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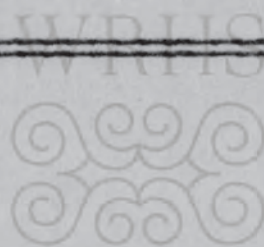
The American Theatre, 1924.

"THE AMERICAN THEATRE."

RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER.

THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING.

DECEMBER 7, 1924, CLEVELAND.



JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND

Among the great social forces which influence American life today, the theatre must be reckoned as one. There is hardly a town, or even a village, in our land which does not boast of a theatrical performance, if only once or twice a year; if only in the hands of local amateurs. In the great metropolitan cities the theatres are as numerous, if not more numerous, than the churches. The city of New York has close onto one hundred so-called legitimate theatres, innumerable vaudeville theatres, and almost infinite moving picture theatres. In Cleveland we have eight or ten theatres, half a dozen or more vaudeville houses, and approximately a hundred moving picture houses.

So that the influence of the theatre must, of necessity, be pervasive. It may be stated on a fair assumption that almost every man, woman and youth comes within the walls of a theatre more or less frequently through the year. Now, an institution which touches the lives of men and women so consistently must influence them. However lightly one might be tempted to take the theatre, one cannot escape the conclusion that the theatre is an educational force. By that I do not mean that it always educates properly. There are two kinds of education--right and wrong. But it is an effective, dynamic and everpresent educational force for good or evil, for good itself or bad itself, for good manners or bad manners, for correct ideas or stupid ideas. But it is

working upon and influencing thought and conduct and opinion consistently.

Even if we look upon the theatre as a mere place of amusement, as a place of relaxation for the "tired business man," even then are we constrained to take the theatre seriously. For it is just as important to know the kind of play a man engages in as to know the kind of business he engages in. From the point of view of culture it is even more important to know what a man does with his leisure time than what he does with his occupied time; for it is during the leisure hours, after six o'clock, that a man has a chance to develop the extra business interests and aptitudes of his mind and soul and heart. It is after business hours that a man gives his imagination a chance, that a man gives his esthetic inclinations a chance. It is after business hours when we seek play, relaxation, that we either gain or lose culture.

So that I say, even if we were to look upon the theatre as a mere narcotic for overstrung nerves, as a mere opportunity for unwinding and letting down, as it were, even then must we take the theatre quite seriously. But surely the theatre is much more than a mere nerve massage. Surely, Sophocles and Shakespeare and Ibsen, and in our own day, Galsworthy and O'Neill and Shaw and S and surely, these men have a higher conception of the theatre, entertain for it higher hopes and a more exalted role in society.

The theatre, to those who serve it in the spirit of faithfulness and consecration, is an art, a representation of life, and perhaps the most real and vivid representation of life. For don't you see that a play, a real play, is a slice taken out of life? It is a segment of reality transported to the boards, where men, persons, action, color, movement, speech, life itself, is most vividly represented. A great painting represents life only in line, in color, in mass, in design. A great piece of sculpture has not even color. But a play has color and design and movement and plot and idea and speech and living persons. It is the most real and vivid form of art. And in the dexterous hand of an artist a play can become, consciously or unconsciously, deliberately or by implication, a criticism of life, of manners, of conventions, of institutions--a clinic, as it were, of the habits and conduct of men. The theatre in the hands of a gifted artist can become a protest and a prophecy. From that point of view the theatre becomes a very critical institution in the life of society, one to be looked to with hope and fear, a place boding good or evil--a very serious affair.

Now, it is my conviction that the American theatre, both as a place of entertainment only, and as a place of serious art, has been found wanting, or, rather, has not yet found itself. Have you ever thought of it, how very much behind musical education is the dramatic education of the American public? You take our own city of Cleveland.

Cleveland has almost weekly, and sometimes daily, music of the first order at the hands of our own local orchestra, our own local artists, or at the hands of visiting artist musicians, and these musical events are welcomed not merely by the few, but very often by the many. The Chicago opera is greeted by thousands, the Metropolitan opera by tens of thousands in our community, and throughout our city hundreds of men and women or children are seriously studying music appreciation, to be able to listen to music more intelligently and more creatively.

Now, contrast that with our dramatic appreciation. Our theatrical pabulum last week was a play called "Big Boy"; and another play called "Lollypop." A good play has a hard road to travel in Cleveland, and not only in Cleveland but in almost every city in American outside of New York. Don't you see, in New York there is a sufficiently large foreign population to support real American drama. American Boston, the one hundred per cent city to this day will not support a good play. New York City will. It is a surprising and a disconcerting fact, but a fact, nevertheless, that the revival or the renaissance of good drama in New York in the last ten years first took place in the ghetto on Grand Street, in Greenwich Village, in out-of-the-way places, in the nooks and corners of foreign settlements. It was there that the good play first had its chance and was nourished and nurtured in the Little Theatre, in the Settlement Theatre, before it became profitable enough to be welcomed on Broadway.

