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THE NEED FOR THE MUNICIPAL THEATRE.

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THE NEED FOR THE MUNICIPAL THEATRE.

The theatre, in one way or another, is probably as much discussed as any institution in the country to-day. To many people the theatre in some form is the only means of relaxation and entertainment. They talk over this or that "show" that they have seen, or the particular charms of such and such a "star", or repeat the latest vaudeville jokes. On the other hand, there are those who do not go to the theatre at all, - who will not go because they are convinced that it is evil to the core; and they are loud in their anathemas against it. There are still others who love the theatre in its better moments, and they realize that such are all too rare. They regret the corruption of an art which is so rich in its possibilities for education, culture and enjoyment, and discuss the disastrous results of commercialism in the theatre. But many, after a superficial glance at the situation, are willing to dismiss the subject. Things are as well as they can be under the

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present conditions, for, - with a tone of finality, - as the speaking of some unconquerable monster - there is the theatrical trust.

However in this day of demanding the why for all wherefores, it behooves us to go deeper into a matter which on the surface reveals its importance. It is evident that the theatre is a mighty force which touches a large percentage of the people of our country. It is necessarily making our citizens better or worse by this daily contact. Therefore, it is too great a power to go on unheeded. If conditions are bad, we must inquire into the cause, and try to discover whether the evils are inherent in the nature of the institution. If they are irremediable, should we not attempt to crush out the theatre, as we are attempting to crush out many of the evil forces of the day, rather than allow it to continue undermining the character of our citizens?

But in attempting to do away with the play-house we are reckoning with more than an ordinary evil condition which has grown up in society. Take away the play, and

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you take away an integral part of man, The dramatic instinct is as old as man himself, and the history of its development reveals the history of human nature. Man universally seeks self-expression. The savage, lacking our ~~many means,~~ instinctively turns to mimicry. He knows that his plunges and animal-like howls are all that is necessary to tell his comrades that he has just come from a successful hunt. The the literary drama, the play as we know it, with its finer attributes of structure and style, is a much later development, still it is a direct outgrowth of this rude primitive expression. As the people advanced in culture, the early choral and mimic dances took form in a definite art, which gradually developed thru fortune and misfortune, until at its best it became the most comprehensive expression of a people. In the hands of its most representative masters the drama has always revealed the very soul of the people from whom it sprung - their beliefs, their loves, their hopes, their miseries, and their victories.

An art which expresses so much of man himself, could not but cast an irresistible spell over him. It delights

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his senses and excites his wonder before it engages his
thought. It haunts his imagination, He laughs and weeps, and
comes away richer in experience and readier for the drama
of Life, for he

"..holds the world but as the world,

A stage where every man must play his part."

During its history the theatre has had varied experiences; at one time crowning the public glory of a people with the unfading laurel of great imaginative genius; at another sinking to the depths of infamy. Among the Ancients the theatre at Athens exerted a guiding influence both upon the state and society. It sprang from the people and was their pride. The honor of winning a place in one of the dramatic contests was one of the greatest honors a man could earn. And consider the result. Aeschylus, Sophocles and Aristophanes wrote for the people of ancient Greece, but so great was the perfection demanded of them that their work has endured for all time. The theatre was a temple of art for the people, at once the religious the civic and the social center of the state.

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The drama of Rome was of a more exotic nature. It was not so close to the people, and did not grow out of their needs. It was intended for, and interested only the few, and the people found bull-fights and gladiatorial combats more stimulating than such an art. Therefore the drama never attained the glory in Rome that it did in Greece.

Our modern drama emerged from the cathedral shades, and in England had its day of glory and decay. The reaction was so great that we, as inheritors of the Anglo-Saxon tradition, have never recovered from it. The theatre has not been able to regain the place of dignity and power which is rightly its own. Its origin and place, as growing out of and filling the needs of a people is almost lost sight of.

