

RICHARD BURTON

HOW TO SEE A
PLAY

Richard Burton

How to See a Play

«Public Domain»

Burton R.

How to See a Play / R. Burton — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

PREFACE	5
CHAPTER I	6
CHAPTER II	11
CHAPTER III	16
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	19

How to See a Play

PREFACE

THIS book is aimed squarely at the theater-goer. It hopes to offer a concise general treatment upon the use of the theater, so that the person in the seat may get the most for his money; may choose his entertainment wisely, avoid that which is not worth while, and appreciate the values artistic and intellectual of what he is seeing and hearing.

This purpose should be borne in mind, in reading the book, for while I trust the critic and the playwright may find the discussion not without interest and sane in principle, the desire is primarily to put into the hands of the many who attend the playhouse a manual that will prove helpful and, so far as it goes, be an influence toward creating in this country that body of alert theater auditors without which good drama will not flourish. The obligation of the theater-goer to insist on sound plays is one too long overlooked; and just in so far as he does insist in ever-growing numbers upon drama that has technical skill, literary quality and interpretive insight into life, will that better theater come which must be the hope of all who realize the great social and educative powers of the playhouse. The words of that veteran actor-manager and playwright of the past, Colley Cibber, are apposite here: "It is not to the actor therefore, but to the vitiated and low taste of the spectator, that the corruptions of the stage (of what kind soever) have been owing. If the publick, by whom they must live, had spirit enough to discountenance and declare against all the trash and fopperies they have been so frequently fond of, both the actors and the authors, to the best of their power, must naturally have served their daily table with sound and wholesome diet." And again he remarks: "For as their hearers are, so will actors be; worse or better, as the false or true taste applauds or discommends them. Hence only can our theaters improve, or must degenerate." Not for a moment is it implied that this book, or any book of the kind, can make playwrights. Playwrights as well as actors are born, not made – at least, in the sense that seeing life dramatically and having a feeling for situation and climax is a gift and nothing else. The wise Cibber may be heard also upon this. "To excel in either art," he declares, "is a self-born happiness, which something more than good sense must be mother of." But this may be granted, while it is maintained stoutly that there remains to the dramatist a technic to be acquired, and that practice therein and reflection upon it makes perfect. The would-be playwright can learn his trade, even as another, and must, to succeed. And the spectator (our main point of attack, as was said), the necessary coadjutor with player and playwright in theater success, can also become an adept in his part of this coöperative result. This book is written to assist him in such coöperation.

CHAPTER I

THE PLAY, A FORM OF STORY TELLING

THE play is a form of story telling, among several such forms: the short story, or tale; the novel; and in verse, the epic and that abbreviated version of it called the ballad. All of them, each in its own fashion, is trying to do pretty much the same thing, to tell a story. And by story, as the word is used in this book, it will be well to say that I mean such a manipulation of human happenings as to give a sense of unity and growth to a definite end. A story implies a connection of characters and events so as to suggest a rounding out and completion, which, looked back upon, shall satisfy man's desire to discover some meaning and significance in what is called Life. A child begging at the mother's knee for "the end of the story," before bedtime, really represents the race; the instinct behind the request is a sound one. A story, then, has a beginning, middle and end, and in the right hands is seen to have proportion, organic cohesion and development. Its parts dovetail, and what at first appeared to lack direction and connective significance finally is seen to possess that wholeness which makes it a work of art. A story, therefore, is not a chance medley of incidents and characters; but an artistic texture so woven as to quicken our feeling that a universe which often seems disordered and chance-wise is in reality ordered and pre-arranged. Art in its story-making does this service for life, even if life does not do it for us. And herein lies one of the differences between art and life; art, as it were, going life one better in this rearrangement of material.

Of the various ways referred to of telling a story, the play has its distinctive method and characteristics, to separate it from the others. The story is told on a stage, through the impersonation of character by human beings; in word and action, assisted by scenery, the story is unfolded. The drama (a term used doubly to mean plays in general or some particular play) is distinguished from the other forms mentioned in substituting dialogue and direct visualized action for the indirect narration of fiction.

A play when printed differs also in certain ways; the persons of the play are named apart from the text; the speakers are indicated by writing their names before the speeches; the action is indicated in parentheses, the name business being given to this supplementary information, the same term that is used on the stage for all that lies outside dialogue and scenery. And the whole play, as a rule, is subdivided into acts and often, especially in earlier drama, into scenes, lesser divisions within the acts; these divisions being used for purposes of better handling of the plot and exigencies of scene shifting, as well as for agreeable breathing spaces for the audience. The word scene, it may be added here, is used in English-speaking lands to indicate a change of scene, whereas in foreign drama it merely refers to the exit or entrance of a character, so that a different number of persons is on the stage.

But there are, of course, deeper, more organic qualities than these external attributes of a play. The stern limits of time in the representation of the stage story – little more than two hours, "the two hours traffic of the stage" mentioned by Shakespeare – necessitates telling the story with emphasis upon its salient points; only the high lights of character and event can be advantageously shown within such limits. Hence the dramatic story, as the adjective has come to show, indicates a story presenting in a terse and telling fashion only the most important and exciting things. To be dramatic is thus to be striking, to produce effects by omission, compression, stress and crescendo. To be sure, recent modern plays can be named in plenty which seem to violate this principle; but they do so at their peril, and in the history of drama nothing is plainer than that the essence of good play-making lies in the power to seize the significant moments of the stage story and so present them as to grip the interest and hold it with increasing tension up to a culminating moment called the climax.

