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## THE RELATION OF THE AUDIENCE TO THE DRAMA

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IT HAS been declared that there are no rules of dramatic technique, but that there are merely certain dramatic conventions which are as changeable as April weather. When one considers the multitudinous forms of drama which have existed and the many forms which exist today, he is quite ready to admit that there is no inviolable rule of the drama. Yet there is a *sine qua non* which is a very important factor in dramatic art, and which differentiates it from all other forms of art. It is the audience. All other arts appeal primarily to the individual. Drama, alone, must appeal to the crowd. A dramatist is successful in proportion to his understanding of the audience and his sympathy with its ideals. If a playwright feels, as Jonson did, that the multitude "loves nothing that is right and proper," or, to paraphrase Shakespeare, that the censure of one judicious critic must o'erweigh a whole theatre of others, he must either overcome this attitude or turn to some other form of art for the expression of his ideas. However Shakespeare may have felt at times about writing for an audience, the fact remains that he did appeal even to the groundlings; and it is difficult to imagine him fretting because he had to entertain a crowd made up of people drawn from all walks of life. He was evidently content to accept theatrical conditions as he found them, and to leave to more or less sterile scholars and critics of his time the question of uplifting the drama and the audience.

The influence of the spectators on the drama has been taken into consideration from time immemorial. Plato recorded the fact that the audience brought poets down to its own level. Aristotle said in his *Poetics* that even the actor must descend to the ignorant part of his audience. Lope de Vega claimed that Spanish dramatists did not subject themselves to classical rules, not because they were ignorant, but because the spectators had no taste for such conventions. Molière said that the only rule of the drama was to please the public. Voltaire insisted that all kinds of plays were good except the boresome kind. Mercier, a French critic of the eighteenth

century, put his finger on the cause of the decadence of the contemporary drama when he ascribed it to the fact that French playwrights refused to follow the popular taste. So we might continue indefinitely to cite examples of successful dramatists who kept close watch on the trend of public opinion.

From the very inception of his work, the dramatist must keep in mind the audience. Producers of other forms of art can work with a feeling of courage and freedom born of the knowledge that they will give their work in its final form, that in a manuscript or on the printed page it is accessible for centuries, that the reader can wait for the correct mood in which to judge it, that if this individual or generation does not like it, perhaps in later years it will win appreciation. But the playwright knows that his work will be given one chance, that it must make an instantaneous appeal, not to an individual but to a collection of individuals acting for the most part under the psychology and law of the mob. The dramatist, an individual, must write for a crowd. His success or failure will be quick and complete, and will be decided by a jury without a presiding judge. As a rule a play is thus given one chance for life and only one. If it fails it is generally denied even a phantom existence in book form. The work of poets, philosophers and artists lives after them. With few exceptions the work of a dramatist is interred with his bones. After a dramatist is dead, interest in his dramas falls off in every case, and generally the play dies before its author. In other fields of art many examples can be cited of men whose work has been recognized only after death and who have grown steadily in the world's esteem; but fame of posthumous birth is not bestowed upon the playwright, for the dramatist can never be successful if he is too far behind or at all ahead of his time. He can never make a direct appeal to posterity because he is always too tightly bound by the prejudices and ideals of his contemporary audience,—whatever it may be, good or bad, puritan or frivolous, intellectual or stupid. If Shakespeare still enjoys a rather precarious existence on the stage it is because for generations he has been studied in schools as a poet, philosopher, and psychologist, if not as a playwright. Every English speaking person feels in duty bound to admire Shakespeare and for this reason, with the aid of the finest acting, it is still possible to produce his plays.

