

Shall we write Melodramas?

At least two of us are

~~Denizens~~ ~~of~~ ~~the~~ ~~probable~~ in the habit of attending The Melodrama at Popular Pries as often as we possibly can. ^{intimately do} We know Hawksbury the detective, and Major Enrigner de Vampas, Stephen Lucas the solicitor, Joe Mayfield Nature's Nobleman, Jack Tolly A.B., Captain Herbert Skinner known as The Spider, the Earl of Denwort Prime Minister of England, and Count Fosco himself.

A good many spectators, like ourselves,

~~Mockers~~ explain that ^{they} ~~we~~ go to laugh in ^{their} ~~our~~ superior way at the Drama of the People. I suppose we do laugh a good deal. But speaking for myself and I secretly expect for all we go almost entirely because of the entrancing dramatic interest. The excitement is intense, yet never painful; the comic relief potently amusing, and never out of place. In fact the melodrama is a superb artistic whole; I would endorse melodrama, that every errand boy might see it; if I loved the true theatrical thrill I would act Melodrama; and like Shakespeare and Aeschylus if I but could it would be Melodrama I should write.

And yet

~~As~~ ~~the~~ ~~tragic~~ ~~is~~ ~~to~~ ~~the~~ ~~poor~~ ~~of~~ ~~the~~ ~~people~~ aesthetically we usually criticize Melodrama; reason in details as well as in essentials is the ideal we ~~set~~ set before our playwrights; your play must be real life, we say, only more amusing; you must give us real people in real surroundings; we allow ^{you} to compress and to select and even to ~~create~~ ^{devise on} ~~unusual~~ ~~difficult~~ concatenation of trouble, so long as you are not to hijane; but you must never forget that your duty is to make public the Comedy of Human life, not to play the

dence with it, or to philosophize about it as we allow our novelists; you must ~~not~~ ^{you must} represent it as it really happens, and the only legitimate difference between the stage and ^{the} ~~any~~ party is that the former is deliberately chosen as the most fascinating of ten thousand te-parties, ~~and~~ ^{while} the latter is determinately fixed by the Law of Causation and the Uniformity of Nature and the incidents you may ~~have~~ happen to have issued.

It is against the setting up of this ideal of realism which to be sure has never been attained that I protest.

Its difficulties smother us in their complexity; ~~as we have to do~~ and we shall never write a play which will rank with the Agamemnon, or Lear, or the Woman in White until we give it up.

For melodrama, as it exists to day in the Drama of the People, is, it must be admitted, open to some few criticisms. It is on the right path, but its methods are not ~~unimprovable~~ perfect. The novelty and depth of its sentiment, the character of the issues as opposed to the incidents involved, the ~~interest~~ ^{interest} of the leading characters, the stateliness and poetry of its diction are open to improvement.

But how superb the perfected melodrama might become! How superb indeed it was in the hands of the great masters of the past. Even as it stands, ~~it presents the most~~ ^{there is no more} satisfying product ~~and that~~ the modern theatre ^{afford?} ~~can~~ ^{compare}. Give it aesthetic beauty, graft subtlety in essentials onto the magnificent crudeness of the main construction, create two or three human beings in the hands of the he villain and she villainess to be snatched from

destruction by conviction from Heaven, or finally lured to a
 tremendous and tragic destruction by the powers of darkness,
 and you give us drama which will be all things to all men,
 which will run a thousand nights and convert a thousand
 critics; ~~which~~ ^{you} will ^{still} open wide the eyes of the crowd boys and
 bring tears to the eyes of the barmaid; ~~and you will also~~ ^{but}
 you will do as much ^{and more} for those who know most of human beings
 and their emotions; your audience will hiss the villain and seethe
 in their seats ^{they applaud} as ~~is~~ ^{for} your sentiments; your actors will rant
 and declaim and tear their hair; and in the midst of this
 tumultuous crowd of unreality, ~~you~~ ^{you} ~~open~~ ^{open} ~~one~~ ^{two or three}
 human beings painted full length and to the life will pursue
 their tragic or triumphant course.

