

ENDOWED THEATRES AND THE AMERICAN STAGE.

THE task of writing upon the actual state of the American stage is very difficult and delicate, and I undertake it with great diffidence and serious misgivings. Being foreign-born, I am not familiar enough with its past as perhaps I should be to do full justice to my theme, but possibly my foreign origin and experience have given me certain facilities for comparisons and judgment which, if I were of American birth, I might not be able to make.

It seems to me that there is no danger in America which can be said to threaten the future existence of the stage. In this country new theatres are built every day; every day new stars appear on the histrionic horizon; every day new companies and new combinations are formed. This is not surprising, for the stage offers a large field for financial investment and speculation. One can get a higher rent from a theatre than from almost any other kind of building. The work of the theatrical manager is comparatively very easy, as it consists mostly of "filling dates"; that is, of finding enough so-called attractions to give performances during the whole of the theatrical season. Such work does not require any artistic or literary education or any preliminary training. There is also in this land of possibilities and ambitions a vast number of candidates for histrionic honors, and their prospects seem always bright. But the future of the stage and the future of dramatic art and dramatic literature are very different from each other.

The increasing number of theatres and of theatrical organizations in America proves only one thing; that is, the increase in the public desire here for theatrical performances. The population of the cities and even of the minor towns here grows at a wonderful rate; besides, the general welfare and the natural need of recreation after a day's hard work or after a day of idleness are certainly incentives for some outside excitement. This is, however, not the ultimate *desideratum* of dramatic art. No harm is done if a manager fill his pockets or if an actor or actress acquire a fortune. But is this the manner in which a

higher standard of dramatic art can be attained? Are pastime on one side and speculation on the other the only objects for which the theatre exists? Is there not a higher object than either of these?

When I came to America, there were many things in the theatrical methods and customs prevailing here that puzzled me. The first thing I noticed as strange was the manner in which theatrical performances were advertised. Huge posters, lithographs, quotations from the press on the bills, pictures of Shakespeare standing side by side with advertisements of patent medicines and dog-shows were placed in such a way as to catch the eye of every passer-by and disfigure the walls. This brutal custom of bringing the people to the theatre by means of elaborate prints and a bragging style struck me very disagreeably at first, but little by little I came to understand that it was adopted and sanctioned by even the best actors of this country, for the reason that it was the only way to attract the public. On the continent in Europe, however, the people are always on the lookout for everything that is going on in the artistic world, and a small sheet of paper is sufficient to notify them of performances. Another surprise awaited me when I took up a newspaper and looking eagerly for theatrical notices found them under the heading of "Amusements," and, to cap the climax, discovered, just beneath an elaborate criticism on the performance of "Julius Cæsar," an account of a show of trained monkeys. I must confess that the heading and the juxtaposition filled me with dismay. I have since noticed that some of the papers of a higher standing use the title of "Drama" or "Theatre" instead of the hateful one of "Amusements."

One of the strongest proofs of the relatively small importance of the theatres in the United States is the lack of buildings built solely for the drama. In Europe, theatres bear the character of public buildings and are situated in a square with plenty of space around them. Here nearly all of them are crowded between the shops in business streets. They present externally very slight indication of their exceptional character, except by means of a signboard and a frame with photographs of actors and actresses exposed in the open lobby. In some large cities the manager of to-day attempts by adorning the front entrances of his building to give it something of an artistic air; but in the majority of towns the lack of respect for the appearance of the theatre is appalling. Very often one has to pass through a drug store to the stage, and both of those establishments are frequently under the same management. The arrangements behind the scenes are still

worse, and though I have learned not to expect too much, I cannot be reconciled to the appearance of the stage entrances and to the condition of the dressing-rooms. There is an unpardonable negligence in this regard on the part of the local managers, who seem to consider nothing but the box-office. The actor during the intervals of his work has not even the chance of resting or breathing in his dingy dressing-room, which is without air, or rather is filled with bad air, and in its equipment is both shabby and unclean. These inconveniences and drawbacks, however, are trifles in comparison with the greater evils which affect the character of dramatic art in this country, the main one of which is a complete lack of stock companies.

