WHAT IS WRONG WITH THE AMERICAN DRAMA?

BY CLAYTON HAMILTON

At a meeting of the Authors Club of New York on the evening of April 9th, Mr. William Archer delivered an informal address, during the course of which he asked an exceedingly significant question concerning the current American drama. He stated that he had visited this country several times during the course of the last fifteen years, and that, on each occasion, he had been impressed by the vivacity of invention, the alertness of observation, and the zest of entertainment in our popular American plays; but that, whenever he had returned to New York after an absence of only two or three years, he had discovered with surprise that nearly all the current American plays had been written by new writers, and that the playwrights whose work he had admired only a short time before had apparently been relegated to oblivion. He regarded our continual discovery of new writers as an evidence of an extraordinary fertility in native talent for the theatre; but he considered our apparent failure to develop the writers whom we did discover as an evidence of a scarcely explicable prodigality. "Why is it," he inquired, "that each new generation of American playwrights seems to endure only two or three seasons? Why is it that so many men of talent, who have written one or two promising plays, are supplanted by other men of talent before they have had time to fulfil their promise? What becomes of all your playwrights? Why do you throw them away, instead of helping them to develop their ability?"

This inquiry is extremely difficult to answer; but, at the request of Mr. Archer, some attempt will be made to explain the current situation in the present paper. In the first place, it may be stated that our theatre-going public seems to set a higher value on invention than on imagination. This fact was clearly felt by the late Clyde Fitch; and to satisfy the public craving for invention, he nearly always devoted his initial acts to exploiting some novel device of theatrical dexterity. His audience desired him to be clever; and, responsive to the sense of this demand, he tossed out a sop of cleverness before proceeding to the imaginative business of his play. But the history of nearly all considerable artists teaches us that they begin with invention and then slowly ripen to imagination,—they commence with cleverness and ultimately rise to simplicity and serenity. It is not surprising, therefore, that the most vivid invention, the most captivating cleverness, should be displayed in the first or second plays of writers of ingenious talent. A new idea is most likely to be advanced by a new man. This is probably the reason why the American public, with its avidity for clever invention, prefers the ingenuity of new authors to the matured imagination of writers who have risen above the initial exercise of cleverness.

In the second place, it should be stated that the American public goes to the theatre merely to be entertained, and that it finds more entertainment in a shifting of the point of view toward life than in a deepening of the vision of life from an established point of view. Thus far, no incentive has been offered to our playwrights to grow up. Our public does not ask that a man shall meditate upon our life until he is able to say something about it that is valuable; it asks merely that he shall point an unexpected finger at some aspect of our life that has not previously been exploited on the stage. In setting this premium on sheer originality, it votes in favour of new writers

at the expense of older and wiser men, and tosses aside Augustus Thomas, who is trying to expound a philosophy of life, in favour of Bayard Veiller, who gives it news.

Only twenty years ago, it was commonly complained that a new playwright could not get a hearing in America. Nowadays any playwright can get a hearing, provided only that he come forward with something that is new. This premium that is set on novelty is perhaps the greatest cause that inhibits the development of serious drama in America. A mature playwright, who has grown to take a greater interest in life than in the theatre, is seldom likely to deal with novel subjects or to present them in a novel way. Great themes are never new; and an artist with something to say about life is rarely willing to overlay his message with the distractions of inventive ingenuity. As a result of the public demand for cleverness, we are now confronted with a situation which makes it easy for new playwrights to display their inventions, but makes it comparatively difficult for the same writers a few years later to secure a favourable hearing for the more imaginative works of their maturity.

Until this situation is changed, we shall never succeed in developing a national drama in America. Until we devise some system for distinguishing between new playwrights who are merely clever and new playwrights who are likely to progress from invention to imagination, until we devise some method for nurturing the comparatively few writers who seem inherently capable of an ultimate achievement of dramatic art, until we learn to throw away the merely entertaining craftsmen as soon as they have entertained us but never to throw away an author of real promise, and until we learn to laud imagination more than we applaud invention and to set a premium upon the man who secures his incentive from life itself instead of from the theatre, we shall not be rewarded with a national drama in America. The familiar statement that the theatre-going public gets what it deserves is true, at least, to this extent:—that no public ever gets a national drama until it deserves it.