There are three main characteristics of the melodrama which ^{exist} ~~are~~
 always, I am sure, like ready to the playwright's hand whenever
 he requires them - violent action, endless conventions, and
 persons malignantly wicked beyond all known example. The
 violations of realistic canons which these involve are not
 fundamental; ^{let} the setting, the machinery, even the incidents
 be as arbitrary as you will; the essential lies in the development
 and portrayal of character - that is admitted. But never
 will character be wrested from its tenacious hiding place,
 never will human beings as they are in themselves stand
 nakedly upon the stage, with the assistance of those weapons
 only which the canons of realism allow. For ~~so~~ The

weapons we ~~need~~ ^{need} for so penetrative a task must be forged elsewhere; the storehouse of the most vigorous imagination can scarcely be sufficient; if we are ~~limited~~ ^{bounded} by the narrow circle of experience, we shall be helpless before ~~so~~ ^{so} ~~obscure~~ a query so elusive.

I do not think there is any need to enter into the general discussion of realism in art; it is agreeable that where we seek to image or represent external appearance, no striving after real and true portrayal even of the minutest details is to be despised. But in the dramatic art this is not our object; costume exhibitions, optical illusions, illustrations of the manners and customs of different ages and countries, these do not constitute our goal. They are at the best pleasurable appendages; they should never be allowed to hide the progress of our full expression.

This is the fundamental point to bear in mind in dealing with the problem of realism in the dramatic art; our object is not the optically obvious; we seek by signs and symbols to make known the workings of the spirit. We endeavour to convey through the medium of the eyes and ears not what the eyes and ears immediately perceive, but what of the immaterial and intangible parts of men it is by their means possible to suggest.

Mental events compose the essence of the play; they must be actual ^{and} real to the minutest flicker of feeling, the subtlest

suggestions of changing sentiment. But the setting must be
 so devised as to assist the development and portrayal
 of these, ~~and~~ to make with them ~~as perfect~~ an aesthetically ~~adequate~~
 perfect whole, and to produce ~~that~~ ^{that} necessary degree of
 illusion which the lavish use of convention does not by any
 means forbid.

I have no quarrel with realism in itself; a certain degree
 of it is plainly necessary; but a high degree ^{of it} is not essential.
 If the leading characters be human beings, every ~~high degree~~ ^{little}
~~of~~ realism in the accessories will produce conviction.

My quarrel is indirect and based on the belief that the pursuit
 of it will render utterly impossible the intelligible portrayal
 of the more subtle and ~~delightful~~ absorbing side of human
 characters, because realism in essentials seems utterly
 incompatible with a ~~truly~~ realistic treatment of those which
 really matter.

For how is it possible to let the audience know the most intricate
 play of feeling in the minds of persons whom they meet for the
 first time that evening, if these persons may never believe in
 any other way than would be natural in life outside the stage?

By what possible ~~or arbitrary~~ ^{or arbitrary} selection of interviews compressed within the
 compass of an hour or two, could we learn the qualities and
~~motives~~ ^{motives} of our friends, viewing their actions from the external
 standpoint of the observer. ~~It~~ Years pass before we ~~know~~ fully
 know the character of those about us, and even then we are

The most innocent persons are incessantly involved in the most suspicious circumstances possible; the most ordinary indications of the truth are overlooked. There are more murders than teapots; no written documents appear which are not forged.

The most healthy and wholesome individuals are left for dead; ~~the~~ 'where is my chloroform pad?' says the villain, when the ordinary person would miss his handkerchief.

In the second place, and this is most important, there are villains.

In real life, alas, there are no villains; I hardly see how a play can hope to succeed without one. I ~~don't see~~ do not count them amongst the human beings I was speaking of.

Villains are part of the machinery of the stage, an essential accessory of the footlights, which somehow real life succeeds in doing without. We meet stupid men and selfish men and even cruel men sometimes; we meet cross unsympathetic tyrants of their little fields; but men whose souls incessantly keep alive the pallid flame of impersonal, unprovoked malignity we never meet. They must step the stage not as men but as gods, brothers of the blind forces of nature, akin to storms and tempests, madness and hereditary disease.