In place of stock companies we have the modern system of travelling stars and combinations. There is nothing more detrimental to the actor, nothing more injurious to the advancement and development of his art, than the constant shifting on his part from one place to the other, and, what is still worse, the run of the same play hundreds of times, until the actor's work becomes nothing more than a mechanical and weary reproduction of his part night after night, and his only desire is that it may soon be over. Tomasso Salvini is the only man who has had the courage to revolt against this custom of the English and American stage. He never has played two nights in succession. Even when frequently changing his repertory, he has found his task too wearisome and in great measure injurious to his art. In order to give a good performance, the actor must have rest; he must not appear on the stage tired, trusting in his good luck or in the indulgence of the public. He ought to go to his work with eagerness and anticipation of all the joys and enchantments which a well-performed part gives to the true artist. If acting is, as it should be, the actor's highest enjoyment, it will be equally enjoyed by the audience. But how can one feel able to perform the difficult tasks of the stage after twenty-four hours of travelling or after a number of weeks of so-called "one-night stands"? Still, in spite of fatigue the actor has to obey the prompter's bell; no matter whether he feels well or ill, he must "go on"; no matter if he has a bad cold, he must recite the blank verse with hoarse voice, or he must dance a minuet with a headache. Scarcely has he time to unpack his trunk and eat a cold supper in a hurry before he must appear on the stage with a radiant countenance. Where is art then? Art has covered her face and flown away, ashamed of those who cease thus to be priests at her altar and simply become commercial travellers in art, changing the stage to a sample-room where the

public has only a vague idea what the article might have been if it had been shown under the best conditions.

Why do the great actors of this country travel from place to place instead of remaining in the large cities? There is one main reason: the lack of an endowed theatre, where the principal talent of the country, having an assured sustenance, may, without regard to the future, be devoted exclusively to artistic pursuits. Great actors would thus create a standard which would be authoritative in matters of dramatic art. It would be impossible for a single person, even of the most prominent standing, to keep up in any of the American cities a stock company devoted purely to legitimate drama and comedy. The sad experiment made by Edwin Booth is the best proof of this fact. And yet there is no name dearer to every ear, no talent shining with greater splendor than his. Where now is the beautiful theatre to the erection of which he sacrificed the gains of many years of hard work? Where is the stage upon which "Romeo," "Hamlet," "Shylock," walked in the full bloom and vigor of his genius? They are gone, and trade now spreads its goods where Shakespeare's spirit reigned. It is true that there are several stock companies in New York. The organizations of Augustin Daly, Palmer, and Frohman, as well as the cheerful home of local comedy under Harrigan, answer in part to the wants that permanent theatres ought to supply. There is also a stock company of old standing and reputation in Boston—the Boston Museum. All these companies contain excellent talent; they are conducted with sagacity and artistic knowledge; they possess a public of their own. And yet we see that even they lose sometimes their best actors or sublet their theatres to inferior organizations; that they are compelled to make long runs of pieces of poor intrinsic merit, mostly translations, and that only occasionally they can afford to give performances of a legitimate order. Is there no remedy for this degraded condition of American dramatic art?

There is no remedy except in the establishment of endowed theatres independent of the money question. The supremacy of such institutions, supplied with superior talent, artistic management, and elevated repertory, would soon be acknowledged by a public so quick to appreciate as the American people. This would naturally improve the taste and necessarily react upon the conduct of other theatres. There is no question that they would attract a great many persons who, disgusted with present conditions, rarely or never go to the play-house. Such theatres, if obliged by the provisions of their endow-

ment to produce the classic works of dramatic literature, would at the same time offer a ready hospitality to the best modern plays and bring to the front new authors, exciting emulation among the foremost writers of the country. A few great actors and innumerable so-called stars and combinations cannot furnish opportunities for the development of dramatic literature. The plays now written are mostly well or ill fitted dresses, made to order for each individual star, pieces of one part; or else they are conglomerations of scenic effects adapted to the capacity of the company, where the author sometimes has little to do, the ingenious actors having burdened the lines with their own inventions.