As Mr. Archer stated, we have more than enough playwrights of sufficient talent to achieve a national dramatic literature, if only the conditions of our theatre were such as to foster the development of their ability instead of to cut it off at the very outset. The reason why we produce so few American plays of any genuine importance is not that we lack the men to write them, but that as yet we lack the conditions to demand them. Great dramatists are made, not born. Dramatic talent is born; but dramatic genius is developed only when dramatic talent is fostered by inspiriting theatrical conditions. No plant can come to flower unless it can take root in fertile soil; and the reason why so many of our playwrights are never heard from after their first two or three plays is that they are sown as seed by the wayside and fall on rocky ground.

The responsibility for the present dearth of American dramatic art must be divided between the public, the managers, the critics, and the playwrights themselves; and we may most clearly analyse the situation by approaching it successively from the points of view of these four factors.

First of all, it must be frankly stated that the public of America, considered as a whole, is not at all interested in the drama. It is enormously interested in the theatre; but that is another matter altogether. Throughout his recent book on *The Foundations of a National Drama,** Mr. Henry Arthur Jones has insisted on the prime importance of dispelling the confusion between the drama and the theatre which persists in the popular mind. The drama is an art of authorship; and the theatre entertains the public by the exhibition of many other matters than the art of authorship. Mr. Jones has pointed out that the theatre

*The Foundations of a National Drama. By Henry Arthur Jones. New York: George H. Doran Company.

has often flourished in periods when the drama was dead. Thus, in England in the early nineteenth century, there was no British drama of any consequence, but the British theatre prospered by exhibiting the acting of such great performers as Mrs. Siddons and the Kembles, Kean and Macready. Sir Henry Irving, who did great things for the British theatre, did absolutely nothing for the British drama, since he never produced a play by a contemporary author of importance. Likewise, Edwin Booth and Richard Mansfield, who led the American theatre for two successive generations, accomplished nothing whatsoever for the American drama.

The drama, to repeat, is an art of authorship; and the American public of to-day, considered as a whole, cares nothing for dramatic authorship. It goes to the theatre merely to be entertained; and it does not care in the least whether it is entertained by musical comedy, vaudeville, moving pictures, or what are quaintly called legitimate plays. It groups all these heterogeneous exhibitions together, and decides that certain offerings—without regard to class—are "good shows" and certain others are not. *The Belle of Bond Street* is considered a "good show" because the cast contains the widely advertised Gaby Deslys; and *The Legend of Leonora* is considered a "good show" because the cast contains the no less widely advertised Maude Adams. But the public would never think of deciding that *The Legend of Leonora* was a "good show" because it had been written by ——— "what was his name? . . . Oh yes, Barrie. . . . Of course:—wrote *Peter Pan*,—didn't he? . . . Wasn't Maude Adams cute as Peter Pan?"

Since the American public is not interested in dramatic authorship, and cares only for what it is willing to consider a "good show," it would scarcely be fair to blame our theatrical managers for devoting most of their attention to non-dramatic forms of entertainment, such as musical comedies, vaudeville, and moving pictures, nor even for insisting that the legitimate plays they do produce shall be so planned as to compete commercially with these other types of "what the public wants." Thus we perceive that the growth of the American drama is actually impeded by the popularity of the American theatre. The fact that a million Americans go to the theatre every night is of no assistance to our playwrights; it is, instead, a hindrance to them, since, in spending their time and money for forms of entertainment that are mainly non-dramatic, these million people are preventing themselves from developing any interest in the drama.

The reason why Mr. George M. Cohan is the most popular playwright in America to-day is that he has succeeded in inventing a type of legitimate comedy that can hold its own against the drastic competition of musical comedy and vaudeville and moving pictures. His plays unite the rapid, dashing plot of kinetoscopic exhibitions with the low-comedy characterisation of vaudeville turns and the general air of inconsequential sprightliness that pervades the best musical comedies; and *Get-Rich-Quick Wallingford* or *Seven Keys to Baldpate* are denominated "good shows" by the same people who always go to see Gaby Deslys and never go to hear John Galsworthy. Mr. Cohan is an artist of the theatre; and he must be very highly praised for his dexterity in managing to meet the public on its own ground with plays that, none the less, may be admired by people of intelligence and culture. But it seems unfortunate that the Cohan formula should be accepted at the present time as the only talisman to success in the American theatre. With the exception of the vulgar and reprehensible *To-day*, which attained what the French would call "a success of scandal," the only American plays which have succeeded in the season that is now drawing to a close were cut in accordance with the Cohan pattern. *Seven Keys to Baldpate* was written by Mr. Cohan; *Potash and Perlmutter* was produced at Mr. Cohan's theatre; and *The Misleading Lady*, *Too Many Cooks*, and *A Pair of Sixes* were

all devised in deliberate imitation of Mr. Cohan's methods. All these plays may be highly praised as popular entertainments; but do they constitute the makings of an American dramatic literature? . . . If not, the reader should remember that they constitute the best that our native playwrights have produced during the season of 1913-1914.

