

PETER USTINOV

CRISIS IN THE THEATRE

THERE are four groups of people who contribute towards the success or the failure of the theatre as an art. The first, and most important group, is that of the workers on the stage side of the curtain: the actors, the authors, the designers, the directors, the technicians. Next in importance comes the group who laugh, cry, or sleep on the other side of the curtain. The third: the men with the money; and last, and by all means least, the critics.

The cause of the present crisis in the theatre is not far to seek. It is, quite simply and quite depressingly, that not one of these groups is pulling its weight. This sounds a very sweeping statement, but it is, I think, true. The blame must be shared by everyone interested in the theatre. Mr. Michael Redgrave blames the critics. He is flattering them. At their worst they can be responsible for only their own meagre share in the general disgrace.

Let us deal first of all with the people who earn their living on the stage, the actors and the authors, and see what is wrong in their department. Are our actors good? On the whole, yes. And are our dramatists good? On the whole, no. Here lies part of the tragedy. The acting of a period is governed largely by the drama of that period, and our dramatists have unfortunately fallen into certain set patterns copied from the leaders of each respective genre. The average dialogue of a modern play compels the poor actor to run the same old gammut of conventional situations and platitudinous lines *ad nauseam*. Mr. Coward has been one example for young dramatists to follow, Miss Dodie Smith another. Too few of them have been daring. Influences, especially in youth, are pardonable, even essential, but they should never be used coldly and consciously. Conscious copying of the masters, especially in cases where the cause of that master's greatness or popularity is not fully understood, leads to almost the entire output of rejected plays. If an aspiring dramatist wishes to be successful, the last thing he should do is to sit down at his desk with the intention of writing a successful play. How often have we come across the stock lines in the stock situation!

X. You mean that he . . . that you . . . that I . . .

Y. (Gravely) I'm afraid so. . . .

Or—

He: Mary . . . d'you remember . . . Vienna. . . .

She: (Emotional) It's no good, Francis!

He: Mary . . . the music . . . the gypsies. . . .

She: (Her eyes full of tears) The Danube in spring. . . .

He: (Laughing) Yes . . . and you remember that funny old band leader with the great red whiskers who tried to play 'Dance Little Lady' for you and it sounded like Chopin's Funeral March. . . .

(They both laugh. Then she looks at him, sadly).

She: I'd quite made up my mind to be angry with you, Francis. . . .

He: Darling . . . have a tomato. . . .

She: (Smiling through tears) Francis . . . you child. . . .

And so on. This sort of thing has reached such a pitch that if a new play of a certain kind is heralded in London, with a certain cast in it, we know in advance the clothes that will be worn, the kind of lines that will be thrown away, the attitudes that will be struck, and the make of the interminable cigarettes that will be smoked. There is no feeling of novelty at all, no electricity in the house on the first night. Let us imagine what happens. The house is full. The curtain goes up while some members of the audience are out of their seats, gossiping, waving to each other, being seen. To cover the shuffling, there is a lengthy duologue between two servants in a luxurious room belonging to obviously successful and worthless people, and exquisitely furnished with extreme lack of taste. The servants establish everything. Time, place, location of guest room, fact that master is a flirt, fact that mistress knows it, fact that master is a playwright (here we guess that he will make his entrance in a dressing gown), fact that mistress is an actress, fact that this particular play is one of it's author's most typical, and will therefore take nobody by surprise, thank God! The tedium continues for some time, and the audience is obviously enjoying itself. Then, at exactly the right moment, the moment the experienced playgoer had expected, the actor-in-chief makes his entrance, in a dressing gown. Tumultuous applause. He's so easily recognizable!

By the end of the first act, the audience can guess the trend of the other two acts, and comes back after the interval happy in the

knowledge that it will not be taken by surprise under any circumstances, and that it's theatrical sense has been flattered. It can sit back, and refrain from thinking. The evening will go according to plan. The play is a success by virtue of its veneer, it's lack of originality, and it's well-known profile.

