



# AMERICAN DRAMA VERSUS LITERATURE

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**I**N a recent critical article about the plays of Eugene O'Neill, Professor Homer E. Woodbridge, of Wesleyan University, remarks that "up to the Great War we (i.e., the United States) produced almost no plays of more than immediate contemporary interest—almost none which had literary value or prospect of permanence." He speaks of Quinn's collection, *Representative American Plays*, as "depressing," and concludes, "To get up much interest in the American theatre before O'Neill one must consider it from the historical or sociological point of view."

Well, why not? Is it not perhaps true that in our study of the drama, certainly our academic study, we have put an emphasis on the literary side which neither the nature of the drama nor the function of the theatre wholly warrants, and dismissed as unworthy of study much which properly considered is interesting and important? Is it not true, for example, that a great deal of Elizabethan drama has lived as literature (though some of it I venture heretically to hazard is less exalted literature than I was taught in college) by virtue of its poetry, when actually as permanent drama, as stuff capable of being acted in a theatre today and holding an audience, it is quite as dead as the earlier American dramas which so depress Professor Woodbridge? I was taught, and trustingly believed, that "The Way of the World" is one of the most brilliant comedies in our language, in spite of the fact staring me in the face

that it failed in Congreve's own day. It was not till I became a worker in the theatre myself that I realized a failure before one's contemporaries means a failure before posterity, and not till I saw "The Way of the World" produced that I realized not only that it isn't the most brilliant comedy in the language, but is actually a very bad play. It has passages of dazzling dialogue—yes. The literary style is brilliant in the extreme. There is a charming female character, and one scene for her of delicious comedy on the stage. But the play pursues a long, confused, and tedious way in getting to it. In plain language, it is a bore. Congreve's contemporaries were right. So why, I now ask myself, should I bow down to this play, which is a bad play, because the dialogue has literary charm? Literary charm is an accident, or overtone, of drama, not its end. The end of drama is the emotional excitation of an audience in a theatre. If that fails, all fails. If that is achieved, even without the aid of literature, we have at least a living playhouse.

In recent years I have had numerous opportunities to see revivals of all sorts of plays, from various languages and periods. Among them have been dramas more or less famous in the annals of English literature, and several of the earlier American plays which so depress Professor Woodbridge (and, lest I seem to single him out, many other commentators on our native literature). It is, I assure you, a fact that something of theatrical verve and effectiveness

still lives in certain of these American works which is painfully absent from their resounding literary rivals. Making all due allowance for the greater historical interest, to a native audience, in an American play, it is still impossible not to find the audience response to "The Contrast" or "Fashion" much more warm and spontaneous than to most Restoration comedies, and certainly than to such a Restoration tragedy as "Venice Preserved." Indeed, an American tragedy in the heroic verse drama tradition, Boker's "Francesca di Rimini," is far more effective in the theatre today than "Venice Preserved" or any of its companions, even though it is included in Quinn's "depressing" collection of *Americana*.

It is not my purpose, however, to defend these plays as enduring works of art. It would be as difficult to do that as to defend as enduring works of art nearly all the plays produced in England from the end of the Restoration to the days of Gilbert, Wilde, and Shaw. If you left out two plays by Sheridan and one by Goldsmith, what collection of eighteenth century English plays could you honestly read without depression. And how about a collection of English plays from 1800 to 1860. We must rule out entirely the closet dramas of the great poets, for their theatrical future is admitted. Who now could read, let alone sit through, without depression, "London Assurance," "Money," "Richelieu" (unless Booth came back to play it), "Virginius," "The Lady of Lyons," or even perhaps most of Robertson's comedies and Gilbert's "Pygmalion and Galatea"? The fact of the matter is that only in widely separated periods do playwrights arise who combine with enduring theatrical situation an enduring literary style, and hence create for posterity.

It is not entirely true, as Somerset Maugham implies in his latest book of craftsman autobiography, that poetry is essential for survival. Sheridan has certainly survived, or at any rate until very recent times, as a living dramatist, not a mere his-

torical curiosity. But it is undoubtedly a fact that in the majority of cases true survival—that is, the ability to meet the test of paying audiences in the theatre of commerce, generation after generation—is dependent on romantic timelessness of theme, and on poetry, on a heightened speech which transcends its own hour and still sings to the hearts of later ages. And such poetry is so infrequently written by men who can also write plays, and only in periods when it is a fresh and natural expression, not a traditional mould, that the chances for survival of any plays in the theatre are slight indeed.