An audience composed of a certain number of individuals is absolutely necessary for drama, not merely for financial considera-

tions, but from an artistic viewpoint. One enjoys a picture or a piece of sculpture when viewing it alone. All forms of literature can be appreciated in solitude by the individual fully conscious of his own ego. Perhaps a keener enjoyment comes to one listening to music when quite alone; but one cannot conceive a normal human being preferring to witness a play unsurrounded by his fellow-men. Even if some hermit souls could be found who might prefer such aloof enjoyment, the man has yet to be discovered who can pass unfailing judgment upon the merits of a play given without an audience. The more experienced a manager is, the less he prophesies about a play before he has seen it under fire from the public. A musical critic does not need to see the effect of a symphony upon an audience before passing judgment on it; but no conscientious dramatic critic would try the experiment of writing a criticism of a play produced at a dress rehearsal no matter how smooth the performance might be. This is not because the critic is insincere and changes his opinions in defence to the opinion of the audience; but it is because he has in a measure sunk his individuality, has given up a part of his ego, and is no longer a unit in himself, but is a part of a large whole: the mob. So it is that certain lines and whole scenes change from tragic to comic effect and *vice versa* when played before an audience, though no change has been made in the manner of presentation. Thus it happens quite frequently that a line meant to be taken seriously in a vital scene will sound humorous to an audience and after that one line the audience will refuse to take the rest of the play seriously, although no single individual in that audience would have thought the line humorous if he had been alone. With such possibilities before him there is little wonder that the dramatist considers the audience first, last and always; or that he envys at times the novelist who need never fear that one unfortunate line will ruin his work.

The question as to how many people must be present to form an audience cannot be answered by giving an exact number, but enough people must be assembled so that each individual may sink his own personality into that of the crowd. When the curtain rises the spectators are a diffuse mass of individuals. They are inclined to be restless, and are hardly what may be called an audience since they lack homogeneity. The reality of the outside world has not been shaken off and each is conscious of his own entity. The dramatist, therefore, must arrange his plot so that during the first few

minutes of the play nothing will be done or said which, if missed or misunderstood, will make any difference in understanding the play. The novelist begins with whatever scene he chooses. If he makes his opening paragraphs important and strong, he need not fear they will be any the less appreciated because they come first. The dramatist, however, cannot safely begin with an important scene even if such a scene is the logical opening of his play. He must often juggle the order of events for the sake of the audience, and must always be more prepared than any other artist to sacrifice sincerity of detail in order to set forth the truth of the whole. He must remember that what is truth to the individual is not necessarily truth to the crowd.

If the play interests the spectators, the separate individuals are fused into a unit, a homogeneous mass of humanity, thinking and feeling in the same way. It becomes a mob and is governed by the psychology of the mob. At every theatrical performance it is possible to watch the individuals melt into one mass. If the same play is watched night after night before different audiences in different cities it will be noticed that the fusion is complete sometimes in a very short space of time and often the process takes much longer. The more intellectual, the more thoughtful the listeners are, the longer the process of the melting pot takes. A *matinée* audience of young people and women rarely applauds as much as an evening audience; but it comes more quickly under the emotional dramatic spell. It is when the melting process is complete that the indescribable wave comes over the footlights to the players and a bond of sympathy is formed between them and the great unified mass of emotion out in the semi-darkness of the auditorium. A well-known actor has said that until this wireless communication was established his heart pounded with fear, but after it was established he was calm even in moments of simulated emotion.

The process of unification is carried on by certain persons who unconsciously become leaders and perform the same functions as the leaders of any mob or crowd. They are the people who are the first to enter into the spirit of a play and who, by their attitude, unwittingly influence their neighbors. If the play is serious, they are the first to become quiet and attentive, or very often they are the first to shed tears. At a comedy especially it is very easy to single out the leader of the mob by his hearty laughter. The rest of the audience follows in his wake quite unconsciously. The phe-



nomenon has been observed repeatedly that if, as often happens, the spectators begin by being amused at the too boisterous cachination of some person, they finally laugh not at but with its leader. Nor is this at all remarkable, for laughter and tears are as contagious as coughing and yawning. Indeed the whole system of the claque is founded upon the principle that a crowd can be influenced by certain applauding leaders. Although one deprecates the institution of a claque, there is no denying that professional applauders exert a great influence, providing their presence can be kept a secret.

