

THE PASSING SHOW

WILLA CATHER

Israel Zangwill recently delivered his lecture on "The Drama as a Fine Art" here. Zangwill has written a great many very clever and very witty articles on the theatre, but I think most of us went to hear him chiefly because once in his early youth he wrote a very remarkable novel called "The Master." Since Mr. Zangwill has been lecturing in America much has been said of his voice and personal mannerism on the platform that is patently uncalculated for. A lecturer is not supposed to be an orator or a vaudeville "artist," and his business is not to captivate his audience. His appeal is to the intellect solely, and so long as he speaks distinctly enough to be understood and conducts himself with reasonable decorum, his accent and his attitudes are his own affairs. In the first place I wish to say that this gentleman's portraits give a very wrong impression of him. Handsome he certainly is not, but neither is he a freak. I was rather pleasantly surprised, indeed, when this slender, pale gentleman stepped before us. His physiognomy is typically semitic, the bold nose, the pale, olive skin, the full lips, the heavy dark eyes, the shaggy black hair, suggested not only the Jew, but Oriental Jew. He has that mobility of feature which bespeaks a highly developed nervous organization, and there is about him a certain most positive atmosphere of scholarship. A wit as sharp and fantastic as Heine's, a face full of the idealism of his race, he suggested even more strongly than the scholar the dreamer of the Ghetto. For besides its pawn brokers, its sweatshop toilers, its itinerant peddlars, its Shylocks and money-hagglers, its money barons and pillagers, the Ghetto has always had its dreamers, and their dreams have changed the course of history and founded empires. Without attempting to give an analysis of his lecture, I will mention merely some of the points which most interested me.

Art, Mr. Zangwill defined, in Spencer's terms, as the overflow of energy not exhausted in the struggle for existence. The drama did not begin as an artistic production. It had no intention of being artistic. Its intentions, on the contrary, were strictly honorable. The first drama was not drama at all, but life. The conditions of the modern stage are largely the result of the conflicting Hellenic and Semitic ideals which have modified all western civilization. The Hebrews, indeed, felt the beauty of holiness, but the Greek felt the holiness of beauty. The English stage has suffered a great misfortune in its complete separation from the church. From this separation it has grown frivolous and has lost the desire to deal with the most serious questions of life. The Puritan revolution against the drama was based upon a true instinct. Stupid people are often right upon wrong grounds. But the inborn instincts of humanity are not to be killed entirely, even by Puritanism, and by the irony of things the churchgoer often takes his sermon as art, something to be enjoyed and criticised, rather than to be acted upon.

A good play must have three things; unity, lifelikeness, and the element of spiritual stimulation.

Under the head of the first of these essential qualities, Mr. Zangwill said that Ibsen is the greatest living master of dramatic form. He does not write parts, but plays. In Alma Tadema's studio in London there is a screen made of small rectangular panels; each of these panels was decorated by one of the artist's painter friends; the marine painter who habitually uses a six foot

canvas, and the miniature painter who handles only small pieces of ivory, has adapted himself and his mannerisms to those rigid, rectangular panels. The stage is much such an austere background, and the dramatist who can express himself most perfectly within those rigid limitations is the best craftsman. Ibsen has mastered the art of presenting a dramatic theme in a dramatic way. He realized that in every family, in every group of human beings closely related together, there is a moment of awakening, of exposition. That events inevitably bring about a household climax when the members of the family or community are driven to speech and "have it out" with each other, when they voice secrets long locked up, protest against indignities long endured, speak of hopes or passions long concealed. In short, the romantic revolt occurs every day in the unit of society, the family. And it is this dramatic revelation of life that Ibsen seizes and makes the cardinal force in his plays.

In speaking of lifelikeness in plays, Mr. Zangwill said that this does not mean that the characters of a drama must be real people, but that they must be true types. No two lovers ever spoke as Romeo and Juliet, yet they express the feelings of all lovers. The nearer you approach to life the further you depart from art. When I wish to particularly please my servant maid, I get her tickets to some performance where she can see a real fire engine or a real snow storm on the stage. She can see either presented very much more realistically on the street any day, but we are all very fond of the real thing in the wrong place. In fiction everything is true except the names and dates; in history nothing is true except the names and dates. That play which depends for its interest on some surprise at the end is a poor play. Surprise is not art emotion. You can only be surprised once, but a thing of beauty is a joy forever. People are not fond of seeing their own kind of realism on the stage. The man who beats his wife at home, is the man who loudly applauds the virtuous hero in a melodrama. One of the evils of modern English dramatic construction is the so-called "comic element" which is dragged in with no logical sequence and at the cost of the serious motif of the play. Suppose that half of the canvas of a picture representing the death of Lincoln were employed to depict the courtship of a cook. The plays of Bulwer Lytton appear very meritorious to an uncultivated mind. Just as fine feathers appear fashionable to a chambermaid.

