

# PROFESSOR BAKER'S METHOD OF MAKING PLAYWRIGHTS

*By Walter Prichard Eaton*

Professor Baker, more than any other one man in America, has been responsible for the changed academic attitude toward the theatre. Time was, and not so long ago, when it was entirely dignified to study the plays of Shakespeare from a book, but quite beneath dignity to study the plays of Cohan in a theatre; that is, the drama as a vital, contemporary thing was ignored, and the study of past drama led to philology, not play writing. Professor Baker, however, out of a passion for the theatre even Brattle Street could not quench, determined to establish a course at Harvard, in practical play writing, for picked students who showed sufficient interest

and aptitude. He did so against considerable academic opposition and amid considerable popular scoffing. Both opposition and scoffing have long since disappeared. The academic world has seen both the educational and the possible social and civic value of such instruction in the practical theatre arts; and the public has seen interesting plays emerge as a result, and young men and women graduated to leadership in brave theatrical experiments.

Yet, until now, Professor Baker has never published any text-book of method. "Dramatic Technique" is, at last, a revelation to the curious of the principles underlying his instruction in play writing (so far as that instruction can be divorced from the accompanying practice in the Workshop Theatre at Harvard). To those already somewhat familiar with the difficult art of play making or play analysis, the first impression of this book will probably be one of cool sanity and hard common sense. The book is largely free from theory and entirely free from any assumption whatever that you can make a playwright out of a man without a talent for the theatre, any more than you can make a poet out of a man without poetic sensitiveness.

Defining "dramatic" as something capable of rousing emotion in an audience (the only satisfactorily inclusive definition), Professor Baker goes on to state that dramatic technique is the peculiar method the dramatist has to employ to realize the possibilities of his material. Certain things in dramatic technique are universal and permanent—that is, they had to be employed by Sophocles and they have to be employed by Belasco. Certain things are temporal—that is, they belong to the conventions of a peculiar

society or age. Certain things are individual—that is, they belong to the peculiar style of a Shaw or a Barrie. It is only with what is universal and permanent in technique that Professor Baker deals in this book. His aim is to show the would-be dramatist the basic demands and restrictions of play technique, so that he may reach, with the minimum of wasted effort, the point where he can make his own individual contribution (if he has one) effective.

What these basic demands and restrictions are, as Professor Baker picks them, space does not permit us to enumerate here. After almost twenty years of professional theatre-going, however, we can confidently state that it is not only the would-be dramatist who needs sometimes to learn them. Professor Baker did not discover them, of course, but his book is likely to become the standard work in this field because he sets them forth so clearly; and especially because he illustrates them so well with passages from actual plays, often in parallel columns, showing the right way and the wrong way to make a dramatic point, or showing how a second draft of "The Doll's House" or "Hamlet" improved the first.

We cannot refrain, however, from specific mention of the author's emphasis on the supreme, enduring value in technique of characterization; and of his advice, backed by example, to extract the utmost out of a situation by the imaginative realization of the characters involved, by a full acquaintance with one's people, instead of pressing on for more plot complications. Underlying all else in the drama is, after all, the human being in his actions and reactions; and unless the dramatist knows his human beings and lets them, once under way, deter-

mine the course of events, he will never achieve any distinction. And if anyone thinks this is advice for beginners only, let him attend the theatres on Broadway for a season!

The scope of the book involves one or two obvious omissions, which doubtless classroom and laboratory instruction supplies at Harvard, but which the mere reader feels. One is the failure to grapple with the always vexing problem of style in dramatic dialogue. Style being so much the man, Professor Baker no doubt regards this as a feature of individual technique, yet the problem of writing dialogue which is "in character", and at the same time of writing dialogue which is musical or eloquent or otherwise elevated above mere colloquial speech, faces every playwright who aspires to be something more than a hack. Another omission, doubtless made because it is at least on the border-line of temporal technique, varying with the varying periods, is the problem of atmosphere, of suggestion by scenery, of the use of silence, color, costume, music, and so on, to induce a mood and reinforce or even create an emotion.

Indeed these omissions might be extended to some length, and indicate, perhaps, not so much that this book is deficient, but that it might well be supplemented by a second book, by the same author, on the technique of specific dramatists, perhaps; as a continuation and higher development of the instruction in the first volume, and on the technique of play production in its relation to the dramatist. When any man brings to the theatre so keen and analytical a mind as Professor Baker's, combined with so much practical experience and so much enthusiasm and love of the land behind the proscenium, we can ill afford to have

our theatrical text-books written (as most of them now are) by men of inferior abilities.

---

Dramatic Technique. By George Pierce Baker. Houghton Mifflin Co.