This is particularly true of the realistic plays characteristic of our generation and the years just preceding it. Indeed, we might almost say that the better they met the exacting test of realism, the slighter were their survival chances; for what gave to the modern drama, *i.e.*, the drama since Ibsen, its vital appeal and its great creative dignity was its newly found technical ability to comment seriously on the contemporary scene, to be a weapon, consciously employed, of social criticism and even of reform. You may if you like call it journalistic, in the sense that it was deliberately contemporaneous, and deliberately discarded all "fine writing" and "bookish" or "literary" language in favor of the actual conversational vernacular of the hour. Not to have done so would have defeated its own ends, shattered the illusion it sought to create. But by so doing it paid the price of impermanence.

Until the coming of modern realism, the life of a successful play in the theatre could often be reckoned by half centuries, at least. Most comedies were based on farcical intrigue. You recall Pinero's definition of a classic comedy—"A successful farce by an author who is dead." It is the farce in "The Rivals" which has given it a superior theatrical vitality to "The School for Scandal." Molière is farcical to such an extent that in translation his plays, when acted, seem almost burlesque. Blank verse tragedy

established a tradition which was accepted for generation after generation, and the theatrically effective plays written in that tradition were the vehicles for actors age after age. "Venice Preserved," to us a dreary waste of pretentious bombast and unmotivated incident, gave tragediennes a chance to snuggle bloody ghosts and go pathetically mad from 1682 well into the nineteenth century. It had dropped from the repertoire after the Civil War, but was revived at Booth's Theatre in 1874, in a new version made by Dion Boucicault, with a long speech for Pierre incorporated from Byron's "Marino Faliero." John McCullough played Pierre, and Fanny Brough, later noted as a comedienne, played Belvidera, evidently very badly. The revival did not succeed. Post war taste had definitely dated the old play.

From still farther back, Massinger's "New Way to Pay Old Debts" survived into the repertoire of numerous nineteenth century tragedians, until the last quarter of the century. But when Walter Hampden attempted to revive it in this century, he speedily discovered it an old way to contract new debts. In general, we may almost say that a thoroughly successful play could, until comparatively recent times, count on at least half a century of theatrical life.

But plays in our day, as successful at the time of first production, and I venture with no hesitancy to say often superior in technical construction and intellectual point, even sometimes in emotional appeal, can hardly count on more than a decade or two of theatrical life. It is true that Ibsen's "Doll's House," the opening gun in that author's campaign for the modern drama, first produced in 1879, was successfully revived in New York last winter. But even that seemed, as we say, a trifle "dated." After all, Nora won her battle some time ago. We all admit women are people now—or Heaven help us if we don't. The play had a job to do; it did it; and that's that. Its permanence is not on the stage, but—shall we say?—in the ballot box. And how

about "The Second Mrs. Tanqueray"? How well I recall the tears I wept over Paula's fate in the nineties—and how distressingly uninterested I was in it at a recent revival, by which time society had something else to think about more important than Victorian taboos. Another illustration from the nineties is Henry Arthur Jones's comedy of manners, "The Liars," a brilliant play, beautifully constructed, and in its day deliciously amusing. But why does the heroine have to lie to her husband, and induce all her friends to lie, also, in her behalf? Because she has gone to dinner with another man! Since, today, she would simply call her husband up and tell him to leave the front door unlatched, the present generation finds no validity in the premise, and hence no fun in the play. It is hopelessly "dated" because once it was dated so accurately.

Shaw (like Ibsen) was wiser in his generation. He dated his plays ahead. But even he, a wit as keen as any Restoration writer, a literary stylist who has to be considered in the same class with Swift, an intellect far deeper and incomparably more earnest of purpose than Congreve or Wycherley, did not date his plays, perhaps, far enough ahead for immortality. Already we have made many of his ideas our own, and the young even call him "old fogey." "Candida," which does not deal with social ideas so much as with emotions, "Saint Joan," which is an historical work, and possibly "Heartbreak House" because it is so closely and subtly connected with one of the world's most shattering events, the Great War, may survive a long while. But the others seem already slipping from our repertoire. Who of my hearers, I wonder, recalls that one-act masterpiece by J. M. Barrie, "The Old Lady Shows her Medals"? Barrie was moved, as we all were, by the psychology of war time, by the mass urge to do each his bit. He had that psychology to rely on in his audience—he knew exactly the extent and direction of potential response; and with sure, quick strokes of mingled comedy

and pathos (the ideal stroke to use if you can master it) he drew our tears. But a whole new generation of theatre-goers has grown up since the War. They know nothing of that psychology which Barrie relied on, which was so important a contemporary element in the success of his play. Would it have the original effect on this new generation? Certainly only in part. In another generation it may be quite forgotten.

