

# Life is Dramatic Only in Perspective



From the melodramatic excitements of war it took nearly ten years for R. C. Sherriff to distil this simple scene of its primary human emotions in the highly popular play, *Journey's End*.

The confused emotions of today's stirring events have too much *dramatic value* for the stage. Their *dramatic utility* appears only after reflection has sifted and proportioned them, and memory has distilled their primary human meaning.

Traveling through Europe after the Armistice, I was struck by the utter frivolousness of the theatrical programs in all countries. Cheap bedroom farces, noisy musical shows, febrile melodramas of abnormal horrors. And all, seemingly, seeking to outdo one another in novel vulgarities and obscenities. Could these people, nearly all of whom had had a good close look at the Angel of Death in the recent years, turn so quickly giddy? It was a foolish question, as I soon understood. The one thing these people wanted was to forget about Death's Angel and all his works. I had expected at least dramatic anthems to victory or to valor or to the joy of the return home. But no, the thought of victory was almost as disagreeable as the thought of defeat; for both spelled the hated word War. The passion of the people was to pretend that their

Then I partly understood why, through all history, great events have never found their echo in the theatre while, or shortly after, they were happening. The public, too shaken by the events themselves, could be in no mood to contemplate them with that detachment which art demands for its enjoyment—that detachment which, indeed, is the very avenue to sympathetic or passionate participation. But the more important half of the reason, it seems, lies in the author, too involved in thoughts and feelings to attain that delicate balance between emotion and self-criticism which the creation of a work of art demands.

## Perspective

The topical plays of modern times *par excellence* are those dealing with the Great War.

After the Armistice, America's attitude toward the War was closely parallel to that of Europe, though in less violent degree. As in Europe, when the War was over it was over for good. There was no surer way to get automatically thrown out of a manager's office than to announce, "I have a play about the War." One might suppose that if the subject were so quickly forgotten, the deeper the oblivion into which it would ultimately sink. But of course such a whirlwind of experience could not be forgotten. The emotions of it were moiling in the breasts of the people, waiting for release. Yes, but what emotions? Few persons could have told you with assurance which of the many feelings engendered by the War would be retained in men's hearts as valid. It remains for art to reveal to the people what they really feel.

Then in 1924 Arthur Hopkins saw the script of *What Price Glory?* which Laurence Stallings and Maxwell Anderson showed him. His intuition leapt to the conclusion that the time was ripe and the emotional slant was right. The War-tabu was broken in America. And it was revealed which emotions the great majority of the American public had retained in their hearts as valid. No exultation for victory, no apotheosis of duty, no gloating over the time when we licked the Hun, but a cynical satisfaction in cursing the War and all its physical and moral filth. And so far as I can recall, no successful War play or novel since produced in any former belligerent country has had any other theme.

It is clear why, in this instance, a successful play could not be produced immediately after the event. All kinds of censors and excitements prevented both audience and au-



Elmer Rice wrote of the current depression in *We, the People*. But with all his skill he could not give fresh life to his very dreary picture.



Owen Davis, surely one of the most skilful manipulators of theatrical excitements, failed to make a dramatically thrilling matter of gangsterdom itself in his play, *Just to Remind You*.

## Perspective

thors from recognizing clearly what they felt. It was the vista of time that brought emotional honesty.

When R. C. Sherriff, nearly ten years after the Armistice, sat down to write an easy play for the amateurs of his boat club, he seems to have had no fixed notions of what a play ought to be. The script of *Journey's End* shows a complete absence of strain. Sherriff's memories of the War must have been more than a little dim. His emotions were recollective, clear and unmixed. They flowed through him unobstructed on to the paper. And with them the personality, the individual contribution of the author, who must have been quite unconscious that he was giving anything like a message to the world. But there it is, softly but definitely etched, the point of view toward a half-forgotten war of one R. C. Sherriff, which happened to be the point of view of the great majority of Englishmen who had served with him: "It's a filthy business, but if a chap's got to do it, he's got to do it." Not modesty but emotional honesty prevented him from seeking cheap consolation in glory speeches and routine about Englishmen's honor and playing the Game. There are few similar instances in recent drama of unaffected sincerity coming through and striking a response in millions. But can anyone imagine Mr. Sherriff writing this play in 1919?

I suspect that if *What Price Glory?* had not clicked so exactly in 1924, the era of War plays would have been postponed some years longer. Certainly it set a world's record. For fifteen years after the fall of Napoleon there was no reflection in the theatre of even the mood of that breathlessly dramatic epoch. And Napoleon himself did not appear on the stage, I believe, until the late thirties. Nor was the reason mainly political. People were sick of the futile horror of the Corsican's adventure; a new generation which had not known him and his slaughters had to come to growth to welcome that superb theatric legend. Since then Napoleon has figured in thousands of plays.

