

PLAYWRIGHTS
OF THE
NEW AMERICAN THEATER

BY
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PLAYWRIGHTS
OF THE
NEW AMERICAN THEATER

BOOKS BY
THOMAS H. DICKINSON

CHIEF CONTEMPORARY DRAMATISTS

First and Second Series

THE CASE OF AMERICAN DRAMA

THE INSURGENT THEATER

THE CONTEMPORARY DRAMA OF ENGLAND

PLAYWRIGHTS OF THE NEW AMERICAN THEATER

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PLAYWRIGHTS OF THE NEW AMERICAN THEATER

CHAPTER I

THE PLAYWRIGHT AS PIONEER: PERCY MACKAYE

I

IN 1897 there was delivered at the Commencement Exercises of Harvard College an oration on a theme at the time unusual for college affairs. The subject of the oration was "The Need of Imagination in the Drama of Today." The delivery of this oration deserves some notice, not alone on account of the nature of the subject-matter, but because the speaker represented in his own person a vigorous tradition in American drama and was himself on the threshold of a lifetime of activity in the theater.

"Is there not need of a higher standard in the composition and criticism of our modern dramas?" the orator asks. "Does the public possess a clear and just appreciation of what a play should be?" And he proceeds to discuss the principles that govern in the theater of the time and to test these by stand-

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ards of his own application. He reminds his hearers that the mirror which, in the words of Hamlet to the Players, the art of the theater should hold up to nature, is not a dull, imitative looking glass, but a vitally reflective magic mirror. He surveys current successes to learn whether there is in them any trace of magic, and he concludes that, from the beginning to the end of the play, it is the purpose of the dramatist of the day not to fashion a world of the imagination, but "to keep the spectator in a state of excited expectancy, to draw from the audience the same breathless attention which they would bestow upon a runaway accident or an escaping thief, to appeal, in short, not to the imaginations of men but to their nervous systems." He concludes his oration with a plea for a new ordering in the American theater. Imagination, and then imagination and more imagination! This is the need of the American stage.

The speaker on this occasion was young Percy Wallace MacKaye.—Looking back over the almost thirty years that have passed since this oration was delivered, it appears that the orator spoke better than he knew. Certainly he had pointed his finger at his own program of action. But he had done more than this. He had uncovered the doctrine by which a whole program of dramatic reorganization was to be motivated. He had elected himself spokesman, with all that thereto appertains of hard work and odium, of a new movement in the American theater. This position he has never relinquished. A

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something dynamic in the MacKaye nature, a certain combination in him of the warrior's obtuseness with the sensitiveness of the artist, has given him both the eloquence and the initiative of authority.

Percy MacKaye (in his early published work he dropped the middle name) was born in New York City, March 16, 1875, the son of a line which on both sides had been distinguished for intellectual attainments and strong convictions. His paternal grandfather had been an Abolitionist leader intrusted by Lincoln with responsibilities in connection with emancipation. His mother, as well as his father, had been a writer and playwright. He attended boy's school in New York, Groton, and Washington, D. C. Thence he went to Harvard, and after graduating in 1897, proceeded to Europe to continue his studies in Germany, France, England, and Italy.

Young MacKaye took with him to Europe a definite ambition to be a playwright. This ambition found its source in his own family tradition. Steele MacKaye is but a name to many to-day. A generation ago he was more than a name. He had been successfully painter, teacher, lecturer, disciple and exponent of Delsarte, author of dramatic works (of which "Hazel Kirke" and "Paul Kauvar" are remembered), theatrical manager, producer, architect and innovator. No justice can be done to the life work of the father in a hasty sketch of the life of the son. And yet the father cannot be ignored for two perfectly good reasons. He passed on to the son a

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vigorous tradition of theatrical innovation. Like the son, he never looked upon the drama as an art of pure form; to him it was always an art in which he saw realized an Utopian dream.

Percy MacKaye came to Harvard from his father's death bed. He had spent the previous year beside the drafting boards and work tables of his father in Chicago. He had been confidant and secretary to his father. Boyishly he had shared with him the dream of a Spectatorium overlooking the western lake; his first writing had been done for this ill-fated enterprise. He had seen that dream go down to defeat and his father to death. In the defeat he had had his first taste of a fate too common among those who would transmute dreams into reality, whether in the form of Utopias or theaters. When, four years later, he dedicated himself to his father's work, it was with open eyes.

