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# THE THEATRE

by GEORGE JEAN NATHAN

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## LO, THE POOR CRITIC

IT NEED hardly again be mentioned that many of our theatrical producers' favorite, consoling explanation of any unfavorable criticism of their exhibits is that it was composed by a critic suffering from dyspepsia. That the explanation long since has taken its place in the joke-books has not hindered its autoactivation. The belief that a critic beset by one malaise or another is bound to be influenced by his personal discomfort against a play or show which duty compels him willy-nilly to review is but one of a number of fallacies shared alike by producers, playwrights, and volunteer secular diagnosticians. The fact of the matter is that, instead of being influenced against what he has to review, the critic's indisposition influences him rather in its favor, and for a reason that even the amateur psychologist may determine.

When the critic for one cause or another finds his physical and mental vivacity not what it should be, he, like any other man, is inclined to be

self-apologetic and in that mood far from contentious. He is induced by his enfeebled state to resign himself for the time being to the doctrine of *laissez-faire*, to let things slide, and to avoid anything in the way of discommoding argument. The mere consciousness of so little as a pimple on his nose has been known to humble a man's self-assurance in the presence of another man, or, more particularly, woman whom otherwise he would flee as from the plague. Any critic who has been practising for any length of time knows that the less fit he feels the greater his disposition to be easy on what he reviews. He will not, of course, openly admit it — his *amour propre* is too considerable for that; but the truth remains that any such one depressed by anything short of small-pox is naturally reduced to a charitableness which under other circumstances would be wholly foreign to him.

It is not only theatre criticism that has been inflicted with the opposite conviction. Criticism in general has frequently been criticized in turn on

the senseless ground of its practitioners' health and, in some cases, even looks, as may be amusingly noted in a recent study in the methods of modern literary criticism, *The Armed Vision*, by Stanley Edgar Hyman, wherein Van Wyck Brooks is summarily dismissed with the observation that he has aged and has now a white mustache. "In what way hair on the lip, no matter what its color, can interfere with critical judgment," Joseph Wood Krutch has added, "Mr. Hyman does not make clear."

Drama criticism remains, however, the chief victim of such imbecile prejudices and confusions. Shaw's devastatingly accurate criticism of Henry Irving, it will be remembered, was attributed by numskulls to his jealousy of a rival for the affections of the fair Ellen Terry, and his equally riddling criticism of sentimental Victorian twaddle to the fact that he did not eat meat. And Beerbohm's objection to some of the juvenile sentiment flooding the stage of his day was argued by his detractors to be predicated on the circumstance that he had a bald head. *Unfavorable criticism*, in short, is ever thought to have a dubious well-spring or motive. The clichés are numberless: the critic is a disappointed playwright; the critic employs criticism as a derrick for his little ego; the critic is a failure who seeks to vent his spleen on others who have succeeded; the critic is a homely creature who dislikes an actor who is handsome; the critic is against an actress because she has won a rôle

coveted by an actress of whom personally he is fond; the critic is a drunkard on the score that he enjoys a Martini before his dinner; the critic has dined well before the show and a decent meal notoriously corrupts the brain; etc., etc.

## II

It is further sometimes charged against the critic that his reviews tend toward one extreme or the other, that they are either comprehensively laudatory or comprehensively detractory, and that seldom if ever do they allow anything to the middle ground. The charge is often true, but its truth is retroactively foolish. There are various plays that are completely bad, plays with no slightest redeeming qualities, and the only honest manner in which to review them is to say just that, flatly. There are, as well, plays that are wholly admirable and qualifications of their admirableness are simply the gesture of critics who wish to be arbitrarily different and thereby attract some attention to themselves. Qualifications in such cases are infinitely less symptoms of critical acumen and equity than of a desire to gain a reputation for those virtues at the expense of sharp judgment and intelligence.

A still further charge is that the critic is prejudiced in favor of certain kinds of drama and just as prejudiced against other kinds. Again, true. But prejudice, if sound, is what gives the critic his standing. Every man, whatever his calling, acquires prejudices

based on experience, so why not the critic? There are, obviously, silly prejudices as well as sound, but the former soon betray and defeat their merchants. Prejudices which are the consequence of critical education are among the most forceful weapons in the critic's arsenal. Show me a critic without prejudices and I'll show you an arrested cretin.