In America to-day the theatre holds an unclassified position. In the settlement and development of a new country the material wants of the people demand first attention. Opportunities for broader social life are more or less neglected in proportion as the struggle for existence

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is difficult. But as life becomes easier, there are leisure hours to be filled, and man demands entertainment. The theatrical manager is one of the first to see a great business opportunity. The demand is persistent and they are left to satisfy it as they please. Naturally they please to furnish what will bring them the most profit. They offer what they will, following what they call public demand, and grow fat on the proceeds. To-day there are theatres in every corner of our country, furnishing nightly all sorts of entertainment, - good, bad and indifferent.

Gradually people are waking up to the fact that there is a great deal of evil emanating from our theatre. We have very little really good drama, and what there is, is accessible only to the few. It costs a great deal to stage a drama artistically. Everything considered, in order to make his profit on a complete and well rounded production, the manager is compelled to charge fees that are way out of the reach of a greater part of the people, at least for anything but an occasional performance.

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They should be informed by illustrations. Besides, this form should be more fully developed since it constitutes the major portion of the program.

incomes, who constitute only a very small part of our population, but those who have more or less of a struggle to make both ends meet, but who are nevertheless human, - the people must be content with something cheaper, which is almost sure to be less artistic; or they must submit to dramatic starvation. But with the greater number, the desire to mingle with their fellows in the playhouse is too strong to smother, and especially is this true among the younger people. They accept and absorb what is offered within their means, and being trained in it, they know and desire nothing better. If the entertainment pleases them for the moment, that is all they ask; they do not realize that they have the right to ask much more. The manager instead of guiding their taste, is ever on the alert to follow it in the slightest whim. He studies his audience, that curious psychic unity, which is on no higher plane than the lowest of the individuals who constitute it, and when it shows a preference for one sort of thing or another he is not slow to follow the demand. He is running his house entirely as a business proposition, and it matters

not to him that he may be contaminating the minds of the young people of the community. If they desire vulgarity it is their fault, not his. He is often a little daring of himself, too, in his search for novelty. He warily feels about among his audience to find out what will take. A performer will try a questionable story, and if it is well accepted, it usually leads to more. Continued entertainment of this sort can not help but drag down its audience to its own level. It dulls the finer sensitiveness until finally nothing better is appreciated.

As yet there has been no concerted action to change this state of affairs. Every reform only needs an awakening of the people to its importance to make it effective. In this, people must realize the immense power in the theatre. The dramatic instinct is clearly so strong and so universal that it must necessarily be a great force in society. If turned into the right channels, it might exert a more comprehensive influence for good than is even hoped for by the most optimistic advocates for the higher drama. For much of the evil that the theatre is

working to-day is not apparent on the surface, nor could its extent be estimated. It is the gradual undermining and honeycombing that causes ruin. It may not show to-day nor to-morrow, but time will always tell. Under ideal conditions, the good that would come from the theatre would permeate society in much the same way that the evil does now. Its influence might be felt at first in many more tangible ways, but higher ideals of art and life would slowly but just as surely get into the blood. It is probably because the extent of the theatre's influence is not realized that people as a whole have not taken it more seriously. But one after another our public and social activities are receiving attention, and the theatre is bound soon to have its turn.

It is not so many years since public school attendance was made compulsory. To-day there are few who do not consider such education absolutely necessary to our well being. The theatre, under proper conditions, is the broadest and most practical form of education, supplementing what can be obtained in the public schools. We are now

recognizing the necessity for play-grounds for children. It is just as necessary for their parents to have play for their minds as for the children to have it for their bodies. The theatre is the proper place for them to relax, and to have those nobler emotions of the human heart so stirred that they are obliged to forget the mundane things of life.

