THEATRE -
AN INTERPRETATION

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THESIS

My thesis is an argument against the idea that the playwright is the pinnacle of theatre, the top of the pyramid out of which all the other facets of theatre are dependent.

The first part of the thesis deals with the general attidude that holds with this argument, quoting such people as Lee Simonson, Mrs. Block, etc. Questions are put forward regarding this attitude, and the methods of the Broadway concept of play production are seriously questioned.

My thesis then goes on to develop the idea that all the facets of theatre are interdependent, that there is no single facet- such as the script- that is solely creative and all the others merely interpretive.

It concludes with the question whether Theatre can develop further on the basis of it's present form.

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

THEATRE - AN INTERPRETATION.

ON STAGE

Play and Production

A PLAY, according to William Archer, one of the outstanding dramatic critics of the past generation, is "a ship destined to be launched in a given element, the theatre." In Archer's metaphor the dramatic script is something which comes to the theatre. The wide-spread tendency now is to consider the theatre as something which is placed at the service of the script. Thus in his informative book, The Stage is Set, Lee Simonson arrives at the conclusion that the progress of theatre must wait upon the dramatist. " In the modern theatre, as in every other, the beginning is in the word."

There is even the implication that the forces of production, as distinguished from the script, must be looked upon as a threat to the integrity of drama itself. Mrs. Anita Block, in The Changing World in Plays and Theatre, declares:

> Theatre-consciousness is the condition of being entranced by the glamour and by the often spurious trappings of the theatre-such as clever acting, smart dialogue, dazzling costumes and effective scenery - into a drugged indifference to the values of the play content. Play-consciousness is the condition of being critically alive, in the theatre,to the play as literature . . . . Once a t heatre-goer has developed play-consciousness he can never be deceived in the theatre again.

It is curious that this tendency in dramatic theory should now be current in a type of theatre which, when it was younger, insisted that "the Art of the Theatre is neither acting nor the play, it is not scene nor dance, but it consists of all the elements of which these things are composed." (Gordon Craig, 1905). But in fact few present-day American critics are as extreme in their views on this

problem as are Lee Simonson or Mrs. Block. It is still generally affirmed that theatre is something bigger than the playscript. "The play's the thing-in the library," says John Mason Brown.

In practice the fundamental belief is simply that dramatic production exists to illustrate a story written by a dramatist (even though it is quite possible that in the process the story may be drastically altered).

It is comparatively easy to think of the dramatic process beginning with the writing of a play. This chronological order, however, is not sufficiently chronological. Before the dramatist can write a play for the theatre, the theatre has to be there. And not only a theatre in the abstract but a very particular kind of theatre-the theatre of the playwright's own epoch.

What comes first, the dramatist's script or the forces of theatre in general? Can it be said that the script alone is truly creative, while the other elements of production are "interpretive"? What is the value of such a distinction? Or is it of no more pressing importance than the question of which came first: the chicken or the egg?

It happens to be a question of great theoretical and practical importance whether the script alone is creative while the other factors of production are interpretive.

The belief that the script alone enters upon new paths, while the other elements of production must wait upon the script because they are "interpretive" has been set forth by Lee Simonson:

> ... the development of scene-designing as an art must wait upon the arrival, in sufficient numbers, of dramatic poets capable of interpreting life profoundly. Until they appear the scene-designer, whatever his graphic gifts may be, can do little more than mark time... As designers we cannot perform the functions of dramatic poets, but once they enter the theatre we are their indispensable collaborators. We cannot call them forth. It is they who must summon us. Meanwhile we wait and work.

Is the theatre really obliged to wait until the dramatist makes up his mind to change it?. It is only the dramatist who can initiate progress in the theatre? Is it true, as those who think always in terms of playscripts assert: "It is the dramatist who brings about changes, for he calls for innovations which the actors, designers and directors hasten to supply"?

The truth is that all the elements of theatrical production are creative. We have no right to put any of them in an uncreative category. The progressive theatre must make progress in all its branches.

The overwhelming importance attached at present to the factor of the script-at the expense of the other factors-is due to a special condition in the production methods of Broadway and Hollywood. Here production usually revolves around the playscript. The script is the center of the theatre's economic set-up, and productions are assembled by the "casting-office" method. That is to say, the productive forces are assembled temporarily for a specific play, after which they are disbanded.