Only a little over a decade ago an American play was produced which aroused great interest. It was called "What Price Glory?" and was a lusty, bawdy, disillusioned yet oddly heroic story of a company of American marines, "hard boiled" professional soldiers, in the Great War. No one questioned its realism, which went, of course, deeper than expletives and mud-caked uniforms. It caught the spirit of bitter disillusion in most of us at the time, and simultaneously gave us a kind of grimly comic insight into the ironic contrast between amorous instincts deeper than battle lust, and doggedly courageous devotion to duty. It was a fine play, full of color, excitement, humor, truth. But when have you seen it revived? Its theatrical life was two or three brief years. Another enormously effective play produced in 1926 was "Broadway." It was the saga of the prohibition era, it swirled madly, to a jazz rhythm, through the back rooms of a "speak-easy," with gangster and "hoofers" and cheap girls and gun fire and murder keeping you on the edge of your seat. It was realistic, and as a play has no way to be "literary," so far as the academic critics seem to apply the term to drama, save through its dialogue, I suppose "Broadway" was quite without literary merit. One touch of "literature" would have sent illusion reeling. It would have been as out of place as a bar of Beethoven from the "speak-easy" saxaphones. But it was capital theatre, and enjoyed a huge success. Where is it now? It has vanished with the Noble Experiment which it so ironically hymned. Its realism both gave it its life, and took its life away.

But there is no need to labor the point further. Even were our theatre conducted as it used to be, with resident stock companies, everywhere, slapping a great number of plays on to their stages, in repertoire, with the minimum of cost and scenic originality and fitness, and of course depending largely on constant revivals, it would still be impossible for modern realistic plays to enjoy the length of life successful dramas could formerly anticipate, especially if they were written in verse and ignored contemporary themes. The greater the faithfulness of the realistic play to the speech, the customs, the ways of thinking and still more of feeling, of its hour—in other words, the better it very often is as a realistic play—the less its chance of survival. And, we may add, the more difficult for a critic of a later date to judge its merits from any ordinary academic, or literary, standards. It can only be estimated fairly by taking, in Professor Woodbridge's phrase, "the historical or sociological point of view," and also, I fear, the theatrical point of view—something which, alas, too many academic critics are incapable of doing.

Let us now try to take these points of view in considering a certain very famous American play, to be found in Quinn's "depressing" collection. It is a play made from an even more famous piece of literature, but of literature in the printed play you will find a great dearth. Perhaps only one line. That line begins, "Are we so soon forgot?" And the speaker is Rip Van Winkle.

Irving's story of Rip Van Winkle contains scarcely two hundred words of dialogue, and its entire narrative could be condensed into a couple of pages. But through the magic of literature, the creation of atmosphere, it has so saturated the Catskill Mountains with a legendary haze that all the water system tunnels and cement roads and filling stations and boarding houses cannot dispel it. Irving's Catskills, for most Americans, are more real than the reality. But what is there dramatic in all this? Only the satisfaction of a human



JOSEPH JEFFERSON AS RIP VAN WINKLE

curiosity to learn what would happen to a man if he slept twenty years, and then came back to his home. The character of Rip in Irving's sketch is lightly drawn. It scarcely moves out of the second dimension. His expulsion from home is the hint of drama, not the realization. To the playwright, for whom that legendary haze created by Irving

is largely impossible, the material is thin and baffling. It proved so baffling, indeed, that from 1829 when the first stage version was made, until 1865, when Joseph Jefferson called in Dion Boucicault to help and produced, in London, the famous version which was to serve him the rest of his life, no play about Rip satisfied either the

actors or the public. Yet both actors and public hungered for such a play, the actors because they felt in the part the opportunity for rich and picturesque character delineation and emotional possibilities, the public because the story gave them, the children of a new raw country, a sense of the past, a background of legend.

Now, Joseph Jefferson was an actor who combined a delicate and highly trained craftsmanship with an enormously winning personality, and both were peculiarly adapted to the potential demands of *Rip*. He could be entrusted himself to develop the character into three dimensions on the stage without violence to Irving, but he couldn't do it without more framework of plot and dialogue than Irving had provided. Atmosphere doesn't make a plot. Boucicault gave him the plot, devised the progressive situations in which *Rip's* character could be revealed and developed, the sleep accounted for, and the return illustrated by incidents which would bring out its pathos and round the story to a happy close. If you read the text of this Boucicault-Jefferson play today, you will not be impressed with much of the dialogue, you will feel, perhaps, that the trumped up business of the deeds and the villainy of *Derrick* in Act I is a sad descent from Irving's delicate art, you will think *Rip's* expulsion from home a bit like a comic strip, and for most of the scene in the mountains (so magically evoked by Irving) you will be confronted only by stage directions, which, unless written by Shaw or Barrie, are among the least literary of human word arrangements. You will, perhaps, be depressed, and deem all this unworthy of attention.