A third allegation is that the critic too often aims to be clever and witty instead of being straightforward and simple, and that this is deplorable. How and why it is deplorable is hard to make out. A review is intended to be read and if cleverness and wit will help it to be read, so much the better. The theory, moreover, that cleverness and wit may not be reconciled with forthright honesty is kin to one which would maintain that intelligence is best to be expressed dully and that judgment is most acceptable if recorded in glassy writing. The most valuable dramatic criticism of modern times, from Shaw to Palmer, from Montague to Howe, and from Béraud to Kerr, has been that which has been percolated through wit, humor, and literary legerdemain; the least valuable that which has been purveyed like an austere frost. Opinions long and strongly stated have a way of becoming objectionable and even slightly offensive, however valid they may be. Best to serve, they should be coated with varied brightly colored dyes. The dyes do not penetrate seriously into them; they are largely superficial; but, as with an Easter egg, they

engage and tickle the attention of such children as would disdain the egg in its common, unadorned state.

## III

We hear that the critic should efface himself in his criticism and not, as is the practice of some, employ it in part as a personal show-window. The contention is that of other critics who hope to make acceptable their own lack of any personality by decrying it in their betters. Anyone who uses criticism as a personal show-window must have the goods to display in it or soon go out of business. A good critic can no more keep his personality and all it stands for out of his criticism than he can keep it out of his speech, his politics, or his love-making. Impersonal criticism, if there can be such a thing, is like an impersonal fist fight or an impersonal marriage, and as successful.

To ask of a critic that he dismiss his personality and its various facets from his criticism is an affront both to him and to criticism itself. It is like asking the individual to convert himself into a blank and to allow the blank, like a whitewashed, flat wall, to reflect what rays there may possibly be against another such wall which is the reader. Personality, far from deflecting the light, makes it seem relatively brighter and yet more comfortable on the eyes by embellishing it with shadow and color. What the objectors object to is really not any such factual personality but what is sanguinely passed off for it through

the common journalistic over-use of the first person singular pronoun. The critic who dots his paragraphs with "I's" may conceivably enjoy a personality as striking as Napoleon's or General Coxe's but he does not know how to sell it. True personality does not work itself thus contrabandily into criticism; criticism naturally reflects it.

It is also the habit to look askance at the critic who contradicts himself. Such contradiction is held to be the mark of an insecure and untrustworthy mind. It should rather be the habit to look askance at the critic who does not occasionally contradict himself. Contradiction may as well be the offspring of increased education, experience, and perception as it may be of the vacillation induced by ignorance. The critic who stubbornly adheres to original statement is sometimes like a bulldog who gluttonously clings to a rubber bone. There is a tide in the affairs of art as there is in the affairs of man, and, while the basic principles may not be affected, there are ripples that glint with new lights and these new lights now and then dim the antecedent ones. The critic who vainly is unwilling to contradict himself is accordingly in the position of a man who has been unpleasantly punched in the eye, which thereupon turns black, but who stoutly denies to witnesses of the contretemps both that it took place and that his eye is not its normal color.

"Whenever either side of the scale

is over-weighted," writes Eric Bentley in a treatise called *Theory and Theatre*, "it is for the critic to try — by exhortation, invective, satire, or whatever — to weight the other side. In a sense the critic's job is not to be impartial but always *to weight the other side* [*italics his*], the side that needs it." This is an applaudably generous point of view and one that appeals to every man's impulse to help the underdog, but otherwise it would convert the critic into a mere propagandist. The critic who would arbitrarily weight the other side, whatever it might be, would be a suspect critic indeed. The temptation to do it is wholly understandable, and in moments of careless thinking I have not been the only one who has succumbed to it (Mr. Bentley seems to prove that he, among others, is like me in this regard), but such weighting surely is no part of criticism. It is part, rather, of critical politics. I agree that in a sense the critic's job, as Mr. Bentley puts it, is not to be impartial. He should fight for what he soberly deems right and best, and should pitch his lance come hell or high water. And if over-weighting his stand will assist his purpose, let him over-weight it to the limit. If another critic who, though agreeing with him, elects then to posture as playing fair by sophisticating the virtues of the other side and thus elevate himself as a square-shooter over the other, he is not only critically dishonest but, however cunning, a critical fraud.