Civilization is, to a great extent, dependent upon wholesome entertainment, especially in a nation like ours, where every nerve is stretched to its limit in the mad rush after the almighty dollar. The theatre is capable of furnishing such entertainment. But it is capable of more than merely entertainment. It is a comprehensive art effort with endless cultural and educational possibilities. It appeals to the mind and the imagination. It furnishes a common public activity and is, therefore, a fraternizing and democratizing influence, - an influence which makes for sympathy, tolerance and kindness. Great drama, when fitly represented, offers the rank and file of a nation recreation which brings with it moral and intellectual and

spiritual advantage. "As the theatre must deal with the eternal conditions of humanity," says Sir Henry Irving, "so must it ever have weaknesses which result from human imperfection. But as humanity has a nobler part, so too the theatre has capabilities of good which are as illimitable as the progress of man."

Then, it might well be asked, why do these capabilities of the theatre not materialize here in America? We are a fairly intelligent and cultivated people. We are far advanced along many lines. We are fresh and full of energy and stand well among the powers of the world. It would seem an ideal place for the development of a great universal art. But right there lies the answer to the question. In America, the theatre and art are, generally speaking, two different things. It is in the drama as an art that such great potentialities lie. The art of the American theatre seems to be the art of obtaining the largest receipts. The fault is not fundamentally with the drama or the playhouse, but with us because we do not recognize the difference between a business and an art.

Specific reference?

Until the drama is established on the basis of an art, we cannot expect it to fulfill its mission.

The theatre is to-day not only a house in which to produce plays, but also a place in which to sell the dramatic product. The playwright brings his wares; the manager following public demand, takes them or rejects them as he sees fit. The playwright knows pretty well what the manager will take, and the average man will write not to secure perfection, but to secure a saleable product. His play when staged elaborately, and used by a star, may secure theatrical effectiveness. Take it away from its set setting, and its flimsy fabric crumbles under analysis. Such plays are popular for the day - they are the 'journalism of the stage', as Brander Matthews calls them, - but they possess no lasting qualities. They are not literature, and their art is only artifice.

*Shakespeare's
defiance?*

We have become so used to seeing this sort of play in our theatres, that the mind has, quite unconsciously, cast the drama forth from literature. The theatre has become dissociated from all relationship to institutions

for the public weal. But what is the thing of underlying and permanent interest in a dramatic performance? If it be not the play, then the drama has ceased to perform its function and the theatre has sunk to a stage for the display of personal charms of body or mind for the diversion or excitement of the moment. Our whole interest in historical drama centers in the play and the playwright. In the theatre to-day everything makes to obscure the play, and hide a poverty of ideas behind richness of theatrical production. The newspaper advertisements announce that Mr. Theatrical Manager will present Miss Popular Actress next week in A New Play. Possibly the name of the author will also appear, but the size of the type which tells of the play and its writer is so small in comparison with that which advertises the manager and his star that it escapes the casual glance. The interest is made to center upon the actress and very often is built around her to suit her particular physical and mental peculiarities. The interest has been shifted from its proper place. The acting is made the end rather than the means of dramatic

interpretation. What will Americans fifty years hence care about our favorite actors and actresses? However, if our plays be of artistic value they will remain a heritage to future generations. But if the theatre becomes so permeated with the spirit of business that art and the playhouse are considered entirely apart, then one great avenue of public enlightenment will be closed.

It is evident that unless there is a revolution in the theatrical world of America the drama can never attain a place here among the serious arts. So long as thoughtful people stay away from the playhouse it can not occupy any very vital place. The Reverend Charles M. Sheldon said in a recently published article; "I seldom go to the theatre myself because I do not know what I am liable to run into, even when the actors and actresses are known as first class." High prices and the best talent we possess are not any guarantee of dramatic perfection. Of course such may be obtained at times, but even the high priced house does not hold to a uniformly high standard.

