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THE CONTEMPORARY THEATRE

IN approaching this formidable subject, I might have taken one of three possible routes. The first is that of the old-timers, those grave, nostalgic people who shake their heads and say, "The theatre of today can't be compared with the theatre of my day. Then giants walked the earth!" Several of the articles in the January issue of *Stage*, in the special holiday section, "Fifty Years of Fond Recollections," suggest this route. There Clayton Hamilton says, "Mansfield was the last of the titans; and since his death in 1907, we have not looked upon his like again." He goes on:

The theatre as we know it today is a very different institution from the theatre as we knew it in the 1890's. At the present time, the play's the thing and the actor has become subservient to the playwright; but at the close of the last century, the player was more important than the play. The main motive for going to the theatre in the 1890's was to see an actor act, preferably in a play with which everybody had long been familiar; but nowadays the main motive is to see a new and unknown play, cast carefully to type, in which the performers have been earnestly rehearsed to do as little acting as possible.

Mrs. Patrick Campbell, writing about Sarah Bernhardt, pipes the same tune, with even more doleful semi-quavers. "Today," she says, "when Behavior seems to have taken the place of the Art of Acting, those of us who have seen and remember the art of the great ones feel it a duty to cry out

to the artists of the theatre today...." And so on.

Mrs. Campbell, by the way, very seriously quotes a telegram from the great Bernhardt which reminds me of a story told by Daniel Frohman in his chaotic, delightful book of memoirs, *Daniel Frohman Presents*—. The telegram reads, "Doctor will cut off my leg next Monday. Am very happy. Kisses. All my love. Sarah Bernhardt." (I do not mean to mock at Mrs. Campbell's rather arch worship of Bernhardt, but surely that was a very curious message for even the "most resplendent and glorious" Sarah to send!) Frohman tells about the enterprising American who cabled to Mme. Bernhardt after the amputation of her leg, offering \$100,000 (to be given to any charity she chose) if he might exhibit her leg at the Pan-American Exposition in San Francisco. She cabled back only two words: "Which leg?"

The second route might have been that of the world theatre, a study of the contemporary theatre abroad, as well as at home. For the most part, however, such an investigation would almost inevitably have become a discussion of the Russian theatre, which is probably the most vital in the world today. The theatres of England and France and, in the main, of this country, are, as Brooks Atkinson pointed out after returning from Russia, "cluttered up with mediocrity." The Russian theatre, though hampered in the expression of free speech, which Atkinson thinks is the greatest virtue of our theatre, is, according to him, "lively and dynamic and animated by the driving force of a State in the making." The theatre in Germany is, of course, dead, along with the other arts. The Nazi government has driven out all the truly crea-

tive German artists, among them the brilliant Jewish writers and producers who ten years ago were doing tremendous things for the theatre: Toller, Werfel, Kaiser, and Reinhardt; the first three the authors of the famous expressionistic plays, *Masses and Men*, *The Goat Song*, and *From Morn to Midnight*; the last the great director and impresario, whose work we have recently seen in the film, *Midsummer Night's Dream*. Last season he directed the impressive spectacle at the Manhattan Opera House, *The Eternal Road*, which was written by his friend and fellow expatriate, Franz Werfel, author of *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*.

Four years ago I wrote to Max Reinhardt in Germany, thinking that I might like to study under him in the Berlin Grosses Schauspielhaus. His assistant, Herr Adler, answered, discouraging me, hinting at the outrageous conditions of art in Germany. "Alas for my poor country," he ended. Now only a rubber-stamp theatre survives. In it Hitler has added absurdity to tyranny by forbidding all criticism of plays. Reviewers may describe and "meditate upon", but not criticize, the drama.

The Italian theatre is of little greater importance, though Mussolini is lowering box-office prices for the sake of the poor man. The Italian prefers opera in any event, and when he can listen to Verdi he can happily forget that he has no right to call his soul his own. Art does not flourish under fascism.

Elmer Rice, our tempestuous playwright (*The Adding Machine* and *Street Scene*) and ex-director of the Federal Theatre in New York, recently made a survey of the theatre in central Europe and reported some interesting experiments, but chiefly under the influence of Russia. The theatre of Japan is merely imitative, like all her other arts. The splendid, adventurous Irish theatre seems at the moment to be static. Scandinavia alone is quietly productive.

