

OUR DRAMA SINCE 1900

PLAYWRIGHTS OF THE NEW AMERICAN THEATRE. By Thomas H. Dickinson.
New York: The Macmillan Co.

Twenty-five years have witnessed many changes in the American Theatre, but none more significant than the awakened interest in drama which is creating a more intelligent theatregoer. The country is to-day alive with people—in school and college, church and library—who follow intently experiments in writing, in production, both at home and abroad; and who read, in print, plays which set the standard of theatres in other countries than our own. The quarter century has seen an insurgency in the playhouse which has offered a wider outlet of expression, a greater freedom of creative will. In other words, our American Theatre—as measured by the competitive struggle which goes on yearly in New York—is not so wholly dominated by commercialism, that it has not room for such a personality as Eugene O'Neill, and such group endeavor as The Theatre Guild.

Mr. Dickinson's new book devotes the first hundred and twenty-three pages to an analysis of the work of Percy MacKaye as pioneer and of O'Neill as Prometheus Unbound. In the credit he gives to these two men he indicates the far road the American dramatist has travelled since the days when he was dictated to by the commercial manager of the old Theatre Trust. No estimate of MacKaye would be just that failed to recognize the amount of plowing he did over a field which seemed distressingly unfertile on the surface, the new methods he experimented with, the unshakable faith he possessed that the theatre had a social mission, and that the people had a mass aspiration which needed, through dramatic art, to find expression.

With painstaking thoroughness, Mr. Dickinson describes the output of O'Neill, good, bad and indifferent, and evolves therefrom what he considers to be the dramatist's social philosophy; and, if I read him aright, his conclusions place O'Neill in his healthy pessimism much nearer Strindberg than anything we have ever had of native origin. I cannot yet acknowledge

O'Neill to be a master of form—though his experiment in form challenges interest; nor does one recognize in him a clear vision of the life which he tries to handle fundamentally. He can see the stars but an instant, because of the bitterness of reality—his irony is embedded in this angle. Yet no dramatist we have thus far had, possesses more interest in abstract ideas underlying palpitant situations than O'Neill. Being our one instance, in the American Theatre, of a continuity of purpose, there is a tendency to place O'Neill in almost finality of judgment. Whereas I believe he has still much to learn of life, much compassion to feel for life, much to explore that is nearer the divine than the Neanderthal.

One has only to know what the American Drama was before 1900—drama written after a pattern, drama catering to external interest, drama following the lines of least resistance, drama listening to and compromising with every taboo—to be thankful for the hope that Mr. Dickinson's book holds forth in the many other dramatists he discusses briefly, but always with personal conviction as to their value in the onward progress of the theatre. That one cannot always agree with him is no reason why his discussion should not be healthily invigorating and challenging. He is prone to conclude that certain points of view handled by our playwrights "just grew", like Topsy, instead of being influenced by others who pointed the way. "With Barker and Shaw," he writes, "Jesse Lynch Williams is the exponent of the brilliant idea in drama." Would it not be better to say "because of Barker and Shaw" this is so, remembering *Getting Married* and *The Madras House*? He claims that no man writing for the theatre has less of the theatre in his works than Augustus Thomas, not recalling perhaps those significant introductions Mr. Thomas has written for a Library Edition of his plays, wherein he shows how expertly he always veneered the chips of life with which he dealt into a theatrical commodity.

So we could go through this book disagreeing with Mr. Dickinson as to particulars, but in the end reaching conclusions not unlike his as to the healthful potentiality of the American Theatre at this very hour. In the previous books, he has shown himself to be interested not so much in the theatre as in the rea-

sons for a theatre: this tendency to philosophize makes parts of the new book a little jumbled by side passages which divert the attention without being diverting. One could never accuse him of insularity, and yet there is an almost blind acceptance of the "American product" as the best the market affords; this enthusiasm is an excellent quality, not often to be found in his writing. And strange to say, where he allows it to reign, it runs away with his judgment. He brings a scientific analysis to many things that have no science to them; he is prone to pigeon-hole too closely; he launches great arguments against small dogmas. But none the less, in this plethora of material, which he has condensed into very small space, one finds his essential purpose: to indicate the new threads of a new drama, to assay the soil for the new drama. He has done his work thoroughly, alertly. In fact, sometimes we cannot see the drama for the names. Nevertheless, it is a careful diagnosis, with the conclusion that the patient is doing well, and, when full grown, will be better than ever. My only worry at present with the American Drama is its mental growth, its body of ideas. Technically, it has flowered beautifully since 1900.

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A GERMAN REALIST

FABER, ODER DIE VERLORENEN JAHRE. By Jakob Wassermann. Berlin: S. Fischer Verlag.

BRANDER MATTHEWS used to like to tell the story of a French play in which Mama, always about to appear but never quite doing so, was the mainspring of the action. A character, reminiscent of the whimsical French comedy only in this particular, broods over the action of Jakob Wassermann's latest venture in fiction, *Faber, oder die verlorenen Jahre*. From the opening pages when Eugen Faber, after more than five years as a war prisoner in Siberia, returns home with a scowl on his handsome face and a gnawing fear at his heart because he thinks that the Princess has engaged his wife's affections to his exclusion, we realize that there must come a reckoning between these two