

"THE PEOPLE'S THEATRE" AND THE PEOPLED THEATRE

BY WALTER PRICHARD EATON

TWO books lie before me, quite different in character and yet both leading to the same somewhat melancholy reflections. They are Barrett H. Clark's translation of Romain Rolland's "The People's Theater", and Constance D'Arcy Mackay's "Patriotic Drama in Your Town". One, the work of a profound radical and great creative artist, is based on the fundamental assumption of class consciousness, and seeks to show the almost complete unfitness of the current theatrical repertoire for the needs of "the people". The other, the American work, is based, apparently, on a serene disregard (or ignorance) of class consciousness, and the assumption that a so-called little theatre in your town may be the center of a unifying art movement which shall unite all the peoples in the joyous bond of Thomas Wood Stevens, Ibsen and Percy Mackaye.

When, in the first three years of this century, Rolland wrote the papers now gathered in the present volume, he was greatly interested in the various projects then being agitated (or even tried) in France, to give to the people their own theatre. With lucid common sense, he realized that the French classic drama bored these people (as it has bored others, not laborers!); that the French romantic drama was inflated hokum (including the plays of Rostand); that the boulevard drama was an art essentially for a degenerate bourgeoisie; and even

the modern social dramas of men like Brieux and Hauptmann have both an ephemeral quality, due to the impermanence of their themes, and, moreover, are usually directed rather at the well-to-do. The manufacturers may profit by "The Weavers", for instance, but it's rather tough on the workers to ask them to contemplate their woes in the very theatre.

Accordingly, Rolland was forced to condemn a good part of the people's theatre efforts of his day, and to outline what he conceived should be the lines of the new drama. First, the people's theatre "must be a recreation". It must give "a sort of physical and moral rest to the workingman, weary from his day's work". Second, "the theatre ought to be a source of energy"—that is, it should show action on large and inspiring lines. Third, it should be "a guiding light to the intelligence". "It should flood with light the terrible brain of man, which is filled with shadows and monsters, and is exceeding narrow and cramped."

To fulfill these requisites of joy, energy and intelligence, it would seem that Rolland dreamed of great, poetic melodramas, "Hamlets" and "King Lear" and "Othellos" written by Frenchmen in modern idiom; of historical plays showing crowds, especially, as the heroes; and of social plays, rustic dramas, folk-legends, and pantomime and music. In practice, he endeavored himself to meet the need,

producing "Danton" and other like dramas, which, unfortunately, fail for lack of dramatic structure. But his book of criticism and theory remains a masterwork of common sense interpenetrated with the noblest idealism, save that he fails to take sufficient account of the most important element—the actual desires of the workers themselves, their line of self-development.

Miss Mackay's slender volume, on the other hand, while it pretends to be little more than a working sketch to aid those ardent souls who wish by means of community pageants, little theatres, and the like, to foster local unity and aid both in the "Americanization" process and in the development of dramatic taste, is oddly deficient in common sense—or, let us say, in common experience. Writing in the heat of war, when "national unity" was a phrase on all lips, it is perhaps understandable that the author should have been carried away; but already the war is over, and as we return to more ordinary conditions we are again faced by the grim fact that the so-called little theatres, for instance, are in almost every instance thoroughly aristocratic institutions; that in a town like Northampton, where for six years there has existed a semi-municipal theatre, not a baker's dozen of the proletariat ever darken its doors, in spite of heroic efforts by the management to reach them; finally, that the very often considerable civic benefits of widely participated-in pageants and festivals are, essentially, civic benefits and cannot honestly be traced into the subsequent dramatic art-life of the people.

Anything more boring to the people than perpetual pageants, or some of those historical recitation-tableaux outlined by our author, could not well

be imagined, unless it were certain of the dramas she suggests the little theatre companies should take about to various halls, steps, and open-air theatres. It is extremely laudable to wish to "Americanize" all our population, and to usher in universal democracy by means of pageants about George Washington. But the stubborn fact remains that "the people" desire much more to be amused, to enjoy themselves, and unless the theatre vitally reaches them as a part of their spontaneous amusement life, it is merely beating the air.

It reduces itself to this—probably in France as well as here: the *people's theatre will never come unless it rises from the people*. It cannot be lowered to them from above. You will never get them into your existing theatres, even, and still less into your independent and aristocratic art theatres, until the themes and atmosphere of the plays there are the themes and atmosphere of their own lives (which will never be, of course, under the existing social order). To take these plays down to them will only be to bore and offend them. To take *any* plays down to them will not work.

