

What is a Good Play?

Considerations of a Leading English Dramatist

ONLY last week I received from a Middlesbrough listener the following postcard: "When you go to the theatre have you a standard play at the back of your mind by which to measure and judge? If so, how many acts has it? How many scenes? Is the action 'consecutive'? Is it a 'one-man' play? Has it a happy ending?" The answer is that I always have an ideal play at the back of my mind, only this play isn't a rigid, unalterable thing like the standard yard, pound, or pint. It isn't shaped like a foot-rule, and I measure by it in my own way.

DICKENS used his absurd figure of Mr. Curdle to poke fun at the silly professors who know nothing about the drama, but all about its rules. Now, how are the rules of my art arrived at? Well, I don't think anybody would want to establish a chair of poetry before there were any poets, or make rules about playwriting before there were any playwrights. The horse comes first, and then the cart. I imagine therefore that a principle is created as soon as you find a number of artists putting it into practice.

Take the elementary rule about not keeping a secret from your audience. It is not to be supposed that Aristotle woke up one morning, got into his bath, seized the soap and shouted: "Eureka! No dramatist must keep a secret from his audience!"

What Aristotle did, or what later professors did after him, was to discover that the great practising dramatists made so little use of the quality of surprise that it was obvious that they didn't think it a good quality. Sophocles in the play of "Oedipus Tyrannus" lets his cat out of the bag at once. We in the audience know almost immediately that the dreadful prophecy has come true and that Oedipus has killed his father and married his own mother. But the French dramatist, Corneille, when he treated the same theme in "Oedipe Roi," kept the fulfilment of the prophecy equally from the audience as from Oedipus himself and filled in with three acts of gaffle so as to spring his fourth-act surprise on both sides of the curtain at once. The result is that the French play gives only a momentary shock after which virtue goes out of it, whereas the Greek play braces the spirit of man for ever by showing how much agony a noble mind may endure. And, of course, you can't go on repeating a surprise.

In Peacock's "Headlong Hall"—from which Mr. Shaw took the idea of "Heartbreak House"—there is a Mr. Gall who distinguishes between the picturesque and the beautiful, and adds to these qualities, in the laying-out of gardens and pleasure-grounds, "a third and distinct character which he calls unexpectedness." "Pray, sir," retorts a Mr. Milestone, "by what name do you distinguish this character when a person walks round the grounds for the second time?" It is because the quality of surprise has been found to cheapen drama that a rule against it has been made.

IN view of the fact that the R.B.C. are making an appeal for plays, this article, from the pen of Mr. James Agate, dramatic critic of the B.B.C., should set the efforts of many who have taken interest in the appeal moving in the right direction.

It is the same with the things you must do as with the things you mustn't: in each case it is experience which lays down the law. The tragedies of Shakespeare, Racine, and Corneille have fine acts because though the Greek play had only one act the emotion of that act went through five distinct stages. There was first the beginning of the story, second its growth and application, third a state of suspension or gathering of clouds before the storm.

The scenario for my ideal modern comedy reads as follows:—

- Act I. The drawing-room in Lady de Courcy Marshmallow's House in Park Lane. Afternoon.
- Act II. The morning-room in Mr. Austruther's House in Curzon Street. The same evening.
- Act III. The Hon. Repton Marlborough's chambers in the Albany. Midnight.

Prizes offered to Writers of One-Act Play and Poems

WE would remind readers, and especially those who have a gift for writing, that entries for the one-act radio play competition close on February 28, and for the poetry competition on March 1. The prizes offered for the best one-act play are:—

FIRST PRIZE	£5/5/-
SECOND PRIZE	£2/2/-
THIRD PRIZE	£1/1/-

The prizes offered in the poetry competition have been donated by Cadbury's Ltd., and are:

FIRST PRIZE	£3 Cash
SECOND PRIZE	£2 Cash
THIRD PRIZE	10/6 Box Cadbury's Chocolates.

The judges for the radio play will be a sub-committee of the IYA Music and Dramatic Committee. The judges for the poetry competition, which was proposed by the IYA Music and Dramatic Committee, will be Mr. Johannes Andersen (Librarian at the Turnbull Library, Wellington), Dr. Guy Schofield (Parliamentary Librarian), and Mr. C. A. Marris, editor of the "N.Z. Referee."

All particulars concerning these competitions appeared in the "Radio Record" of January 25.

fourth the climax or thunder-clash, and fifth the clearing-up, which included the time necessary for the audience to become calm again and leave for home in a state of equanimity corresponding to that in which it entered the theatre. A certain similarity might be deduced between the principles of the drama and the Turkish bath. More seriously, it follows that it doesn't matter how many acts you have provided you have emotional progression with a climax in the proper place.

IN the question of the number of scenes, again it hardly matters whether like the Greeks you have one, or whether like Shakespeare in "Antony and Cleopatra" you take two. But perhaps you had better be a Shakespeare before you decide on so many, as even the very great play I have mentioned undoubtedly suffers from the constant chopping and changing of scene. I admit that each time when, in a modern play, the curtain goes up and discloses the same scene as before, I suffer a slight disappointment. It would seem that the eye needs a change as much as ear or brain.

Is the action consecutive?—asks my friend. This brings us back to Mr. Curdle's unities.

In Greek drama the unities were those of action, time, and place. In other words, there had to be one main plot: the time taken must not exceed twenty-four hours; and the place of action must remain the same throughout the piece. Yet I seem to remember a play by Mr. Bernard Shaw which began in the Garden of Eden and ended in the year of Our Lord, thirty-one thousand nine hundred and twenty. And, since "Back to Methuselah" is a masterpiece, one would say that the unities can safely be broken. But there is this to be said for them: that deference to them entails much beauty of craftsmanship which otherwise would go by the board. "Limitations proclaim the matter," said Goethe.

Is my ideal play a one-man play? It isn't, if that means a one-leading-man's play. But I think that any good piece should have a central theme which may be typified in a central character. Has my ideal play a happy ending? Yes, if it calls for one, but not if the audience is deemed so weak-

minded that it cannot endure a sad one. If the soldier-hero in "Caste" did not return to Esther's arms and baby, "Caste" would be a bad play, because the feelings of the spectator would be lacerated by an entirely unnecessary tragedy.

There is no reason why George D'Alroy should not come safely through his war. But "King Lear" would be a bad play if the old man made it up with Regan and Goneril, and Cordelia came to life again and married Edgar. "King Lear" was meant to end unhappily. It ended unhappily before the very first word was written.

The golden rule about playwriting is that there is no golden rule, except that a play must be consistent with itself. My ideal play is any play which has been devised by a fine mind. If the play is tragic its issue shall be nobly conducted and debated; if it is sentimental the sugar in it must come from the same shop which sold the Dormouse (or whoever it was in "Alice in Wonderland"), the best butter. And again, I mean by a fine mind a mind which is good of its sort.

"The Private Secretary" and "Charley's Aunt" are ideal farces, because they proceed from first-class farcical minds and are faultless. Or you might call "Hamlet" an ideal tragedy in spite of its faults. Why, for example, didn't Horatio tell Hamlet when he met him at the railway station on his return from England that Ophelia was dead? The real point is that the

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