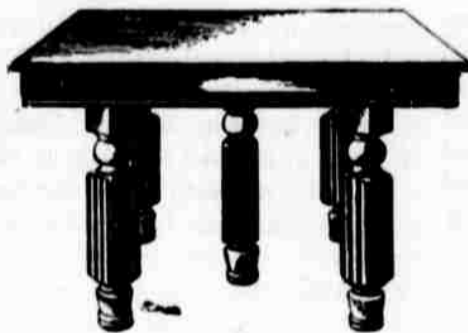
Under the head of spiritual stimulation, Mr. Zangwill said that a play might lack both the former qualities named and still, through this element alone, be a great play, but without this it could not live. Many of Shakespeare's strongest plays utterly lack unity. He simply followed the rambling plots of the old novels he appropriated. They were only possible on a stage without changes of scenery and elaborate appointments. They are practicable now only because they are not acted as they were written, and were practicable then only because they were not acted at all. They owe their perennial youth chiefly to this quality of spiritual stimulation. Shakespeare is no longer classic art, but romantic art. His art is, in fact, Gothic art.

The old playwrights, said Mr. Zangwill, are dead and buried, the old plays are dead and printed. You can buy them at the price of eggs, twenty-five cents a dozen—mostly bad. The only English comedies since Shakespeare's time which have the breath of life in them, are "The School for Scandal" and "She Stoops to Conquer." The French stage alone has preserved its literary traditions. In our dramatic poverty

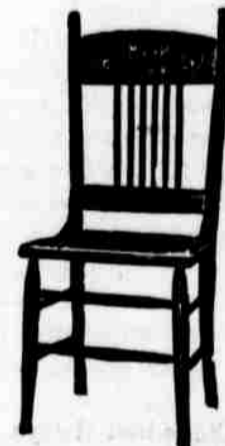
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we have stolen and appropriated various plays from the French. We have legitimized their natural children, turned their intrigues into flirtations and their exquisite language into meaningless twaddle and generally emasculated them. But such virtue is indeed its own reward.

Of dramatic criticism Mr. Zangwill said it is an art now dead. No man has any particular right to print his own opinions about a play, and for a trained theatre-goer to attempt to voice the opinions of the masses is absurd. How can he possibly see with the eyes of the man who goes to the play only occasionally, who does not know that the hero is not young, the heroine not beautiful, and that the villain is less wicked than either of them.

In the course of his tour through the east this whimsical, brilliant young Hebrew has dropped here and there sparkling witticisms that are worth remembering. When he arrived here a delegation met him at the train and proceeded to lay out his program for him; a dinner at the hotel with speeches and toasts, a tour of the Carnegie galleries attended by the fairest of the daughters of Israel, a reception at five o'clock before the lecture, a banquet at the Hotel Schenley after the lecture, etc. When they had finished the weary scholar, exhausted by a long series of such festivities elsewhere, murmured:

"And my funeral, gentlemen, you seem to have neglected any arrangements for that? Surely that is the logical sequence of your program."

At one of his receptions here the daughter of one of our oil kings asked him for his autograph in one of his books. He assured her that he did not travel with his books, not even with sample copies. The dauntless maiden sent a bell boy out to procure a book by

Zangwill, any old one he could find. The boy returned with "The King of Schnorrers" and on the fly leaf the author obligingly wrote: "To _____, a schnorrerd autograph, but granted with pleasure. I. Zangwill." The young lady tactfully remarked that she had never read the book, whereat the author exclaimed with ambiguous enthusiasm:

"You are to be congratulated, mademoiselle, congratulated!"

When dining with a noted collector of book plates in Boston, Mr. Zangwill exclaimed when his soup was served to him: "What! Why I expected it to be served in a book plate!"

In the Harvard museum he stood meditating for some time before the case of skeletons illustrating the evolution of man from the ape, and then turning to the student who conducted him he said cheerfully, "and now let's go and see the latest stage—by all means let us call upon the professor of psychology."

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