

THE PLAYWRIGHT AS THINKER

Shaw
Ibsen
Strindberg

Pirandello

Brecht

Sartre

A study of the modern theatre by

ERIC BENTLEY

The playwright as thinker

*A study of drama
in modern times*

by ERIC BENTLEY

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I believe above all in the future and in the universal need of serious things . . . the time is ripe for the DRAMA OF THOUGHT.

ALFRED DE VIGNY

The serious thing about drama is not the ideas. It is the absorption of the ideas by the characters, the dramatic or comic force which the characters give to the ideas.

HENRY BECQUE

In the theater an idea can only exist if it is given dramatic form.

FRANCISQUE SARCEY

FOREWORD TO A FOREWORD (1955)

Early in 1945 *The Nation* commissioned me to review the published versions of a number of new plays. But the time was past for such a journal to be interested in non-conformity. They refused to print the review I wrote, and it appeared, logically enough, in *Partisan Review*.

Feeling that what *The Nation* rejected must be pretty good, I reprinted the review in *The Playwright as Thinker* under the title Foreword. This was probably a mistake—not because reviews shouldn't be reprinted and not because this review was bad criticism but because, as I was to discover, so many professional readers would read it—and ignore the rest of the book. Many reviews of *The Playwright as Thinker* were reviews of its Foreword alone. Most comments made on the book, from that day to this, have really been comments on its Foreword.

I should not be ungrateful. Although a lot of critics commented unfavorably, it was clear that, if they hadn't disliked that Foreword so cordially, they wouldn't have commented at all. It was Flamboyant and it was Negative, and celebrities came down from their niches to say so. A little later on,

when I wrote a book that was Sober and Eulogistic, they stayed in their niches silent and, I like to imagine, rather sulky. People prefer the later book; and read the earlier one. Perhaps there is a moral in this for some younger man embarking upon a career of authorship in 1955.

I shouldn't be ungrateful to those who have only read the Foreword: what about those who have only read the title? The phrase "the playwright as thinker" suggested to them the idea that a playwright is solely a thinker—or pre-eminently a thinker—and no "triple thinker" at that but a fine, philosophical one-track mind. They were not slow to find this idea unsound, and had they found it also subversive I should no doubt have been hauled before a committee: *for they attributed the idea to me.* (Let me refer them to pp. 51-54-55, 67, 78, 109-110, 126, 148, 258-259, 266, 269, 272.)

The Playwright as Thinker is being reprinted, after ten years, with the intention of urging upon a few thousand readers not only a title, a foreword, and an afterword, but nine chapters. I found myself faced with the problem: in what way should this book be revised? I considered bringing everything up to date. That would have meant discussing the plays which, for example, Eliot, Brecht, and Sartre have written since 1945. But I have discussed these in other books and, besides, *The Playwright* has a certain shape which would be spoiled by lengthy insertions. I decided against up-to-dateness except where bibliographical notes had become positively misleading—and even here the insertions stand outside the text as footnotes. I considered a more complex type of change: making the book represent the author as of 1955, instead of 1945. On the face of it it seems odd to send to press opinions which one no longer holds or which one no longer holds so passionately exclusively. Is one so egoistic that one attaches public importance to an opinion, not because it seems true, but because one once held it? Unhappily, egoism is something there is no way out of: would it not be equally egoistic to force one's *changes* of opinion on the reader's attention?

cided that if anyone wanted to know: "Would he still say that today?" etc., he could find out by reading my later books. If *The Playwright as Thinker* is to preserve its integrity, it mustn't be allowed to degenerate into a dialogue between the author in 1945 and the author ten years later. I, in my egoism, imagine that the advantage is all with the author of 1955; a reader might have a different opinion. We think we are wiser when, who knows? we may just be less interesting. This, then, is a book written in 1945; and anything I have wanted to say by way of disclaimer, qualification, and elaboration I have said elsewhere. However, I have done some "editing" here, my notion of editing being derived from magazine editors. They are dreadful people, but their dreadfulness has limits. They are ruthless in the chopping and changing they'll inflict on your MS, yet, to give credit where credit is due, they do try to keep what they think you meant. I have gone to work on the first edition of *The Playwright as Thinker* with the restrained fury of a magazine editor. I have added a phrase here, subtracted a word there, used the blue pencil extensively, and written in new matter wherever what I found seemed clumsy or unclear. I tried to keep what I thought was meant.

In removing the substance of the old Foreword—the stone that *The Nation* rejected—my understanding is that it was never the cornerstone of the edifice: it was an obstacle that prevented people from crossing the threshold; it is better removed.