As a matter of sad fact, they already have their theatre in America—a terrible thing, it is, but their own, though shared by the less intelligent of the class above them—the movies. The neighborhood movie house is the people's theatre. Whether we like it or not (and no sane person can contemplate the prospect calmly), it will remain the people's theatre until the people themselves decree a change. That will not be until they have greatly improved their economic condition and consequently their educational condition, removing as well their deep-rooted hostility to anything patronized and perpetuated by the

"upper crust". The present writer has a great love of the pageant as an art-form, and a great hope of the little theatres as torch bearers of the finer drama. But of either of them as a democratizing force, under present social conditions, he has, alas! no hope whatever.

Professor William Lyon Phelps, a critic who never permits subtleties to interfere with enthusiasms, in his new book, "The Twentieth Century Theatre", is not at all concerned with getting "the people" to appreciate great drama. He seems to feel that there is quite enough to do in getting our present bourgeois audiences to appreciate it! In fact, he doesn't seem to feel that even our critics appreciate it. We are, he says, living in the period of the greatest dramatic products since Shakespeare, while the actual theatre, outside of a few large cities (New York alone in America, he says, though we would add Chicago), is pitifully unable to show the public any of this splendid stage literature. He is concerned with the reorganization of our present playhouse in order to give a wider hearing to our present available repertoire, and in order to train actors once more, through the medium of repertoire companies, into something like their old-time competence.

Yet one point he makes is perhaps a more significant hint for those who dream of "Americanization" and democracy than any suggested pageants and municipal hand-outs. He says, most truly, that a tremendous drawback to our present system is the fact that a new play is produced by one company only, in one place, instead of by two hundred or three hundred companies all over the country. Should a significant and stimulating American drama find its way to the stage, it would spend a year in New York, and

then slowly, very slowly, percolate through the country. He might have added that today it would never get beyond a limited number of cities. This not only robs the country of the stimulus of discussing the same thing at the same time, giving us all an art consciousness, but it reduces all the rest of the country to a state where it meekly accepts New York verdicts and lacks all power of individual judgment. The remedy, of course, is the establishment of resident repertoire companies in all cities.

This hint, however, is but one of many in a chatty, informal, rather unformal, but wise and stimulating book.

When two comedians of such personal charm and technical skill as Cyril Maude and Miss Laura Hope Crews act a new play, it is not always easy, even for the trained critic, to say just how much of the effect of lifelike character they convey is due to the author and how much to the players. It is, therefore, with peculiar interest that we turn to the printed text of C. Haddon Chambers's comedy, "The Saving Grace". Our youngsters would call it old-fashioned—it even opens with a scene between the servants! That is pretty hard to forgive, just as it is hard to forgive the transparency of the conclusion, sensed almost from the start. We are in the play-world of sentimental comedy.

Yet Mr. Chambers, practical hand though he be in the elder tricks of the trade (the drama has its tricks, also!), possesses two traits which are neither old nor new, but timeless. He has charm, and he has a sense of character. Even in reading the bald text, with its old-fashioned stage directions ("crosses left", "exit R. U. E.")—so crude in comparison with a Shaw or

a Barrie stage direction), you feel the quaint, sweet charm of the humorless wife, the quaint and slightly acid charm of the humorous husband who is too much of a gentleman to be wholly admirable, and too much of a gentleman to lose our respect and regard, and altogether and subtly British—which, even more than his humor, is his “saving grace”. A dramatist may open his play with a dozen servants delivering the exposition, and we shall not greatly care, so long as he can bring on such delightfully studied and unflaggingly sustained living characters as these.

In the second volume of his “library edition” of the major works of Pinero, Clayton Hamilton presents “The Gay Lord Quex” and “Iris”. Mr. Hamilton’s enthusiasm for Pinero is almost unbounded, and leads him into curious excesses. One of them is his admiration for the “great” third act of “The Gay Lord Quex”. He regards it as a tremendous and never-to-be-too-much-studied feat of technical dexterity, and so it seemed to us eighteen years ago, when we saw John Hare and Irene Vanbrugh play it. But today we are disposed to say that any study of it is too much. Our dramatists do not, and perhaps never have, needed that kind of dexterity. What they need is utterly to forget it. Far rather, for their souls’ good and ours, would we send them to study the placid character drawing of “The Saving Grace”. This “great” act is simply the Gallic “spiral stairway” climax, the “winding up”, by cumulative suspense and surprise, to the final astonishment, the wooden, artificial trickery of “the well-made play”, so called, no doubt, because it is generally so badly made from the higher view. Compared with the technical dexterity of J. M. Barrie,

say, in indicating by a few vivid strokes, partly of pantomime, the whole tragic renunciation of Crichton and the whole philosophic import of the drama, in Act III of “The Admirable Crichton”, this act of Pinero’s is mere showman’s work. It is the work of the “play builder”, not the creative dramatic artist.