The third approach, and the one I have chosen, is that of a discussion of the con-

temporary American theatre. I shall try to point out its complex organization and to say something about its evils and its goods.

The American theatre begins in Broadway. In spite of all the development of the so-called Regional theatre, New York remains the center of the theatrical profession. There in an average year about a hundred new plays, five to ten musicals, and five to eight revues are produced. A play that runs for a hundred performances is called a success. Only nine of last year's eighty-three plays were successes; seventy-four were failures, 89% of the total. The average run of all the plays was only 48.2 performances. During the seasons before the depression, the average number of simultaneous shows was from fifty to sixty. On Broadway during a typical week last season there were twenty-nine shows: of these four were musicals, two were revivals, four were plays left over from the preceding season and the perennial *Tobacco Road*, eight were insignificant comedies. Of the remaining eleven, four were comedies, one a Shakespearean play, one a social drama, and five serious plays. Besides the individual producers of these plays there were several producing groups, notably the Theatre Guild and the Group Theatre.

Road shows are once more going out to tour the country. During the lean years, traveling shows almost disappeared. Eva LeGallienne and Katharine Cornell, however, touring in repertory, showed that the country was once more ready for the legitimate drama, and now there are several shows on the road. The old stock company, unfortunately, seems to have applied its last grease paint and made its last bow. According to the last available report there is not a single stock company left alive at this time. It has succumbed to the flank attacks of the movies and the little theatre.

The non-professional or regional theatre is a very flourishing part of the American theatre. It springs up everywhere, in schools and colleges, in churches, in civic

groups. A recent report says that there are more than 2000 amateur groups in this country, with more than 50,000 annual performances. That is, every day in the year 137 amateur plays are being presented somewhere. These non-professional theatres may be training groups for actors, designers, and directors, who later go into the commercial theatre; or they may be an end in themselves, satisfying a community's need for dramatic activity. Among the greatest of these regional theatres are the Cleveland Playhouse, the Pasadena Community Playhouse, the Yale University Theatre, the University of Iowa Theatre, the Carolina Playmakers Theatre, and the Cornell University Theatre. Jasper Deeter's repertory group, the Hedgerow Theatre, though professional in purpose, may be mentioned in this division of the theatre.

The Federal Theatre is acquiring stature in the many-sided organization of the American theatre. Established less than two years ago as a relief project, under the direction of Hallie Flanagan of Vassar, it has not only employed many theatre people who would otherwise be out of work, but has brought the living drama at a very low cost to millions who had never seen plays before. The Federal Theatre has many ramifications: it includes a Popular Price Theatre, The Living Newspaper, The Experimental Theatre, The Negro Theatre, and the Try-out Theatre, with special divisions for a Puppet Theatre, a Poetic Theatre, a Children's Theatre, etc. Its work is distributed throughout the country.

No description of the American theatre is complete without mention of the moving pictures, which have not only taken over almost the entire function of supplying cheap entertainment, but have seduced actors, writers, designers, and directors from the legitimate theatre. They have added insult to injury by furnishing the money for from fifty to seventy-five per cent of cur-

rent Broadway plays, using Broadway as a try-out place for future movies.

So much for the organization. Now for the evils of the American theatre. In the first place, the professional theatre tends to be venal. This is no new complaint. It goes back to the theatre of Aeschylus. Nevertheless, there is little use denying the fact that Broadway is interested in making money, not in advancing art, except, perhaps, incidentally. Most current shows are sheer speculative enterprises. Of the twenty-nine productions on Broadway at the height of last season, only about eight were worth seeing; one of these was a Hampden revival of Ibsen, another was Shakespeare's *Richard II*, three others were by Maxwell Anderson, two were carried over from the preceding year, and one was the Pulitzer prize winner, *You Can't Take It With You*.

The Broadway theatre is highly competitive. Rents are enormous. Production costs are great. A musical show costs from \$100,000 upwards; a play costs from \$15,000 to \$75,000 or more. No wonder producers take chances only on plays of obvious popular appeal, however superficial. Fine plays, apparently, don't pay. In the *New York Times* for Sunday, February 21, 1937, the Board of Managers of The Theatre Guild regret that some of the greatest plays written in this generation, some of them now regarded as important steps in the development of modern drama, were box-office failures. Among these plays were Lawson's *Processional*, Werfel's *The Goat Song*, Kaiser's *From Morn to Midnight*, Philip Barry's *Hotel Universe*, and Maxwell Anderson's *Valley Forge*. In short, our professional theatre is in general reactionary and mercenary. It caters to a brittle, rather vulgar taste. Most of its productions, beautifully dressed, expertly directed and acted, are as empty as gourds. Maxwell Anderson calls them "journalistic social comment." Only rarely does the professional theatre venture into the new

and revolutionary, and then, as the Guild well knows, only to meet apathy. The Group Theatre, another young theatrically creative organization, the offspring of the Guild, discouraged by failures, disbanded early last season.