Yet the fact remains that from 1865 until after 1900, Jefferson played *Rip* in every city in the land, to see him was a part of the education of every American child, and not to have seen him was to have missed one of the most charming, the most moving, the most enchanting experiences the theatre of that, or any other day, afforded. From the point of view of American cultural history,

this play can hardly be ignored. But from the theatrical point of view, also, it should not be ignored, and so considered its merits are much greater than the literary approach can disclose. Far from being depressing, it is highly stimulating.

Its greatest and most obvious merit, of course, is in the opportunity it gives the skilled actor to enlarge Irving's pale figure into a living character, a lovable character whose amiable virtues are his weaknesses, who can resist anything but temptation, and in whose mind a mingled shrewdness and humor and naiveté were forever resulting in the most delightful of surprises.

Here is one of his speeches, when he recalls his wedding day: "My! My! Yah, we was a fine couple altogether." And he holds out his cup for the schnapps Nick Vedder is dispensing. But when Nick starts to add water, he cries, "Stop! I come along mitout that, Nick Vedder." Then his mind reverts to Gretchen again, but the mood has shifted from past to present. "Good licker and water is like man and wife. . . . They don't agree together." And now he has rounded the years of his married life, and completes his speech with a laugh: "I always like my licker single." A speech like this was not devised with any thought of its effect in print. It was devised to give the actor opportunity to illuminate character, to create that undercurrent of emotion, of life in process, which is the heart of theatre. The extraordinary charm and vitality of Jefferson's *Rip* testifies to how well the playwrights succeeded.

Because we loved *Rip*, because we wept to see him driven into the storm, because he had become endeared to us as a living person, the pathos of his return and his bewilderment at being unrecognized took on, with Jefferson, a dignity almost like Lear's. But that mood was not long to be sustained. This is a happy play, as Irving's is a happy story. But, because it is a play, and *Rip* is the hero, he must on the stage do something volitional. He foils the villain. He tries and fails again to resist temptation. His final

words are the familiar toast gurgled into his tankard.

In the mountain scene, when Rip encounters the ghostly crew and drinks the potion, the theatre was able as early as 1865 (and would be far more able today) to create by costumes, lights, and scenery its equivalent of Irving's magic description. This scene, in which Hudson's crew never speak, thus emphasizing Rip's growing loneliness and terror, was of Jefferson's own contriving. Rip's humor was not in complete abeyance till the end, which intensified the uncanny strangeness. Naturally, when you read the stage directions without willingness or power to visualize them carried out in terms of theatre, and read Rip's monologue without power to visualize the solemn, nodding, sinister crew who pressed close around him, or the actor's changing expressions and the tones and inflections of his voice, you are not moved as you are by literature, and there is little for your mind to get hold of. Yet dramatic literature is there, if by that term we may be permitted to mean something which can create that responsive emotion peculiar to the theatre, roused by situations in which character is truly displayed and the imagination of the audience released. It is there as surely as music is in the black lines and dots of a Mozart score.

Many of you will say, I know, that I am finding in the play of "Rip Van Winkle" rather more my memories of the great actor who played it than its actual merits. The merits were those of Joseph Jefferson. Booth was almost equally regnant as Hamlet from 1865 to 1892, but others have shone as Hamlet since: no one has succeeded in making Rip live again, or only sporadically. That last is true, and for more than one reason. "Hamlet" is a great play from every angle, written in a poetic dialogue seemingly as enduring as the English language. Much of the secondary dialogue of Rip is as old fashioned as a black walnut hat-rack. Jefferson held the play so exclusively his own for forty years that it seemed to die

with him. Finally, there is no longer in our theatre public the urge for the comfort of legend to give us background. The play's mission in our social history has been fulfilled. But because it was—and still is—a theatrical framework which enables a skilled actor, with the right temperament, to fill in a humorous and tender and touching character study, and imparts stage vividness to one of the humanity's famous folk tales, "Rip Van Winkle" cannot justly be dismissed as either depressing or insignificant. Properly considered, it gives us considerable respect for the American theatre of our fathers.