Certain advantages and certain limitations follow from these characteristics of a play. For one thing, the drama is able to focus on the really interesting, exciting, enthralling moments of human

doings, where a novel, for example, which has so much more leisure to accomplish its purpose to give a picture of life, can afford to take its time and becomes slower, and often, as a result, comparatively prolix and indirect. This may not be advisable in a piece of fiction, but it is often found, and masterpieces both of the past and present illustrate the possibility; the work of a Richardson, a Henry James, a Bennett. But for a play this would be simply suicide; for the drama must be more direct, condensed and rapid. And just in proportion as a novel adopts the method of the play do we call it dramatic and does it win a general audience; the story of a Stevenson or a Kipling.

Again, having in mind the advantages of the play, the stage story is both heard and seen, and important results issue from this fact. The play-story is actually seen instead of seen by the eye of the imagination through the appeal of the printed page; or indirectly again, if one hears a narrative recited. And this actual seeing on the stage brings conviction, since "seeing is believing," by the old saw. Scenery, too, necessitates a certain truthfulness in the reproducing of life by word and act and scene, because the spectator, who is able to judge it all by the test of life, will more readily compare the mimic representation with the actuality than if he were reading the words of a character in a book, or being told, narrative fashion, of the character's action. In this way the stage story seems nearer life.

Moreover, the seeing is fortified by hearing; the spectator is also the auditor. And here is another test of reality. If the intonation or accent or tone of voice of the actor is not life-like and in consonance with the character portrayed, the audience will instantly be quicker to detect it and to criticize than if the same character were shown in fiction; seeing, the spectator insists that dress and carriage, and scenery, which furnishes a congruous background, shall be plausible; and hearing, the auditor insists upon the speech being true to type.

The play has an immense superiority also over all printed literature in that, making its appeal directly through eye and ear, it is not literary at all; I mean, the story in this form can be understood and enjoyed by countless who read but little or even cannot read. Literature, in the conventional sense, may be a closed book to innumerable theater-goers who nevertheless can witness a drama and react to its exhibition of life. The word, which in printed letters is so all-important, on the stage becomes secondary to action and scene, for the story can be, and sometimes is, enacted in pantomime, without a single word being spoken. In essence, therefore, a play may be called unliterary, and thus it makes a wider, more democratic appeal than anything in print can. Yet, by an interesting paradox, when the words of the play are written by masters like Calderón, Shakespeare, Molière or Ibsen, the drama becomes the chief literary glory of Spain, England, France and Norway. For in the final reckoning only the language that is fit and fine preserves the drama of the world in books and classifies it with creative literature. Thus the play can be all things to all men; at once unliterary in its appeal, and yet, in the finest examples, an important contribution to letters.

A peculiar advantage of the play over the other story-telling forms is found in the fact that while one reads the printed story, short or long, the epic or ballad, by oneself in the quiet enjoyment of the library, one witnesses the drama in company with many other human beings – unless the play be a dire failure and the house empty. And this association, though it may remove some of the more refined and aristocratic experiences of the reader, has a definite effect upon individual pleasure in the way of enrichment, and even reacts upon the play itself to shape its nature. A curious sort of sympathy is set up throughout an audience as it receives the skillful story of the playwright; common or crowd emotions are aroused, personal variations are submerged in a general associative feeling and the individual does not so much laugh, cry and wonder by himself as do these things sympathetically in conjunction with others. He becomes a simpler, less complex person whose emotions dominate the analytic processes of the individual brain. He is a more plastic receptive creature than he would be alone. Any one can test this for himself by asking if he would have laughed so uproariously at a certain humorous speech had it been offered him detached from the time and place. The chances are that, by and in itself, it might not seem funny at all. And the readiness with which he fell into cordial conversation with the stranger in the next seat is also a hint as to his magnetized mood when thus

subjected to the potent influence of mob psychology. For this reason, then, among others, a drama heard and seen under the usual conditions secures unique effects of response in contrast with the other sister forms of telling stories.

A heightening of effect upon auditor and spectator is gained – to mention one other advantage – by the fact that the story which in a work of fiction may extend to a length precluding the possibility of its reception at one sitting, may in the theater be brought within the compass of an evening, in the time between dinner and bed. This secures a unity of impression whereby the play is a gainer over the novel. A great piece of fiction like *David Copperfield*, or *Tom Jones*, or *A Modern Instance*, or *Alice for Short* cannot be read in a day, except as a feat of endurance and under unusual privileges of time to spare. But a great play – Shakespeare's *Hamlet* or Ibsen's *A Doll's House* – can be absorbed in its entirety in less than three hours, and while the hearer has perhaps not left his seat. Other things being equal, and whatever the losses, this establishes a superiority for the play. A coherent section of life, which is what the story should be, conveyed in the whole by this brevity of execution, so that the recipient may get a full sense of its organic unity, cannot but be more impressive than any medium of story telling where this is out of the question. The merit of the novel, therefore, supreme in its way, is another merit; "one star differeth from another in glory." It will be recalled that Poe, with this matter of brevity of time and unity of impression in mind, declared that there was no such thing as a long poem; meaning that only the short poem which could be read through at one sitting could attain to the highest effects.

