

BOOK REVIEW

THE THEORY OF THE THEATRE

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“All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players.” This phrase that begins the monologue from Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*, correctly compares the world to a stage, life to a play and men and women to actors. Clayton Hamilton’s eminently practical guide *The Theory of the Theatre* also reverberates with the same ideology. In today’s modern world where motion pictures readily solve the purpose of entertainment and recreation, people hardly pay much attention to theatres. But in fact theatre has a crucial role to play in one’s life. It brings people together. It focuses on human beings, their existence and their relationship with life, thus forces one to emphasize, since what we experience is much more realistic, organic and vital.

Projecting the same concept, in the first chapter, “What is a play?” the author begins by dissecting the definition of a play. According to him, “a play is a story devised to be presented by actors on a stage before an audience.” The phrase “devised to be presented” distinguishes it from all other forms of narrative. Nowadays we look upon Aeschylus as a poet rather than a playwright, reason being his plays no longer fit the modern theatre. With the change of time, the critics and students over the generations have shifted it to the genre of poetry, being immortalized thus. We realize that even if the playwright doesn’t write greatly, he must have a literary excellence to transcend his work over generations and find a place in the closet of literature. In fact “excellent plays have often been presented without the use of any words at all” - like Pantomime. Reference is made back to the period of the so called “commedia dell’arte”, the sixteenth century Italy where the dialogues were written only at the end after working out the complete scenario, production arrangement and selection of actors. One can appreciate a play only when it is acted on the stage rather than read as the master

dramatists like Shakespeare and Moliere have always been men of theatre rather than men of letters.

Tennyson, Browning, Stevenson, Maurice Maeterlinck failed as dramatists since their drama appealed only to individuals and not to the crowd. The true essence of a play comes forth only when one sits amidst the crowd as an audience and watches it being performed. This whole idea has been discussed in the second chapter, “The Psychology of the Theatre Audiences”. According to M. Gaustave Le Bon “a crowd is less intellectual and more emotional than the individuals that compose it. It is less reasonable, less judicious, less disinterested, more credulous, more primitive and more partisan...” Ferdinand Brunetiere’s “No struggle, no drama”, has become a catch-phrase in dramatic criticism. A crowd readily believes what it sees, is volatile to emotional contagion, more sensuous and receptive of common, conservative, traditional themes and ideas rather than innovative and new. In fact Hamilton correctly states that Shakespeare is popular because he did the old thing better than the other men had done it! Now, theatre audiences differ from other kinds of crowds since they are more heterogeneous than those at any social, political or religious convention. The important difference between the two crowds is that the theatre audience’s purpose is mostly recreation and not any other specific agenda, which is also one of the reasons of inattentiveness. Victor Hugo, in his preface to Ruy Blas divides the theatre audience into three classes; thinkers, who demand characterization; women who demand passion; and the mob, who demand action. Nowadays it is necessary to appeal to women since the crowd which forms the matinee and evening audiences are entirely or chiefly women. But among any theatre audiences, there consist some individuals who do not belong to the crowd, who do not let their self-consciousness merge with the general self-consciousness of the multitude. They are professional critics or frequenters to the theatres. A true dramatist should never neglect these individuals while writing for the crowd.

In the next chapter, “The Actor and the Dramatist”, the author effectively portrays how the range or restrictions of actors directly affect the author’s task of character creation. A dramatist selects his actors first and then writes his dialogues which befit them when delivered upon the stage. Hence, the actors have tremendous influence upon the dramatists contrary to that of the novelists, the story-writers, or the poets.

The evolution of English drama and how it has been broadly classified into three different categories has kept the discussion lively in the fourth chapter named, “Stage Conventions in Modern Times”. The first is the ‘Drama of Rhetoric’, which existed during the sixteenth century where emphasis was laid upon high astounding sounds, stately speeches replete with poetic passages due to lack of scenery. An example of it is the Elizabethan theatre. The actors then were gaudy, robust and considered themselves as all-in-all upon the stage. Theatres were shut in 1642. When restarted in 1660, the physical atmosphere of the theatres underwent a change. Thus began the era of ‘Drama of Conversation’ which existed throughout the eighteenth century and focused on the brilliancy of dialogues employing wit and repartee while the stage was known as the “apron” stage. For instance, the Restoration theatre. Naturalness in the conventions of acting could be seen unlike the actors during Elizabethan days. Finally, it was with the invention of electricity that the “apron” stage gave way to ‘Drama of Illusion’ where the stage have become pictorial, curtain-fall after the scenes customary and which represents faithfully the actual facts of life. Here actions speak louder than words. Soliloquy and asides have disappeared now as the dramas have moved towards being more natural. Dramatists consider these as lazy expedients. Our forefathers had the natural ability to imagine the atmosphere with respect to what the actors spoke. They could imagine star studded sky while sitting under the bright sun even though no props were used back then. While nowadays it’s difficult for the audiences to imagine unless they witness the action live.