Let us go back now to the decades before the Civil War, and consider a form of American theatrical entertainment which cannot be represented in any collection of American plays, but which I think can be shown to have greatly influenced the plays, or perhaps we had better say the audiences, which followed. I refer to the so-called negro minstrels. In any serious academic study of the drama as a literary art, the minstrels have, I'm sure, no recognition. They came about in the early forties as a result of the success of certain men, whom we would now call vaudeville performers, blacking up and imitating negro singers and dancers. A group of these performers got together and by pooling their resources were able to give an entire evening's entertainment. Soon the country was flooded with minstrel troupes, and for at least two decades the negro minstrels were undoubtedly the most widely popular form of entertainment in America. Their popularity endured, in diminishing degree, until the present century, and the curious theatrical form they evolved is still employed by amateurs. The Elks probably gave a minstrel show in your town last winter.

In general, the minstrel show was divided into three parts. Part one, ~~the~~, found the whole troupe in a semicircle on the stage, with the Interlocutor in the middle, and the two chief comedians as Bones, or End Men, and between jokes the rest, solo or in chorus,

sang, danced, and played their banjos. Finally they all marched out to a stirring tune called a "walk around." Part two was an interlude, which often contained as its meat a satirical political stump speech. Part three was a short play, not necessarily with negro characters (but played in black face).

The initial appeal of the minstrels, of course, was in their exploitation of African rhythm and the warm, simple humor of the negro. Their employment of these things was but partial and imperfect, yet it gave us our best loved American songs, the songs of Stephen Foster. "Oh, Susanna" so captured the country that it was the marching song of the forty-niners across the continent. "Old Folks at Home" still remains the most beautiful song composed by an American. "Dixie," now the national song of the South, was written by Dan Emmet (whose parents were ardent Abolitionists) as a minstrel "walk around." The black faces were burlesqued, the songs were often sentimental and imperfectly negroid, the jokes were often those of the negro only in the dialect in which they were spoken. Nevertheless, something peculiarly American, and something familiar to all of us, was at the base of the appeal.

But there was something else. The minstrel shows were intimate, contemporaneous, they made the audience a part of the entertainment. Here were not actors removed across a void and living imagined lives apart, but jolly men facing you directly and aiming their songs and gags right at you. More than that, the gags were changed from night to night, from town to town. The Interlocutor and the End Men made it a point to learn something harmlessly funny about leading citizens of any town they played in, and nobody in the audience knew when he or his neighbor would become the butt of laughter. Similarly, comment on contemporary events of national scope were constantly incorporated into the text of the entertainment, particularly, of course, in the burlesque stump speech. There were, too, among the minstrels, a sur-

prisingly large number of genuine artists, who could develop their interludes into character studies. One such typical minstrel character interlude survives to this day on the radio—the Amos and Andy skits. But even these character interludes were a part of the contemporaneous appeal, because they were based on a realistic observation of negro life. There was no hint of literary creation about them, no likeness to the classic repertoire the elder Booth may have been playing across the street, or to Forrest's thunderously rhetorical Indian chieftain, Metamora.

Now, there is a profound psychological difference between sitting across the gulf of the orchestra pit, watching actors move and declaim in an imagined story, and sitting ready to chuckle when a black face Bones on the stage looks right down at you and tosses off a gag about your next door neighbor. And there is an equally profound difference between your response to satire, however witty, directed at Bob Acres or a Restoration husband, and satire, be it ever so crude, directed at the man in the White House at the moment, or whatever event or fad might be uppermost in the national consciousness. Passing over the musical appeal of the minstrels, which in their earlier years, at least, was deservedly great, their appeal by the spoken word, and by interludes of character delineation, was to a considerable extent revolutionary, because it brought intimacy into the playhouse, and the pleasurable excitement of contemporary comment, and a genuine, if crude, conception of realism. Negro life was too close to us, bulked too large in our consciousness, to permit any grave tamperings with its more obvious aspects.

In 1829 Edwin Forrest, the American born tragedian, offered a prize of \$500 for a play on a native theme, and the result of this first prize play contest in our history was a drama by John Augustus Stone, called "Metamora," which was concerned with the Indian Wars in Rhode Island. Unfortunately, the full text of this work has not

survived, although the drama was played by Forrest for many years. But the actor's own part is treasured at the Forrest home in Philadelphia, and causes us to wonder how even Forrest could have poured forth these surges of heroically rhythmed prose without being a trifle ridiculous—although, to be sure, they are no more bombastic and inflated than the speeches in the great Sheridan's version of "Pizzaro," which Mrs. Siddons thundered in Old Drury.

