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THEATRE AS A SOCIAL INSTITUTION

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ABSTRACT

The greatest hope of the theatre today rests with the people. The first expressions of communal art came from the people; the Greek drama developed from a national sentiment and from a national religious custom. The modern stage came into existence through a church necessity and by way of vulgar tongue and guild support. So we see that, institutionally, the art of representing life has always been called into use for social purposes. However much it has been elaborated from the old vocero or tribal songs of grief, and from the tropes of the church service; however much it has departed from the dithyrambic chorus, it has made its appeal to the crowd. The theatre that is cut aloof from the crowd, if it is not altogether impossible, is at least so anemic that its energies are squandered for want of the red blood of popular appreciation. The whole art value of drama is at first determined by the extent of its instant appeal to a crowd; and there are as many types of drama as there are broad communal appeals. Present paper is an analysis how theatre can fulfill dual purpose i.e. to entertain and to give messages to the society.

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INTRODUCTION

The mistaken idea has long been held that the play is a thing governed wholly by the caprice of the dramatist. The theatre is always close to life, and exists by reason of communal sanction. The drama, therefore, depends upon social support; it has to talk of life in terms of life, and it has to appeal to life in matters with which life is concerned. Even before nationality in drama added characteristics which distinguished the British from the French or Germans, and differentiated the Americans as separate, even though a part of the English, the drama echoed the fundamental principles of life, and dealt specifically with the vital energy which surged through man's blood.

The drama as a social force — apart from its primary object to have and to hold the interest of a crowd through the essential factor of its story — has resulted in a species of play which, for want of a

better term, has been designated "the social drama." It is really a drama of condition, social or economic. All critics recognize it as a definite species: Shaw in his prefaces, Henry Arthur Jones, Walkley, W. P. Eaton, and Clayton Hamilton distinguish it as a form in which the message is carried direct; in which conviction is being hurled at the people, regardless of sensibilities and regardless of whether the immediate crowd heed or not. But the dramatist who disregards the crowd is no real man of the theatre; he will find it difficult to have his philosophy — social, economic, or spiritual — accepted across the foot-lights. And truly, as Mr. Hamilton has stated in his suggestive book on "The Theory of the Theatre," the dramatist under these conditions might as well be a novelist; he would be heeded much more readily. Drama will not abide long exposition, such as one finds in the plays of Paul Bourget and in the last act of Augustus

Thomas's "As a Man Thinks." As a social force, drama necessarily must be in touch with the sympathies of those wit yet we need not hesitate, for we perforce must seek in condition, in the tang of our soil, for American drama. It is useless to think that we may transplant something foreign to our natures, and that it will flourish. We must meet life in our own way, and not have it met for us by others in their foreign way. Still, the value of social drama lies in the impulse it gives to our dramatists to depend on other than newspaper knowledge for condition and for human nature. Social forces lie deep; they are not on the surface; they are the true history of any movement. Hence, it is not cleverness, but understanding, they require for their full and ample explanation. The dramatic treatment of the mysteries of life, as they react upon the individual, has been modified in accordance with the highest individual action toward those very mysteries. Hence the progress from the Greek idea of Fate, to the meta-physical concern for the individual soul, to the modern conception of heredity — almost as inexorable as Fate — and finally to the collectivist concern for social regeneration, which seems to be the color of national theatre.

Of course, even today, the vital literature at its most vital moments transcends nationality, though not rejecting it. Ibsen in Scandinavia, Hauptmann and Sudermann in Germany, Tolstoy in Russia, Shaw in England, are all swept by the same social movement which tends toward partial social solution, even though the methods of using it are surprisingly uncomfortable for those of us who are willing, as Vockerat says in Hauptmann's "Lonely Lives," to be "the drones in the hive." To the big dramatist, to the true citizen, the happy ending in drama is one that satisfies only when it cleanses and leaves the soul in the light of truth.

The theatre is a social institution. Through its activities people meet and interact. This happens on two different levels. In the first instance, a group of people meet to discuss, rehearse and produce a play. The theatre, in this instance, is a closed institution. Only those people who are concerned with the working of the theatre are allowed to participate — the director, the actors, the carpenters, the cleaners, the financial backers. In a repertory

theatre the theatrical community is likely to consist of between fifty and one hundred people. In the second instance, the theatre is an open institution. The living theatre consider themselves to have strong revolutionary function to play in society.¹

There is no simple way of defining the social purpose of the theatre although people continually go on trying to rely on simplistic definitions like 'the purpose of the theatre is to educate', 'the purpose of the theatre is to divert- to entertain' and, more recently, 'the purpose of the theatre is to disturb'. James Birdie, a playwright of the 1930s and '40s, though one of the major functions of the theatre was to give people living in a dull, safe world the illusion that for two and a half hours they were living in a dangerous one.²

But these definitions, ranging from the inflammatory to the cynical, are only indications of how practitioners or members of the audience felt. Such indications might arise out of an articulate reaction of a performance: a person uncomfortably by what he has seen might well react by trying to shrug off the experience and ascertaining that the theatre should stick to good, old fashioned, escapist entertainment. The theatrical experience is very complex one. Its effect sometime stay with us for the rest of our lives, coming back like ghost to haunt us. If the experience can be summed up in one phrase, or one paragraph, it was not a very profound experience.