Chapter five, “Economy of Attention in Theatrical Performances” highlights how to economically grab the attention of the audience during a stage performance upon the most important element on the stage. This has been discussed from the point of view of the dramatist, the actor and the stage-manager. Dramatists must state every important point at least three times during the exposition, they must not keep any secret from the audience unlike in a novel, must avoid over-elaborateness of detail and any sudden shock of surprise to avoid scattering of attention. Also it is always wise to use conventional characters like “the comic valet, the pretty and witty chambermaid, pathetic old family friend” and familiar breaks like the “comic relief” to avoid digressions from the main plot or characters. Such a setting is also known as “star-system” which has its own disadvantages as the actors who have always been occupying the centre of the stage and are the “star performers” often find it

difficult to keep themselves at the background at moments when the scenes should be dominated by other actors, thereby drawing undue attention. Not only the dramatist or the actor but also the stage manager should therefore avoid any unexpected or startling innovation at crucial situations, magnificence of the setting, unfit music and be on guard of not sacrificing the major to the minor.

In the sixth chapter, “Emphasis in the Drama”, the author lists certain elements which are to be emphasised since they are vital to keep the audience glued to their seats. The scene should be built such that the background or minor elements which are scarcely noticed should contribute to the central plot taking place. Emphasise by position where the scene before intermission, curtain fall, the last and the first scenes should be made effective. Pause in action and use of repetition are also equally important for the idea to sink within the mind of the audiences. Emphasise by proportion where dramatist should wisely allot significant scenes and dialogues to strong characters and accordingly decide the share of the minor characters. Antithesis, “comic relief”, unity of mood, use of climax, emphasis by suspense, verisimilitude of the set are the various tools which should be employed by the dramatist for the same.

In “The Four Leading Types of Drama”, Hamilton discusses subtle differences between tragedy and melodrama on one hand and comedy and farce on the other. Although tragedy and melodrama are alike yet they differ in certain essential points. The melodramatist exhibits what may happen while the tragedist exhibits what must happen. In a tragedy the characters are themselves responsible for their doom, they determine and control the plot showing inevitability of the disaster which is exactly the opposite in the case of a melodrama. Element of chance predominates a melodrama and not character. Similarly, actors dominate the action in a comedy while action dominates the actors in a farce where both being humorous plays. The only two essential elements in a farce is that it should be funny and should make the audience believe the situation for that very moment but in a comedy apart from these two factors there should be credibility of the action being performed.

The modern social drama popularly known as the problem play which began during the fourth decade of the nineteenth century can also be called a modern tragedy. It belongs to the category of the third type of tragedy where the individual is in conflict with the environment

discovered by Victor Hugo and perfected by Ibsen. The other two categories are, the one where the individual is in conflict with Fate as in a Greek tragedy and the other, where the individual is in conflict with the defects inherent in his own nature as in the Elizabethan drama. Hamilton, in this chapter “The Modern Social Drama” further adds that its origin is based on the struggle between the ideology of the early eighteenth century literature which dealt with the exaltation of the society and the early nineteenth century literature which believed in individualism. It is therefore realistic by nature and is the product of nineteenth century. The individuals here do not go by the conventions of the society hence struggle is seen. Protagonists are exceptional outcasts which has narrowed the subject matter of modern social drama. Since it’s difficult to make a good case out of a murderer or a robber hence majority dramatists deal with the man and woman involved in sexual relation bringing upon the censure of the society, thereby naturally instigating the question : Is a drama that does this moral or immoral? The author here remarks that instead of this question, the critics must essentially check whether the playwright tells the truth about people in the drama and how positively or negatively does it affect the audience.

The second section of the book, “Other Principles of Dramatic Criticism”, takes the discussion a notch higher with critical outlook by the author towards various other factors related to the theatre. In “The Public and The Dramatist” the author in clear terms explains that unlike in a novel, a painting, or a sculpture where the end product is directly appreciated by the public, in a drama since the dramatist indirectly presents it through the actors, the public may not interpret and appreciate it if the artists on the stage fail to convey the exact thoughts of the dramatists accurately. Hence, the play will be misjudged. The general public mostly watches a drama for they are more interested to watch the actors and not because it is a particular dramatist’s work. In simple words the dramatist does not get his due.

“Dramatic Art and The Theatre Business” shows the interconnection between the drama and the manager producing it. Drama is one such art which cannot be dissociated from the business of the theatre. A dramatist not only has to study the technical laws of dramatic art but also commercial laws of theatre business unlike other artists. In today’s world the quality of the drama produced, the business strategies of managers are undergoing degradation which should be checked.

“The Happy Ending in the Theatre”, as the title suggests, brings forth centuries old discussion that whether or not a play should have a happy ending. If seen from the point of view of the box-office or production managers, in order to make more profit, they would always want the dramas to have a happy ending whether it is a comedy or a serious drama. But, the ending should be fair, justifiable and credible in accordance with the plot. Serious plays logically demand unhappy ending instead of a happy ending which the audience cannot believe. The public wants to be pleased but also it wants to be satisfied in the end.