But along with these advantages go certain limitations, too, in this form of story telling; limitations which warn the play not to encroach upon the domain of fiction, and which have much to do with making the form what it is.

From its very nature the novel can be more thorough-going in the delineation of character. The drama, as we have seen, must, under its stern restrictions of time, seize upon outstanding traits and assume that much of the development has taken place before the rise of the first curtain. The novel shows character in process of development; the play shows what character, developed to the point of test, will do when the test comes. Its method, especially in the hands of modern playwrights like Ibsen and Shaw, is to exhibit a human being acted upon suddenly by a situation which exposes the hidden springs of action and is a culmination of a long evolution prior to the plot that falls within the play proper. In the drama characters must for the most part be displayed in external acts, since action is of the very essence of a play; in a novel, slowly and through long stretches of time, not the acts alone but the thoughts, motives and desires of the character may be revealed. Obviously, in the drama this cannot be done, in any like measure, in spite of the fact that some of the late psychologists of the drama, like Galsworthy, Bennett and others, have tried to introduce a more careful psychology into their play-making. At the best, only an approximation to the subtlety and penetration of fiction can be thus attained. It were wiser to recognize the limitation and be satisfied with the compensating gain of the more vivid, compelling effect secured through the method of presenting human beings, natural to the playhouse.

There are also arbitrary and artificial conventions of the stage conditioning the story which may perhaps be regarded as drawbacks where the story in fiction is freer in these respects. Both forms of story telling strive – never so eagerly as to-day – for a truthful representation of life. The stage, traditionally, in its depiction of character through word and action, has not been so close to life as fiction; the dialogue has been further removed from the actual idiom of human speech. It is only of late that stage talk in naturalness has begun to rival the verisimilitude of dialogue in the best fiction. This may well be for the reason (already touched upon) that the presence of the speakers on the stage has in itself a reality which corrects the artificiality of the words spoken. "I did not know," the theater auditor might be imagined as saying, "that people talked like that; but there they are, talking; it must be so."

The drama in all lands is trying as never before to represent life in speech as well as act; and the strain hitherto put upon the actor, who in the past had as part of his function to make the artificial and unreal plausible and artistic, has been so far removed as to enable him to give his main strength to genuine interpretation.

The time values on the stage are a limitation which makes for artificiality; actual time must of necessity be shortened, for if true chronology were preserved the play would be utterly balked in its purpose of presenting a complete story that, however brief, must cover more time than is involved in what is shown upon the boards of a theater. As a result all time values undergo a proportionate shrinkage. This can be estimated by the way meals are eaten on the stage. In actual life twenty minutes are allotted for the scamped eating time of the railway station, and we all feel it as a grievance. Half an hour is scant decency for the unpretentious private meal; and as it becomes more formal an hour is better, and several hours more likely. Yet no play could afford to allow twenty minutes for this function, even were it a meal of state; it would consume half an act, or thereabouts. Consequently, on the stage, the effect of longer time is produced by letting the audience see the general details of the feast; food eaten, wine drunk, servants waiting, and conversation interpolated. It is one of the demands made upon the actor's skill to make all these condensed and selected minutiae of a meal stand for the real thing; once more art is rearranging life, under severe pressure. If those interested will test with watch in hand the actual time allowed for the banquet in *A Parisian Romance*, so admirably envisaged by the late Richard Mansfield, or the famous Thanksgiving dinner scene in *Shore Acres*, fragrantly associated with the memory of the late James A. Herne, they will possibly be surprised at the brevity of such representations.

Because of this necessary compression, a scale of time has to be adopted which shall secure an effect of actualness by a cunning obedience of proportion; the reduction of scale is skillful, and so the result is congruous. And it is plain that fiction may take more time if it so desires in such scenes; although even in the novel the actual time consumed by a formal dinner would be reproduced by the novelist at great risk of boring his reader.

Again, with disadvantages in mind, it might be asserted that the stage story suffers in that some of the happenings involved in the plot must perforce transpire off stage; and when this is so there is an inevitable loss of effect, inasmuch as it is of the nature of drama, as has been noted, to show events, and the indirect narrative method is to be avoided as undramatic. Tyros in play-writing fail to make this distinction; and as a generalization it may be stated that whenever possible a play should show a thing, rather than state it. "Seeing is believing," to repeat the axiom. Yet a qualifier may here be made, for in certain kinds of drama or when a certain effect is striven for the indirect method may be powerfully effective. The murder in *Macbeth* gains rather than loses because it takes place outside the scene; Maeterlinck in his earlier Plays for Marionettes, so called, secured remarkable effects of suspense and tension by systematically using the principle of indirection; as where in *The Seven Princesses* the princesses who are the particular exciting cause of the play are not seen at all by the audience; the impression they make, a great one, comes through their effect upon certain characters on the stage and this heightens immensely the dramatic value of the unseen figures. We may point to the Greeks, too, in illustration, who in their great folk dramas of legend regularly made use of the principle of indirect narration when the aim was to put before the vast audiences the terrible occurrences of the fable, not *coram populo*, as Horace has it, not in the presence of the audience, but rather off stage. Nevertheless, these exceptions can be explained without violating the general principle that in a stage story it is always dangerous not to exhibit any action that is vital to the play. And this compulsion, it will be evident, is a restriction which may at times cripple the scope of the dramatist, while yet it stimulates his skill to overcome the difficulty.