There can be no doubt that dramatic art is in its influence very important and is worthy of a better fate than falls to it in this country. It speaks more keenly to the human heart and mind than any of the other arts; its means are the most direct of all, appealing as they do to both our ears and eyes. Partaking thus of the advantages of music and the plastic arts, it penetrates the deepest recesses of the human soul, whose innermost chords it puts into vibration; however short may be its action, the impressions which it leaves are often very durable. By rendering some of the highest works of genius, this art makes more accessible to us the great inspiration of the master minds of humanity, and stirs in us the love of the ideal slumbering in every soul, and which, when awakened, raises man above the level of the brute. I have heard two of the most eminent divines of this age declare that next to the pulpit the stage can have the greatest influence for good. And yet there is no art which is so much abused. Controlled by sordid influences, it descends slowly but surely to a degraded position. Its influence certainly grows, but not for good. Instead of being itself a guide in matters of refinement and art, the stage of to-day is guided merely by the question of attractiveness and knows no higher aim than the receipts of the box-office; instead of trying to improve the public taste, it panders to the tastes of the majority. And who can deny that the lower the taste is the more general it is? I do not speak here of the great public, but of that portion of it which is most eager in its search for excitement. Is there anything more noticeable than the increasing vulgarity, falsely called realism, of the plays that nowadays achieve the greatest success?

In old Europe, where many things are in decay, but where also many other things remain as the outgrowth of centuries of civilization, the theatre has preserved to a great degree the character of a public institution. Almost every large city, every town of some im-

portance, possesses one or more theatres endowed either by the state or the city or by private donations. The foremost of them, like the *Théâtre Français* in Paris and the *Burg Theater* in Vienna, have exerted an exceedingly salutary influence, not only on the improvement of dramatic art, but equally on the development of literature, the refinement of public taste and manners, and in a great measure on the preservation of the purity and elegance of the language. Conservative in their tendencies, they have been a barrier against the encroachments of vulgarity, and they have not been indifferent to genuine improvement and progress. Similar to them was the action of many others, those in Berlin, Dresden, Munich, St. Petersburg, Copenhagen, Warsaw, Pesth, Prague, etc., etc. Strange to say, England, the home of Shakespeare, does not possess a national theatre. Germany, in fact, takes the front rank in regard to the respect it pays to dramatic art.

An endowed theatre is conducted on the basis of a stock company selected from the foremost talent of the country. The actor remains there for the greatest part of his life; at the end of his services, when old age or infirmity disables him for further work, he is granted a pension. The manager is not a speculator, but a responsible employee, chosen on account of fitness for his duties. In many of those institutions the plays are accepted or refused by a committee composed of the most prominent members of the company, sometimes in conjunction with a few select literary advisers. "Runs" of plays night after night are practically unknown. A successful piece is placed in the permanent repertory, to be repeated several times weekly or monthly. The rule is a continual change of bill. The companies are numerous; therefore there is no necessity for an actor to play every night. The regulations of the endowment usually prescribe the production of standard works at certain intervals. There is, for instance, no week in the *Théâtre Français* without a performance of Racine, Corneille, or Molière, no week in the *Burg Theater* without Schiller, Goethe, Lessing, or Shakespeare. Besides the endowed theatres, there exist in the larger cities, mainly in the capitals, many private ones that have to support themselves, and are therefore conducted more on a business basis. But such is the prestige of the endowed theatres that the others are compelled to follow the example set by them, and thus avoid the complete anarchy which is the result of our American system.

Starring is not wholly unknown on the European continent, but it is singularly modified and restrained. Actors and actresses who have achieved a notable success, whose fame has reached beyond the limits

of their own town or country, are granted now and then a few months' vacation, during which they are invited by other theatres to appear as "guests" in conjunction with the stock companies. Such was, I understand, the practice in this country as long as the stock companies existed. The latter disappeared because the present system seemed to promise a larger income both to the managers and to the actors. It is a question if we ever shall return to it. It would certainly be an improvement, but it would not solve the difficulty.