I find some interest in the fact that Percy MacKaye, who was to raise his voice for an American theater, should have started his life work by browsing in European libraries. A generation ago few American playwrights had attended college. Bronson Howard and William Gillette were college men; Clyde Fitch, a college man, was just beginning his career. But Augustus Thomas, David Belasco, James A. Herne, Denman Thompson, Charles Klein, had come to writing either through business or through acting. The theater was alienated from the

bookish world. Writers for the stage acquired a hand-picked education that was by no means to be despised, but a college education as such was considered a handicap. Few have suffered more from this handicap than Percy MacKaye. He began his career by separating himself still further from the currents and interests of the American stage by burying himself in the myth and fable, in the classical tradition of the old world. It was as if he said to himself that as the way of preferment was closed in the popular avenues of stage activity, he would gather all forces for an attack upon the stage from the vantage ground of the accumulated tradition of the world of culture.

And indeed, for the task he had undertaken, there were advantages in the severely academic and classical equipment with which the young poet provided himself. I imagine that from his earliest youth MacKaye never deluded himself into thinking that he could write for the average commercial stage. I believe he was never interested in writing for this theater. From his childhood he had had another purpose, the purpose of writing for the theater as it is going to be. Nowhere could he gain a conception of the theater of the future so well as from a study of the theater as it had been in the golden days of the past. He was soon to learn that history does not repeat itself, that the theater of the future was to run on formulas of its own: he was himself to play his part in attempting to work out these formulas.

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Meanwhile he found his support and inspiration, as so many others have done before him, in the past.

Of plays, MacKaye has written more styles than Polonius at his most garrulous ever dreamed of. The number of his published works comprises more than seventy titles, including collected editions of his works. There are six volumes of poems; four volumes of essays on the civic theater and on social ideals; fifteen volumes of plays, four volumes of operas, twelve volumes of masques and community dramas, and a score of miscellaneous works and editions. If these show the energy with which he has thrown himself into work, the themes of his earliest group of plays show the voracious appetite of the man for the old fables, the stored riches of world imagination. He started his playwriting as an Elizabethan with "A Garland to Sylvia"; moved back to the period of Chaucer for "The Canterbury Pilgrims"; thence to Scandinavian mythology for "Fenris, the Wolf"; over to France for "Jeanne d'Arc," and finally to the classical world for "Sappho and Phaon."

In 1896 MacKaye had begun, while still a student at Harvard, a play upon a theme derived from Elizabethan sources. Completed in Italy in 1899, "A Garland to Sylvia" was reserved for publication for some ten years and when finally published in 1910 had the advantage of a second preface in which the author expounded its history and some of the considerations entering into its composition. The

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play itself, taken in conjunction with the two prefaces, is a lucid document upon the whole career of the poet. Governing everything is the influence of Shakespeare. It would not be proper to say that the play is imitative of Shakespeare, but it is imbued with the spirit of the early comedies. The influence extended to the theme, the atmosphere and to some of the versification of the play, but not to its form. Of the hero of the play Mencken has said, "Felix, to put it in plain English, is Shakespeare-drunk. He has steeped himself in the gorgeous word music of the peerless bard as Thackeray once steeped himself in Addison's Haydnesque prose. . . . It is in fine, the Forest of Arden. I know of no more striking imitation, in this unpoetical age, of the 16th century Shakespeare—not the serious, self-conscious metaphysician of the bald dome and coat of arms, but the light-hearted devil of the 1590's and the early comedies."

MacKaye was always impressionable. The immediate influence, then, is not the most significant feature of a MacKaye play. Of greater significance are those persistent traits which, present in the first play, come to be the signs manual of the MacKaye technique. "A Garland to Sylvia" displays that artist consciousness, that theater consciousness, that is the peculiar mark of MacKaye's mind. In this work he seems always to be divided between two interests, his interest in the drama as an art of expression through form, and even more strongly his

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interest in the potentialities of the art of the theater in human affairs. It is the latter that gives his work that sense of *responsibility* that is a distinguishing attribute of most of his plays and a contributing reason for the failure of many of them in production.