Here is a fair sample of how John Augustus Stone and Edwin Forrest represented the speech and character of a Narragansett chief in the Colonial days:

The pale faces are around me thicker than the leaves of summer. I chase the hart in the hunting grounds; he leads me to the white man's village. I drive my canoe into the rivers; they are full of the white man's ships. I visit the graves of my fathers; they are lost in the white man's corn fields. They come like the waves of the ocean forever rolling upon the shore. Surge after surge, they dash upon the beach, and every foam drop is a white man. They swarm over the land like the doves of winter, and the red men are dropping like withered leaves.

There was in this sort of language, and in Forrest's manner of delivery, undoubtedly an emotional release for our ancestors difficult to understand today. But even for some of them it had its humorous side, and John Brougham's famous burlesque of "Metamora" and all the Indian plays which followed it, which he called "Pokahontas" and produced in 1855, was one of those important burlesques of the mid-century that

both here and in England played a leading part in laughing stale tradition out of the theatre. When, four years later, Dion Boucicault produced his drama, "The Octoroon," he put an Indian into the play, and played the rôle himself. But this Indian did not speak like Metamora. In fact, he did not speak at all. He merely grunted.

The Indian however, was a minor figure in "The Octoroon." What counted most heavily were the negro slaves, and of course

the Octoroon herself, whose tragic predicament was, and still is, the stuff of drama. The play opens with a little plantation genre picture which even today has humor and charm and truth; and the later scene of the enforced slave auction held audiences tense only two years ago, in a summer theatre production which I witnessed. The rôle of Old Pete was almost always played by some actor trained in the minstrels, and was long looked upon as a choice part in our native repertoire. If you will bear with me for a moment, I should like to include here the opening scene of "The Octoroon." It opens on a view of the plantation of Terrebonne, in Louisiana. A branch of the Mississippi is seen winding through the estate. A low-built but extensive planter's dwelling, surrounded by a veranda and raised a few feet from the ground, occupies the left side. On the right stand a table and chairs. GRACE is discovered sitting at the breakfast table with the negro children.

(SOLON enters from the house.)  
SOLON. Yah! you bom'ble fry—git out—a



EDWIN FOREST AS METAMORA

gen'leman can't pass for you.

**GRACE.** (Seizing a fly whisk) Hee!—ha, git out. (She drives the children away: in escaping they tumble against **SOLON**, who falls with the tray; the children steal the bananas and rolls that fall about)

(Enter **PETE**, who is lame; he carries a mop and pail.)

**PETE.** Hay! Laws a massy! why, clar out! drop dat banana! I'll murder dis yere crowd. (He chases the children, who leap over the railing at back. Exit, **SOLON**.) Dem little niggers is a judgment upon dis generation.

(Enter **GEORGE** from the house).

**GEO.** What's the matter, Pete?

**PETE.** It's dem black trash, Mas'r George; dis ere property wants claring; dem's gettin' too numerous round: when I gets time I'll kill some on 'em, sure!

**GEO.** They don't seem to be scared by the threat.

**PETE.** Stop, you varmin! Stop till I get enough of you in one place!

**GEO.** Were they all born on this estate?

**PETE.** Guess dey nebber was born, dem t'ings! what, dem? Git away! Born here, dem darkies? What, on Terrebonne! Don't b'lieve it, Mas'r George; dem black t'ings nebber was born at all; dey swarmed one mornin' on a sassafras tree in de swamp; I cotched 'em; dey ain't no count. Don't believe dey'll turn out niggers when dey're growed; dey'll come out sunthin else.

**GRACE.** Yes, Mas'r George, dey was born here, and old Pete is fonder on 'em dan he is of his fiddle of a Sunday.

**PETE.** What? Dem tings—dem?—get away. (Makes blow at the children.) Born here, dem darkies? Don't believe it, Mas'r George. No. One morning dey swarmed on a sassafras tree in de swamp and I cotched 'em all in a sieve—dat's how dey come on top of dis yearth—git out you, ya, ya! (Laughs) (Exit **GRACE**)

(Enter, **Mrs. PEYTON** from the house.)

**MRS. PEYTON.** So, Pete, you are spoiling those children as usual.

**PETE.** Dat's right, missus, gib it to old Pete! he's allers in for it. Git away, dere! Ya! if dey ain't all lighted, like coons, on dat snake fence, jest out o' shot. Look dar! Ya, ya! Dem debils Ya! . . . Git down dar. I'm arter you! (Hobbles off)

**MRS. PEYTON.** You are out early this morning, George.

**GEO.** I was up before daylight. We got the horses saddled and galloped down the shell road over the Piney Patch; then coasting the Bayou Lake, we crossed the long swamps by Paul's Path, and so came home again.