Is there a single manager in America who is willing to forego the emoluments that result from wholesale dealing in popular theatric entertainments, in order to foster the development of an American dramatic literature? . . . Have we a single manager who is willing to work for a national achievement, as Lady Gregory has worked in Dublin, as Miss Horniman has worked in Manchester, as Mr. Granville Barker has worked in London? Without the managerial efforts of Lady Gregory and Mr. Yeats, the world would never have heard of John M. Synge; without the managerial efforts of Miss Horniman, the world would never have heard of Stanley Houghton; and without the managerial efforts of Mr. Granville Barker, the world would never have heard of Bernard Shaw. It is, perhaps, enough to ask this question. It would be, of course, embarrassing to answer it.

Our managers, following our public, seem to care only for the theatre and not at all for the drama. Perhaps, for the sake of clearness, it may be desirable, at this present point of our discussion, to define what is meant by "the drama." We can find no better definition than one which has been offered by Mr. Henry Arthur Jones. According to this good and faithful servant of all that is noblest in the contemporary theatre, the purpose of the drama is (1) to represent life and (2) to interpret life, in terms of the theatre. Mr. Jones admits that only a few great dramatists have succeeded in *interpreting* life in terms of the theatre; but he insists that no writer should be dignified with the name of dramatist unless he has at least succeeded in *representing* life in terms of the theatre. According to this formula of criticism, we should, in estimating any drama, inquire (1) whether the author has set forth a representation of life, and (2) whether he has also revealed an interpretation of life. A play that passes the first test is a drama; a play that also passes the second test is a great drama; but a play that does not pass either test is not a work of dramatic art and can be considered only as a passing entertainment.

How often are these simple tests applied by the men who are employed by our newspapers and magazines to inform the public of what is going on in the theatres of America? . . . This question brings us face to face with one of the most important causes of the dearth of public appreciation of the drama in this country. Our so-called organs of opinion, instead of endeavouring to lead the public, are content to follow it; and, instead of establishing departments of dramatic criticism, they are content to conduct departments devoted merely to gossip of the theatre. With less than a dozen exceptions, the newspapers and even the magazines of this country treat the theatre as "news" and refuse to recognise the drama as an art. When the late Stanley Houghton came forward with *Hindle Wakes,* a work of dramatic art in which he told the utter truth about an important phase of life which for centuries had always been lied about in the theatre, did any of our newspapers trumpet this rare and wonderful achievement in its headlines? . . . Did any of our editors deem it important to declare that a new dramatist had emerged in Manchester who was able to set forth both a truthful representation of life and a piercing interpretation of it? . . . No, indeed; our newspaper reviewers merely stated, as a piece of news, that *Hindle Wakes,* though meritorious, seemed scarcely likely to enjoy a long run in New York. In other words, it wasn't a "good show"; and the public, prejudiced against it by the faint praise of the papers, permitted the piece to be withdrawn without a hearing.

It seems scarcely an exaggeration to

state that there is no dramatic criticism in America,—that there is no concerted effort on the part of those who edit the theatrical pages of our publications to assist the public to distinguish between the drama and the theatre and to cultivate an appreciation of the drama which shall be clearly set apart from the enjoyment of non-dramatic types of entertainment. Our so-called "dramatic critics" [with less than a dozen exceptions in the whole United States] are not critics but reporters. They give greater publicity to the fact that Miss Billie Burke looks well in pink pajamas than to the fact that Miss Eleanor Gates has written a work of art in *The Poor Little Rich Girl*. The fancy and the wisdom of Miss Gates are considered less important as a piece of "news" than the pajamas of Miss Burke; and, as a result of this sort of propaganda, our potential dramatists are required to compete not only against musical comedy and moving pictures but also against the lay figures in a haberdasher's window.