The theatrical manager is the easiest person to

Specific reference

blame for this state of affairs, and consequently many are the thrusts at him. He is accused of causing the corruption of the drama because he has commercialized it. In his search for novelty and catchiness he has introduced so much 'comic relief' that the theatre as an institution has lost its seriousness. He has made it a slave to public demand rather than a guide; a menace rather than an inspiration to genius. But really, is the manager so much to be blamed as it might at first seem? The people as a body have never risen in protest against the theatre being run by a private individual. To the manager the theatre is a business and like every other business man he is making what he can from it. He buys the product that he thinks will sell the best. From his experience he knows what sort of thing brings in the dollars, and it is to his interest to get that thing. If a dramatist offers a play which is too literary or too much out of the ordinary to secure immediate success, in his estimation, he will not put it on, because he faces financial ruin himself should it not succeed. He must be practically sure of an exten-

give audience before he assumes the great expense of staging a drama. So he tends strictly to business. If art creeps in along with the necessary popular qualities, well and good. Otherwise, it is none of his affair.

Of course, there have been artist managers who have used their feeble individual efforts to raise the dramatic standard. They may have done much in their own time and place, - as much as could be done under the circumstances. But there has been no rational and concerted action to go deeper and attempt to change the circumstances. The theatrical manager is using the theatre as an institution for speculative business, but he must use it so or not at all. He is violating no public trust, for he has received none.

The blame for the condition of the theatre to-day falls upon the people of the country; - not only upon those who give hearty support to the theatre, but also upon those who cry out against it. How much good does the condemnation of an institution as fundamental as the theatre really do? It simply keeps the sort of people who might raise its standard out of it. Would not a strong public demand for the right sort of thing accomplish infinitely

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foot-note.*

an ineffective protest,
more than a negative force?

The theatre in America does not represent the taste and desire of our better people, nor does it really represent that of the majority of our people. Because as an art the theatre is corrupt, the virtuous keep out of it, not wishing to soil themselves by the contact. President Harlan of George Washington University, in a recent address urging the importance of good citizenship, spoke of a corrupt political boss, who controlled a certain town. He did not represent the morals of the men of that town but was allowed to retain his position because he represented the morals of the few who were actively interested. The case of the theatre is much the same. What is called 'public demand' is not the demand of the people. They are not, as a whole, actively interested enough to demand anything. The manager supplies what he thinks his public will pay for - or what a certain element shows that it cares for. The others take what is offered, or let it alone. All the people of this country do not want variety shows: some of them do. Others may take variety shows because nothing else is convenient. People are liable not to be critical

in judging a play. If it has made a hit, the crowd goes because everyone else is going - not because the play is particularly what they want. The fault is not so much in what the public demands but in what it does not demand.

However, so long as the playhouse is conducted along commercial lines, the expression of public demand ^{can} could not have free sway. It must be made a temple of art, instead of a market. For the drama cannot be considered apart from the house in which it is to be presented. It can not be judged by purely literary standards, as a novel or poem would be, for the completed work of the dramatist is not the completed work of the theatrical producer. In order that the people may find expression in the drama, the playhouse must be under popular control. The question that faces our drama, then, is a civic and not an aesthetic question.

The last decade has witnessed a decided tendency toward the enlargement of the field of municipal activity. Little by little legislation has thrown a protecting arm around those institutions which directly or indirectly affect the people as a whole. We have our schools, our museums, our

~~and~~ art galleries and our libraries. But in English speaking countries there have been few attempts to care for the art of the theatre, which is in a sense the consummate product of all the others. This does not mean that people are indifferent to art, but that the theatre, from the very nature of the conditions under which it has operated, has obscured the extent of its influence - its great possibilities for good or for evil.

Absolute endowment is the only condition under which the playhouse in America will be free to become an institution of leadership in public service. Other schemes have been proposed, but they give only temporary relief. They do not go to the root of the matter and better conditions for all time. Percy MacKaye, in his book "The Playhouse and the Play" has given his idea of the theatre of to-morrow. His vision expresses the ideal of those who hope for, and expect much from the American drama. He says, from his viewpoint of the future:

"Reviewing the present theatrical situation, it seems but yesterday that we in America were walking in mediaeval darkness and superstition. Let us, for a moment,

briefly set forth the status of the theatre in our country to-day, that we may compare it in recollection, with its status of yesterday.

