

## Emancipating the Theatre

*How to See a Play, by Richard Burton. New York: The Macmillan Co. \$1.25 net.*

A DESIRE exists in America to-day to emancipate the art of the theatre, one of the finest desires that ever animated a number of Americans. And it is a desire which nothing is more likely to suffocate quietly and effectually than such fostering as this by Dr. Richard Burton, president of the Drama League of America.

The trouble with the American theatre, according to most diagnosticians, is the American public. But what is the trouble with the public? As a man who has lectured up and down the country, who is intimately aware of the conventions, the phantasms, the superstitions, that blind many Americans to the art of the theatre, Dr. Burton diagnoses the trouble as the semi-Puritanism of semi-educated people. These are not his words, but the idea is his. It is the idea which gives his book its character.

As to semi-education, the assumption is sound enough, and Dr. Burton's chapters on method and structure, on development and climax and ending, are honest first aids to sophistication. They may possibly sharpen the intellectual interest in drama for many who never before conceived of it as intellectually interesting.

It is, however, the semi-Puritanism of his audience that stands most in the way of an emancipated theatre, and it is his concessions to that semi-Puritanism that make Dr. Burton so unsound. For, in order to win his audiences, Dr. Burton shows himself perfectly ready to reconcile the theatre to philistinism. He thinks that this is making enlightenment easy. In point of fact, it is making enlightenment impossible. It is guaranteeing to philistine America the maintenance of the very attitude which is incompatible with the emancipation desired. It is doing nothing more wonderful than extending the area of pseudo-culture, imposing on the theatre the uninformed righteousness and respectability on which the love of beauty can no more thrive than a flower can thrive on sand.

With Dr. Burton's applications of whitewash to dramatic art it is not necessary to quarrel. There is no doubt that the theatre, as he says, has been regarded carelessly, thoughtlessly, as a place of idle amusement, "or worse." It is true that, in certain closed minds, it has "neither been associated with a serious treatment of life nor with the refined pleasure derivable from contact with art." It is therefore forgivable if he takes time to assert the startling fact that the drama "is in its finest estate a work of art comparable with such other works of art as pictures, statuary, musical composition and achievements of the book world." But where such leniency with the reactionary becomes fatuous is when Dr. Burton treats of the play as "Cultural Opportunity" and declares it to be his chief wish "to create the playhouse innocently pleasant, rational and sound as art."

In the mouth of a popular lecturer nothing, after all, is more ominous than the word culture. It is the word that betrays the ulterior motive of the missionary who wants from art not quickened sympathies, expanded desires, delectation, but self-improvement and moral uplift. It means that the lecturer regards beauty as something objective and dead, a fly that can be preserved for parlor admiration in the amber of suburbanism. It means that he has standards and rules and principles by which, with a certain amount of effort, any vital subject can be reconciled to the fixed and blinkered sympathies of Elders.

the radical dramatists. But in doing so he is simply sticking cut flowers into the painted desert he has accepted. A man who wants the playhouse to be "innocently pleasant" is like a man who wants life to be "innocently pleasant"—a man, that is to say, who is naïve. What is one to think, then, of Dr. Burton's lofty reference to dramatists' "personal vagaries, extravagant theories and lawless imaginings"? These words will bring great comfort, no doubt, to those who think that beauty can come to life without courage and sacrifice, the dangers of fidelity to emotion and the agonies of birth. But behind such words lurks precisely the complacency which makes Dr. Burton say his book is intended to help the theatregoer "to get the most for his money." You cannot have the love of beauty if your first idea is a good bargain, even a bargain in culture.

