

THE DRAMA TOMORROW

I choose as my subject “the drama tomorrow”. With a somewhat doubtful appropriateness I recall a letter sent to me by a playgoer during the run of *The Apple Cart*, in which I played the part of King Magnus. The writer, a lady of obviously penetrating discernment, said that she did not admire my performance, chiefly because I did not look or behave much like a king, though she did think my repartee, in the circumstances, was quite good. To look convincing as a king, I wish to say, is not an easy task, and, in a Shaw play, it is apt to be a responsibility. At least I shall not need any one so minded in this audience to write and tell me that, equally, I am not very convincing as an advocate of the drama and its future, for that, too, is not an easy task, while of my responsibility in trying to interest you even for a few minutes I am, I can assure you, most deeply sensible. Having chosen my subject,

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I am conscious also of the possibility of there being some among you having doubt of its matching the occasion, for the drama is widely held to have not only no claim to a future but an undistinguished, if not wholly insignificant, present. I take it, therefore, that my first business is to show you why, in my judgment, the drama has a tomorrow and also why I think it worthy of discussion and emphasis in this place.

I begin by assuming, possibly with a rashness certain people would deplore, that human nature itself has a future. Optimism about the future of civilisation—may I say?—happens not to be a factor in my own mental development. But, standing here, for a moment of time I am reassured. And, challenged about the future of the drama here and now, I shall reply that as long as human nature survives the theatre will also survive. The theatre was created out of an inherent human need. I deny that the cinema was so created or that television, if it is really coming, will be. These are

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novelties. We are discussing, as I truly believe, something with the nature of a verity. The theatre had its beginning in the essentially human desire, deeply rooted, for corporate physical action. In the course of time this desire became crystallised in an ordered ritual, partly mime, partly speech; and from that evolved a more or less passive attendance at these expressions of it. So long as ritual, which, after all, is only vicarious action, is performed, the audience, whether the occasion be a State procession, a religious ceremony, or the presentation of the drama, cannot be entirely passive. Audiences are and must always be an integral part of it, participating in it by their sympathetic reactions. That participation, which is not only a satisfying personal experience but an actual and fundamental human necessity, can be effected only by living contact. It reaches its height in the performance of a great play, which is art made flesh.

This association of stage and religion is neither fortuitous nor casual. It is, I could

almost say, profound enough to be recognised as part of evolution. The theatre, as we have often enough been reminded, has its deepest roots in religious rites. So, for that matter, did much else that, with the passing of time, has lost all traces of its first parenthood. Religion and the drama, however, still have a spiritual affinity. As the distinguishing mark of all the religions which have commanded the attention of humanity is some form of reincarnation by which our dreams of goodness have been epitomised in one personality, so the special gift of the theatre is to incarnate men's dreams of beauty and perfection. Every other art is individual, aloof. In solitude you may read a poem, listen to a symphony, gaze at a picture, contemplate sculpture. In each instance the artist communicates with you by means of the materials of which he is the master. But in the drama the material the creator uses is humanity itself, and he makes his appeal not to you or to me as entities but to mankind. He may indeed require all these

other arts to render him service in the pursuit of his own art. He calls on the poet for his language, the painter for his scenery, the musician to emphasise this mood or that. But these are the embellishments, not the essence. That consists, as was long ago said, of “three boards and a passion”. Together, in just that basic simplicity, author and actor collaborate in the greatest art of them all. For centuries, so, they have moved men’s hearts and minds with the agony of *Cædipus* and the madness of *Lear*, the doom of *Orestes* and the bewilderment of *Hamlet*. So, I believe, they will go on moving them as long as life shall last.

What do we find, for instance, at this moment in history when, according to some of the prophets, the momentum given to the theatre by its greatest writers and actors is clearly slackening? With the disappearance of the touring company, which has been almost completely eclipsed by the celluloid eruption of the cinema, little drama movements are more numerous than they have ever been.