Even the mood of the theatre took long in swinging. During the French Revolution,



The stage set from a 1930 German production of "Journey's End."



## Perspective



Maxwell Anderson, in the current *Both Your Houses*, manages to treat of national politics successfully by assuming the jester's privilege.



But R. C. Sherriff (above), waiting ten years after the end of the Great War, accurately interpreted the Englishman's code of fighting honor in his *Journey's End*, which has gone around the world.

it was the curious fact that the supporters of the new regime of freedom were rigidly classic in their dramatic ideals, while the new romanticism was cultivated by the reactionaries. And the romantic mood of the Directory and the Consulship, when opportunity and adventure were bursting through every crevice of society, did not achieve expression on the stage until *Hernani* was produced in 1830.

The Civil War remained cold dramatic material for the better part of a generation. It was a new crop of Americans who thrilled, at the invitation of Bronson Howard and William Gillette and David Belasco, to the perils of spies and sweethearts on the other side of the lines, to durance and danger until, not a moment too soon, the strains of *John Brown's Body* in the

distance proclaimed that the Federals were coming to the rescue. And Abraham Lincoln, surely a dramatic figure, appeared but fleetingly in plays until he entered as a full-length character in John Drinkwater's drama, half a century after his assassination.

But though there seems to be a law estopping the dramatist from treating seriously the events that go on about him, there is nothing that prohibits his thumbing his nose at them. Compare, for example, *Merry-Go-Round*, bitterly dramatizing the political corruption of a city all too carefully specified as *not* New York; and *Face the Music*, aiming a snowball at half the high hats in the city. The subject-matter of the two pieces is the same—graft, incompetence, perversion of justice. But *Merry-Go-Round* sagged, just as *Gods of the Lightning* sagged; whereas the political raillery of *Face the Music* was completely successful.

The Greeks well understood this distinction. The comedians were commonly occupied in satirizing current events—the Sophist fad, the Peloponnesian War, the Sicilian Expedition; but *The Persians* was, I believe, the



## Perspective

only tragedy written about events within the memory of any spectator, and it is one of the least of the tragedies. It is significant that Shakespeare, who hymned the exploits of Henry V, wrote no play about the defeat of the Armada. History makes grand entertainment, as Scribe and Meyerbeer shrewdly knew, but not while it contains painful associations for the spectator.

There is another kind of topical play which refuses to let itself be put quickly into satisfactory dramatic form. That is the play of what might be called personal current events. A skilled fiction reader in a publishing house can spot in the first few pages a "spite manuscript"—one written to ease the author of some grudge; resentment against the race of men who do not pay due deference to the author's charms, or against a wife who fails to appreciate the writer's fine character, or against a society which is niggardly with jobs and rewards. A person so writing of what is burning within him is sure to rig his story to palpable implausibility. I recall a play produced a few seasons ago, written by a man recently separated from his wife by divorce. He seemed (ungenerous though it may be to say so) to be under a compulsion to proclaim her shame to the world. The audience could not avoid sensing the private venom in the piece, and the evening was a most painful one, and dull. For the author promptly turned the lady into a viper and then there was nothing to write a play about.

I suspect that the writing of a play is as delicate a business as the writing of a lyric poem. Twist emotions and try to make them assume false guises, and they will wink at the audience, when the playwright isn't looking, as though to say: "I'm not being myself; I'm just play-acting." But while the emotions of the play must be treated as tenderly as a sensitive plant, the structure of the play has to be manhandled within an inch of its life. It is the job of the playwright's brain to fashion a structure in which his emotions will be at home.

There has been drama enough in this depression, heaven knows, and innumerable volcanoes of emotion have been set in action by it. But which emotion is the one which expresses our predominant mass attitude toward it? Is it rebellion, resentment, self-pity? Is it joy at the discovery of human values previously slurred? Is it zest and self-reliance in a fight that tests resourcefulness and courage? Certainly not one of us knows for a certainty. And no playwright has an intuition sufficiently penetrating and embracing to tell us today. Try the exercise for yourself. Of all the guesses you may make, there is not, I warrant, one on which you would be prepared to lay more than a one-to-ten bet. And

## Perspective

the mass emotion which ultimately comes through is likely to be one you never thought of. It is the test which art ultimately applies which is the revealing one.

HIRAM MOTHERWELL

**STAGE**

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*p. 13*

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