Let us grant, with Dr. Burton, that an enormous number of Americans associate the word theatre with the "forged lies" and gluttonies of lust, with tinsel and sham, with the nets and snares of Old Nick. The best way to kill this is surely not, as Dr. Burton attempts, to advertise the theatre as a place where souls can actually be polished, a spiritual shoe-shining parlor, with Shakespeare and Ibsen and Shaw at the brush. When you are dealing with a drunkard, such deference is advisable. When he points at the moon and says: "Damned old clock bust again, isn't it?" you naturally reply obsequiously: "Yes, dear, the damned old hands are gone." But to treat the public with the obsequious persuasiveness which you use for imbeciles is simply to prolong our night. What the Americans who want a finer theatre need is not a shrewder discrimination in the purchase of theatre tickets, a few little clues as to "cultural opportunity" and an assurance that the drama is really and truly Art. What we all need is to realize that until we revolt against ugliness simply because it is ugliness, and seek beauty simply because it is beauty, because something inside ourselves authenticates it and rates it above tangible assets, folkways, honor in the community, real estate opportunities and improved silo tanks, we shall go on having a theatre as uninspired as ourselves. It is a new mood that is needed, a mood in which beauty and religion and reform are advocated for a better reason than that ulteriorly they pay.

But it is hard to believe that Dr. Burton really feels this. There is, for example, the damaging internal evidence of his style. When Dr. Burton says "It is all in the day's culture," or when he speaks of England "getting into line" artistically, he may goodhumoredly contend that only pedants will seriously object. But what of his statement that the Elizabethan play is "languaged in a sort of surplusage of exuberance"? What of his statement that Shakespeare "bulked large in school and college, perforce"? What of his remark that "it is curious to reflect upon the neglect of the theatre hitherto for centuries as an institution"? What of his reference to Miss Barrymore's "increase of avoirdupois of late years"? These are not mere verbal lapses, common enough among popular lecturers. They are indications of a genuine insensitiveness. They show that to him the drama is a mere commodity, a thing talked about and judged but not felt. Beauty also is a name. For the quality of beauty he apparently has no time.

A word should be said, incidentally, about the unfortunately slipshod manner in which "How to See a Play" has been edited. The omission of the table of contents may be intentional but nothing but indifference can account for the incompetent proof-reading. Such spellings as Echgera-

## A Rodin in Fiction

THREE things in Paris apparently dissociated but nevertheless connected in my mind are Rodin's "Thinker" in front of the Panthéon, a small canvas of Rembrandt's in the Louvre representing Jesus of Nazareth, travel-worn and weary, resting in a laborer's cottage, and the novels of Charles Louis Philippe. Philippe is the young Paris municipal clerk and man of letters whose untimely death in 1909 cut short what promised to be one of the most extraordinary careers in contemporary French literature. He was the son of a provincial shoemaker, and the grandson of a beggar. An entire number of *La Nouvelle Revue Française*, the most fastidious of French reviews, was consecrated to his memory. Last year appeared a critical edition of his works, including seven novels, a book of short stories, the letters of his youth, and "Charles Blanchard," an experimental and unfinished study of the life of his father. "Philippe est mort qui était seul et pauvre et petit," wrote the poet Paul Claudel, in his melancholy and piercing dirge. Philippe was poor and little; yet, aided only by his unquenchable love for all that was human, a certain fiery evangelism and the rigorous exactitude of his art, he had accomplished something solidly beautiful. "I dream," he once wrote to a friend of his youth, "of writing things substantial and compact, like certain statues of Rodin." To a very remarkable degree he accomplished his ambition.

Philippe was poor and little, but he was not alone. He belonged to a group of writers of the French proletariat, which also includes Marguerite Audoux, the famous seamstress of Montparnasse, and "Lucien Jean" (Lucien Dieudonné), a fellow clerk in the Hôtel-de-Ville, who died young, leaving a posthumous classic, "Parmi les hommes" ("In the midst of men, our brothers"). These writers, and others less notable, are linked together not only by literary comradeship, but by the sobriety and subtle beauty of their thought and the classic simplicity of their style. They are possessed of an artistic dignity and modesty which must forever distinguish them from the bourgeois novelists who are industriously "making copy" out of the lives of the poor, and the more academic novelists with a social thesis.