**MRS. PEYTON.** You seem already familiar with the names of every spot on the estate.

**GEO.** Just one month ago I quitted Paris. I left that siren city as I would have left a beloved woman.

It is apparent, is it not, that when Old Pete leaves the stage, he takes with him something recognizably real and recognizably illusive as we know the theatre today. Pete talks something like a negro. George, and to a lesser extent his Mama, talk like the stage characters Boucicault had been maneuvering in half a hundred plays before. We must not forget, of course, that "The Octoroon" had been preceded by "Uncle Tom's Cabin," which had prepared us to find pathos and humor in negro life. But that hardly explains the superior realism Boucicault displays in handling his negro characters over his treatment of his whites. In handling his whites, he was working in a convention. In handling his negroes he was working with material familiar in daily life, but comparatively new in the theatre—only a generation old. And that generation had seen the negro chiefly represented by minstrels, i.e., intimately and with a crude and kindly realism. It is hard to avoid the belief that the minstrels had a definite effect upon the best parts of Boucicault's best play on an American theme. And it is impossible to avoid the belief that they had an effect upon American audiences, making them perhaps subconsciously dissatisfied with too much aloofness in the theatre, eager for the delights of the contemporary reference and the tang of the moment's reality, and hence in the long run preparing them for the advent of the modern realistic drama. In fact, I have a suspicion that if the Civil War had not suddenly intervened, we would have evolved a modern drama for ourselves and not been forced to get it by importing the comedies of Tom Robertson.

Nothing is more futile, though we all indulge in the pastime, than predicting the immortality of contemporary works of art. Any one of us, who has reached middle age, can recall evenings of high excitement in the theatre, or books which roused him to a burning pitch of enthusiasm, and yet, today, those plays, those books, are accumulating dust. What of it? If in their day and hour they accomplished well what they set out to do, that is enough, and their immortality is to be found in the effects they had on those who saw or read them, and on the artists who followed. Who of my generation can forget the enormous excitement with which we pounced upon a new story by Kipling? Today the young read him, if at all, either with apathy or resentment at his "Empire complex," as they call it. I fear I do myself. But that isn't to say that he was not a great force in the nineties. Can anyone, I wonder, recall James A. Herne at the end of "Shore Acres," when he fixed the old kitchen for the night and went upstairs to bed? All the humble, homely, and heart-warming quality of rural New England life was in that scene, and the sweet simplicity of brave old age. It was the beginnings, too, of American realistic drama, but we didn't know that (though Herne did). We accepted it as touching and tender, a poem of the familiar. But I dare say "Shore Acres" would prove depressing to the literary critic today. It has no permanence on the printed page. It was compounded of an actor's art, pantomime, a stage setting, and the spirit of 1893.

If you had been present some night in a minstrel hall when the black faced comedians on the stage tuned their banjos, paused a moment for silence, and then began to sing "Way down upon the Swanee Ribber," would you have known that you were present at the birth of something immortal? Would you have cared? The minstrels, you may be sure, had no thought of immortality for their songs. They thought only of entertaining the paying customers. I was myself present at the birth (at least, the birth in

Boston) of a now seemingly immortal work, "The Mikado." To be sure, I was a trifle young to be thinking of immortality, but I cannot recall that any of my elders talked about it, either. They were too busy singing "The flowers that bloom in the Spring, tra-la—." We all had a wonderful time—and waited for the next one. But at how many other plays have you and I been present when we had as wonderful—well, *almost* as wonderful, a time, but which have not achieved permanence either in the theatre repertoire, or on the printed page? Their number is considerable, even for those people who are not yet old. We know that those plays, as performed in their day and hour, had an artistic validity which made them important. And we are bound to assume, therefore, that if later critics find them "depressing" it is because those critics are not able properly to appreciate them in their social, historical, and above all their theatrical setting.

Hence it is that the study of drama solely, or chiefly, from the printed text and the literary point of view not only results in failure to understand many interesting and important examples of playmaking, but actually sometimes in a distortion of the real progression and direction of dramatic art. For a long time (and I fear sometimes even today) Goldsmith and Sheridan were represented as the apex to which British drama climbed in the eighteenth century. But, as a matter of fact, they were both throwbacks. The future was not with either man, though the literature was. It was far more with Lillo and his "London Merchant," which as a literary production is certainly depressing. The future in the nineteenth century, was not with "Richelieu" or "Virginius" or "London Assurance," but with the burlettas produced by Madame Vestris. In America the future was not with Boker's "Francesca," "Mose the Fireman," the negro minstrels and "Yankee Hill." In fact, to study the history of drama from a collection of the literary highlights of various periods may

very easily result in missing almost completely the true line of evolution, and never seeing the sources of even the master works themselves.