The regional theatre, though its problems are very different from those of Broadway, is a great, unwieldy thing, still without unified purpose, untidy with amateur ineffectiveness. In many places it is ruined by social overemphasis or by well-intentioned desires to "put on a play and make some money for a new piano." Often it is arty and pretentious; more often it is dull and worthless. Ignorant but aspiring directors, hopelessly bad but enthusiastic actors, and skeptical audiences combine to make most amateur productions, like Vergil's Fama, great monsters, to be shuddered at.

The Federal Theatre, too, has to face many vexing difficulties. From the beginning, it has been snarled in red tape. Elmer Rice, who at first hailed the WPA projects with eagerness, declaring them the theatre's only conceivable means of escape from defeat by the movies, and who accepted the leadership of the New York department, resigned in wrath against the whole federal system of administering the projects. Within the plan itself there has been chaotic organization. Many incompetents were put on the rolls, often shutting out the deserving. The pay was too high and the work was not good enough. According to one of its critics last season, "In its second year the WPA Federal Theatre is not only unable to absorb new talent; it is now faced with the task of indiscriminately discharging many of its members—the competent and the incompetent alike." Again, though this is hardly a compelling criticism, Broadway, arbiter of American theatrical art, calmly ignores the Federal Theatre. Brock Pemberton, writing about the events of the theatre during the season of 1935-6, mentions the Federal Theatre

only disdainfully. The critics, who have been occasionally sympathetic, have said hard things. Brooks Atkinson, writing about *It Can't Happen Here*, says, "Like most Federal Theatre productions, the Sinclair Lewis and John C. Moffitt stage version of *It Can't Happen Here* is not well done; it is careless, slipshod theatre work, according to Broadway standards."

Well, these are grave imperfections. In the American theatre, it seems, creative art is lacking. Producers say that the reason is the lack of good plays. Playwrights claim that producers are philistines and that audiences lack imagination. Audiences say that they want to be amused, that life is hard and serious enough and that they don't want to be harrowed by social problems and confused by radical experiments in art in the theatre. They'd rather go to the movies. And to the movies they go, where their sense of realism is gently stimulated, and their love of glamorous stars satisfied. As important a worker in the theatre as Allardyce Nicoll, head of the Department of Drama at Yale, in his recent book, *Film and Theatre*, has made such sweeping predictions about the encroachment of the cinema upon the stage that lovers of the theatre have been appalled. He allows to the theatre only the drama of imagination, poetry, universal thought, and "the glory of words." The movies, he believes, will take over all naturalistic plays. The theatre will be a minor institution, patronized only by the fit though few.

Yet there are answers to all these questions. Broadway, for all its venality, is not unaware that in the final analysis only good things are successful in the theatre. As Nicoll says in *Theatre Arts Monthly*, in answer to a disgruntled producer, who was quitting because of the theatre's "manifold chicaneries, its union outrages, its chiseling gyps, its insuperable confusions and its self-destructing financial problems," all the theatres of the past in which great art has developed have also been commercial.

Last season saw some admirable productions; two fine *Hamlets*, that of John Gielgud having a longer consecutive run than any *Hamlet* ever presented, Maurice Evans's *Richard II*, Walter Huston's *Othello*, Helen Hayes's *Victoria Regina*, Max Reinhardt's *The Eternal Road*, Kingsley's *Dead End*, not to mention such expert comedies as Kaufman and Hart's *You Can't Take It With You* and Clare Booth's *The Women*. The Theatre Guild's excellent productions of Maxwell Anderson's three plays, *The Wingless Victory*, *High Tor*, and *The Masque of Kings*, gave Broadway three simultaneous modern plays in verse. The Theatre Union, trying courageously to stay alive while candidly examining social problems for proletarian audiences, sincerely and compellingly produced Lawson's *Marching Song*. The Group Theatre's failing play, *Johnny Johnson*, in the words of *Stage's* reviewer, was "a valiant effort with words and music, satire and symbolism, to say something important about the stupidity of war." The Theatre Union has now disbanded, but the Group Theatre, after a temporary retirement to Hollywood, is again opening shop.