As to the *personnel* of endowed theatres, there would be no difficulty in forming it. Dramatic talent is not rare here. The prevalent mixture of races, the inherent quickness and subtlety of perception, the nervous and emotional temperament, as well as the innate sense of humor and observation among Americans—all these elements seem exceedingly propitious to the development of native dramatic talent. Among the older actors and actresses, trained in the school of stock companies (I include not only the stars, but, possibly even more, those who are satisfied with the humbler position of supporters), there are forces sufficient to form the nucleus of excellent companies. By grouping around them a number of younger actors and training them, we could certainly be able, in time, to emulate the better theatres in Europe. The managerial positions could be filled either by actors of experience and ability or by those of the local managers who have distinguished themselves by the artistic conduct of their business. Good-will would not be lacking; a great number of actors would welcome the change, and would gladly abandon their present uncertain and unsatisfactory manner of life to obtain a more dignified, more stable, and more artistic position.

As our mode of government places entirely out of question any idea of State or municipal support, it is not to be expected that in the present state of the public mind, where the theatre is considered mostly as an amusement and very often as a precursor of Hades, public subscriptions could be solicited with any prospect of success. The only chance is to find among the rich, the very rich, of this country men both enlightened and generous enough to endow such theatres with private donations. I say *very* rich, because it would be unfair to conceal that the cost of the establishment of such a theatre would run not merely into tens or hundreds of thousands, but into millions.

However, I do not despair. Was not the whole *renaissance* movement in Italy supported, not so much by Italian courts and governments as by the patronage of the wealthy inhabitants of the little

republics? Many of our millionaires have nobly shown how well they understand their duty to the country which gave them their wealth, by establishing religious, educational, and charitable institutions. Few commonwealths, indeed, can boast of such generous examples of philanthropy as the United States. In the artistic sphere we have instances of individuals endowing symphonic orchestras, musical institutes, and museums of fine arts. With regard to dramatic art, we know of a few cases where public-spirited citizens have erected fine buildings for theatres; but as no fund was provided to maintain companies in them, the theatres have been obliged to support themselves in the usual manner.

The awakening of the sense of art in other directions is a happy sign of the time. It is not unreasonable to hope that soon we shall see a Mæcenas of dramatic art, inspired by a noble ambition, not only erecting in one of the larger cities of America a theatre worthy of the high purposes for which it is founded, but also devoting a sufficient capital to assure its independence. Such an endowment would certainly be duplicated in time in other cities, because nothing is more contagious than good example. This is the only hope which sustains the courage of those who long to see the American stage in the place it ought to fill.

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A NEW IMPULSE TO AN OLD GOSPEL.

"HULL HOUSE, which was Chicago's first Settlement, was established in September, 1889. It represented no association, but was opened by two women, backed by many friends, in the belief that the mere foothold of a house, easily accessible, ample in space, hospitable and tolerant in spirit, situated in the midst of the large foreign colonies which so easily isolate themselves in American cities, would be in itself a serviceable thing for Chicago. It was opened on general Settlement lines, in the conviction that along those lines many educated young people could find the best outlet for a certain sort of unexpressed activity. Hull House is neither a University Settlement nor a College Settlement: it calls itself a Social Settlement, an attempt to make social intercourse express the growing sense of the economic unity of society. It is an attempt to add the social function to democracy. It was opened on the theory that the dependence of classes on each other is reciprocal; and that as the social relation is essentially a reciprocal relation, it gave a form of expression that has peculiar value." This I wrote in the FORUM for October.

I attempt in this paper to treat of the subjective necessity for a Social Settlement, to analyze, as nearly as I can, the motives that underlie a movement which I believe to be based not only on conviction, but on genuine emotion. I have divided the motives which constitute the subjective pressure toward Social Settlements into three great lines: the first contains the desire to make the entire social organism democratic, to extend democracy beyond its political expression; the second is the impulse to share the race life, to bring as much as possible of social energy and the accumulation of civilization to those portions of the race which have little; the third springs from a certain *renaissance* of Christianity, a movement toward its early humanitarian aspects.

It is not difficult to see that although America is pledged to the democratic ideal, the view of democracy has been partial and that its best achievement thus far has been pushed along the line of the fran-