The theatre's social role and function arise out of its relational interaction with the community. If the theatre presents work which is totally unacceptable to its audience, it will have no audience. If it continually shows only what it knows, then its audience will accept that it will never advance. However in this instance the theatre can be said to have a very clear social function- it is giving a small section of the population what it wants in the way of illusion and entertainment. In fact, this is what has largely happened in the world for the last eighty years, in most of the established theatres. The result is a theatre which continually play safe in its policy and minority audience of middle-aged middle class, middle-browed citizens- people in fact, who know what they like and like to see what they know. Outside of this group 97

percent of the population, at least, who never go to theatre.

But we must be varying of accepting the situation as either natural or necessary. The theatre is social institution and relies for its operation and support on a mesh of international ship between actor and actor, between actor and audience, between actor and manager, between manager and audience, and the nature of these relationships give the theatre at any one particular historical time its special character. The theatre of today is very different in character from the theatre of early Athens, from ancient Indian Sanskrit 'Natya', From the Jacobean theatre of England, from the theatre which exist in China today, because in other places and at other times the theatre has been seen to have a more important social function than it has in our country today.

The theatre reflects the social relationships of its times. It might be said with justification that the theatre is an art of social relationships. More than any other art form, it concerns itself with the ways in which people interact.

What is exciting is that the whole range of relationships within and without the theatre is being called in to question. The theatre is embarking on a path of violent and often drastic change. Artists are questioning on the passive role of the audience. Ought theatre is more than a presentation of some distant reality? Ought it not to be an event in its own right? Should the performance be an experience rather than a illusion? Ought the audience to participate? To this end many experimental companies are throwing out the concept of actors performing a play and putting in its place an interchange between actor and spectator. Often the play stops while discussion takes place. Often the spectator finds himself cast in the role of involved participant. Some artist are questioning between actor and dramatist, maintaining that some form of group improvisation on a pre text is more productive and creative than actors rehearsing a fixed polished text. Some artists are even questioning the viability of any form of discrimination between actor and spectator and are producing 'happening' and 'rituals' in which all who take part are participants. Such 'events' dispense

with pre determine conventions of form and time, allowing the form to develop out of the action and allowing it to take whatever length of time it need to work itself out.

Very often one finds companies who strike at the very root of the organized theatre world by dispensing with contracts of employment, choosing to live as a commune, in a close family relationship. They do this to demonstrate their rejection of established patterns of social relationships which they believe are competitive and alienating, and to demonstrate an alternative way of life based on the sharing of experience and property. In doing this, they attempt to make their theatre not only a mirror held up to society, but also an ideal model of what society ought to be like.

Within the 'respectable' established theatre, changes are taking place in response to pressures from outside. Playwrights, dissatisfied with the three -act drama, are using more fragmented montage techniques to communicate to an audience in daily contact with the cinema and television. Many of the mainstays of recent dramatic method are being jettisoned. In particular, the theatre is losing interest in the rational, psychological examination of characters. Playwrights who are involved in the psychology of their characters are usually more interested in trying to articulate their characters' experiences, rather than in explaining how their characters came to be that way.

Questions are being asked about theatrical experience itself. Why do people go to the theatre at all? What happens when a spectator identifies with a character on stage? Why should this be valuable, or enjoyable? Why is the theatre so dangerous an experience? Why throughout history has the theatre attracted heavier censorship than other art forms? What really happens when a theatrical performance takes place, and where does its potency lie?

By far the most important questions that are being asked are the overall questions of the theatre's relationships with society. What should be the social purpose and function of the theatre, and how best can the theatre discharge its social responsibilities in our time? The escapist idea that

the theatre should be purely the purveyor of diverting entertainment is losing favour, and new concepts are being examined. This reappraisal has, to some extent, been forced on the theatre by the community. The economic decline of the theatre has forced it to go to the community, in the form of national and local government, to appeal for subsidies and grants. In order to justify these appeals, the theatre has had to present a case to demonstrate its value to society.

The new concepts of the theatre's social role have centered on two main issues. Firstly, the purpose of the theatre. Should it consider itself an agency for social and political change? Should it consider its job to be to educate and edify? Should it be committed, in the sense of being for a particular line or form of social development, or should it stand back and be objective? Should it attempt to stir up its audience in a partisan way and try to inspire them to action, or should it keep its distance and be a critical voice in society? There are few theatres to whom the foregoing are constant and crucial concerns; most fluctuate between these concerns and a comforting dispensation of the old mixture. But few theatres are entirely free from these questions, and sign of the times is that these questions are arising more strongly and more frequently.