Thirdly there are numerous conventional devices, with ~~which~~ which even your realist would not hope altogether to dispense, but which he would confine within the narrowest limits possible. I would reintroduce the soliloquy into serious drama; both this and the aside I would allow the other characters to overhear

or not according to the convenience of the moment. I would make no bones about coincidences, or punctual intervention. I would play the deuce with all known medical or physiological laws. I would draw up the legal code according ^{to} my own special needs, and draw it up afresh in every play I wrote.

I would make my characters at least as frank with the audience as they usually are with themselves.

I would let them declaim blank verse when it seemed suitable, and slow music would play ~~over~~ if I thought it could help express the true emotional key at any moment.

With these advantages and other tricks and dodges of the art which ever realism might allow, I might well hope to achieve what would be impossible to one working in a less malleable material without some such return as this ^{that have the sanction} to the conventions of the past, the theatrical art has reached an impasse out of which I see no escape.

The ~~the~~ money and the means at the disposal of the leaders of the profession have ^{made possible} ~~not brought~~ a superficial imitation of actuality; ~~with~~ ^{with} ~~their~~ ^{power} and this increase of power has coincided with a natural trend of thought.

For real life, or at any rate selected portions of it, is the most interesting thing we know; in a private drama of which we are ^{the} ~~the~~ only witnesses, we dream how complete and how thrilling this ~~could~~ ^{could} might be upon the stage; and by easy stages we come to think how ^{absolutes} ~~perfect~~ a play selected episodes from the life of any one of us might make,

handled by a genius, faithfully spoken and described: - or at least a play founded upon the circumstances of some we know. How thrilled the audience would be! What a superb feast of mingled passion and psychology they would enjoy.

But we forget that we have inside knowledge, we are not mere observers; at the least we have seen and felt for months or years; or we have received confidences perhaps.

How is the audience to understand, if they can only overhear, ~~and~~ when it is strangers they see and then only for a single evening? Clearly here is a problem which cannot be solved without the aid of the craft's technique and the craft's conventions; how far we are to travel into an imaginary world is the important question: for most assuredly we must leave our own.

I believe it is those devices of the melodrama ^{which} I have already described that will help us most.

They enable us to put our characters in extraordinary and disturbing circumstances, in which of their own accord they will disclose more than is usual, and further by means of our conventions they will disclose to the audience what ~~they~~ in real life they would keep to themselves.

In addition the mere interest and excitement of the plot will tide over the moments when the psychological development is necessarily dull; and it will be possible to introduce those dramatic ^{situations} ~~situations~~ in which events syndronise in a way unknown to reality, ^{and} at which the dramatic emotion of the audience can be puffed into

a flame by the concentration and poignancy of the moment.
After all I am only asking for what has constantly been done in
the past, but which there seems to be difficulty in frankly
accepting at the present.

Realism has never been achieved; ~~it~~ hardly has it been
seriously attempted; but theory and criticism and public
opinion points in that direction.

There are one or two points in conclusion. How the ^{plays that are} crowned and classic
~~tragedies~~ teem with melodrama! How full they are of convention! What
impossible villains crowd the stage of Shakespeare or the Greeks!
Yet Othello justifies Iago; the daughters of Lear and the Penes of
Aeschylus are of the same ^{stuff} ~~stock~~, grim gigantic creatures, that
do not live in this real world, but on the stage ^{are} ~~are~~ potent to weave
tragedy about the lives of ^{other} beings, gigantic too perhaps, but yet
recognized by us to be of human make.

No doubt realistic ^{drama} is the most glorious vision for the playhouse; it is
realistic drama that is daily played before God and he knows best.
But I feel it is too difficult for us; if we vainly grasp at it, we
shall lose what we might have gained.

Major Enriquez de Vampes points the way; - if only a band of better
men than he will follow.