Tragic indeed, because the real actors are often there, playing either the comic policeman *deus-ex-machina* who winds everything up in the last ten minutes, or the caricatured harridan who 'does' for the master, and speaks stage cockney—perhaps the great King Lear is there, in tails, patting the cushions as the first-nighters find their seats, talking to the great aproned Lady Macbeth about Master's this and Mistress' that:

But that is not the worst of it. Let us say that by some strange fluke the great King Lear is discovered, and given his chance. He straightway runs into another difficulty. If an actor disappears too often into the heart and soul of the character he plays—if that process necessitates the abundant use of crêpe-hair, of noses and beards, and of integrity, he runs a grave risk of being neglected. If, however, he can let some obvious clue to his identity penetrate his disguise, the performance is generally considered remarkable. A man like Mr. Laughton, for instance, must take good care that his disguises are penetrated. He, of course, has little difficulty. He has now a reputation as an outstanding character actor. Apparently Captain Bligh, the Hunchback of Notre Dame, and Squire Pengallan all look alike, all think alike, all act alike, and I suspect would all speak the Gettysburg Address rather beautifully if asked to. Meanwhile an actor like, say, Mr. Stephen Murray, is foolish enough to maintain that Thersites and Abraham Lincoln are not even distant relations. Oh, what a risk he is running!

We have seen how the work of the brilliant often goes unappreciated. There is yet another evil. The influence of mediocre texts on ordinary actors. When the play is bad, the average modern actor all too rarely tries to lift the thing out of the commonplace rut—which is bad for two distinct reasons. Firstly, it makes the play as boring and stereotyped as when he read it. Secondly, the poison of indifference and complacency works on him, so that when he is presented with a really sensitive, and therefore difficult text, he has forgotten how to go about it, and plunges into every pitfall, ignoring the punctuation, and finding himself unable to create any atmosphere behind the lines. Too many actors keep an

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inventory of their capabilities stored in their minds, and to them a colonel is just a colonel, a clergyman is just a clergyman. How dull! The theatre is, after all, hard as it is to believe, an art. All the joy, all the mystery associated with an art vanishes immediately it is degraded to a routine, a plain functional job of work.

And here we come to the guilt of the critics. Why are the plays of one of the greatest contemporary dramatists writing in the English language never to be seen in London? Probably because that great dramatist can foresee what would happen. I refer, of course, to Mr. Sean O'Casey, an angry dramatic poet, whose plays are full of the most shocking surprises enacted before dingy crumbling walls, horribly devoid of clappable entrances and exits. He will never be popular in this day and age, but he will outlive us all. Why is he so great? Are his recent plays perfect? I personally don't think so. Are his plots admirable, his construction beyond praise? I wouldn't know. He is great simply because he is the only dramatist in England who consistently dares to bite off more than he can chew. And there is a certain glory in that. Shakespeare, one feels, would want his plays judged alongside perfection itself. He reached for the stars, and failed more magnificently than anyone else. With O'Casey it is the same. His work is full of continual striving after moods too large to express. He too, would wish for perfection. He too, will fail, obviously. Mr. Somerset Maugham has often achieved what he set out to do. Shakespeare and O'Casey, never. 'The Circle' is, in it's way, a perfect play. 'King Lear' is not. Yet nobody doubts which is the greater of the two.

It is the spirit of enterprise which has deserted our playwrights. They are too concerned with rules and regulations. No artist of any kind can achieve anything really worth while within the limits imposed by the theorists. Very few of our writers throw caution to the winds. It is less lucrative.

Mr. O'Casey is not one for the theorists. The theorists, the critics, would not subscribe to his violent assaults on the Dramatic Muse. Bite off more than you can chew, try something new, and you lay yourself open to their wise scolding. A foolish few have learned this to their cost.

Of course, the critic's function is not always a pleasant one. In a far from golden age in the theatre, it must be incredibly boring—but that is no excuse. I met a critic the other day at some

theatrical function, a perfectly charming gentleman, who was pleased to describe himself as one of the most experienced critics in London. Speaking about Mr. Maxwell Anderson's 'The Wingless Victory', he accused it, quite rightly, of being just an old-fashioned melodrama. I was impressed, and approved of him as a critic. Then, a little later on, he rose to his feet, and made an impassioned plea for more melodrama in the theatre of today—'Why don't our young authors write more melodrama?' He said—'The most splendid moment I have ever experienced in the theatre was during Henry Arthur Jones' 'Silver King' . . . while the immortal line "O God, put back Thy universe and give me yesterday" was being uttered.' He also chided me mildly for saying that the theatre was in a bad state, claiming that everything in the garden was rosy. Replying to his demand for more melodrama, I claimed that it was impossible nowadays to emulate that kind of play unselfconsciously, unless it was to be coddled, but that if he insisted on an example along the lines that he had indicated, surely Doctor Faustus' last speech—

'See, see where Christ's blood streams in the firmament!