Summarizing the differences which go to make drama distinctive as a story-telling form and distinguish it from other story molds: a play in contrast with fiction tells its tale by word, act and scene in a rising scale of importance, and within briefer time limits, necessitating a far more careful selection

of material, and a greater emphasis upon salient moments in the handling of plot; and because of the device of act divisions, with certain moments of heightened interest culminating in a central scene and thus gaining in tension and intensity by this enforced method of compression and stress; while losing the opportunity to amplify and more carefully to delineate character. It gains as well because the story comes by the double receipt of the eye and ear to a theater audience some of whom at least, through illiteracy, might be unable to appreciate the story printed in a book. The play thus is the most democratic and popular form of story telling, and at the same time is capable of embodying, indeed has embodied, the greatest creative literature of various nations. And for a generation now, increasingly, in the European countries and in English-speaking lands, the play has begun to come into its own as an art form with unique advantages in the way of wide appeal and cultural possibilities.

CHAPTER II

THE PLAY, A CULTURAL OPPORTUNITY

CERTAIN remarks at the close of the preceding chapter hint at what is in mind in giving a title to the present one. The play, this democratic mode of story telling, attracting vast numbers of hearers and universally popular because man is ever avid of amusement and turns hungrily to such a medium as the theater to satisfy a deeply implanted instinct for pleasure, can be made an experience to the auditor properly to be included in what he would call his cultural opportunity. That is to say, it can take its place among those civilizing agencies furnished by the arts and letters, travel and the higher aspects of social life. A drama, as this book seeks to show, is in its finest estate a work of art comparable with such other works of art as pictures, statuary, musical compositions and the achievements of the book world. I shall endeavor later to show a little more in detail wherein lie the artistic requirements and successes of the play; and a suggestion of this has been already made in chapter one.

But this thought of the play as a work of art has hardly been in the minds of folk of our race and speech until the recent awakening of an enlightened interest in things dramatic; a movement so brief as to be embraced by the present generation. The theater has been regarded carelessly, thoughtlessly, merely as a place of idle amusement, or worse; ignorant prejudice against it has been rife, with a natural reaction for the worse upon the institution itself. The play has neither been associated with a serious treatment of life nor with the refined pleasure derivable from contact with art. Nor, although the personality of actors has always been acclaimed, and an infinite amount of silly chatter about their private lives been constant, have theater-goers as a class realized the distinguished skill of the dramatist in the handling of a very difficult and delicate art, nor done justice to the art which the actor represents, nor to his own artistry in it. But now a change has come, happily. The English-speaking lands have begun at least to get into line with other enlightened countries, to comprehend the educational value of the playhouse, and the consequent importance of the play. The rapid growth to-day in what may be called social consciousness has quickened our sense of the social significance of an institution that, whatever its esthetic and intellectual status, is an enormous influence in the daily life of the multitude. Gradually those who think have come to see that the theater, this people's pleasure, should offer drama that is rational, wholesome amusement; that society in general has a vital stake in the nature of an entertainment so widely diffused, so imperatively demanded and so surely effective in shaping the ideals of the people at large. The final chapter will enlarge upon this suggestion.

And this idea has grown along with the now very evident re-birth of a drama which, while practical stage material, has taken on the literary graces and makes so strong an appeal as literature that much of our best in letters is now in dramatic form: the play being the most notable contribution, after the novel, of our time. Leading writers everywhere are practical dramatists; men of letters, yet also men of the theater, who write plays not only to be read but to be acted, and who have conquered the difficult technic of the drama so as to kill two birds with the one stone.

The student of historical drama will perceive that this welcome change is but a return to earlier and better conditions when the mighty play-makers of the past – Calderón, Molière, Shakespeare and their compeers – were also makers of literature which we still read with delight. And, without referring to the past, a glance at foreign lands will reveal the fact that other countries, if not our own, have always recognized this cultural value of the stage and hence given the theater importance in the civic or national life, often spending public moneys for its maintenance and using it (often in close association with music) as a central factor in national culture. The traveler to-day in Germany, France, Russia and the Scandinavian lands cannot but be impressed with this fact, and will bring home to America some suggestive lessons for patriotic native appreciation. In the modern educational

scheme, then, room should be made for some training in intelligent play-going. So far from there being anything Quixotic in the notion, all the signs are in its favor. The feeling is spreading fast that school and college must include theater culture in the curriculum and people at large are seeking to know something of the significance of the theater in its long evolution from its birth to the present, of the history of the drama itself, of the nature of a play regarded as a work of art; of the specific values, too, of the related art of the actor who alone makes the drama vital; and of the relative excellencies, in the actual playhouses of our time, of plays, players and playwrights; together with some idea of the rapidly changing present-day conditions. Such changes include the coming of the one-act play, the startling development of the moving picture, the growth of the Little Theater, the rise of the masque and pageant, and so on with other manifestations yet. Surely, some knowledge in a field so broad and humanly appealing, both for legitimate enjoyment of the individual and in view of his obligations to fellow man, is of equal moment to a knowledge of the chemical effect of hydrochloric acid upon marble, or of the working of a table of logarithms. These last are less involved in the living of a normal human being.