On the other hand, “Iris” still impresses the reader as an honest and relentless, though at times crude, study of a weak woman, and its conclusion is still dreadfully satisfactory. Mr. Hamilton hints that it has never been played. I did not see Fay Davis as Iris, but it is certainly true that in America Miss Harned failed of the possibilities, though Oscar Ashe’s Maldonado was one of the memorable performances of our generation. With “The Thunderbolt”, this drama stands up above the bulk of Pinero’s work, possessing together with his careful, solid, often too rigid carpentry, a sense of worlds beyond the theatre and the awful shadow of actual life. It deserves study, and a revival on the stage.

The shadow of actual life does not perceptibly darken the door of Philip Moeller’s study when he sits down to write a “somewhat historical play”. Five of these plays from his pen, all in one act, and four familiar in the repertoire of the Washington Square Players, are now published in a single volume. History, to Moeller, is merely an excuse for a burlesque. He would have been a capital librettist for Offenbach, and if we now had a lyric stage he would certainly adorn it. “Helena’s Husband” (a burlesque on Helen of Troy), familiar not only to patrons of the Washington Square Players but by this time to patrons of nearly all the little theatres in the land, is as youth-

fully high-spirited, irreverent, keen, witty, satirical and theatrically effective as any one-act play of its kind ever written in this country. The theme so dear to American burlesque writers of seventy-five years ago, Pocahontas, is not so happily handled, but in "The Roadhouse in Arden", mingling with the absurdities of an aged Hamlet wedded to a decaying Cleopatra as innkeepers, and Shakespeare and Bacon as guests, is a strain of real poetic fancy, a laughing, bantering flash of symbolism, which is odd and delightful.

Certain of the other skits are not without a touch of the Greenwich Village lack of reticence in speech, but all

of them show adroitness, wit, theatrical sense, and a unifying idea. When the Washington Square Players could give us work like this, we realize anew the pity of their enforced closing. Our "commercial" theatre offers us nothing whatever to match it in kind, and precious little in quality.

The People's Theater. By Romain Rolland, translated by Barrett H. Clark. Henry Holt and Co.

Patriotic Drama in Your Town. By Constance D'Arcy Mackay. Henry Holt and Co.

The Twentieth Century Theatre. By William Lyon Phelps. The Macmillan Co.

The Saving Grace. By C. Haddon Chambers. Brentano's.

The Social Plays of Arthur Wing Pinero, Vol. II (The Gay Lord Quex and Iris). E. P. Dutton and Co.

Five Somewhat Historical Plays. By Philip Moeller. Alfred A. Knopf.

VAN NIPPEN, HOMER OF OUR FLEET

BY BENJAMIN DE CASSERES

THE Great War was in a sense a poets' war. No sooner had the German legions begun their march toward the graveyard of the Marne through Belgium, than a German poet hurled his "Hymn of Hate" at the world. It was answered by Emile Verhaeren, Belgium's greatest poet and one of the greatest of all time, with a defiance written in blood with a sword. Gabriele D'Annunzio hurried from Paris to his beloved Italy, and with poems that set the very craters of Vesuvius on fire he mobilized the soul of his countrymen and seated, miraculously, millions of peasants on the bare back of Pegasus.

France sent her poets to the front to a man, and few returned, for a real poet, like Byron at Missolonghi, always meets the Pale Horse half way, with a song on his lips. Remy de Gourmont, exquisite fabricator of

"Litanies of the Rose", was struck down at home by psychic concussion. He died of grief because his sword was only a pen. Rupert Brooke, no longer singing songs of wasted love and annihilations, rose to glory in the trap at Gallipoli. Alan Seeger, an American of the Foreign Legion, went to his "rendezvous with Death" with an ecstatic light in his eye. Joyce Kilmer forged his immortality in his hot and buoyant young manhood with singing shells. Lord Dunsany, Irish fabulist, was twice wounded before he quit. Where there are ideals there are always poets who strip to the waist to die for them. For great poetry, like great love, is sib to Death.

"The Challenge", by Lieutenant Leonard Van Noppen, has just been issued in London and will soon be published in this country. It contains one hundred and twenty-six sonnets