This method, considered in the light of theatre history, is a radical change in the customary manner of production. It happens to be an injurious change.

THE STORY ON STAGE

The true relationship of the playscript to production is hidden from us today because of certain conditions peculiar to our theatre. These conditions prevail in the Broadway theatre especially.

The Broadway dramatist, unlike his predecessors (who were usually associated with theatrical companies) as a rule does his work separately. To all appearances he is an independent craftsman who writes his plays in the seclusion of his own study (if he is an established success;in the reading room of

a public library if he is rather less fortunate). The product of his labor is thrown on the play-market, where it may be bought by any one of a score of producing managers or producing organizations. As soon as a manager decides on a script and has the necessary funds, the director, designer, actors and technical people are called in. It therefore looks as if dramatic activity always begins with a number of typewritten pages.

But in fact the dramatist's script grows out of the whole apparatus of the theatre as it is available in his own day. More than that, it grows out of the living individual talents available in his own day.

Still more, the dramatist's choice of theme and his treatment of that theme are determined by existing theatrical producers. Dramatists write with the expectation of interesting not just the play-market in general, but specifically George Abbott, the Theatre Guild, Guthrie McClintic, the Playwrights' Producing Company or the Group Theatre. The mere existence of the Group Theatre, for example, causes certain types of plays to be composed which would not otherwise be written. On the other hand, some plays even if independently written would never become stage realities did not an organization exist which was willing to give them life. Sklar and Peters' STEVEDORE (1934), written in the spirit of the workers' theatre movement, remained a sheaf of paper untouched until a newly created organization, the Theatre Union, turned it into a stage success.

If the chronology of production is one apparent reason for the overwhelming emphasis on the script on Broadway, a more solid reason is the economic value of the script. The script, more than any other element, more even than the high-priced star, is the cornerstone of commercial theatre enterprise. It is the script in which the producer invests primarily, for which he gathers his financial and artistic resources and from which he hopes to profit on Broadway and in Hollywood.

Audiences, it is too often forgotten, to to the theatre to see a Show. This means that, among the things which the spectator goes to see is a Group Theatre cast, a setting by Donald Oenslager, the direction of Lee Strasberg or a solo performance by Katharine Cornell or by Paul Robeson.

It is true at the same time that the spectator is mentally prepared always for a story which will take place on the stage. Even revues and burlesque shows are accustomed to have a story, however flimsy, upon which the comic scenes and vaudeville acts are strung together. A story, or at least the rudiments of one, seems to be essential.

Still this fact does not settle the matter. The important question for us is not whether a story is essential to theatre, but whether it is theatre. Whether the whole significance of stage production consists in transferring a story to the stage without "hurting" it; or whether the story is no more than an important ingredient of something which, on the stage, becomes more than a story - something which turns into that ceremony, that composite of many art forms, which we call theatre.

THIS TOO, TOO SOLID FLESH

We have seen that in theory-but not in practice- most critics grant that the dramatic performance is something different from something more than, the playscript which it contains. The performance does not illustrate a script; rather, the script is imbedded in the performance. How do these critics define a dramatic story?

What constitutes a story to some people's notions is not a story to others'. There was a time when a study of private emotions, as the Sturm und Drang period saw them, was not a story to the classicists who understood only objective behavior in stage characters. When the Expressionists set to work, audiences accustomed to Naturalistic plots saw

no story in the stream-of-consciousness pattern of the newer writers. The plays of Brecht and Piscator were not stories in the opinion of those who did not like politics on the stage. No doubt a well-presented account of drop-forging, which might seem intensely dramatic to some people, would not be considered a story by others.

Again, it becomes evident that a story in its literary form cannot be the same as a story in its form on the stage. The moment the story appears in the theatre it becomes subject to the laws of the theatrical worlk. A chair has to be placed on the stage. What kind of chair? And where to place it? The stage must be lit up. What kind of light? How much of it, from what direction? Shall it be constant, or shall it change from time to time? At once the story, as such, gives way to more immediate problems, more immediate in a theatrical sense.