In the first place, to-day, in every important city in the land, there is erected at a convenient central point in the community, an ample and beautiful building, capable of seating an appropriate proportion of the population. This building, by the simple grandeur of its architecture is seen at first glance to be the permanent home of a vital civic institution: an institution vital not merely to changeing seasons of a cult of playgoers, but to the continuous generations of citizens. This is immediately evident to the casual observer by the fact that the only other public buildings comparable to it, in solemnity and permanence of design, are the Court House and the City Hall, with which it is architecturally grouped.

This municipal building is the Theatre; not Jones's theatre nor Rosenbaums, nor Robinson's, but the Theatre: the house of the conscious life of a free community. Here foremost are focussed the highest efforts of all

artists. Here, in visible symbol for the thronging people, the sculptor has recorded in stone and bronze the noblest traditions of the people's life: their civic leaders, among whom are seen, harmonious, their statesmen, their soldiers their scientific inventors and philosophers - the liberators of men, gazing on whose perennial forms the meanest of the crowd at their pedestals may hope one day so to be beautifully recorded."

Specific reference?

Mr MacKaye goes on to tell how the artist - painter, the musical composer, the actor and the dramatist so correlate their arts as to best serve the highest objects of dramaturgy.

"Here the dramatist, the focal artist of this focal art of the community, competes with his fellow dramatists in executing for the selective approval of his peers, dramas which shall most splendidly express, by passion, imagination, beauty, and delight, the vital significances of the people's history, - past, present and prophetic.

"Here the actor, disciplined in the old and new traditions of the theatre, chosen by competition with his fellow-actors, by native insight, experience, adaptability,

excellence in movement, pantomime, gesture, eloquence, speech, embodies the passion, imagination, beauty, and delight of the dramatists conceptions.

" Here other technicians, in arts which yesterday were latent or unconceived, - the masker, the tapicer, the leader of pantomime and dance, the master of lights and disappearances, - ply their expert crafts, like practiced members of an orchestra, under the viewless baton of the theatrical director.

" Here, most of all, the object and instigator of these combined efforts of artists, the audience holds its civic ritual."

As to the manner of establishment of such a theatre he says: "In some instances, wealthy citizens of the commonwealth have presented to the city the building, with a maintenance fund in perpetuity, and so perpetuated their own fame, like that Rufus Holconius of Pompeii, whose gift of a theatre to his city has conserved his name in the ashes of two thousand years. In other instances, the churches have cooperated with civic organizations to put

the institution of the theatre upon a basis more nearly corresponding to that of the Athenian theatre of Pericles than that of any other prototype. In still other instances the municipality itself, thru channels analogous to those of the public school system, has authorized the expenditure of public funds for the building and perpetual endowment of its theatre. In other cases the State has cooperated with the universities to this end. In still other cases, significant organizations of leading citizens, such as the National Institute of Arts and Letters, have stood sponsors for raising and establishing the needful foundation fund. In a single instance the Federal Government itself has established a theatre of national primacy at Washington. In all cases, the public theatres - being established for the civic welfare of their communities - have been safeguarded by reliable and perennial trusteeships.

" For occasions of dramatic performances - which usually occur four or five nights in the week - seats are provided, sometimes gratis, sometimes for a nominal sum, thru a special office whose function is the equitable distri-

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bution of seats.

On all other occasions the building is available for public purposes. It is a public institution not merely by night, but by day. For here also the once perfunctory and commonplace incidents of civic routine take on their appropriate significance and solemnity."

Truly, the theatre under this regime is a very different one from the one we know in the present day. Yet this is no wild Utopian scheme. The continental European countries have their State and Municipal theatres, and have had them for years. In detail they are not exactly like the one proposed for America, but they were built for a different people. Ours must be suited to our particular needs. However, the same general principles underlie all. Their purpose is the maintenance of the theatre as an art.