I am glad to be rid of that passage, and one or two others, because they were not received in the spirit in which they were offered. We do not live in an age of healthy polemics and lively nonconformity, and an attempt to write as if we did creates misunderstandings. I was never more surprised than when one of the most powerful men in the American theater said I had hurt his feelings. I must have known he had feelings, but I simply hadn't expected he'd take any notice of me, nor had I dreamt he was so lacking in self-confidence. Easy for the Great X to speak quietly and with-

out strain; the world listened just because it was the Great X. But how could he fail to understand that the position of a young unknown was different, that no one would listen unless he raised his voice, that the Great X himself wouldn't have listened except for this . . . But since I had cast him for Goliath, I had to let him cast me for David.

If some thought I wrote with intent to kill, others were friendly and handed me the accolade of severity: I was "one of our theater's severest critics." Now, although severity in criticism is not a fault, it is also not a virtue, and I should be the first to be offended by the personality of a critic who, in effect, kept saying: What a severe boy am I. I don't like a critic to be forever getting the better of the people he criticizes. I remember the voice of one of the Punches I saw as a child. After Mr. Punch had clonked each victim on the head and rubbed his hands with glee, this voice—a cackle, fiendish and falsetto—would say: "So much for you, you son of a gun!" I was recently reminded of this by a history of literature in which the life and soul of the party was the historian himself, despatching his authors in rapid succession. If that is severe criticism, I do not wish to be one of our severest critics.

Speaking of punches, I hope I am not pulling any. In revising *The Playwright as Thinker*, though, I wish to give no one any pretext for imputing personal animus, I am far from wishing to soften the impact of legitimate blows. In fact, precisely by clearing away certain illusions about a personal hostility I did not feel, I want to render more effective the impersonal hostility I did and do feel. Nor can I deny that impersonal hostility must affect persons. (Our impersonal hostility toward Japan cost the lives of half the persons in Hiroshima.)

The Great X never called me David; he called me an *enfant terrible*. This puts me in mind of a much greater *enfant terrible*, Samuel Butler, who wrote: "I am the *enfant terrible* of literature and science. If I cannot, and I know I cannot, get the literary and scientific big-wigs to give me a

shilling, I can, and I know I can, heave a brick into the middle of them." Butler doesn't tell us what effect he thinks the brick will have on the big-wigs. Experience leads me to believe that they will be rather hurt. Rubbing the lump on their foreheads—they have sensitive foreheads—they will enquire: "Why didn't he *ask* for his shilling? We'd have given him half a crown!" But they are liars and hypocrites and the truth is not in them.

Or they are naïve and do not realize. I was naïve too. I didn't realize that big-wigs could be hurt. When I did realize, *I* was hurt. But the consequences of my misdeeds may have done me good. Often before, when congratulated on the "courage" it took to say this or that, I had modestly disclaimed that virtue on the grounds that no courage is needed when there are no consequences. But when you say "courageous" things in dramatic criticism, there often *are* consequences. Heads turn away, whispering starts, and doors are closed.

It is not from those who are thrown at that you will learn the necessity of throwing bricks. I don't know what shilling I was after when I wrote *The Playwright as Thinker*, but I do know that the voice that tells me it is *unnecessary* to throw bricks is the voice of opportunism.

"The box office never lies."—LEE SHUBERT

"Dramatic criticism is, or should be, concerned solely with dramatic art even at the expense of bankrupting every theater in the country."—GEORGE JEAN NATHAN

FOREWORD (1945)

This book is about the playwright, the forgotten man of the modern stage. Forgotten? I shall be told that he is so far from forgotten that he occupies a recognized place in an industrial hierarchy. Here we must distinguish between real playwrights and those committees of businessmen and script manufacturers who put together Broadway and Hollywood shows on intellectual assembly lines. In other words we must distinguish between art and commodity. This book is concerned with art. But it can be admitted at the outset that the relation of art to commodity is seldom simple and that, particularly in the theater, art has seldom or never flourished in absolute independence of commodity. Indeed, it is well known that dramatic art has most often had to exist in the commodity theater or not at all. If by now the public is so specialized in different directions, so stratified and diversified, that independent art theaters are possible and desirable, this is a new and unprecedented situation. Let us postpone the analysis of it until after we have perused the modern stage more thoroughly. What we should acknowledge from

the start is that the commodity theater constitutes—on the most modest estimate—a tremendous pressure upon the drama as a whole. Perhaps at some periods of history this pressure can be regarded as on the whole salutary. It may provide a firm convention, a necessary habitat for the playwright to operate in. But circumstances alter cases. The pressure of commercial theater may also become a tyranny. In that event the artist can know but one relationship to it: the relationship of antagonism. In such an era the playwright is either a rebel and an artist or a yes man and a hack.