Here are signs of the time, which mark a revolution in thought. In the light of such facts, it is curious to reflect upon the neglect of the theater hitherto for centuries as an institution and the refusal to think of the play as worthy until it was offered upon the printed page. The very fact that it was exhibited on the stage seemed to stamp it as below serious consideration. And that, too, when the very word *play* implies that it is something to be played. The taking over of the theaters by uneducated persons to whom such a place was, like a department store, simply an emporium of desired commodities, together with the Puritanic feeling that the playhouse, as such, was an evil thing frowned upon by God and injurious to man, combined to set this form of entertainment in ill repute. Bernard Shaw, in that brilliant little play, *The Dark Lady of the Sonnets*, sets certain shrewd words in the mouths of Shakespeare and Queen Elizabeth pertinent to this thought:

Shakespeare: "Of late, as you know, the Church taught the people by means of plays; but the people flocked only to such as were full of superstitious miracles and bloody martyrdoms; and so the Church, which also was just then brought into straits by the policy of your royal father, did abandon and discountenance playing; and thus it fell into the hands of poor players and greedy merchants that had their pockets to look to and not the greatness of your kingdom."

Elizabeth: "Master Shakespeare, you speak sooth; I cannot in anywise amend it. I dare not offend my unruly Puritans by making so lewd a place as the playhouse a public charge; and there be a thousand things to be done in this London of mine before your poetry can have its penny from the general purse. I tell thee, Master Will, it will be three hundred years before my subjects learn that man cannot live by bread alone, but by every word that cometh from the mouth of those whom God inspires."

The height of the incongruous absurdity was illustrated in the former teaching of Shakespeare. Here was a writer incessantly hailed as the master poet of the race; he bulked large in school and college, perforce. Yet the teacher was confronted by the embarrassing fact that Shakespeare was also an actor: a profession given over to the sons of Belial; and a playwright who actually wrote his immortal poetry in the shape of theater plays. This was sad, indeed! The result was that in both the older teaching and academic criticism emphasis was always placed upon Shakespeare the poet, the great mind; and Shakespeare the playwright was hardly explained at all; or if explained the illumination was more like darkness visible, because those in the seats of judgment were so ignorant of play technic and the requirements of the theater as to make their attempts well-nigh useless. It remained for our own time and scholars like George P. Baker and Brander Matthews, with intelligent, sympathetic comprehension of the play as a form of art and the playhouse as conditioning it, to study the Stratford bard primarily as playwright and so give us a new and more accurate portrait of him as man and creative worker.

I hope it is beginning to be apparent that intelligent play-going starts long before one goes to the theater. It means, for one thing, some acquaintance with the history of drama, and the theater which is its home, both in the development of English culture and that of other important nations whose dramatic contribution has been large. This aspect of culture will be enlarged upon in the following chapters.

Much can be done – far more than has been done – in this historical survey in school and college to prepare American citizens for rational theater enjoyment. There is nothing pedantic in such preparation. Nobody objects to being sufficiently trained in art to distinguish a chromo from an oil masterpiece or to know the difference in music between a cheap organ-grinder jingle and the rhythmic marvels of a Chopin. It is equally foolish to be unable to give a reason for the preference for a play by Shaw or Barrie over the meaningless coarse farce by some stage hack. It is all in the day's culture and when once the idea that the theater is an art has been firmly seized and communicated to many all that seems bizarre in such a thought will disappear – and good riddance!

The first and fundamental duty to the theater is to attend the play worthy of patronage. If one be a theater-goer, yet has never taken the trouble to see a certain drama that adorns the playhouse, one is open to criticism. The abstention, when the chance was offered, must in fact either be a criticism of the play or of the person himself because he refrained from supporting it.

But let it be assumed that our theater-goer is in his seat, ready to do his part in the patronage of a good play. How, once there, shall he show the approval, or at least interest, his presence implies?

By making himself a part of the sympathetic psychology of the audience, as a whole; not resisting the effect by a position of intellectual aloofness natural to a human being burdened with the self-consciousness that he is a critic; but gladly recognizing the human and artistic qualities of the entertainment. Next, by giving external sign of this sympathetic approval by applause. Applause in this country generally means the clapping of the hands; only exceptionally, and in large cities, do we hear the *bravos* customary in Europe.

But suppose the play merit not approval but the reverse; what then? The gallery gods, those dethroned deities, were wont more rudely to supplement this manual testimony by the use of their other extremities, the feet. The effect, however, is not desirable. Yet, in respect of this matter of disapproval, it would seem as if the British in their frank booing of a piece which does not meet their wishes were exercising a valuable check upon bad drama. In the United States we signify positive approval, but not its negation. The result is that the cheaper element of an audience may applaud and so help the fate of a poor play, while the hostility of those better fitted to judge is unknown to all concerned with the fortunes of the drama, because it is thus silent. A freer use of the hiss, heard with us only under rare circumstances of provocation, might be a salutary thing, for this reason. An audible expression of reproof would be of value in the case of many unworthy plays.