In all cases the Municipal or State theatre must be a repertory theatre. This does away with the 'long run' so prevalent in America. A play is seldom given more than twice in succession, which gives the audience a wide range of drama, and obviates the danger to the histrionic capacity of the actor. The long and steady con-

tinuance in a single play, blunts his faculties by the narrow monotony of experience. The 'star system' also would of course be no more. The Municipal theatre relies on its finished team work to produce an artistic performance rather than upon the talent of one member of the company. A theatre of this sort aims to keep alive the classics, to present the contemporary drama of its own and other countries, and, best of all, to furnish aid and inspiration to the rising dramatic genius.

The Theatre Francais is the great national theatre of France. The state grants the theatre, rent free, accompanied by an annual subvention of about fifty thousand dollars. It also appoints its administrator, who is the chief executive. He directs the theatre as he thinks best. The associated players all share in the risks and profits, and after twenty years they may retire on a pension. Besides the associates who have a voice in the management and a share in the profits, there are about forty others who are known as pensionnaires, because they are employed on a definite salary. The associates are usually chosen from this body. To be sociétaire in the Comedie

Francaisis the highest honor that French actors and actresses may receive, and is the crowning event of an artistic career. They are recognized as having a definite position in the national administration.

With the theatre under public control, the people have an interest in its management. An institution for which they are collectively responsible, would be of a different tone, morally and intellectually, from one in which they had no direct interest. If the people once understood the necessity for the theatre's success, and realized that success were dependent wholly on them, there would be no chance of failure. But the people must stand behind it and support it in every possible way, -and especially must the leading men of the community, who are looked up to by the others. The status of the playhouse in the community means everything. If it is looked down upon by the most respected people, their opinion carries great weight with their humbler fellows. If they support it and use their efforts in getting the best from it, the people will lose their scepticism and make the playhouse their civic pride.

Then, and then only, will the drama become a powerful factor in guiding public taste. The theatre will be as much the home of the people as are the public libraries to-day. The dramatist will give forth the best that is in him, for he will not need to prostitute his talent to make an immediate hit before a few depraved intellects. He will have to reckon with the people as a whole, and they, when they are once interested, make the most critical of judges. They may not know this or that scientific fact, but, having passed thru the school of toil and poverty, sorrow and self-denial, they do know human nature, - and human nature, first, last and always, is the dramatists material.

There are movements in the right direction in several places in the country to-day. Red Wing, in our own state, is one of the smaller towns which owns and operates its municipal theatre. Tho there is no endowment to back it, still the townspeople are enabled to see many of the better plays which come to Minneapolis and St. Paul, which otherwise they would have no chance of seeing. The theatre was the gift of a public spirited citizen. In

New York city, the Peoples Institute is reaching a great many people. The Educational Theatre, for children and young people, is getting to the bottom of things. It is run on non-commercial lines, and is using the elemental power of the dramatic impulse in young people for the refinement of the imagination and the upbuilding of character. It is helping to create the first requisite of an enlightened theatre, - an enlightened audience.

The New Theatre is on a greater scale than anything that has been undertaken before. It has many apparent defects, but it is a trial for something better. As yet it is too young for us to judge as to whether it is suited to American conditions. But it is bound to teach the theatrical world some valuable lessons as to how to do things and how not to do them. Looking back over its first season, just closed, the end seems more auspicious than ^{did} the beginning. It has had to feel its way, and to work out its own policy; but those who scoffed at first are now expressing their approval and offering their support. According to its artistic achievement the New

*Here is the
new theatre!*

Theatre must rise or fall.

In the final analysis, the fate of the theatre, and of the future American drama rests with the people - not with the aristocracy of money, nor of brains, but with the citizens of our democracy. It is theirs to use as they please. To-day the future looks bright. There are stirrings, faint in themselves, but coming from many quarters, which herald the awakening of the people of the land to the appreciation of the meaning of the drama.

*and to a realization of the artistic and social desirability,
if not necessity of municipal theaters.*

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