I am afraid that the present is such an era. The nature of modern drama, if I am right, is comprehensible only to those who can see the sharp difference between modern and earlier cultures. One example will suffice. Until the modern period great drama has possessed not only those deeper and subtler qualities which reveal themselves to the careful analyst and which constitute its greatness, it has also possessed more generally available qualities. It has appealed on different levels. It has appealed to the connoisseur *and* the amateur, the critic *and* the public. It has functioned as mere entertainment for some and as the highest art for others. A great deal of modern art, however, including drama, does not possess this double appeal. It appeals only to those who can discern high art, just as modern entertainment frequently appeals only to those who are satisfied with mere entertainment. Scandalized, our spiritual doctors call on the entertainers to be artistic or on the artists to be entertaining. The one class is censured as low-brow, the other as high-brow. Whatever the proposed solution, wherever the blame is to be placed, the facts themselves are inexorable. A peculiar, problematic, and perhaps revolutionary situation exists. Art and commodity have become direct antagonists.

This book is not about playwrights who could never have risen above the commercial theater. It is not about playwrights whom the commercial theater has spoiled. But neither is it about playwrights whose sole merit is their rejection of commercial theater. It is about great playwrights and

Aeschylus.
notorious

about playwrights who—if they are not great—are highly original. For there is another sort of artist who is important besides the great artist who finds and fulfills. That is the original artist who seeks and suggests. This kind of artist is of special importance in a revolutionary period. "In our time," said Ibsen, "every new creative work has the task of shifting the boundary stakes."

The fact, then, that many well-known contemporary playwrights are not discussed in this book is not necessarily an aspersion on their work. My account of modern drama limits itself—for the sake of clarity and simplicity—to certain key figures. Sometimes when there was no obvious key figure I realize that another name would have done as well as the one I chose. There are three American playwrights in particular whom I would like to have said more about: Eugene O'Neill, Clifford Odets, and Thornton Wilder. One reason I did not say much about them is that all of them are expected to bring out major work early in the new postwar period. Since I regard the earlier work of all of them as chiefly promising, rather than great, I propose to wait for the new work before discussing them at length.

The fact that I put even O'Neill in the class of the promising, and not in the class of Aeschylus where his friends put him, will suggest another reason why many well-known playwrights are not discussed in this book: it is that I do not admire them enough. We have been fooling ourselves into believing that the period 1920-1940 was a great period of drama, particularly of American drama. It was not. The period has its important experiments and its important achievements; but the experiments are only notorious and the achievements still almost unknown. The drama that our best actors lent their charm to and that critics and anthologists lent their support to was—as I think we shall soon be discovering—much overrated. To write about the established playwrights of Broadway would be to write about the crippling effects of a sick theatrical culture on honest talent. That is why I shall *not* write about them. For this is not a

book about the corrupting forces which turn artists into willing slaves or imagined Shakespeares. It is about those who were neither enslaved nor deluded.

I pick on the American theater because I am writing in America. I am under no illusion that things were at all times better elsewhere. Soviet Russia has had the liveliest popular theaters in the world but latterly the standard of her plays has seemed to be falling steadily to the Broadway level. Nazi Germany maintained the theatrical organizations of Weimar Germany, or substituted new ones, but had to rely on nineteenth-century drama for productions of any quality. Scandinavia, like America, turned out competent plays but little that was original and nothing to approximate Ibsen or Strindberg. After the deaths of Garcia Lorca and Pirandello, Spain and Italy had to be content with the histrionics of Franco and Mussolini. France had her experimental theater, but, already before 1940, it seemed to be languishing. The two art theaters of Dublin have had, perhaps, a smoother history than other such ventures, yet Sean O'Casey was turned down and Denis Johnston, greeted as O'Casey's successor ten years ago, has apparently written nothing recently. As to Britain, drama is there reduced to the status of opera: the best energy goes into revivals of classics. There seem to be only two dramatists of consequence in England: O'Casey who is not improving and Bernard Shaw who is not getting any younger. Such is the record down through the thirties.

It is not a very good record. But then, as Bernard Shaw once told his biographer, "The theater is *always* at a low ebb." The modern high drama, in which my readers and I are interested, exists—if at all—in the nooks and crannies of a graveyard called the show business. It feeds—if at all—necrophilously upon the body of the theatrical monster. It succeeds—if at all—by flukes and irrelevances (by sexiness, by violence, by winning the patronage of a star actor). The present situation differs from that of, say, twenty years ago chiefly in the comparative fewness of the flukes. Add to all

this the annihilation of good European theater by the Nazis, the increasing stress on sentimental propaganda in Russia, the apparent lack of important younger dramatists in all countries; add above all that time marches on, and that—in the economic sphere—the pressure of the big business upon the small business increases. High theater is a very small business. It is constantly bought out by Hollywood and Broadway, which need its talents for their own very different commodities.

