

Towards a Municipal Theatre

HARCOURT FARMER.

It is an interesting indication of human progress to note that the theatre to-day is regarded and accepted as part and parcel of every-day life. We speak of the theatre as we speak of the family, the church, the state. It is an institution, and as such is slowly being allowed the recognition that it requires. One might even say, the recognition it richly deserves; though until the theatre comes into its own, reaches its fullest estate, it cannot put forth its best effort, and we cannot accord a place to something that has not yet placed itself. In Europe the theatre is a force to be reckoned with. In America the theatre is still practically in its infancy.

The old-fashioned prejudice against the theatre is dying out. It was, of all the curious puritanical survivals, the most curious. The critics of lavender days, secure in the perfection of their own morals, attacked the theatre as being morally harmful to the community. These puerile minds represented the midvictorian intellect; they cheerfully described flying machines as inventions of the devil. So it is not surprising that the theatre had to struggle for a long time against the spleenful slings and arrows of the bourgeois critics.

But to-day, as I say, the theatre is slowly coming into its own. Scarcely a newspaper that has not its dramatic page; hardly a magazine without its theatrical mention and comment. Lecturers all over the American continent are telling what the theatre is, and what it should be. Writers on every hand are doing permanent missionary work of a high order. The public is being educated to the fact that the theatre is an inherent and vital part of human life; and it is responding. The response is slow, it is difficult, for growth is always painful. But it is steady.

It is always risky to indulge in prophesy; but I think I am right when I say that there will be a time when the theatre will be regarded by people in Canada as a national thing, when its ownership and its operation will be a matter of civic pride, and then the commercially-owned theatre will be a fantastic relic of theatrical antiquity.

* * *

What do I mean by implying that the theatre is de facto a state institution and consequently a municipal concern?

If we agree that all educational media are affairs of the municipality, we must agree that the theatre is educational, and so it should be a municipal affair. It is an educational force, and consciously and unconsciously it exerts a tremendous educational drive against stupidity and ignorance.

If we agree that certain recognized means of public amusement and recreation are affairs of the municipality, we must agree that the theatre is without a peer in its ability to amuse, so it should be recognized by the municipality and encouraged.

If we agree that the majority of public utilities — railroads, street traction, water supply, fire protection and prevention—are affairs of the municipality, we must agree that the theatre ranks with other public utilities. It is a vital popular thing. It merits municipal ownership.

My reference to the commercial theatre must be taken generally and not particularly. There are many commercial managers in England, in the United States, in Canada, who personally evince the keenest desire to produce good plays. But economic conditions, competition, and the inelasticity of other managers, render it impossible for them to produce other than mediocre plays. The blame must not lie upon the individual, but upon the nation.

The Canadian theatregoer, on the average, is little interested in the theatre. The average American goes to the theatre, and goes because he enjoys going. The average Englishman goes to the theatre because it is an ancient custom which has its definite attractions. But the average Canadian goes to the theatre because he has been told he ought to go, or because he has nothing else to do. To the average Canadian mind the theatre is an empty name. To the average Canadian mind, the welfare of the theatre, the development of a Canadian drama, the producing of good plays, are all matters with which he is sublimely unconcerned. He ignorantly divides plays into two classes: girl shows and "highbrow" shows. Now, in their way, leg shows are all very well. For the kind of mentality they appeal to, they are the best possible form of cheap aphrodisiac. But good plays are emphatically not "high-

brow" shows. Good plays, the kind that Miss Horniman presented in Manchester, and the Abbey Theatre presented in Dublin, and the kind Mr. Arthur Hopkins (one of the most intelligent of commercial managers in the United States) presents in New York, these are not "highbrow" plays; they are intelligent contemporary interpretations of life.

When good drama is given at popular prices, it will invariably draw an appreciative audience. I mention one instance by way of proof. The Montreal Stage Society, of which I am director, gave a public performance of Ibsen's great drama of heredity "Ghosts" in Montreal on May 10th last. The audience was a large one. The receipts covered the expenses of production, and gave the Society a respectable profit besides. And this with a good play.

Yet the Canadian theatregoer is not yet sufficiently educated to the point where a tour of "Ghosts" through Canada would be a profitable and practical undertaking. He will see the "Follies"; but he will ignore Sir Herbert Tree. To the trained observer, there is something cynically pitiful about this. But it will change. There is much hope for us all.

When the time comes that we shall have a Canadian theatre, possibly the average Canadian theatregoer will interest himself to a greater extent in the theatre. But at present we have no national theatre. We have buildings into which theatrical attractions are put, true; but the plays that are put into them are mostly of American origin, sponsored by American managers, financed by American money, acted by American casts. To the Broadway manager who sends his attractions here, Montreal is simply a "week-stand" for the earning of such-and-such a percentage. Pleasant facts for Canadians, there!

I am not objecting to American productions or American actors; there is no reason why I should attempt so silly a thing. But I am calling my readers' attention to certain damning facts. I am trying to convince practical men who read this journal that Canada, the coming country of the world, has no theatre. We have a government, we have an army, we have a press, we have a parliament; but we have no national theatre, no drama, no national music. I am reminding my readers that the continued use of Canadian territory by Broadway managers to exploit American plays for American profit is little short of scandalous. It is folly. And it is unnecessary. Our schools, our churches, our factories, our military and civil matters — all are Canadian undertakings, national, universal, intimate, personal things. Yet the theatre, one of our most vital properties, we have no part in. It is run by Canadians for the profits of our neighbors.

* * *

Such are the facts. In this article, necessarily much condensed, it is manifestly impossible to present the entire case for the theatre; so I rest in the hope that perhaps the few facts I have been able to give may give food for thought here and there. If the thoughts crystallize into decisive action, so much the better.

Such are the facts. They are unpretty. What is the remedy?

It must be remembered that a National Theatre is absolutely essential to our growth as a country. There are no doubts about that. A national theatre is as necessary as a national picture gallery, as necessary as national libraries, national music halls. If there exists any man so sapheaded as to question this statement, let me remind him that Canada hopes and plans to eventually occupy a position of prominence and power in the world — tremendously more so than Canada does to-day. And just as a nation must be pre-eminent in commerce so must it be pre-eminent in art. All sorts of things go to the making of a man. All aspects must be considered in the making of a nation.

* * *

Assuming that a state theatre is attainable and desirable—and it is—there remains the question of organization, and after that, operation. The first step would be the erection of theatres, or the purchase of existing theatres by each municipality. A town of 100,000 can well and profitably support a municipally-owned theatre. Germany can do it, has done it, and presumably will continue to do it. It is high time we recognized Germany's superiority