One drop would save my soul—half a drop: ah, my Christ!'—which was in the same vein as the Jones' one, was more worth copying. It transcended melodrama because of its power and its poetry, I said, rather rashly. And he was seen to nod furiously. In other words, he seemed to agree with absolutely everything anybody said. One's knife passed through him time and again, and he always emerged smiling, ever so nice, ever so keen on everything, trees, birds, cross-word puzzles, ice-cream, China tea, drama. Naturally, they are not all like that, but this incident, which I hope will prove an isolated one, shook me. I believe that violent, biased critics are better for the theatre than ones who see perfection everywhere.

But what critics have we? There is Mr. Agate, who loves the theatre, and is always well worth reading, There is Mr. Farjeon, who ought to have more space at his disposal. There is Mr. Dent, Mr. Macarthy, Mr. Horsnell, Mr. Brown and a few others. And after that we come across those writers who are not critics at all, but reporters. Their function should be made quite clear, so that their criticism need not be taken seriously. It would be better that way, because when they do attempt criticism, they often

meet with disastrous, self-revealing results. One of these people found 'Uncle Vanya' irritating. 'It isn't made clear if it's a tragedy or a comedy', he grumbled. Well, really!

What is depressing about the criticism of today is not only that new, adventurous plays, like Mr. Ackland's, are treated far too harshly, but also that such a great deal of bilge is given the critic's blessing.

How is this state of affairs to change? I don't think that it's worth the author's or the actor's while to plead with the critics, or to bluster, or to fawn. Only one man in the theatre seems to get any kick out of behaviour of this kind, and that is Mr. Beverley Baxter, who, both as author and critic, has made this side of theatre life peculiarly his own.

No, let us just wake up. Miss Sheila Donisthorpe, in her book 'Show Business' is full of good, if slightly impracticable ideas. She is also full of bitterness. This should not be so. Bitterness has driven some of our best dramatists from the stage, and it is the authors who set the pace. Let the authors persevere, write more and better plays, and they will slowly but surely improve the standard of acting, make the men with the money more adventurous, educate the audience to the great thrills of the theatre, and even, with luck, improve the standard of criticism.

Complacent wishful-thinkers in the theatre attribute the present decay to the war. They believe that all our best theatrical artists are either in the war, or lying in the dark and listening, either being beastly or not being beastly to the Germans. They believe that all people want to do is to laugh. I suppose that is why 'Watch on the Rhine' and 'Lottie Dundass' are so successful. It is an easy thing to say, and a difficult thing to prove.

The theatre is what we make it. Let us make it good. Please, Mr. Bridie, Mr. Ackland, Mr. Priestley, Miss McCracken, Miss Donisthorpe. . . .

It is a task fraught with difficulties, but there is one great consolation. Things are so bad at present that it will need a stroke of diabolical genius to make them worse.

ANTONY BOURNE

WHERE SHALL JOHN GO?

III—U. S. A.

DEAR JOHN,

It would, I suppose be wise to tell you, before we go any farther, my qualifications, or rather lack of them, as an informant on America. The first 6 years of my life were spent in New York City or thereabouts, and though those years must have made deep scores on my subconscious, they left my conscious mind remarkably untouched. I recall myself dressed for the first time in a white fur coat, sitting unwarily on a fly-paper; some rather bold experiments in sex, and sans front teeth playing the wolf in 'Little Red Riding Hood'. The rest is oblivion. During the next twenty years, I became, or like to think I did, a European.

On my return to America I spent a few months in New York, a few more in Southern California, and what seems like a lifetime in various Army camps scattered over the country, in locations remarkable only for their inaccessibility. Moreover I spent a considerable part of this brief time mooning about in a little private bubble blown from my European experiences, which refracted every glimmer of understanding of the country into a succession of absolutely invalid European comparisons, so that it was not until it was rather too late that I discovered that I was revisiting a country as different from England in particular and Europe in general as Aztec Mexico.

Although I have peered through the window of a Pullman car or an automobile at most of the natural wonders and horrors of the landscape, and visited a number of the more notorious beauty spots, I'm afraid I came away without the conventional impressions of Nature unconquered, of infinite space, or of overwhelming beauty; my reaction to everything not urban has been either one of acute melancholy or an urgent *nostalgie du pavé*. For this I don't particularly apologize, for the only important discovery to be made about the natural scene is, I believe, its unimportance; its only appeal, the sadness of a lost cause. Everywhere, always, you sense the threat of what might be called the Cube-Ice Age. Even in parts of the country undiscovered by