Some ebbs are lower than others. The past few years have seen the almost total extinction of artistic drama in the commodity theater. This is “no time for comedy”—or for tragedy either. Can we speak as confidently of a coming dramatic renaissance after this war as our fathers did after the last war? The last war was preceded by Ibsen and Strindberg; the postwar generation forged ahead on *their* steam. Between the generations such a man as Max Reinhardt was (for all his foibles) an essential link. This time the links, or most of them, have been broken. One might be tempted to say that the theater at present fulfills only one precondition of renaissance: it is dead.

Would this be an overstatement? We need not prejudge the issue. And even if the theater *is* dead, we can comfort ourselves with the thought that only when a man is dead can we review his career with any semblance of detachment and comprehensiveness: a lull in the history of drama is a good time to review the situation. We can now look back upon a period—the later nineteenth century and the earlier twentieth—when high drama somehow managed to make its presence felt. Much of the drama that is known as modern can now be seen in perspective and at a distance. To our fathers, Ibsenism was new and, whether shocking or exhilarating, seemed to them more the beginning of something than the end of something. To us the birth of Ibsenism, and of expressionism, too, was a process at which we did not assist. The “new spirit in the theater” as advertised twenty years ago is already extinct, the “theater of to-

morrow" as advertised by adventurous stage-designers is already the theater of yesterday, an aspect of the Bohemian twenties. Even the Federal Theater belongs to a Roosevelt Era that already seems far away.

Nevertheless history does not so easily close its doors. Nothing with life in it is easily shut out. Great artists live on by their greatness when they cannot survive by some more negotiable coin. Many who are not supremely great live on by the continued fruitfulness of their work. Some great modern dramatists have scarcely yet begun to fructify: Strindberg is one of these. Others have been heeded only where they collided with our grandparents' ethics: of these Ibsen is the chief. Another—Bernard Shaw—we have often heard from but seldom listened to. Yet another—Richard Wagner—we have disputed over in musical and political argumentations without heeding what Nietzsche long ago told us: that Wagner was first and foremost a man of the theater.

Looking back over the whole long span of drama since 1850, a few such figures as the above detach themselves from the crowds with whom they mingled. We would no longer care to discuss Ibsen and *Björnson* or Shaw and *Galsworthy*. We would no longer care to have a Henry Arthur Jones lecture us on the revival of the theater at the hands of Henry Arthur Jones. (My youngest readers, without being the worse for it, will not even know who Henry Arthur Jones was.) If a William Archer made the anti-Ibsenites sound old-fashioned, what could be more so now than Archer's championing of Pinero? Whoever wishes to share the less exhilarating sensations of an Egyptologist rifling a tomb should read the drama books of forty, thirty, even twenty years ago. It is a chastening thought for the writer on drama today.

Yet we must use the perspective of our own point in time for what it is worth. What follows is an attempt to do so, an attempt motivated by a deep concern with dramatic art and its fate in our civilization, by a feeling that something is

wrong which might—at least partly—be put right. There would of course be nothing new in urging that the money-changers should be driven out of our temples with whips. What I shall urge is that the temples be left to the money-changers to profiteer in; the true faith must survive—if at all—elsewhere. The hope of the theater—I shall maintain—lies outside the commercial theater altogether. Not that we can forget the money-changers. They are fat and influential. They have the scribes and Pharisees on their side: for the scholars and critics of the theater—or at least a high proportion of them—have sold themselves to the managers. The academicians are determined to be unacademic.

So much the worse for them. If it is academic to see plays in the context of thinking, feeling, and doing rather than in the context of footlights and box offices, then there is much to be said for academicism. I should be happy to oppose the antiacademicism of even the best of the regular theater critics, George Jean Nathan, who holds that a good play is not a thing that can profitably be examined in detail and that criticism of great drama is therefore fruitless or impossible. My own conviction is that any good thing is a very good thing and that any work of art can bear the closest scrutiny. The better, the closer. The most revolutionary tenet to be advanced in this book is this: the drama can be taken seriously. "A play," as Oscar Wilde said, "is as personal and individual a form of self-expression as a poem or a picture." This being so, the playwright must have a self to express. Like any other writer, he must *be* somebody—in order to write the somebody he is—and in order to write the world in which he is.

If, then, we seek out the mind and art—the real identity—of our best playwrights, we shall at the close be in a better position to confirm, reject, or qualify our impression that the theater is dead.

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