

Wireless as a Factor in Education

W. E. A. Lecture---Why Do We Laugh?



BLOW are the notes of a lecture to be given from 4YA by Mr. Lloyd Ross, M.A., LL.B., on Tuesday, May 7, at 7.30 p.m. Special reference will be made to Shaw's "Pygmalion."

"Man is the only animal that laughs and weeps," said the essayist Hazlitt, "for he is the only animal that is struck with the difference between what things are and what they ought to be."

A very dignified portly gentleman slips on a banana skin, and we all laugh at the contrast. That is probably the most elementary form of comedy—the jam-tart type of the moving picture—the comedy for children and savages, when we witness the misfortunes and catastrophes that accidents bring.

The Virtue of Comedy.

IN Shakespeare's "A Comedy of Errors," two twin brothers, indistinguishable even to their wives, have

two twin servants, also alike. The hero plot must be humorous. It is really too easy for a great dramatist. We want more for a good comedy than such artificial situations.

The comedy of manners laughs at the follies, vices, and failings that make us bad members of society.

The dramatist exaggerates but he selects the follies that society may regard as dangerous. So Mrs. Candour speaks in Sheridan's "The School for Scandal," and at the same time Miss Tattle, who was by, affirmed that Lord Buffalo had discovered his lady at a house of no extraordinary fame. But, Lord, do you think I would report such things! No, no! Tale-bearers are just as bad as tale-makers.

Many comedy writers have taken their jobs seriously! They want to improve society. They offer us a sugared pill. They make us laugh and unconsciously we see ourselves as others see us. "A writer of high comedy," says a recent critic, "is a man who in stage plays can put his finger, for our delight, on those moments in

which we see a man's ridiculous ideas revealing something wrong with him as a social being."

Yet comedy is kindly. We laugh at Falstaff, but we love him, too. We laugh at Charlie Chaplain, but he is a little pathetic, too. After all the comedy if it hurt too much would be a tragedy.

Moods in Comedy.

A GREAT play must be universal. An Elizabethan apprentice would laugh at many things that we would regard as unfit for the stage. In 13th century England an insane person, "a fool," was used for comic relief—a genuine idiot would amuse by his antics and gibberish, when to-day, if on the stage at all, he would arouse pity or terror. Insanity is almost too painful for the theatre. Could you give examples of subjects unfit for comedy that once were used, and of subjects that we laugh at, but which a more civilised world will regard as cruel? In a very famous comedy, Congreve's "Way of the World," Millamant, breaking out into mocking laughter as she taunts an unsuccessful rival, cries, "Pardon me, dear creature, I must laugh, though I grant you 'tis a little barbarous." So it is, yet we can still laugh at failures—because we, too, fail. Here, then, is a hint of the characteristic of a true comedy. It may delight in the follies of an age, but it usually seizes on those particular follies that are permanent in all ages.

Sir Toby Belch and Sir Andrew Aguecheek from "Twelfth Night" are not only Elizabethans, they are the revellers of any age. We have among us many Mrs. Malaprops, who misapply high-sounding words, so we delight in Sheridan's comedy "The Rivals." This permanent value we shall find in all the greatest comedies of the ages. Even far back in ancient Greece, Aristophanes pictured the mob orator of to-day. The miser, the hypocrite, the simpleton, the conceited—these are the figures which are not peculiar to any one country or any one time, and they appear indiscriminately in the plays of Shakespeare, Jonson, Moliere, and Shaw.

Another reason why comedy is universal, is that it is full of the zest of life. Synge's "Playboy of the Western World" becomes a hero because he claims to have killed his father. Synge would have no problems. He

did not want to reform mankind. He wanted to stir people to laugh. Synge declared the source of comedy to be "the rich joy found only in what is superb and wild in reality." So one critic has suggested that a source of laughter is the sense of liberation of the natural man from the ties and conventions of society. We are savages still. We have an outlet in full, wholesome, tempestuous laughter, as in a farce.

An Essential of Comedy.

CONFLICT is necessary in a comedy as in a tragedy—a conflict between society and the eccentric, between the savage and the civilised, a conflict between the sexes, or, best of all, the conflict within an individual. "My daughter! O my ducats! O my daughter!" cries Shylock, and we laugh, partly at the incongruity of it, partly at the inner struggle that it reveals. Wit is the rapid expression of a conflict between two fancies. It is the expression of a clash between two several fancies or ideas, combined for one moment together—a pun, a bon mot, a witticism. On these depend much of the modern comedies.

(1) It is sometimes argued that Bernard Shaw will not live because his plays are topical and limited to the criticism of a passing age. Do you find in his plays anything universal? Aristophanes was a social critic like Shaw. His plays are full of topical illusions. He lives. Could you find in Shaw the qualities of both the universal and the topical?

(2) If comedy is a criticism by society of the eccentric or the unsocial, could you have comedy in a Utopia?

(3) Sketch the characters that you would put into a modern comedy to expose some of the evils of to-day. Could you also make it universal?

(4) Bonamy Dobree says that there are only two sorts of comedy—the realistic comedy where the people should show that they mind intensely what they are about, and we laugh at them for it, and the artificial comedy where the point is witty comment, epigram, and clever generalisation, in which the people are interested only in being funny.

Give examples from your own reading. Suggestions and criticisms are invited. The Otago W.E.A. recommends for reading its correspondence course, "Modern Drama." Library books of plays may be borrowed.

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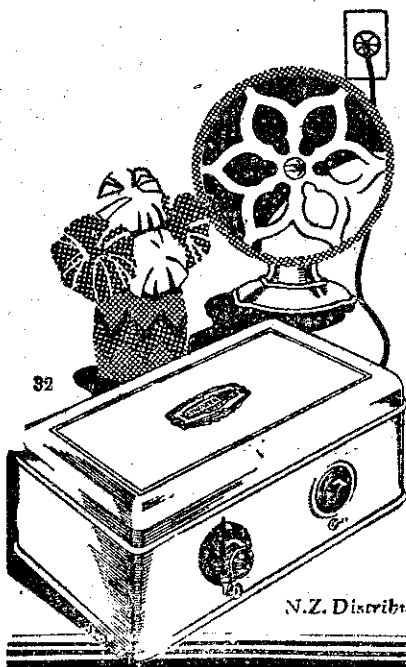
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