## IV

There is, finally, it need scarcely be repeated, a distaste for any man who sets himself up as a critic of other men and their works. It is not for me to argue its justice or injustice. But the terms in which it customarily vents itself are too often questionable. There surely must be better arguments lying around somewhere; I myself, indeed, can think of some honeys, though I shall here cautiously keep them to myself.

A critic, for example, will be derogated because he is a "dapper dresser," like Richard Brinsley Sheridan, Chopin, and Disraeli; because he is self-assured and hence "pompous," like Talleyrand, Botticelli, and Wagner; or because he doesn't go to a barber frequently enough, like Andrew Jackson, General Grant, and Walt Whitman. He is discountenanced by ill-favored playwrights like Moss Hart who take to the radio to observe, acidly, that but one dramatic critic has ever written a successful play, to wit, William Archer and *The Green Goddess*, only to be informed to his embarrassment that among the large assortment who have written successful plays have been Robert de Flers, Franklin Fyles, Charles Hoyt (whose satirical comedies have clearly influenced some of Hart's plays), George Ade, Channing Pollock, St. John

Ervine, C. M. S. McLellan, Charles Frederic Nirdlinger, H. Granville-Barker, Victor Mapes, A. E. Thomas, Frederic Hatton, Harry B. Smith, Brander Matthews, Charlton Andrews, Thompson Buchanan, Augustin Daly, Paul Potter, Walter Browne, Charles Morgan, Hermann Bahr, Ashley Dukes, Edmond See, Harold Brighouse, Bronson Howard, and, along with a lot of others, G. B. Shaw.

If the critic pens sweet words about a pretty new young actress, even one of unmistakable talent, it will be said of him that he is a sentimental push-over when it comes to the fair sex. If he has no taste for cheap, soapbox propaganda in drama, it will be claimed against him that he knows nothing of what is going on in the world and that his interests are confined to the world of Broadway. If he reviews a succession of miserable plays exactly for what they are, he will be accused by their producer of conducting a vendetta against him, inspired by unstated but darkly implied motives. And if he by any chance rises to any eminence in his profession, the gossip columns will not let an opportunity pass to make him ridiculous in one way or another and to minimize what esteem people may conceivably have for him.

He is, in short, a black sheep — in a pack of jackasses.

## HAROLD STASSEN MEETS THE PRESS

*This forms the second contribution to the series dealing with the problems of the Republican party, inaugurated in the February issue with "Why the Republicans Lost," by Clarence Budington Kelland. Mr. Stassen hardly needs any introduction. He is now President of the University of Pennsylvania, was formerly governor of Minnesota, was a leading contender for the Republican nomination for President in 1944 and 1948, and still speaks for a large segment of his party. His remarks, which are slightly cut here, were broadcast over Meet the Press, presented by the Mutual Broadcasting Company, in association with the editors of THE AMERICAN MERCURY.*

THE participants in the broadcast, aside from Mr. Stassen, included Arthur Sylvester of the Newark *Evening News*, Robert Riggs of the Louisville *Courier-Journal*, Phelps Adams of the New York *Sun*, and May Craig of the Portland (Me.) *Press-Herald*. Lawrence E. Spivak, editor of the *MERCURY*, presided.

ADAMS: Governor Stassen, in the light of what happened on election day, are you glad now that you didn't win the Republican nomination at Philadelphia?

STASSEN: No, of course not.

ADAMS: What I was getting at, Governor, is this: Do you think the Republicans would have won the Presidency if you had been the candidate?

STASSEN: Well, that's putting it another way. We felt confident that we did have the majority support of the people of the country for a program of true liberalism within the

Republican party, and I think the general indications in the primaries would bear that out.

ADAMS: Well, will your new job as the President of the University of Pennsylvania prevent you from engaging in politics?

STASSEN: Of course, my first responsibility will be to the University of Pennsylvania. We do have a very extensive program for developing a physical plant and for working with the faculty and the students of this great institution. But it does not mean that we are removed from public issues. As a matter of fact, this University was founded by Ben Franklin, and he was right in the midst of the most vital issues of his time. The tradition is here and the definite understanding, and of course I will participate in public affairs.

RIGGS: Governor, you spoke of carrying on the fight for liberalism. There are a good many people who believe