Eva Le Gallienne, Helen Hayes, and Katharine Cornell (whose *St. Joan* of two years ago was one of the great performances of this century) are actresses of first rank; all of them are doing important things, as are the Lunts, Ruth Gordon, Burgess Meredith, and others. Now writing for the theatre are men like O'Neill, Anderson, Paul Green, S. N. Behrman, and Sidney Howard. The contributions to the development of the physical theatre of our scene designers, Mielziner, Jones, Oenslager, Bel-Geddes, and Simonson, are of great beauty and artistic value. In many cases, their designs have been of greater significance than the plays they adorned. Indeed, for a time, it looked as if we might be beginning another eighteenth century of overstress on the stage-settings, in the absence of great plays.

The regional theatre, whatever its drawbacks, is unmistakably vital. Out of the theatres of E. C. Mabie in Iowa, Gilmore Brown in California, Frederick McConnell in Ohio, Frederick Koch in North Carolina, and many others are coming, as Barrett Clark says, "fairly large numbers of young people with better background, more taste and knowledge of what it's all about than we have ever before had in this country." The regional theatre is giving playwrights whom the commercial theatre might ignore as financially unproductive a chance to be heard. Such plays as O'Neill's *Lazarus Laughed*, Paul Green's *Tread the Green Grass* and *Shroud My Body Down*, Owen Davis's *The Harbor Light*, Dan Totheroh's *Moor Born*, Anderson's *The Seawife*, and Elmer Rice's *Not for Children*, had their first and in most cases the only production in the non-professional theatre. Here too the great plays of the past are receiving intelligent and artistic attention. Where Broadway is pleased with having four Shakespearean productions in one season, the regional theatre can boast of many more in any month, along with plays by Congreve, Molière, Ibsen, Chekhov, Synge, Shaw, and others out of the past and the present.

In their magnificent plants, too, some of the regional theatres are taking the lead, easily surpassing the professional theatres. The great theatre buildings at the University of Iowa and the Pasadena Community Playhouse are models of good architecture and superb equipment.

Barrett Clark says, "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."

The Federal Theatre has overcome many obstacles to do some remarkable things. Last summer, as I watched thousands of people in New York's Washington Square surrounding a wagon, the direct descendant of the old guild wagons of the pre-Renais-

sance period in England, I was struck by the eager attention that they gave to the play that was being presented. During the summer nearly two million people saw the outdoor shows, 77% of whom were witnessing their first legitimate productions. In New York alone, according to Philip Barber, local director for the Federal Theatre, the WPA attracts a minimum weekly average of 100,000 people, paying a top price of fifty-five cents. Five thousand New York actors were given work. Representative of the best of WPA work are the productions of T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*, which successfully competed with Broadway shows on their own ground, the all-negro *Macbeth*, The Living Newspaper's *Triple-A Plowed Under*, and Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus*, which received high praise even from the haughty Broadway critics. Lewis's *It Can't Happen Here*, which may be dramatically disappointing, but which is certainly effective as a thought-provoking, timely document, had twenty-one simultaneous productions in various parts of the country.

Out of the Federal Theatre may even grow a true National Theatre. Eva Le Gallienne, for one, has gone on record as believing that the WPA theatre can be the basis for a great American repertory theatre, devoted to the living drama. She envisions a system of producing units of the highest type, divorced from politics, administered by the finest artists, under the central direction of a Secretary of Fine Arts. What we need in this country, which so far as art is concerned, "is already steeped in mediocrity," she says, is a standard of excellence by which to judge. A national theatre would provide such a standard.

Plans for a National Theatre, growing out of the professional theatre, have already been laid. Arthur Hopkins, in a recent article in the *New York Times*, sketches in some of the ideals of this "American National Theatre and Academy," to which

Congress has granted a federal charter. Among the directors of this ambitious project are A. Conger Goodyear, Edith J. R. Isaacs, J. Howard Reber, Mrs. August Belmont, and Winthrop Ames. The theatre people actively interested include Katharine Cornell, Lynn Fontanne, Alfred Lunt, Otis Skinner, Maxwell Anderson, Sidney Howard, Robert Sherwood, Guthrie McClintic, Robert Edmond Jones, J. Mielziner, Lee Simonson, and Frank Gillmore—certainly a brilliant group.