Except on special occasions, practically every audience assembles in a peaceful frame of mind. It desires to be entertained legitimately and wants to laugh or weep, according to the nature of the play. However, let the performance, especially on a first night, be disappointing, and again another characteristic of the mob appears, that is, cruelty. Immediately something of the savage brutality of a crowd causes the otherwise kind and peaceful individuals, who are acting under the psychology of the mob, to inflict mental or physical pain on their fellow-men. The custom of throwing things at actors is as old as Greek drama, and while it is uncommon in this country yet only a year or two ago an actress was injured in New York in this way. As a general rule American audiences are not so prone to violent outbreaks; but they often heap ridicule on plays by derisive laughter and the newspaper critics reflect the cruelty of the mob in the acrimonious criticism sometimes turning into the personal insults which they heap upon the author. In Europe, however, the custom of hissing, booing and catcalling is universal. There is no form of art which is the target for such bitter criticism as is the drama. From time immemorial, not only has the dramatist been denied the aid of calm, judicial judgment; but he has been subjected, by the very nature of his art, to the capricious opinions of a crowd, which sometimes so far forgets itself as to be willing to inflict pain either physically or by ridicule, and it is difficult to say which hurts the more.

The audience, therefore, is less civilized, less sophisticated, than the majority of the individuals who compose it. Since the individual has given up part of his personality, he feels less responsible for his own judgment. He is influenced by those around him, and he ceases, in a measure, to think and reason. Just as mobs are notoriously governed by emotion, so the average theatre-goer calmly

stows his brains under his seat with his hat, and gives free play to his emotions. This state of mind is reflected on the stage, for there are few characters in drama who are conspicuous for their reasoning power, since the playwright knows well or feels instinctively that if his characters think and reason to the exclusion of feeling that the audience dwindles away. Thus in the seventeenth century in France the reasoning Corneille is deserted for the passionate Racine. When the cynical Voltaire tried to banish love from the stage he produced the "Death of Caesar," and the play died before its hero could. It has often been said that there must be a love interest in plays in order to please the women. It is true that women compose seventy per cent of theatrical audiences; but the real reason for the introduction of the love element lies in the fact that both the men and women of every theatrical audience are primarily emotional, at least as long as they are in the theatre. The unemotional man is not a theatre-goer. Of late we have heard too much of the influence of the tired business man on the drama; but he is a negligible quantity except for the fact that he pays for the seats which he rarely occupies. Likewise that rather vague but none the less existent class of people known as high-brows have little influence, for they talk more about plays than they go to see them and when they are in the theatre their intellectual attitude soon gives way to a free play of the emotions. A glance at any audience will reveal the fact that it is made up of the younger generation and women of all ages.

Since reason is thus partially banished from the stage, it follows that an audience cares more for an interesting situation than it does for the explanation of the causes and reasons for the existence of the situation. The passages in a novel of keen psychological analysis and of logical explanation which so delight the individual reader, bore him or escape him when he listens to them in the theatre. It is for that reason that such scenes are blue-penciled in a drama when it is performed, although the dramatist, writing with the psychology of the individual, felt compelled to introduce them and although they may well remain in the printed version of the play to be read in the quiet of the study, where the reader is in complete possession of his intellectual power. The logic of the drama is not the logic of the brain, but the logic of the heart. The audience, when it stops to question, does not ask if a character is acting according to reason, but if it is acting according to the

laws of human emotion. However, the audience rarely thinks. It is content to feel. The Italian critic of the sixteenth century, Castelvetro, was one of the first to point out that because of the audience, abstruse themes must be avoided and only elemental passions treated. In the old English play *Bartholomew Fair* when Leatherhead is asked if the drama is played according to the printed book, he replies: "By no means. That is too poetical and learned for our audience." Leatherhead was evidently not such a fool as his name implies; but perhaps if the play had been read by the individuals of his audience in their own homes, it would not have been found too learned for the majority.

The difference in standard between the individual reader and the crowd never appears more plainly than when the question of morality is brought up. The audience is less intellectual, less reasonable, more cruel and more emotional than the majority of the persons composing it; but, at the same time, its standard of morality is higher. The reader of a novel will accept without question the full description of certain characters and scenes which he will hardly allow to be suggested on the stage without a protest. In the eighteenth century in France when the people and the literature were anything but puritanical, the turbulent parterre often protested against mere peccadillos shown upon the stage, which would not have caused a ripple if represented in any other form of art which did not make its appeal to the public *en masse*. In New York the modification and withdrawal of certain plays which circulate freely in book form, is an instance of the feeling of moral responsibility of the audience. It is difficult to recall any period in modern times when the moral tone of drama has not been at least as high if not higher than the tone of other contemporary forms of literature. Yet the drama is attacked more often and more bitterly than any other form of art.