The rest of America, to a large degree-- and I do not want to make general indictments--but to a large degree is not yet prepared to support good drama. Our so-called entertainment plays, our musical comedies--what are they? Largely stupid affairs, lacking in originality and ideas and imagination and music--in everything but the sex appeal. The success of the so-called musical comedy depends either upon a very clever comedian, or upon the degree of nudity on the stage. Our so-called comedies are of the Demi-Virgin type, salacious affairs, quite nasty, quite stupid, insipid, insincere, pandering. There are some fine exceptions, but by and large, this is true.

Even our so-called legitimate plays are not yet art. They are still most of the Saturday Evening Post story design and pattern; sweet little nothings, glorifying things first, worshipping success, the poor boy becoming rich, the course of love ultimately running smooth, every hard, cruel or real fact of life being avoided and scorned with marvelous circumvention and dexterity. It is not honest playwrighting, it is not real life; it is a false, conventional life, sentimental life, cowardly representation of life. And if drama is, as has been said, the projection of ideas--the projection of ideas through the medium of concrete representation, then the so-called legitimate American drama, with some rare but now decreasingly great number, has not yet deserved the designation of drama.

In our moving pictures--save the mark--

there are some very fine, and there have been some unusually fine moving pictures offered the American public; but plays like The Covered Wagon, and The Hunchback of Notre Dame, and the first half of the Ten Commandments,--plays of that type are rare and far between. Most of our movies are horrible twaddle, made lurid with a sex appeal--just tinsel, gaudy, fantastic, stupid things, without rhyme or reason.

Here is a list of moving pictures being presented in Cleveland this week. This is not a complete list. A Sainted Devil; Madonna of the Streets; The Fast Set; The City that Never Sleeps, with a sub-title, Midnight Madness of the Great White Way; Shadows of Paris; Wine; Those Who Dance; Open All Night; Sinners in Silk; and in another theatre, as a sort of a supplement, in competition, Sinners in Heaven.

The Sunday magazine of December 1st publishes a list of announcements of the pictures to be released this coming season by one of the most foremost companies, and some of the titles are--and I read them to you because it shows the degradation to which this great institution, capable to be of such tremendous service to the American public, has descended. These titles are nothing more than street solicitations,--some of the titles are: The Enemy Sex; Changing Husbands; Forbidden Paradise; Compromise; Unguarded Women; Playthings of Fire; A Broadway Butterfly; Argentine Love; Wild Moments; Beautiful Adventuress, and so on, and so on, ad nauseam.

Of course, you will at once ask yourselves

who is to blame; and being representative of the exalted American public, you will at once say, "Why, the blame is entirely on the manager or the producer." But it is not so. We would be laying the unction to our souls if we passed the responsibility for these conditions to any group of men. The responsibility must be shared alike by managers who pander to the lowest instincts, by actors who stoop to the depths for the sake of monetary gain, by critics who are hired by playwrights who haven't the faith, the vision to serve an ideal, but who sell their souls for a mess of pottage, and by the public, which delights in these things.

What is the solution? The easiest solution and the most hopeless of all solutions is censorship. It seems the easiest because it seems the most direct--the employment of force, of suppression, of prohibition. It seems to be the most practical because it is the most direct and immediate, but it is the most hopeless and ineffective and dangerous there is. Suppression and prohibition are not education, and censorship, even in the hands of an angel, is a dangerous thing, but in the hands of fallible human beings it becomes a menace; for very often the best of plays, because they challenge things as they are, and conventions which are regarded as sacred and inviolate, have been suppressed and will in the future be suppressed by near-sighted, vision-lacking censors. Ibsen's "Ghost," Shaw's "Mrs. Warren's Profession," and numerous other critical plays have been suppressed by censors. The American public ought not to pass

its responsibility, its own obligation of discrimination, selection and judgment to the hands of one or a few individuals. The worst thing that can happen to American drama is the enthronement of Mrs. Grundy.

What is the solution? Education! A long process, a tedious process, but the only process known to civilization. We must educate the American public to love good drama, even as we have in a marked degree succeeded in educating the American public to love good music; and we must begin that education in the school, in the church, in the high school; through amateur plays, through Little Theatres, through drama leagues and clubs, through community pageants and entertainments. We must present and constantly hold before the eyes of our rising generation and of our adult population samples of the fine in the drama, of the true, of the sincere, and they will react to it, because a man reacts ultimately to the true and to the fine and sincere things of life.

