

THEATRE ARTS MAGAZINE

Volume III

JANUARY, 1919

Number I

~page 35~

Instead of a Theatre

By W. B. YEATS

A COUPLE of years ago I was sitting in my stall at the Court Theatre in London watching one of my own plays, *The King's Threshold*. In front of me were three people, seemingly a husband and wife and a woman friend. The husband was bored; he yawned and stretched himself and shifted in his seat as I watched him with distress. I was inclined to be angry, but reminded myself that music, where there are no satisfying audible words, bores me as much, for I have no ear, or only a very primitive one. Presently, when the little princesses came upon the stage in their red clothes, the woman friend, who had seemed also a little bored, said, "They do things very well," and became attentive. The distinguished painter who had designed the clothes at any rate was able to interest her. The wife, who had sat motionless from the first, said, when the curtain had fallen and the applause—was it politeness or enthusiasm?—had come to an end, "I would not have missed it for the world." She was perhaps a reader of my poetry, who had persuaded the others to come, and she had found a pleasure in the combination of words and speech—a pleasure the book did not give her. Yet when I think of my play I do not call her to the mind's eye, or even her friend who found the long red gloves of the little princesses amusing, but always that bored man. And the worst of it is that I could not pay my players, or the seamstress, or the owner of the building, unless I could draw to my plays those who prefer light amusement, or who have no ear for verse and literature, and fortunately they are all very polite.

Being sensitive, and not knowing how to escape the chance of sitting behind the wrong people, I have begun to shrink from sending my muses where they are but half welcome, and even, in Dublin, where the pit has a liking for poetry, I have no longer the appetite to carry me through the daily rehearsals. Yet I need a theatre. I believe myself to be a dramatist; I desire to show events and not merely to tell of them; two of my best friends were won for me by my plays; and I seem to myself most alive at the moment when a roomfull of people have the one lofty emotion. My blunder has been that I did not discover in my youth that my theatre must be the ancient theatre made by unrolling a carpet, or marking out a place with a stick, or setting a screen against a wall. Certainly those

Theatre Arts Magazine
~the second of four pages~

who care for my kind of poetry must be numerous enough, if I can bring them together, to pay half a dozen players who can bring all their properties in a cab and perform in their leisure moments.

I have found my first model—and in literature if we would not be parvenus we must have a model—in the “Nō” stage of aristocratic Japan. I have described in the introduction to Mr. Pound’s *Certain Noble Plays of Japan* (Cuala Press) what had seemed to me important on that most subtle stage. I do not think of my discovery as mere economy. It has been a great gain to get rid of scenery and substitute for a crude landscape painted upon canvas three performers who, sitting against a screen covered with some one unchangeable pattern, or against the wall of a room, describe landscape or event, and accompany movement with drum or gong, or deepen the emotion of the words with zither or flute. Painted scenery, after all, is unnecessary to my friends and to myself, for our imagination, kept living by the arts, can imagine a mountain covered with thorn-trees in a drawing-room without any great trouble, and we have many quarrels with even the best scene-painting. Then, too, the masks forced upon us by the absence of any special lighting and by the nearness of the audience, who surrounded the players upon three sides, do not seem to us eccentric. We are accustomed to faces of bronze and of marble, and what could be more suitable than that Cuchulain, let us say a half-supernatural legendary person, should show to us a face not made before the looking-glass by some leading player—there, too, we have many quarrels—but moulded by some distinguished artist? We are a learned people, and we remember how the Roman Theatre, when it became more intellectual, abandoned “make-up” and used the mask instead, and that the most famous artists of Japan modelled masks that are still in use after hundreds of years. It would be a stirring adventure for a poet and an artist working together to create once more heroic or grotesque types that, keeping always an appropriate distance from life, would seem images of those profound emotions that exist only in solitude and in silence. Nor has anyone told me after a performance that they have missed a changing facial expression, for the mask seems to change with the light that falls upon it, and besides, the poetical and tragic art, as every producer knows, is mainly in those movements that are of the entire body.

At the Hawk’s Well was performed for the first time in April 1916 in a friend’s drawing-room, and only those who cared for

Instead of a Theatre
~the third of four pages~

literature were invited. It was played upon the floor, and the players came in by the same door as the audience, and the audience and the players and I myself were pleased. A few days later it was revived in Lady Islington's big drawing-room in Chesterfield Gardens, for the benefit of a war charity. There was a platform jutting out from the wall, and some three hundred fashionable people, including Queen Alexandra, were round the platform on three sides, and once more my muses were but half welcome. I remember, however, with a little pleasure, that we found a newspaper photographer planting his camera in a dressing-room and explained to him that as fifty people could pay our expenses we did not invite the Press, and that flashlight photographs were not desirable for their own sake. He was incredulous and persistent, and it was nearly ten minutes before Dulac persuaded him to go away. What a relief, after directing a theatre so many years—for I am one of the two directors of the Abbey Theatre in Dublin—to think no more of pictures, unless Dulac or some other distinguished man has made them, and not at all of those paragraphs which are written by young men, perhaps themselves intelligent, who must applaud the common taste or starve.

Perhaps I shall turn to something else now that our Japanese dancer Ito, whose minute intensity of movement in the dance of the Hawk so well suited our small room and private art, has been hired by a New York theatre, or perhaps I shall find another dancer. I am certain, however, that whether I grow tired or not—and one does grow tired of always quarrying the stone for one's statue—I have found out the only way the subtler forms of literature can find dramatic expression. Shakespeare's art was public—now resounding and declamatory, now lyrical and subtle, but always public; because poetry was a part of the general life of his people, who had been trained by the church to listen to difficult words and sang, instead of the songs of the music-halls, many songs that are still beautiful. A man who had sung "Barbara Allan" in his own house would not, as I have heard the gallery at the Lyceum Theatre, receive the love-speeches of Juliet with an ironical chirruping. We must recognize the change as the painters did when, finding no longer palaces and churches to decorate, they made framed pictures to hang upon a wall. Whatever we lost in mass and in power we should discover in elegance and in subtlety. Our lyrical and our narrative poetry alike have used their freedom and approached nearer, as Pater said all the arts would if they were

Theatre Arts Magazine
~the last of four pages~

able, to "the condition of music," and if our modern poetical drama has failed it is mainly because, always dominated by the example of Shakespeare, it would restore an irrevocable past.