The result of this moral attitude on the part of the audience also has its influence on the dramatic technique. The naïve laws of poetic justice no where else apply so strongly as to the drama. Aristotle criticizes the tragedies which end with the reward of the virtuous and the punishment of the bad, and he adds that such an ending is "accounted the best because of the weakness of the spectators; for the poet is guided in what he writes by the wishes of his audience." The novelist can end his story logically in accordance with human justice or human injustice. He can paint life



as it is; but the dramatist must follow certain prejudices of his audiences, which in late years are forcing the drama in regard to its ending almost to the state parallel to that of early East Indian drama in which an unhappy ending was actually forbidden by law. American audiences are especially naïve and childlike in this respect, and the result is that when European plays with an unhappy ending are produced in this country the dramatist is generally forced to change the outcome to a happy one whether it is logical or not.

Another limitation imposed upon the drama by the psychology of the audience lies in the fact that the chief character must be sympathetic. This is what Aristotle meant when he said that the protagonist must not be wholly bad and he always insists upon the necessity of an ennobled sympathetic character. The sins allowed a hero or heroine of a drama are very few. They are only sins of ignorance, like those of Oedipus, or they are sins of the emotions, which can be readily forgiven and understood by the emotional audience. The dramatist is, therefore, limited in the range of his chief characters. He cannot take as the principle subject for his psychological analysis a character whom the audience will merely pity, for the crowd wants something to admire. Exceptions to this rule are Richard III and Hedda Gabler; but they are merely exceptions and have been constantly attacked on the score of being entirely unsympathetic. The novelist, therefore, is free to choose and develop his characters in accordance with what he conceives to be the truth. Thus in one of O. Henry's stories a boy passes himself off to a mother as her long lost son whom he has killed, and no reader is shocked; but when that story was put on the stage the audience objected to a mother being so deceived as to take in her arms the murderer of her son. The play had to be altered to suit the psychology of the crowd; but it would be unfair to accuse the dramatist in such cases. When such changes are made in plays, it is generally done by the playwright himself because he realizes that the work he did alone at his desk does not seem to ring true to him as he becomes a part of an audience. If he could always write under the psychology of the mob instead of under the psychology of the individual he might well seem insincere to himself as a man, but wholly sincere to himself as a part of a crowd. The successful dramatist is the one who recognizes and feels in sympathy with the modified standards of the theatrical audience. Writing according to these standards is not

necessarily writing *down* to an audience. It is writing *for* an audience.

The crowd of spectators in a theatre, therefore, has a distinct individuality of its own. It resembles a human being on a large scale with rather primitive instincts. Since its intellectual power has given way to emotion the dramatist must assume its ignorance and yet he cannot rely on its ignorance. It wants nothing *recherché*—no caviar for the general. It has certain fundamental prejudices in favor of a stricter code of morals than that demanded for other forms of art. It is unsophisticated, almost childlike in its attitude of mind. It wants certain big—but only everyday—facts of life represented. Refinements of psychology do not appeal to it; for only certain primal passions drawn on broad lines can be understood by the crowd. It is more behind the times in its ideas than the majority of individuals composing it. In the development of art and science drama brings up in the rear. Thus the romantic movement in France was old before romantic drama succeeded. Balzac had produced the *Comédie Humaine* before realistic drama came to its own. Certain principles of impressionism which have long been practised in painting are looked upon today as a distinct novelty in scenery. The to-morrow of the drama is the yesterday of the separate arts which it employs, and the ideas it sets forth. The audience wants life represented not as the individual views life but as the crowd views it. Drama is, therefore, a chameleon on the spectrum of public opinion, changing only after the color of public opinion changes. Drama reflects social conditions but does not alter them. It chronicles reforms but it is not a means of reform, for the theatre is neither a schoolhouse, or a church, or a society for social reform. It is an art upon which great limitations are imposed and one of its greatest limitations lies in the fact that it must appeal to an audience often acting under the psychology of the mob. Whether one believes with Jonson that the “multitude is a beast,” or with Carl Maria von Weber that “the individual is an ass and therefore the voice of the multitude is the voice of God,” it is the multitude which conditions the art of the drama.