One of the greatest boons which has come to the American theatre, and which, to my mind, is responsible for the revival in interest in good drama in America today, and which has saved American drama, has been the Little theatre. When the stage of New York was a mass of pollution and degradation, here, there and everywhere throughout the city and the land, there began springing up little groups of amateurs, prompted not by commercialism, or the love of gain, or the love of ostentation, but simply by the love of the play.

And they organized themselves into troupes or groups, and they builded for themselves little theatres, and they presented there, laborously at first, and with a great gust of energy, those plays which have not yet received popular acclaim and approval. Today we have in this country close onto one hundred Little Theatres. One or two of them are in our own city of Cleveland, and giving us the best which Cleveland has had in the way of art in the last decade. And it is a great thing for the American public, not only for the American drama, for participation in a Little Theatre brings color and life and interest into otherwise drab and uninteresting life. It gives one an outlet for fine, stimulating, creative work, which very often men and women do not find in our big industrial cities.

And in the Little Theatre almost every esthetic phase of life is brought into play; not only acting, not only the proper use of speech, but color and design and the study of periods and movement and rhythm. All these things are effectively brought out and accentuated when amateurs earnestly work in the presentation of a play. Mr. Eaton, the drama critic, I believe is altogether right when he said: "The tremendous theatrical awakening among the people all over the country, their spontaneous desire to achieve a play house of and for themselves, is in truth an art awakening. To me it seems one of the most widespread and significant and hopeful in our entire history."

What shall we say, therefore, of the

American theatre? Everything which we have said in criticism may be said of American literature as well, may be said of the American press as well. American drama is young, and has all the shortcomings and the inadequacies of youth. It is still raw and crude; it is still unmolded, unrefined. It has not yet learned to speak of life and to life accurately and truly and deserving, with insight and with sympathy. That will come in time, and that will come, too, when an American public, educated in the finest of the drama, will begin to demand truth and sincerity and beauty and originality in the theatre. When they will demand it playwrights will find it to their interest to give that type of play to the American public, and critics will find it to their interest to represent these newer ideals of the American public, and managers and producers will find it to their interest to cater to an ever increasingly large number of men and women who want the best in the drama, and they will give it to them.

I am not as hopeful of the movies; for any institution that has to cater to millions, to masses, is, of necessity, compelled to cater to the lowest among the masses. But to the average, which is always very low, a good play does not need millions in order to be supported. A few thousand here and there will keep a good play alive; but a moving picture depends for its very life upon the appreciation and the patronage of hundreds of thousands and millions, and so they will of necessity have to cater to those primitive, elemental aptitudes and desires and passions of men.

There has developed in the last few years even there a hopeful institution--the educational moving picture, which can be used for purposes of instruction in schools and in churches. But that is not the kind of moving picture that the average man wants to see. Some day a great producer will arise who will have enough confidence in the good taste of a large number of people in the American public as to deliberately cater to them. Now he may become a financial martyr to the cause. I do not know. But it is to be hoped that some great spirit will venture into that field of presenting through the medium of that most marvelous institution, the moving picture, plays that are true and earnest and honest, that present life intelligently, critically, helpfully. Miracles do happen, and this miracle may happen.

As for ourselves, we ought to take it upon ourselves to see to it that every earnest effort made in our community to present the good things is adequately supported. It is just as important, friends, for your children and for yourselves to see good plays as to read good books, and it is just as important for them to see good plays and read good books as it is to eat wholesome food. For whatever enters into the mind of your child, forever, forever stays there. Do not permit yourself to indulge in that fiction that you can take a child to see any poisonous movie, and that the child, because he is innocent, will not understand it or will not get its vileness and viciousness. That is a fiction which parents

often indulge in. Everything, everything which a child, however young, sees, stays with that child, and some day that something may rise from the nether world of a subconscious self, where it has been laying latent and dormant for years, and thrust itself upward and blast his life. A bad picture, a nasty scene, an ugly situation, vividly presented before the eyes of youth, is like so much poison sent into his system. It may not destroy him then and there, but it lingers in his spiritual and mental blood, as it were, forever.

So that it is of the utmost momentary importance that you surrender that lackadaisical, indifferent attitude to what is thrown on the screen before the eyes of yourselves and your children, and approach a movie critically, even as you approach the food which you set before your child.

My appeal is for a more alert and more critical, more discriminating theatre-going public as a solution for all the ills of the stage.

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