

## THE CHURCH AND THE MODERN THEATRE

The days have passed when, on the Continent anyhow, to be on the stage was to be outside the Church. This was brought home by the Master-General of the Dominican Order, at a meeting of the English Catholic Stage Guild last summer, when he, who had been its Director, spoke of the activities and spiritual life of the Stage Guild of France.

The theatre is the prodigal daughter of the Church; she was born of the Church and her first playgrounds were in the churches. Now in a 'far land' she is, at least in this country, in spiritual destitution and has hardly the strength to arise and return to her home, but the Church, her mother, has set out on the road to meet her.

In England, it is true, the theatre did not go of her own accord from the Church, she was carried away from it in the arms of public life. We may find in the pages of Shakespeare many traces of the Church's influence and much hankering for the home that the theatre had been torn from; but since Shakespeare the Drama in England has been purely secular, but not as in countries where it was in active rebellion, and not until our own day, irreligious. The Puritan element in the country looked at the theatre askance and not until late Victorian days was it considered a respectable institution.

At present, to quote Elizabeth Robins, 'it is becalmed.' With the possible exception of George Bernard Shaw there seem no great playwrights; and Bernard Shaw has so consistently used the stage and his own great gift of 'theatre' as platform and vehicle for the promulgation of his views that we are forced to consider him more as a pamphleteer than as a dramatist. Nevertheless his influence on the younger writers and his insistence on the work of Ibsen is still responsible for most of the intellectual life that the English theatre still possesses. On the face of it such influence might seem to tell against any reconciliation between the Church and the Drama, but it is not at all certain that such is in reality the case. Shaw at least has

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always been actuated by a passion for truth. It is possible that he has not done so much harm in seeking to destroy that which is in fact indestructible, as he has done good in cutting away much dead matter in the form of false sentiment and a hybrid and merely conventional morality, compounded of fear and hypocrisy. In any case his influence remains at the moment the most vital in our theatre.

Of Catholic drama in England there has been up to now little to speak of. Catholics are a comparatively small body; we have, however, made a mark in literature out of proportion to our numbers; many of the leading publicists are Catholics, some poets and novelists; but so far our voice in the theatre has been all but silent. It is not surprising; playwrighting in England is a hazardous occupation; the theatre is now almost entirely in commercial hands, managers are frankly out to consider the box office first. Catholics may well have felt that it was better to direct their energies into more productive channels.

Some Catholic plays in translation have been produced of late years and have met with a fair measure of success, but, owing to the financial state of the theatre, a play has to prove a very great popular success before it can obtain a long run; and it must be said that such plays have not been supported as they should have been by the Catholic public, who have not yet been educated to their duty in this matter. We have not, certainly, awoken to the fact that through the theatre we could exercise a great influence in the life of the nation.

At present, to my mind, no great influence of any sort is being exercised through it, and there is an opportunity for Catholic drama to take the field. When I say Catholic drama I do not necessarily mean drama that deals directly with Catholic subjects, still less with the drama of propaganda, but plays written from the standpoint, and infused with the culture, of Catholicism. To wake the Catholic intelligence to the opportunity that offers itself, to prepare the ground by fostering an interest in the theatre deeper

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than a mere love of entertainment, should be part of the programme of any Catholic stage society and it is certainly one of the aims of the English one. At present it can exist in little more than embryo: the seed is there but the ground is frozen hard with materialism and covered with the snow of indifference, so that much hard shovelling and digging must take place before it can even be sown, and then we must wait for the Spring before we may see it burst into life.

The outlook is not entirely gloomy. If one looks carefully one can see signs, here that the frozen ground is softening a little, there that the snow has begun to melt, and even aided by optimism—or shall we call it faith—we may imagine rifts in the leaden sky.

On one hand we may hope that the widespread amateur dramatic movement, which progresses under the aegis of the British Drama League, may give birth to an audience that will look to the theatre for ideas and not only for amusement and which, by creating a demand, will bring back to it some intellectual dignity. On the other hand we may find some evidence in the theatre itself that it willing to allow the Catholic voice to be heard directly it is ready to speak. Among Catholics themselves a faint interest in the drama is stirring, and, although so far very little of moment has been achieved, one may rejoice in the multiplication of Catholic play-producing societies, and in the fact that Catholic schools and convents are on the look-out for better material to produce than the dead stuff that served for school 'entertainments' in the past. It would be more idle than ungracious to deny that the Anglicans have done and are doing much good work. They are in the strong position of having plenty of money at their disposal; but it must be admitted that they are for the moment more awake to the possibility of Christian drama than we are ourselves.

The Catholic Stage Guild has a great work in front of it, but those who guide its destinies may feel that it is one comparable to emptying the sea with a pint pot. Till quite lately the Guild has existed for what one may call

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parochial reasons, principally to give a parish and a communal life to the touring actor who, without it, would have neither. It has done a good and necessary work, for the percentage of Catholics on the stage is high. Now it is time for it to come out into the open and to do its share in the revitalising of the theatre by the Catholic message. With this end in view it has lately produced, and strained its resources in so doing, *Caesar's Friend*, a drama of the Passion by Campbell Dixon and Dermott Morrar. Here is not the place to write of the play itself, which is that rarest of rare things, a really successful modern religious drama, but by this admirable production the Catholic Stage Guild takes rank as a serious play-producing society and one to be reckoned with in the future.

From every practical point of view the cinema has done damage to the theatre. It has made a wider because a lower appeal, on the whole, an appeal to the emotions instead of to the intelligence; it is far cheaper, and panders more to comfort and convenience; but it is possible that, by absorbing the less instructed and the merely pleasure-seeking of the public, it may leave for the theatre an audience less intolerant of ideas and one that requires of it higher standards.

In any case the duty of Catholics is clear, they at least have no right to relegate the theatre to the sphere of mere recreation. We exist to-day in a state of warfare; we cannot, as in happier ages, make use of the things of the world simply for our own pleasure, they must one and all turn to weapons in our hands for the defence of civilisation, which our faith alone can save from destruction. The theatre is capable of being such a weapon and it is up to us to make it an effective one.

The stage has its part to play in Catholic action: but the stage is only one part of the theatre, which comprises an auditorium as well. At least as necessary as Catholic drama is a Catholic audience, and a Catholic public alive to the enormous opportunity that the theatre, now perishing for lack of ideas, offers to-day.

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