During the 1937-38 Broadway season there appeared three successful plays - the Mercury Theatre's JULIUS CAESAR and THE CRADLE WILL ROCK, and OUR TOWN, presented by Jed Harris - in which there was a minimum of scenery or which had stage walls showing. Immediately it was declared that these "no-scenery" shows proved that scenery and scene designers are really an encumbrance to the plays in which they are used. They should be abolished.

A peculiar kind of idealism governs these theories. They stem from the notion that theatre consists of a priceless soul (the script) and a mere body (the production). As Brown expresses it,

> Great plays are great for other reasons than that they are adapted to the stage. They soar above its physical limitations as the spirit transcends the body.

Technically considered, the value of a good playscript lies in the fact that it functions on the stage. Otherwise what distinguishes it from any other printed literature? A good script is stageworthy, or it is not a good script.

The author of a good script knows his way around a stage either by experience or by insight. The playscript is essentially a chart, a definition, of stage action, meaning that it defines something which already exists. It was in this way that Aeschylus constructed upon the ritual of Dionysus. It was in this way that Moliere constructed upon the Connedia dell' Arte.

Few laymen understand that, on the stage, dialogue is no substitute for action. Stage dialogue has dramatic worth only when it is another from of action, when it is muted action. Even so, muted, spoken action of this sort is comparatively rare (George Bernard Shaw is one of the few masters of this art). As a rule dialogue functions as a kind of libretto for the stage action.

"CREATIVE VERSUS INTERPRETIVE"

It is true that the playscript must be regarded as an original piece of creative work while the other elements of stage production are merely "interpretive"? It is not true. There is no objective basis for the belief that only the script is creative and that the acting, the direction, the setting, must all draw their breath of life from the script.

How often have we not seen scripts without life, scripts which are mere echoes and imitations of previous productions! Such playscripts are occasionally brought to life by superb performances of actors whose every gesture transcends the play. How often a setting creates a dramatic statement of which the play itself is incapable! How often does not a director take a lifeless script and make it live, to some degree at least, on the stage!

In the course of an article on the principles of directing, the Russian director B.E. Zakhava makes some interesting observations on the question of "creative versus interpretive":

By what standards then does the work of the actor and director become creative work? The director and the actor

work on the basis of the material given them by the dramatist; this latter in itself does not an any sense or degree lessen their right to create. There is no art where the artist creates out of thin air. Every artist uses that cultural heritage which has accumulated in his particular field. He must inevitably profit by this accumulation in his art. More than this we know that, in the history of art, great artists have created their finest masterpieces by using the work of their predecessors. For instance, it is well known that Shakespeare wrote HAMLET on the framework of a Scandinavian saga preserved in the vaults of the Danish scholar Saxo Grammaticus and revised before Shakespeare by Belleforest and Thomas Kyd. It is also no news that Ostrovsky often borrowed plots from the French comedies. This does not in any way lessen our admiration for Shakespeare or Ostrovsky.

What is wrong with something being "interpretive"? The script itself is interpretive of the other theatrical elements; its story carries along and makes understandable to the average spectator certain nuances of acting or setting which he might not otherwise appreciate. HAMLET and KING LEAR provide great actors with adequate means of expression. From this point of view these plays are "vehicles," in a good sense, for actors of superior calibre.

A great script, like a great role or a great scene design, is a valuable achievement. The script has a leading function, moreover, above that of the other elements of production, because it is a chart of production, it rallies the forces of production. (Unlike the other factors, also, it is comparatively imperishable in the form of the printed word.) This leading function is an important privilege of the script; but it is a quality which must not be confused with creativeness.