The second central issue lies in the ways that the theatre should carry out its intentions if it accepts any of the programs outlined above. Should the theatre stay in its building and present plays, or it should go out into the streets? Should it bring its audience to the performance, or should it take its performance to the audience? This is crucial where there is any consideration of enlarging and changing the composition of the audience, and also when considering the educational role of the theatre. Does the theatre want to educate schoolchildren in the ways of the theatre by bringing them to performances of plays, or should the theatre send actors or teachers into schools to activate the children into taking part in dramatic performances? Should these performances be of plays or free improvisations on themes? Is the purpose to teach the child something or to help him express himself? Do we want to see the barriers which separate the

professional artist from the other members of the community broken down and a new range of community activities develop out of integration and co-operation?

Nor must we forget that this questioning of social roles and functions is not happening only in the theatre: it is part and parcel of the changing society we live in, and the theatre reflects wider social movements and concerns. In the early democracies of Greece, the theatre reflected the movement from tribe to state in its concern with civic responsibilities. In the late Renaissance, the theatre following the humanist revolution concerned itself with redefining Man as the centre of the universe, instead of God. In the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century, when psychology became established as a science, so that the mind was more the subject of concern than the soul and psychologists began to examine the structure of personality, the theatre reflected this with a style of playwriting and acting known as psychological realism. Today, the structure of society is changing so rapidly that it is natural that society should concern itself with the institutions and techniques through which society functions, preserves and adapts itself. Sociology is a new science which has grown out of man's need to comprehend the vast and confusing changes brought about by the social upheaval accompanying the industrial revolution. If the theatre is the art of social relationships and sociology is the science of social relationships, we can see that the two have an affinity and that co-operation ought to be mutually beneficial.

Surprisingly, there has been little co-operation, and what there has been is, on the theatre's part, highly speculative and, on the sociologist's part, cramped and unimaginative. Many people of the theatre resist any attempt to test the workings of the theatre by any objective criteria. There is a mystique about the theatre. The actor is an intuitive creative artist and the workings of his imagination cannot be tested scientifically. Among most of the younger actors and companies seeking a more relevant and committed relationship with the community, the commitment is usually more emotional than objective, and too often the

relationship is defined in advance by the actors with little objective reference to the community.

On the other hand, sociology has taken practically no account of the theatre as a changing social institution and has tried to restrict its contacts to those aspects of the known and established forms of theatre which can be measured factually. Sociologists have avoided making, or entertaining, any value judgments about the phenomena being examined.

In these circumstances, it is not surprising that people in the theatre put out manifestoes claiming a wide, and often wild, range of social benefits that arise out of theatre, without bringing any concrete evidence whatsoever to support their claims, and that sociologists have done their most valuable work in that field which lends itself best to the counting of heads-audience survey. A number of very valuable audience surveys have been compiled which have given us information on the type of people who go to the theatre, the reasons they give for going there and the range of their taste and expectations. This may lead to other more profound studies. We now know nearly all we want to know about the theatre audience that can be gathered by these methods, and we can hope that sociologists, now that day have become involved in the theatre, will seek further satisfaction by attempting more searching and imaginative investigations of the theatrical experience.³

There remains, on either side, a truly enormous and challenging amount of work that can and needs to be done to build bridges across the gap that separates theatre and sociology. Very little work of any depth or value has been done on the social function of the theatre and its workings as a social institution in the areas I have outlined above. Analysis of the content of theatrical presentations and the theatres relation to the social structure is almost untouched. Because theatre has, in the past, been considered either as great dramatic literature or ephemeral contemporary entertainment, very little attention has been paid to plays as social phenomena and the social values implicit in them as sociological evidence. The study of the drama has only just escaped from the field of literary studies, and so it is not surprising that sociological studies of

the theatre have been concerned with dramatic literature and not the play in performance. The proper study of this field, and the others outlined, is not rightly the province of either theatre people or sociologists, but calls for specialists qualified in both fields, and this shows the importance of university combined study courses in drama and sociology. The value of these studies is greatly enhanced if the sociology studies include an optional course in social psychology. It is particularly in this area of social studies that work has been done which relates directly to the theatre.

Conclusion

Drama has the power to release energies, to disturb, excite anger, amuse and astound. Tension is sometimes is created between theatre and society, since within theatre there is a constant theatre of exposure of false values and spurious attitudes. Suspicion is aroused when too much drama is practiced intuitively too much of the time, and when it is seen that many practioners find it difficult to communicate exactly why they are involving young people in dramatic experience. It is necessary, therefore, for teachers to know what they are doing and precisely why they are doing it. They need to demonstrate constantly the ways in which drama can help young people to experience perceptibly, evaluate logically and communicate imaginatively.⁴

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