It will be seen, therefore, that the comparatively few playwrights in America who are honestly ambitious (1) to represent life truly, in order (2) to interpret life nobly, are condemned to struggle single-handed against the embattled negligence of the public and the managers and the theatrical reviewers. The public does not want to be told the truth; it wants to be amused. The managers do not want dramatic art; they want "what the public wants." The theatrical reviewers are not interested in the drama; they judge the value of a play in proportion to the number of nights it seems destined to run in the metropolis, and consequently consider *Peg o' My Heart* a more important work than *The Pigeon*. Need we wonder any longer why so many of our playwrights succumb to this embattled negligence and never fulfil the promise of their earliest endeavours?

But our playwrights themselves cannot be entirely absolved from blame for the present dearth of dramatic art in America. Too many of them, even from the very outset, write with an eye to the theatre instead of with an eye to life. They derive their inspiration from the wrong side of the footlights. Instead of trying to express what they think that life is like, they are contented to express what they think a play is like. Instead of following Hamlet's advice and imitating nature, they imitate each other. If one of them writes a play about the underworld that makes money in the theatre, a dozen others hasten to write plays about the underworld,—not because they are really interested in the underworld or have anything to say about it, but because they are merely interested in making money in the theatre. This enervating circle revolves until it has exhausted its transient popularity; and, the next season, the same playwrights are chasing each other around another circle. Thus, instead of moving on and getting anywhere, our playwrights merely exhaust themselves in running Marathons around a track which returns continually to the starting-point.

What, then—to sum up the entire situation—must we accomplish in America, before we shall deserve to develop a national drama to which we shall be able [in the florid language of political platforms] to "point with pride"? First of all, we must educate a considerable section of our public to distinguish between the theatre and the drama, and to value the art of the drama as something distinct from, and better than, such types of ephemeral entertainment as musical comedy and vaudeville and moving pictures. Having educated a special public to patronise dramatic art, we must organise this public and be able to deliver it to the support of every play in which life is represented truly in the endeavour to interpret life nobly. These two tasks —the task of educating the public to recognise dramatic art, and the task of organising the public to support it—have already been undertaken by the Drama League of America; and this society has thus far done its work so well that it no longer seems quixotic to expect that, within the next ten years, a strong

and potent interest in the drama (as distinguished from the theatre) will be developed in America.

In the second place, we must discover and encourage and support a few managers who will be willing to make a living wage by catering to the growing interest in the dramatic art, instead of gambling to win or lose large fortunes by catering to the prevailing taste for entertainment of a type that has no real relation to the drama.

In the third place, we must organise a vigorous demand for dramatic criticism in America. While permitting our newspapers and our magazines to report non-dramatic entertainments as they report baseball games, while allowing our editors to extract the fullest "news value" from the pinkness of Miss Burke's pajamas, we must also demand that contributions to the great art of the drama shall be explained and interpreted by experts in the noble art of dramatic criticism. In other words, we must insist that our so-called organs of opinion shall consider the art of the drama as seriously as they now consider the art of painting and the art of music. We do not permit our newspapers to treat Rembrandt or Wagner as subjects for feeble merriment; and we must likewise cease to allow them to treat Ibsen as a joke.

In the fourth place, we must encourage our playwrights to endeavour to represent life truly and to interpret life nobly, by rewarding them with fame and money whenever they succeed in either of these difficult endeavours. We must convince them that the playing of the game itself is more than worth the burning of the candle at both ends. The present writer now recalls a conversation with the late Clyde Fitch, which occurred about seven years ago, in which Mr. Fitch complained because *The Truth*, which he regarded as his best play, had failed in New York, at the same time when *Sappho*, which he regarded as a work of no importance, was still playing to twelve thousand dollars a week in one-night stands in Texas. "Is there anybody in this country," he inquired, "who cares to have us try to do our best?" . . . It is an encouraging sign that, whereas *Sappho* has now been tossed aside, *The Truth* has recently been revived in New York by one of the very few American managers who care about the drama as an art. This revival has demonstrated that *The Truth* is worthy of its title, and that the man who wrote it was capable of representing and interpreting the life he saw about him in America. But Clyde Fitch was not destined to live until this sincere and able work was accorded, at a belated date, the recognition which it deserved when it was first disclosed. At present we can merely wonder if our public and our managers and our reviewers would so negligently have allowed themselves to throw away this dramatist, if they had known, at the moment when he wrote *The Truth*, that he was doomed to die at the early age of forty-four.