Think for a moment of the present situation in the theatre. Apparently a fresh creative style soon reaches its maximum effectiveness, becomes universally accepted, and then declines—all in a space of two generations. It was so with Elizabethan drama, with Restoration comedy, and it now seems to be true of realism. We in America, mastering the medium later, did not reach our peak till the 1920's; Europe's peak came before the War. But already the decline is evident. Our drama is obviously entering a period of eclecticism, of almost random experiment, and finding outlets, too, on screen and radio hitherto unknown. Maxwell Anderson writes in verse, combining realistic tight construction with the diffusion and freedom in speech of an older poetic tradition. A play without scenery, employing a combination of Greek chorus, Chinese property man, and Josh Whitcomb, wins the Pulitzer prize. Out and out realism wins the critic's prize—"Of Mice and Men." Ireland's leading playwright, Sean O'Casey deserts realism of which he was a master, for a curious jumble of symbolism and poetry which defies classification. The screen's greatest popular triumph this year is an animated illustration of a Grimm's fairy tale. The radio seeks to rouse your imagination purely by sounds and spoken words. Somewhere here is the germ of the future, but who can say where? One prediction is as good as another. Some day in the future it will be known. But what if it were in a play, or series of plays, or in a picture or a radio broadcast, which had little or no literary merit, which is quite unlikely to be printed in an anthology, between O'Neill's "Strange Interlude" and Anderson's "Masque of Kings"?

O'Neill's "Strange Interlude" contained a new kind of stage soliloquy, spoken while other characters were present, and supposed to represent the subconscious thought of the

speakers. Many critics declared that here was a new dimension added to drama, that in the future all dramatists would be forced to employ the device. So far as I have noticed, no dramatists have, not even O'Neill himself after one subsequent and disastrous attempt in "Dynamo." Verily, Cassandra's robe is a perilous garment.

I profoundly hope that none of you is assuming that I therefore attach no importance to "Strange Interlude" as a work of art or a subject for study, and still more that I am advocating any neglect or minimizing of the intellectual and poetic approach to play writing. No student, and certainly no artist, should be unaware of the best that has been done in the past, and no artist can have too much to say, nor say it too well, for his generation. But to succeed in his generation (which he must do, or he is no dramatist at all) the theatrical artist must say things which are understandable and vital to his contemporaries, and he must say them in a speech they can accept. He must rouse emotional interest and create illusion. And what all along I have been trying myself to say is simply this:—that in many, if not most periods of the theatre, emotional interest has been aroused and illusion created by plays, even by mere entertainments, which may not evoke any such responses from us today, which may lack the literary savor to keep them enduring in print and the intellectual pith to survive the changing years. Because this is true of so much American drama before the turn of the current century, we have almost completely ignored any study of our native playhouse; we have dubbed it depressing and unworthy. We have been unwilling to study it, not as printed literature, but as a score from which our actors made music for your parents and mine, as a precious (and, when so studied, fascinating) record of the emotional responses of our forebears which constitutes perhaps the subtlest and surest clue for a spiritual reconstruction of the past.

No more than you and I today, did our

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ancestors go to the theatre to be educated, or to do right by literature. Even as you and I, they went to be entertained. An understanding analysis of what plays most entertained—for there can really be no drama without audiences—will not only explain them, but will disclose as nothing else can the true lines of theatrical evolution, the true steps by which drama advances—or, if you like, recedes. Such study will, alas, sometimes call for more historical sympathy than critical literary acumen. It will entail some knowledge of stage practice, and the imagination to visualize a printed direction into an emotional effect. It will entail the reading of some texts painfully deficient in enduring literary value or intellectual robustness. But it will vitalize the past of the American theatre for anyone who honestly attempts it, and will in the long run cause neither depression nor a sense of wasted time.

When I think of the time many and many a student has spent upon dead dramas from

England because they were “literary”—i.e., too often because they were Elizabethan or Restoration, it is I who am depressed. The style of those plays, the weight of their tradition, was a back drag on the English as well as the American stage for generations. There is something stirring and fine about a poor, crude little Yankee comedy, brashly unconscious of its depressing lack of literature yet rousing our ancestors to gales of laughter by its native tang and truth. I see the Future there. I see the plays which are most important and interesting to you and me today; just as only that is really vital today which is not imitative, traditional, but which speaks to us frankly in our own idiom. The past of the American theatre does not depress me. It couldn’t;—I saw Joe Jefferson play Rip Van Winkle. You may take your “Duchess of Malfi” and go off with her in a library corner or a classroom if you like. I find Rip far more congenial.