But perhaps in the end the rebuke of non-attendance and the influence of the minatory word passed on to others most assists the failure of the play that ought to fail. If the foolish auditor approve where he should condemn, and so keep the bad play alive by his backing, the better view has a way of winning at the last. Certainly, for conspicuous success some qualities of excellence, if not all of them, must be present.

But intelligent play-going means also a perception of the art of acting, so that the technic of the player, not his personality, will command the auditor's trained attention and he will approve skill and frown upon its absence.

And while it is undoubtedly more difficult to convey this information educationally, the ideal way being to see the best acting early and late and to reflect upon it in the light of acknowledged principles, something can certainly be done to prepare prospective theater-goers for appreciation of the profession of the player; substituting for the blind, time-honored "I know what I like," the more civilized: "I approve it for the following good and sufficient reasons." Even in school, and still more in college, the teacher can coöperate with the taught by suggesting the plays to be seen, amateur as

well as professional; and by classroom discussion afterward, not only of the plays but concerning their rendition. Students are quick to respond when this is done, for the vital object lesson of current drama always appeals to them, and they are glad to observe a connection between their amusement and their culture. At present, or at least up to a very recent time, the eccentricity of such a procedure would all but have endangered the position of the teacher so foolhardy as to act upon the assumption that the drama seen the night before could be in any way used to impart permanent lessons concerning a great art to the minds of the pupils. Luckily, a more liberal view is taking the place of this crass Philistinism.

In a proper appreciation of the actor the hearer will look beyond the pulchritude of an actress or the fit of an actor's clothes; he will judge Miss Ethel Barrymore by her power of envisaging the part she assumes, and not be overly interested in an argument as to her increase of avoirdupois of late years. He will not allow himself to consume time over the question whether Mr. William Gillette in private life is addicted to chloral because Sherlock Holmes is a victim of that most reprehensible habit.

And above all he will constantly remind himself that acting is the art of impersonation, exactly that; and, therefore, just as high praise goes to the player who admirably portrays a disagreeable part as to one in whose mouth the playwright has set lines which make him beloved from curtain to curtain. Yet the majority of persons in a typical American theater audience hopefully confuse the part with the player, and award praise or blame according as they like or dislike the part itself.

The intelligent auditor will also give approval to the stage artist who, instead of drawing attention to himself by the use of exaggerated methods, quietly does his work, keeps always within the stage picture, and trusts to his truthful representation to secure conviction and reward. How common is it to see some player overstressing his part, who, instead of being booed and hissed as he deserves and as he infallibly would be in some countries, receives but the more applause for his inexcusable overstepping of the modesty of his art. It becomes part of the duty of our intelligent play-goer to teach such pseudo-artists their place, for as long as they win the meed of ill-timed and ignorant approval, so long will they flourish.

Nor will the critic of the acceptable actor fail to observe that the latter prefers working for the ensemble —*team work*, in the sporting phrase – to that personal display disproportionate to the general effect which will always make the judicious grieve. In theatrical parlance, "hogging the stage" has flourished simply for the reason that it deceives a sufficient number in the seats to secure applause and so throws dust in the eyes of the general public as to its true iniquity. The actor is properly to be judged, not by his work detached from that of his fellows, but ever in relation to the totality of impression which means a play instead of a personal exhibition. It is his business to coöperate with others in a single effect in which each is a factor in the exact measure of the importance of his part as conceived by the dramatist. Where a minor part becomes a major one through the ability of a player, as in the famous case of the elder Sothorn's Lord Dundreary, it is at the expense of the play; *Our American Cousin* was negligible as drama, and hence it did not matter. But if the drama is worth while, serious injury to dramatic art may follow.

Again, the intelligent play-goer will carefully distinguish in his mind between actor and playwright. Realizing that "the play's the thing," he will demand that even the so-called star (too often an actor foisted into prominence for a non-artistic reason) shall obey the laws of his art and those of drama, and not unduly minimize for personal reasons the work of his coadjutors in the play, nor that of the playwright who intended him to go so far and no further. The actor who, whatever his fame, and no matter how much an unthinking audience is complaisant when he does it, makes a practice of giving himself a center-of-the-stage prominence beyond what the drama calls for, is no artist, but a show man, neither more nor less, who deserves to be rated with the mountebanks rather than with the artists of his profession. But it may be feared that "stars" will continue to seek the stage center and crowd others of the cast out of the right focus, to say nothing of distorting the work of the dramatist, under the goad of megalomania, so long as a goodly number of unintelligent spectators egg him on. His favorite line of poetry will be that of Wordsworth:

"Fair as a star when only one is shining in the sky." It is to help the personnel of such an audience that our theater-goer needs his training.