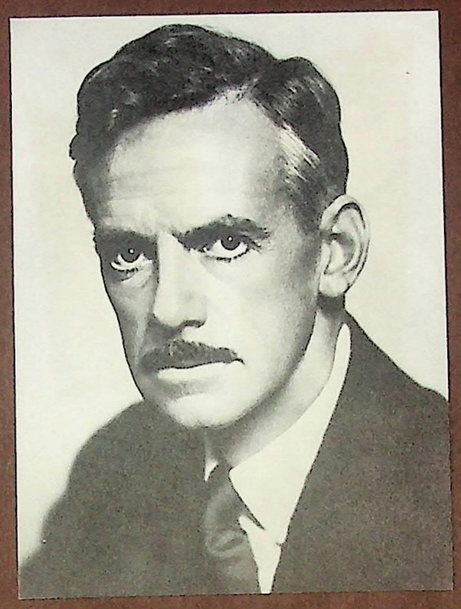
The playwright, like all the other workers in the theatre, has done his share to change the character of the theatre even as he worked in it. Aeschylus is generally

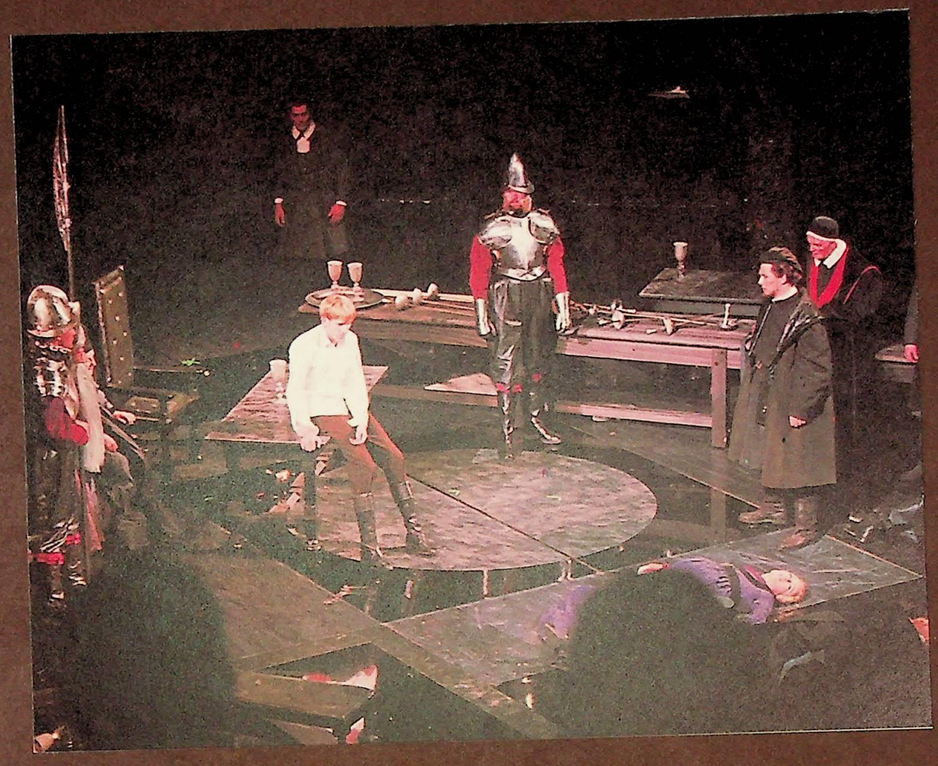
known today only for his plays; but his plays were only one department of his dramatic activities. More than a playwright he was a creator of stage form. He is said to have supervised personally the training of his choruses, for whom he devised dances and designed costumes. He is credited with having given definitive form to the strange costume of the Greek tragic actor. It was Aeschylus who cut down the length of the choral odes, stressed dialogue instead and introduced a second actor-changes which transformed the archaic Dionysian ritual tinto "an essentially dramatic species of art." Like Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides also took part actively in the definition of Attic stage form.

Closer to our own times we have the examples of Goethe, Wagner, Victor Hugo, Strindberg and Zola, who were all vehement partisans of scenic reform. They realized that the problems of production.

Many dramatists of our own period have been aware of the need for changes in theatrical form. Among American playwrights Eugene O'Neill has been one of the most restless of scenic innovators, calling upon techniques which ranged from Naturalism to Expressionism (as in THE HAIRY APE, 1922) and Constructivism (as in DYNAMO,1929). In a whole cycle of his plays the actors were called upon to don masks, as in THE HAIRY APE, THE GREAT GOD BROWN (1926), THE RIME OF THE ANCIENT MARINER (1924), LAZARUS LAUGHED (1926). John Howard Lawson has been equally protean in style, from Symbolism in SUCCESS STORY (1932) and GENTLEWOMAN (1934), to Expressionism in ROGER BLOOMER (1923), Theatricalism in PROCESSIONAL (1925) and Constructivism in LOUDSPEAKER (1927).

