

THE CONDITION AND PROSPECTS OF THE DRAMA IN THE UNITED STATES.

The American who has been abroad and has been a habitué of the play houses in London, Paris, Berlin, Milan, and other noted places, usually returns home with a prejudice against the management of American theatres and can hardly be induced to visit them. This is a conspicuous feature of the travelled American. It is not exceptional, phenomenal or extraordinary, but it is the prevailing result as it is the evidence of a trip to Europe. It inspires a striking contrast for home entertainments of this kind.

The reason of this is readily explained. Europe is far superior to America in what we call aesthetic; and puts into its stage as much talent and hard study as a world into a production. Especially is this true of that part of aesthetics which pertains to the drama. In this department of the fine arts she is proverbially critical, fastidious, difficult to satisfy. As a consequence the drama in Europe is a very serious thing, and is not to be taken lightly. In Europe all actors are expected to be star actors, thoroughly capable and informed in their profession. Their duty is to do well their several parts and aim to make them by their excellent rendering blend and fuse into a whole. Even the Subordinate actors are expected to be star actors, and to do what they are to do as though it were worth doing well. The public in Europe is a hard taskmaster. It will accept nothing that is inferior and common place or superficial. A hint of disapprobation is fatal to its object. The most good natured and accommodating manager must take the hint. This is well; when people pay money for an article they expect a corresponding value in return, and have a right to demand that those who ask their money to entertain and amuse them should play with their best.

The wandering star system is not as great a feature there as here; and when a star goes on his travels it is preceded by his achievements and surrounded by a host of newspaper critics, who perform their task with strict candor. What is good is commended, what is bad is censured, and the mediocre is despised. The result of the actor in Europe is superior. Society here pays more consideration than it does in America. He is usually educated and thoughtful minded man. In fact, the constraints of the popular requirements attached to his profession compel him to be studious. Great labor is expended in preparation; the rehearsals are thorough and exacting. Elocution, declamation, the modulation of the voice, utterance, pronunciation, deportment, these are all thoroughly studied. It is therefore not strange that the condition of the drama in Europe should be so far superior to America. It is not to be compared as he is to something not so good, and cause him to dislike the home article.

What is the condition of the drama in the United States? In none of its spheres can it be said to be in a high state of efficiency. With the exception of London, Wallack's and Booth's theatres, and perhaps the Boston Museum, we have hardly a first-class well conducted play house. Notably is this true of the historical genre. You may count on your five fingers the really great American actors, while of actresses, with the exception of Miss Cushman, we have none to compare with the great actresses of the world. In tragedy, comedy, tragic-comedy, male-drama, opera, burlesque or farce, we have little to boast of. Booth, Forrest, Jefferson, and Warren are the recognized and conceded quartette in American drama. Outside of these we are barren of good actors. We are afflicted with a great deal of either serious or humorous actors, but none of them are filled with dusty animalcule, having locomotive powers, but as destitute of grace and genius as a frosted frog. They grapple, squirm and wriggle in gesture, attitude and speech in a way to provoke contempt. Probably no profession so replete with inefficiency and rank stupidity in not anything that claims to entertain and amuse them can the people and spend many thousands of dollars to support it. The education of American actors is too often superficial; too often they are mere martinet, and slide to the bottom of their profession, until the latter kills them. But little labor is expended in their rehearsals, nor are they thorough and exacting. Elocution is deficient, the flexibility of the voice is not controlled, utterance, pronunciation and deportment receive but little care; hence it is that theatre goers are treated to so much insipidity. The conditions of excellence are not complied with, and the art-piece degenerates into a commonplace, place of realism with nothing to recommend it or redeem its shallowness.

As a consequence, the drama has fallen into a state of inferiority. They have not lost their taste for unique acting, but are so seldom entertained by it that they have come to identify the American stage with flimsiness. They employ and support themselves better at home, the price of admission will buy them more and better entertainment, and while they would gladly patronize genius on the stage, they prefer to stay away until genius puts in an appearance.

Notably, therefore, unless a complete rehabilitation and revivification with the aid of excellence sets in, the stage will continue to decay and decline, until finally it gives place to something more in consonance with the public taste. Nor shall we be sorry. The play of Hamlet, with the Hamlet left out. If your managers cannot reform their theatres, they must not expect a support. This would be giving something for nothing, which is no part of the intention of practical good sense. People who know the value of money, make a good deal now-a-days to bring down the house, - not perhaps to win the applause of the gallery, but to get the money. In every production it is rapidly coming to pass that only first class students win the race. No common man can expect to keep pace with the strides of intelligence until he is a hard thinker and studies his text with arduousness. The best regulator of the profession is the reading propensity of the people. An ordinary newspaper now-a-days contains so much that is excellent and uplifting that the theatre must be a place to be improved, and when we think that the American people are great readers and up in the current literature of the day, we can understand how the theatre complex has become the public demand on the stage. We are sharp critics, every one of us, because we are sharp observers. We know almost by instinct the flaws and faults in a piece of acting. It takes strongly intelligent people to comply with the conditions and requirements of modern taste. Nothing short of toll and labor will fit a man to stand before the public in the character of an actor and win for him his share of fame. When the stage complies with the conditions it will win back its old-time popularity. - St. Louis Journal of Commerce.

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