“The Boundaries of Approbation”, presents the simple fact that there should be a consistency or balance in the type of the play presented to the wide range of audience keeping in mind the upper and lower bound for approbation, which should neither “insult their intelligence nor trifle with their taste”.

“Imitation or Suggestion in the Drama” discusses that a drama appeals its audience in two ways. One is by imitation of what we have already seen around us and the other by suggestion of what we have already experienced within us. The latter stimulates the responsive activity of the mind hence we enjoy the play we witness, unlike the former where the faculties are not stimulated hence no real enjoyment.

A drama should be like a magic mirror which must reflect only the essential and relevant and refuse to reflect non-essential and irrelevant. Like a concave mirror it should juxtapose all the scattered ideas of life in one channel and present before us a single great idea to help us understand the true meaning of life. This is the crux of the chapter “Holding the Mirror up to Nature”.

Lyric, narrative and dramatic are the three types of blank verse known in English literature, where the Elizabethan playwrights wrote all the three kinds, the modern dramatists exclude the narrative and lyric unless used occasionally for a specific dramatic purpose. A poetic drama should be drama first and then poetry, asserts the author in “Blank Verse on the Contemporary Stage”.

“Dramatic Literature and Theatric Journalism” sincerely draws a thin line of distinction between the two terms. Journalism is external, belongs to the moment, portrays facts and provides what the public wants, while literature is internal, belongs to eternity, is an

expression of personal and particular belief. Nowadays a significant amount of contribution to the theatre is classed and judged as journalism. By expressing the true, pure and inmost experience thereby adding to the already existing knowledge of humanity, can the plays rise from being theatric journalism to dramatic literature.

“The Intention of Permanence” is a critical discussion on the transience and permanence in the work of art especially drama. Often a layman finds it difficult to distinguish between a genuine drama which incorporates the Intention of Permanence and a theatric entertainment merely for immediate pleasure. A genuine drama through its acting will portray some eternal truth about human life which is similar to the real phases of an individual whereas the other merely puts the actors to exercise. Nowadays we see more of the latter but it is always better to do the lesser thing perfectly than to attempt something greater and not justify it.

“The Quality of New Endeavor “ suggests that, contrary to the popular belief, a critic should open the doors for a new dramatist who has the urge in him to get into the queue of his work being recognized rather than only considering the already established dramatists who have been enjoying the appreciation of the public. A critic should carefully judge the work of an unknown playwright and give his unbiased opinion as to whether the audience can expect promising works from him in the future or not. This judgment requires forward- looking and far-sightedness.

“The Effect of Plays upon the Public” introspects upon the fact that it is not always necessary to depict pessimistic shades of life in a play, exhibiting unnecessary misery, exacting societal laws which leaves behind doubt, despair and disgust. Sometimes it is nobler to show the joy of living and that life is better than to show its weariness. In fact that play is better which evokes healthiest and hopeful emotional response from the audience.

In his preface to *Plays Pleasant and Unpleasant*, George Bernard Shaw explains these two terms which have been redefined by the author here in the thirteenth chapter “Pleasant and Unpleasant Plays”. An unpleasant play is the one “which interests the intellect without at the same time awakening positive response from the emotions”, while a pleasant play “not only stimulates thought but also elicits sympathy”. The latter are better suited for theatres because it leaves the audience cold and it stirs only the intellect but the former also stirs the emotions of the audience to sympathy as the audience visit a theatre in pursuit of happiness.

In “Themes in the Theatre” we find a correct observation that the theme in a play is of utmost importance. A play which has no theme is like a human being without a soul, like the modern day American plays. Theme helps the audience to remember the drama and instill it within themselves and in their lives.

The last chapter of the essay, “The Function of Imagination”, discusses how the usage of a dramatists imagination can make a play interesting to the audiences. Nowadays, the plays seem conventional and repetitive. There is no novelty in the themes. The author seconds the fact that for new plays old material is the best. It does not mean imitation but an imaginative invention of newness from the old thereby making it real.

Hence, on the whole, *The Theory of the Theatre* by Clayton Hamilton is an indispensable work for any would-be play writer who seeks to learn the basics of playwriting. This is found not only in the first eight chapters but also in the succeeding critical material namely, “Other Principles of Dramatic Criticism” comprising of perfect fourteen chapters which are equally significant, thereby presenting a clear-sighted and deft picture of the same. The author beautifully compares and contrasts works by various dramatists right from the evolution of drama to the present day modern drama, wherever illustration and explanation of the same is necessary. Although in some of the places we find that he centers his criticism upon modern day American drama, playwrights, actors, theatre and stagecraft, yet the views or guidelines he states are applicable equally to every other drama.

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