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The latest information from the British Drama League is that well over ten thousand groups of people are reading, discussing, acting and no doubt writing plays in the cities and towns and villages of Great Britain. Here in your own town of Cambridge there has opened this week a theatre which, I feel quite certain, will play a conspicuous part in this general reawakening. Someone professed in my hearing to see in all this nothing more than the vanity of the petty human ego. Reading a play, at any rate, strikes me as being a singularly inadequate form of expressing a popular emotion. No; I prefer to believe, as I sincerely do, that this is a powerful symptom of the inner need of which I have spoken.

For my part, if I may assume your concurrence in this argument, I shall willingly agree that the future expression of this fundamental need may quite well involve many changes threatening the physical affinities of the theatre as we now know it with that of tomorrow. But before going on to a brief consideration

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of them, may we, please, survey the theatre as we see it now. We see a theatre which is damned and darkened by many forces making for its extinction. The prophets of that cataclysmic process have great weight on their side. They bring up their heavy armaments of the cinema, broadcasting, television, and reinforce them with much talk about all these factors being only still in their infancy, with the implication, most marked, of even greater wonders of science to come. Science is cast as the demon king in this piece, as in many another modern tragedy. Science, which has destroyed philosophies, is destroying also the arts; so we are told and, I have no doubt, with a certain degree of realism and truth. It is not a comfortable experience, watching the slow decline of an art form which gave us a Shakespeare. And, after him, Tchekov, Ibsen, Shaw, Sheridan, to name no others, and including no great actors of the parts they conceived. It is poor consolation to be told that the theatre is supplying most of the talent that has gone into

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the making of the immense moving picture industry. For the time being, indeed, the theatre does appear to be fulfilling the purely architectural and domestic function of “wings” to the great world entertainment stage which the cinema has now become, and we who haunt them are but servants of shadows. And something must be said, I think in melancholy tones, about the effect of these great developments on dramatic art, for never before has the creative artist had so many media at his command. Where is the playwright now who has no thought of the possibilities of adapting his works to the needs of the screen? Where is the novelist who disdains to think and talk, most professionally, of all the different “rights” he has for sale? The industrial and scientific revolution has affected the actor no less. Strange, new words have found their way into his technical vocabulary and often, too, he has a strange, new way of saying them, so that one trembles a little for the future of our English tongue. It all sounds very much like chaos and

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many would say that chaos it most certainly is. Obviously, the stage has found it hard to survive and justify its survival in a world increasingly hostile to any institution not furthering the cause of “realism” in all its grimmest and most shattering manifestations. The post-war generation of men and women started this demand for “reality” above all things. They demanded that dramatists should show them “life”, as if living itself were not sufficiently intense for them. The theatre, their theatre, was not an “escape” for them. They wanted life smeared on thickly. Creative imagination—that was *not* wanted. The world was relaxing. Thinking became unfashionable. But if the theatre challenges life—why, then it is bound to lose. It lost heavily in those hectic years. Noting that fact, it is interesting to reflect on another, which is that since Sir Henry Irving delivered his lecture here on the drama some forty years ago, life and the drama have changed places. At that time the theatre was considered to be slightly disreputable;

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parents, for example, were in the habit of forbidding their children to have anything to do with it. Life then, on the surface, at any rate, was colourless. There was no opportunity for reading much about sensational crimes, let us say, or of knowing more than a very little about that mysterious and attractive locale known as the underworld—not unless, that is, one bought a pink publication called *The Police Times*. Family life was dominated by austere men and women; there was a decided rigidity about existence, even, I imagine, on the lowest levels of the population. Any bright light seen to be burning in the gloom was almost inevitably the light of a theatre; and, by the way, the light did not jump about all over the place, as theatre lights invariably do now. Actors were shunned in private life, and grew to be so proud of being different from the rest of mankind that they developed certain hallmarks of their own, including fur or astrakhan collars to their coats, long hair, and absurd, flowing neckwear. They were

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