A general realization of all this will definitely affect one's theater habit and make for the good of all that concerns the art of the playhouse. It will lead the properly prepared person to see a good play competently done, but with no supreme or far-famed actor in the company, in preference to a foolish play, or worse, carried by a "star"; or a play negligible as art or hopelessly *passé* as art or interpretation of life for which an all-star cast has been provided, as if to take the eye of the spectator off the weaknesses of the drama. Often a standard play revived by one of these hastily gathered companies of noted players resolves itself into an interest in individual performances which must lack that organic unity which comes of longer association. The opportunity afforded to get a true idea of the play is made quite secondary, and sometimes entirely lost sight of.

Nor will the trained observer in the theater be cheated by the dollar mark in his theatrical entertainment. He will come to feel that an adequate stock company, playing the best plays of the day, may afford him more of drama culture for an expenditure of fifty cents for an excellent seat than will some second-rate traveling company which presents a drama that is a little more recent but far less worthy, to see which the charge is three or four times that modest sum. All over the land to-day nominally cultivated folk will turn scornfully away from a fifty-cent show, as they call it, only because it is cheap in the literal sense, whereas the high-priced offering is cheap in every other sense but the cost of the seat. Such people overlook the nature of the play presented, the playwright's reputation, and the quality of the performance; incapable of judging by the real tests, they stand confessed as vulgarians and ignoramuses of art. We shall not have intelligent audiences in American theaters, speaking by and large, until theater-goers learn to judge dramatic wares by some other test than what it costs to buy them. Such a test is a crude one, in art, however infallible it may be in purely material commodities; indeed, is it not the wise worldling in other fields who becomes aware in his general bartering that it is unsafe to estimate his purchase exclusively by the price tag?

To one who in this way makes the effort to inform himself with regard to the things of the theater – plays, players and playwrights – concerning dramatic history both as it appertains to the drama and the theater; and concerning the intellectual as well as esthetical and human values of the theater-going experience, it will soon become apparent that it offers him cultural opportunity that is rich, wide and of ever deepening enjoyment. And taking advantage of it, he will dignify one of the most appealing pleasures of civilization by making it a part of his permanent equipment for satisfactory living.

Other aspects of this thought may now be expounded, beginning with a review of the play in its history; some knowledge of which is obviously an element in the complete appreciation of a theater evening. For the proper viewing of a given play one should have reviewed plays in general, as they constitute the body of a worthy dramatic literature.

CHAPTER III

UP TO SHAKESPEARE

THE recent vogue of plays like *The Servant in the House*, *The Passing of the Third Floor Back*, *The Dawn of To-morrow*, and *Everywoman* sends the mind back to the early history of English drama and is full of instruction. Such drama is a reversion to type, it suggests the origin of all drama in religion. It raises the interesting question whether the blasé modern theater world will not respond, even as did the primitive audiences of the middle ages, to plays of spiritual appeal, even of distinct didactic purpose. And the suggestion is strengthened when the popularity is recalled of the morality play of *Everyman* a few years since, that being a revival of a typical mediæval drama of the kind. It almost looks as if we had failed to take into account the ready response of modern men and women to the higher motives on the stage; have failed to credit the substratum of seriousness in that chance collection of human beings which constitutes a theater audience. After all, they are very much like children, when under the influence of mob psychology; sensitive, plastic to the lofty and noble as they are to the baser suggestions that come to them across the footlights. In any case, these late experiences, which came by way of surprise to the professional purveyors of theatrical entertainment, give added emphasis to the statement that the stage is the child of mother church, and that the origin of drama in the countries whereof we have record is always religious. The mediæval beginnings in Europe and England have been described in their details by many scholars. Suffice it here to say that the play's birthplace is at the altar end of the cathedral, an extension of the regular service. The actors were priests, the audience the vast hushed throngs moved upon by incense, lights, music, and the intoned sacred words, and, for the touch of the dramatic which was to be the seed of a wonderful development, we may add some portion of the sacred story acted out by the stoled players and envisaged in the scenic pomp of the place. The lesson of the holy day was thus brought home to the multitude as it never would have been by the mere recital of the Latin words; scene and action lent their persuasive power to the natural associations of the church. Such is the source of modern drama; what was in the course of time to become "mere amusement," in the foolish phrase, began as worship; and if we go far back into the Orient, or to the south-lying lands on the Mediterranean, we find in India and Greece alike this union of art and worship, whether the play began within church or temple or before Dionysian altars reared upon the green sward. The good and the beautiful, the esthetic and the spiritual, ever intertwined in the story of primitive culture.

And the gradual growth from this mediæval beginning is clear. First, a scenic elaboration of part of the service, centering in some portion of the life and death of Christ; then, as the scenic side grew more complex, a removal to the grounds outside the cathedral; an extension of the subject-matter to include a reverent treatment of other portions of the Bible narrative; next, the taking over of biblical drama by the guilds, or crafts, under the auspices of the patron saints of the various organizations, as when, on Corpus Christi day, one of the great saints' days of the year, a cycle of plays was presented in a town with the populace agog to witness it, and the movable vans followed each other at the street corners, presenting scene after scene of the story. Then a further extension of motives which admitted the use of the lives of the saints who presided over the guilds; and finally the further enlargement of theme due to the writing of drama of which the personages were abstract moral qualities, giving the name of Morality to this kind of play. Such, described with utter simplicity and brevity, was the interesting evolution.

