, that few of the traditionally great companies could compare in all-around effectiveness with the companies of Katharine Cornell, Eva Legallienne, and the Group Theatre. The trouble seems to lie somewhere close to the producers, though it is only fair to them to repeat their forlorn cry, "When we get good plays, we'll produce 'em. But there aren't any good plays."

In any event, something seems to be happening. Whether it is the triumph of Hollywood or the burgeoning of a vast federal theatre or the greater development of the regional theatre or the slow advance of art out of the box-office within the professional theatre itself, no one can tell. Whatever it is, it must have the five qualities that Edith Isaacs in a study of "The Irresistible Theatre; A National Playhouse for America" (*Theatre Arts Monthly*, August, 1934) lists as essential in any living theatre: "It must have an entity, an organism that can be recognized, as you recognize a human being, by certain

traits of character and of physical presence that are marks of personal life. It must have permanence in one or more of its fundamentals. It may be a permanence of place or of leadership . . . , of repertory, of company, or of idea . . . , or of any two of three of these combined; but something it must be that stands firm and rooted, something not too transitory, in that transitory world of the theatre where performances die as they live, each day, as a production is set up, played through, and struck. It must have the power of growth, of progress, both in its permanent and its impermanent factors, because times change and it must change with them so that '*Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.*' It must bear within itself the power of generation, the element of renewal, a force that having flowed out of its own inner strength and integrity, can bring back fresh strength from a newer, younger world. And finally it must have a goal that is essentially a theatre goal."

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### STUDENT TEACHING IN OHIO COLLEGES

RECENTLY the College of Wooster faced the problem of the modification of its arrangements with the public schools in regard to compensation for observation, participation, student teaching, and the method of co-operation between the college and the public schools. In order to get some help in the solution of this problem, it was decided to make inquiry of some twelve other colleges of the state with situations similar to our own. A questionnaire was sent out bearing upon these two phases of teacher training: compensation and co-operation. This investigation yielded results which may be of interest to others.

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