The plans, which Mr. Hopkins admits are still nebulous, include the erection in many cities of properly designed and equipped theatre buildings, which will be the nuclei of cultural centers, identified "with the cultural rather than the commercial life of the community." These theatres will all have stages of identical design, dimensions, and equipment. A typical building of this sort will be constructed for the World's Fair in 1939. Communities desiring to begin sooner, however, need not wait for the fair. The designs and data will be ready this year.

Professional groups doing special types of plays will be fostered. Cycles of the best Broadway productions may be organized. "It is not the intention of the National Theatre to produce plays or operate theatres, but at all times it can and should foster productions and theatre building," Mr. Hopkins says.

To those who still feel that the theatre has been overwhelmed by the cinema or that it is an anemic survival out of a great past, unable to meet the demands of changing civilization, there is irrefutable answer in the words of Miss Le Gallienne:

It is more fun to see a thing one's self *for the first time*, for every living performance in the theatre happens for the first time, with all the scope of the unexpected, the unknown, the not-planned, that living creatures bring to anything they touch, something in which you share to an immense degree;

your eagerness summoning corresponding eagerness in the artist involved, your generosity compelling a richness of giving, your enthusiasm challenging to greater effort and achievement; the entire process of human to human, living, breathing, feeling, becoming a kind of communion of thought and understanding, a mutual illumination of the world that we all know and live and struggle against and accept, the whole creating an almost mystical bond—*that* is the living theatre.

Maxwell Anderson, too, writing a "Prelude to Dramatic Poetry," in which he predicts that this materialistic generation, this "age of reason," will be followed once more by "an age of faith in things unseen," says, "It is incumbent on the dramatist to be a poet, and incumbent on the poet to be a prophet, dreamer and interpreter of the racial dream."

Ernest Toller, the distinguished German dramatist, adds his word:

The American Theatre is today, besides the Russian, the most powerful in the world. You have a host of gifted writers, actors and producers. You have the courage to face reality and to deal with the problems and conflicts of time and age.

I do not know of any other country in Western Europe where social plays are produced and appreciated by hundreds of thousands of men. I am convinced that all these theatres, groups and Federal stages, in which the feeling of community is alive, will lay the ground for an American National Theatre, a real people's theatre, which is devoted to the cultural development of this great country.

The whole problem has been admirably summed up in a short poem by Eunice Tietjens:

The theatre?

The theatre's a mess!

A jungle of true and false, a regal stew,
A world of jumbled incoherence.

There
Selfless devotion still may find success,
But exhibitionism is the shorter way.
There genius may be rooted like the yew
In the deep past, to raise her leafy crown;
Or some cheap-jack may catch the fickle town
To shake its pockets loose for twice the pay.
There legs are assets, while they last, no less
Than clanging eloquence; there charm is gold,
And favor strikes like lightning from the clouds,
To be no more foreshadowed than controlled.
It is the world where Cinderella finds
Her charming prince; and where a prince may
meet
Indifferent doom; a sharpener of minds
Whose past is strewn with broken souls and feet.
And there the future, like a beckoning tart,
Shows many men her thighs, but few her heart.

And yet—and yet—

There is no stronger pull,
Not even in the sea, than in this rout,
This mad world of the theatre, so full
Of ecstasy and pain! For over all
Out of the filth the lily of beauty beckons,
And truth stabs like a beacon through the pall,
Till he who sees their shining little reckons
What may befall him as he strives to serve them—
If for one golden moment he deserve them.

ARGUS J. TRESIDDER

HOT LUNCHES FOR A MILLION SCHOOL CHILDREN

ONE million undernourished children have benefited by the Works Progress Administration's school lunch program. In the past year and a half 80,000,000 hot well-balanced meals have been served at the rate of 500,000 daily in 10,000 schools throughout the country.

This work of rehabilitating underprivileged children is supervised in all instances by competent WPA workers, who while earning money with which to clothe and feed their own families, are given an opportunity for wider training to equip them to take their places in private employment when the opportunity arises. On March 31, 1937, the projects employed nearly 12,000 needy economic heads of families.