Aside from all technicalities, and stripped of much of moment to the specialist, we have in this origin and early development a blend of amusement and instruction; a religious purpose linked with a frank recognition of the fact that if you make worship attractive you strengthen its hold upon mankind – a truth sadly lost sight of by the later Puritans. The church was wise, indeed, to unite these

elements of life, to seize upon the psychology of the show and to use it for the purpose of saving souls. It was not until the sixteenth century and the immediate predecessors of Shakespeare that the play, under the influence of renaissance culture and the inevitable secularization of the theater in antagonism to the Puritan view of amusement, waxed worldly, and little by little lost the ear-marks of its holy birth and upbringing.

The day when the priests, still the actors of the play, walked down the nave and issued from the great western door of the cathedral, to continue the dramatic representations under the open sky, was truly a memorable one in dramatic history. The first instinct was not that of secularization, but rather the desire for freer opportunity to enact the sacred stories; a larger stage, more scope for dramatic action. Yet, although for generations the play remained religious in subject-matter and intent, it was inevitable that in time it should come to realize that its function was to body forth human life, unbounded by Bible themes: all that can happen to human beings on earth and between heaven and hell and beyond them, being fit material for treatment, since all the world's a stage, and flesh and blood of more vital interest to humanity at large than aught else. The rapid humanization of the religious material can be easily traced in the coarse satire and broad humor introduced into the Bible narratives: a free and easy handling of sacred scene and character natural to a more naïve time and by no means implying irreverence. Thus, in the Noah story, Mrs. Noah becomes a stout shrew whose unwillingness to come in out of the wet and bestow herself in dry quarters in the Ark must have been hugely enjoyed by the fifteenth century populace. And the Vice of the morality play degenerates into the clown of the performance, while even the Devil himself is made a cause for laughter.

Another significant step in the advance of the drama was made when the crafts took over the representations; for it democratized the show, without cheapening it or losing sight of its instructional nature. When the booths, or pageants as they were called, drew up at the crossing of the ways and performed their part in some story of didactic purport and broadly human, hearty, English atmosphere, with an outdoor flavor and decorative features of masque and pageantry, the spectators saw the prototype of the historic pageants which just now are coming again into favor. The drama of the future was shaping in a matrix which was the best possible to assure a long life, under popular, natural conditions. These conditions were to be modified and distorted by other, later additions from the cultural influence of the past and under the domination of literary traditions; but here was the original mold.

The method of presentation, too, had its sure effect upon the theater which was to follow this popular folk beginning. The movable van, set upon wheels, with its space beneath where behind a curtain the actors changed their costumes, suggests in form and upfitting the first primitive stages of the playhouses erected in the second half of the sixteenth century. Since but one episode or act of the play was to be given, there was no need of a change of scene, and the stage could be simple accordingly. Contemporary cuts show us the limited dimensions, the shallow depth and the bareness of accessories typical of this earliest of the housings of the drama, for such it might fairly be called. Obviously, on such a stage, the manner and method of portrayal are strictly defined: done out of doors, before a shifting multitude of all classes, with no close cohesion or unity, since another part of the story was told in another spot, the play, to get across – not the footlights, for there were none – but the intervening space which separated actors and audience, must be conveyed in broad simple outline and in graphic episodes, the very attributes which to-day, despite all subtleties and finesse, can be relied upon to bring response from the spectators in a theater. It must have been a great event when, in some quiet English town upon a day significant in church annals, the players' booths began their cycle, and the motley crowd gathered to hear the Bible narratives familiar to each and all, even as the Greek myths which are the stock material of the Greek drama were known to the vast concourse in the hillside theater of that day. In effect the circus had come to town, and we may be sure every urchin knew it and could be found open-mouthed in the front row of spectators. No possibility here of subtlety and less of psychologic morbidity. The beat of the announcing drum, the eager murmur

of the multitude, the gay costumes and colorful booth, all ministered to the natural delight of the populace in show and story. The fun relieved the serious matter, and the serious matter made the fun acceptable. With no shift of scenery, the broadest liberty, not to say license, in the particulars of time and place were practiced; the classic unities were for a later and more sophisticated drama. There was no curtain and therefore no entr'act to interrupt the two hours' traffic of the stage; the play was continuous in a sense other than the modern.

As a result of these early conditions, the English play was to show through its history a fluidity, a plastic adaptation of material to end, in sharp contrast with other nations, the French, for one, whose first drama was enacted in a tennis court of fixed location, deep perspective and static scenery.

On the holy days which, as the etymology shows, were also holidays from the point of view of the crowd, drama was vigorously purveyed which made the primitive appeals of pathos, melodrama, farce and comedy. The actors became secular, but for long they must have been inspired with a sense of moral obligation in their work; a beautiful survival of which is to be seen at Oberammergau today. And the play itself remained religious in content and intention for generations after it had walked out of the church door. The church took alarm at last, aware that an instrument of mighty potency had been taken out of its hands. It is not surprising to find various popes passing edicts against this new and growingly influential form of public entertainment. It seemed to be on the way to become a rival. This may well have had its effect in the rapid taking over of the drama by the guilds, as later it was adopted by still more worldly organizations.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.