Beginning with ON TRIAL (1914), Elmer Rice turned to a play-construction of staccato "flash-back" scenes instead of the previous convention of three or four acts. Plays of twelve or more scenes are now a commonplace on modern stages, necessitating new systems of stage mechanics, scene shifting





and designing. Marc Connelly, Sidney Howard, George Sklar, Marc Blitzstein, Martin Flavin, Irwin Shaw, Sidney Kingsley, Arnold Sundgaard, are other American dramatists who have shown an active interest in technique. Indeed it can be said that every dramatist who has written more than one play has found it necessary to have definite views on the matter, and to make his wishes known. Contemporary playwrights, like those of the past, have left their impress upon the stage conventions which they found, changing the fate of these conventions.

In the course of history we come regularly upon periods when the initiative was in hands other than those of the dramatist. The eras of the artistic ascendency of the script have been few and far between in the course of more than twenty-five centuries of production. Such periods can be numbered on the fingers of one hand: the Attic theatre; the Baroque theatre of France, Spain and England; the Elizabethan theatre; the Romantic theatre; the Naturalistic theatre of the late nineteenth century. Theatre has managed to flourish for centuries with the merest rudiments of a script, or with no script at all.

"But in past times there were eras when story and poetry weighed heaviest, others when spectacles and trick-effects alone satisfied the audiences; and still others when a vigorous show of virtuoso acting was the clou of stage art . . . In a period covering the late seventeenth and most of the eighteenth century, acting was one of the most conspicuous elements in the theatre's activity, and the only element around which a history of the playhouses of the time could be written. Dramatists of world significance are not met with in France for a long time after Moliere, nor in Spain after Calderon, nor in England after Dryden; and Germany won't bring forward any contribution till the star of Goethe and Schiller rises a century hence. (Cheney: The Theatre).

THEATRE AS PRODUCTION.

To understand our present-day theatre or the vistas which are opening for the future we must go beyond the study of the playscript for information. It is necessary to follow closely the mutations of style in the theatre, especially in recent years.

In making our inquiry we may learn a great deal from a consideration of the stage setting. The nuances of style in scene design, once they are properly understood, are more obvious than those of acting or directing styles, hence are more readily illustrative. Again, the factor of design is almost at the polar end of production from that of the script; it affords an approach to production which is very different from the one in vogue at this time. Finally the exact connection between scene design and the other factors of production is a question which has provoked much thought among stage workers; it should prove illuminating to bring up the opinions which have been expressed on that subject.

It is our contention that all the forces of stage production are creative; that each of these factors can and should make progress; that the fight for a better theatre has to be waged all along the line of production.

In line with this contention we have re-examined the relation of the dramatist's script to the other production elements. We have given instances from dramatic history to show that theatre has not been merely a succession of playscripts. We have tried to show that the progress of the script itself may be frustrated by the backwardness of other elements. It has also been pointed out that in everyday practice the script is not "inviolate," and should not be.

While granting the special importance of the script, we have also tried to show that the script is not something independent of the rest of the theatre.

It is, on the contrary, something which arises out of the whole apparatus of theatre.

The American commercial stage employs a casting-office system of assembling its personnel. Yet the whole technique which it has inherited is a product of the creative work of permanent companies; and experience warrants the conclusion that future progress will be made primarily in such companies. For stage production is a composite art, and it is practiced by people working together in creative association - a type of rapport which is unfortunately not encouraged by "casting-office" methods.

We have taken note of some of the personalities in recent stage history who were not dramatists yet devoted their lives to the improvement of theatre in general, a work whose importance justified such devotion. None of these men felt that the perfect technique has already been found, but all of them have believed optimistically that the solution would arrive, perhaps in the near future.

It appears now that before we can go on to the future of which these men have dreamt, we must find the answer to a technical problem that has arisen on our stages. That problem, hitherto vague, is becoming clearer.

It is the question whether the theatre can develop further on the basis of its present form.

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