Philippe came to Paris at the age of twenty-one from the little village of Cerilly, near Moulins, where his father was the shoemaker. During four winter months he searched in vain for work, living on bread and cheese, and writing, to save fuel, in the writing-room of the big department store, Grands-Magazins du Louvre. Sixteen hundred francs a year seemed to him at that time an unrealizable dream. He finally obtained employment in the municipal gas works, and he never afterwards was free from the routine work of his clerical position. Philippe loved the trees and the solitude of l'Île Saint-Louis and for years he occupied lodgings on the Quai Bourbon. Dostoevsky, Dickens and Tolstoy looked down from the walls of his chamber-study. His manuscripts were arranged in neat, workmanlike piles. From his writing-table he could look across the Seine to the Hôtel-de-Ville where he was proud to earn his daily bread. He was never obliged to degrade his art for money. The literary poseur, the sensationalist and the decadent were equally the objects of his detestation.

Charles Louis Philippe was a sincere socialist and profoundly religious, though distrustful of creed and dogma. There was not any contradiction, says Marcel Ray, between the evangelism of Philippe and his socialism. His

tined "Jean Bousset"—"le petit" of "Le Père Perdrix"—to throw a bomb into the heart of Paris; but on reflection he suppressed the bomb. For Philippe was incapable of sustained hatred, even in one of the characters of his creation. Poverty to him was the great sin of man; until it is ended, all men, both rich and poor, can neither be free nor happy, nor can life be beautiful. Meanwhile, the true artist should never veil the ugly facts of life caused by the distortions of our present society. He should seek, on the contrary, to reveal them, and more; he should discover the latent beauty in the ugliest object.

"Mother and Child," an early and tender group, was at first, I think more fittingly, entitled "The Maternal Passion." "Bubu de Montparnasse" is a terrific study of prostitution, as unflinching in its ugliness as "The Old Courtesan" of Rodin. Nothing like its clean veracity exists in our own literature. In "Le Père Perdrix" Philippe modelled a provincial group with the central figure an old blacksmith, afflicted by age and poverty. He goes to Paris with little "Jean Bousset," whom "bad books" have made a socialist, and, hopeless and bewildered, lets himself fall into the black waters of the Seine. It is tragedy simple and poignant. "Croquignole," on the contrary, is almost farcical in its humor, an "epic farce," according to one French critic, of the Hôtel-de-Ville. Yet there is something tragic, after all, in the fantastic figure of the clerk who inherits a small fortune and riots it away, ending his life when his last franc is gone.

"Charles Blanchard," Philippe's posthumous and uncompleted work, is a study of poverty which rises out of submerged human life like a figure of Rodin's from the rough-hewn block. There is no attempt at fiction plotting. Philippe had thrown that aside. "I take," he wrote, "a beggar, a little creature abandoned by all. At twelve years of age he discovers work, and work is his salvation. He becomes a good workman and father." There is nothing, of course, in this subject to attract the ordinary novelist, or, perhaps, the ordinary reader; but Philippe handles it with singularly realistic power.

Take again, Philippe's famous study of prostitution, "Bubu de Montparnasse." It is the most commonly read of all his novels in France, and yet the book is considered untranslatable in this country, so wide is the difference between our moral conventions and those of the French. Philippe wrote of the little Paris prostitute, "Berthe Méténier," as if she were his sister. He even wrote of her bully, "Bubu," as if he were a brother. Evil, in the savage form of "Bubu," conquers in this terrific story, conquers because it is active and strong. When goodness is no longer feeble, says the novelist, when goodness also is active and strong, then the artist can conscientiously give a different ending to such a story—but not until then.

Curiously enough, however, in life, the life from which Philippe so scrupulously sketched his novel, there was, in a way, a brighter conclusion, an unpublished chapter. It has been said that Philippe had much of the evangelical in his turbulent nature. In the "Souvenirs" of her friend, Marguerite Audoux tells us that the very day on which "Bubu de Montparnasse" was published, the real "Berthe Méténier" wrote to Philippe. She wished to escape from "Bubu" and go to Marseille where she could resume, unmolested, her making of artificial flowers. "You alone will have pity on me," she wrote. "I have confidence in you. Save me." Philippe met her at the place appointed. He showed her to his friends as if she were a balanced child. Happening to be presented with a plaster