To the world-old problem, "How is the artist to be true to human nature?" MacKaye adds another: "How is the artist to be true to evolutionary process? How can he be most useful to destiny?" Writing in his earliest preface the young author puts his finger on the trait that always distinguishes him. "As I began to write the play, this somewhat introspective—though I think not morbid—contemplation of my own relation to my characters fascinated, nay, I confess, weighed upon me." And he goes on, "I wished to portray—or rather, I saw portrayed before me mentally—first, a young *dramatist*, groping in the mists of his imagination, confronted and confounded by that personality of his own which he had unwittingly but inevitably wrought into the characters of his play."

This combined theater and social consciousness, this awareness of himself in all he does, this identification of himself with all his themes, controls the structure of this as of MacKaye's later plays. In this play the action is not only set in a containing plot. There is a double containing action and, as if to intensify the impression of the complications and involutions of life, characters move at will from one zone of the action to another. We shall see that

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MacKaye never views the world simply. All reality is seen in a multiple aspect. Among these aspects the author moves freely now in one guise, now in another, inquiring and commenting.

The hero of the play is a young poet, Felix, who appears first in a prologue at Harvard College. He is writing a play. Speaking of Felix, another character in the Prologue says that he is always on "the wildest of speculations as to the relation of life to his imagination. The imagination, he believes, is a faculty of perception and creation. So, on the one hand, his imagination can perceive truths beyond mere eyesight; and on the other, it can create, from these truths, beings beyond mere flesh and blood—creatures which are henceforth indestructible, immortal; for whose existence he is responsible, as the good Lord, for him."

How the responsibilities of Felix work out in the play he writes, how the characters he creates prove as real, even more real than himself, so that they are substance and he is dream, provides the theme of the play. MacKaye would have us understand that while the problem of this play is essentially an artist's problem, it is not only an artist's problem; that all who dwell on the earth are concerned with the complex interrelations of things. "A Garland to Sylvia" has never been produced.

Before writing his next published play, MacKaye had collaborated with Evelyn Greenleaf Southerland in a romantic drama entitled, "A Maid of

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Leyden," which was presented by the pupils of the American Academy of Dramatic Arts at a matinée, December 11, 1900. As far as known, this was the first of MacKaye's works to find production. The manuscript of "A Garland to Sylvia," shown among the author's friends, secured for him the flattering attention of Norman Hapgood, who was then writing on the *Commercial Advertiser*. It also elicited from E. H. Sothorn and Julia Marlowe a commission for a poetic play. For the theme of his next play MacKaye went back beyond the age of Elizabeth to the more distant time of Chaucer. In the composition of "A Garland to Sylvia," the author had had the support of a vigorous dramatic convention. This was not the case with a subject chosen from the fourteenth century. Here the author had to dramatize materials not originally created for the stage. This fact explains, perhaps, a certain staginess and excess of theatrical effect to be found in "The Canterbury Pilgrims." Characters and atmosphere he found ready to hand. Action and plot had to be invented.

The source material of this play is mostly to be found in Chaucer's "Prologue" and "The Wife of Bath's Tale" in "The Canterbury Tales." Many features of the plot are derived not from extant resources in fiction, but from the author's own imagination working upon historical characters of Chaucer's day, including the poet himself, as well as upon the characters of the Tales. The play is in fact

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MacKaye's tribute to the poet's poet, Chaucer. Not accepted by Sothorn and Marlowe, it was first produced by the Coburn Players in Atlanta, Georgia, April 30, 1909, and was afterward acted by this company for six seasons in tour throughout the country.

Of all MacKaye's plays, this has had the largest measure of popular success. The reasons for this are not obscure. It is the most objective of the author's plays in plot, and shows fewer traces of social and æsthetic philosophy, of verbal and stylistic whimsy than MacKaye usually displays. For once the author forgets his passion for the theater in his interest in his characters. The action moves straight-away without prologues or other contrivances. The author does, however, permit his favorite confusion between the real world and the imaginary world by having Chaucer and other figures of history move about among the figures of Chaucer's—and MacKaye's—imagination.

In two respects the play is a delight. MacKaye has always been an enthusiastic Chaucerian. In later days he edited and adapted to modern English the works of Chaucer. This enthusiasm for Chaucer is manifest in the atmosphere of the play. Never are MacKaye's characteristic faults less evident than in this play. He has laid aside his verbal superfacility, his disposition to make sound stand for sense. The verse of this play is instinct with the spirit of joy and adventure. The jocund sense of