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HOW NOT TO
WRITE A PLAY

WALTER KERR

SIMON AND SCHUSTER



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HOW
NOT TO WRITE
A PLAY

BY
Walter Kerr



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INTRODUCTION

America is, at the moment, in possession of a highly unpopular theater. For twenty-five years the taste for legitimate drama has steadily waned. Each successive year finds fewer theaters in operation, fewer plays produced, fewer successes among those that are produced.

In 1929 there were seventy-five playhouses in operation in New York City. Now there are thirty-one.

In 1929 managers were able to get 224 productions on the boards. Nowadays they are lucky to hit seventy.

Only eight or nine years ago a producer figured that the chances of failure were four to one. Now he must expect that they will be about seven to one.

The average professional actor's salary is now \$790 a year.

The most alarming thing about the contemporary American theater is the absolute regularity of its march toward extinction. The figures just quoted would not be half so frightening if they represented a sudden, sharp break with a normal prosperity. Nineteen twenty-nine, for instance, was a disastrous financial year in every way, and if the number of playhouses and productions had been sliced in half immediately after the stock-market crash and then remained stable at the lesser figure, there would be cause for dismay—but not for despair. Stability at any level would be encouraging, and the theater might seem simply to be biding its time in quiet confidence of an eventual upturn.

It didn't happen that way. Instead of staggering with the general economy, and then slowly sharing in its recovery, the theater has undergone a continued, season-by-season process

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of attrition. There has been no single fatal blow, only a casual and apparently irreversible dwindling away.

Nothing—not the gradual recovery of the dollar during the 1930s, not the war boom of the 1940s, not the fantastically easy money of the early 1950s—has halted the shrinkage. The general economy may go wherever it likes; the theater goes right on down.

There is nothing to indicate that the decline will not continue. Since the theater seems to profit not at all from the customer's fattened pocketbook, since it is clearly following a course of its own against the grain of the universal economy, there is no reason to suppose that we will not go on closing theaters and curtailing production at the same annual rate that has prevailed for twenty-five years. Should this happen—what is there to say that it won't?—we may expect to find the New York stage confined to two theaters and seven annual productions within another twenty years. Any time thereafter the theater as we know it may cease to function entirely.

You don't believe this. Neither do I. But where does our courage come from? From the mere pious repetition of the thought that "the theater cannot die"?

The road is just about dead. Most of us have some personal memory of it when it was alive. My own earliest recollection—I was about nine, and beginning to be dazzled by the theatrical advertisements—is of spreading open the Sunday pages of the Chicago Tribune on the living-room floor and studiously memorizing the names of the playhouses: the Apollo, the Garrick, the Four Cohans, the Illinois, the Studebaker, the Selwyn, the Harris, the Grand, the Great Northern, the Erlanger. There may have been twenty theaters in regular operation. Today Chicago is lucky when it has four open.

During my high-school days, in a community of 70,000 I was able to see every successful play of the twenties in stock. Stock no longer operates in that community.

Graduating from college, I went to work in a city boasting

four playhouses. During an eight-year period I watched one of them turn into a parking lot, one into a warehouse, two into motion-picture theaters.

Few major American cities now require more than a single legitimate theater; not many of these offer more than a fragmentary season. Most smaller communities have abandoned all thought of keeping a building available for those three or four discouraged companies that might straggle through during the winter months. Managers cannot hope to send out reasonably good plays, featuring fairly well-known people, and turn a profit. Even hits have been known to lose their New York earnings in vain flings at the road.

The iceberg inches its way into New York. New York is, after all, only another community of increasingly disaffected playgoers—larger, but in the long run no less vulnerable, than Chicago, St. Louis, or Cleveland.

That's the condition of the contemporary theater as a working professional might look at it. How does the audience look at it?

There is no longer any such thing as habitual theatergoing. The audience neither plans to attend the theater two or three times a month nor does it drop in casually at a Broadway show. An occasional production receives such an overwhelming accolade in the New York press, thus becoming a suitable subject for cocktail conversation, that social pressure drives a large number of people into seeing it; the play that does not generate this sort of social pressure might better never have been born. Drama is not thought tolerable as a steady diet; it is something that must be endured now and then in the interests of intellectual upkeep.

There are exactly enough habitual theatergoers left in New York City to fill a single theater for a single evening. Opening nights are crowded. Second nights—unless the newspapers have put the pressure on—are empty. I spent a year as a second-night regular, reviewing plays for a magazine; it was the lone-

somest year of my life. I quickly grew used to the fact that there is no audience for a play which has not been made socially unavoidable. I never quite adjusted myself to a more startling fact: that not even theater people are interested in theater. At these desolate second nights I saw no producers studying the work to find out what was wrong with it. I saw no playwrights analyzing the failure of a fellow craftsman. I saw no directors. I saw no actors. I saw twenty-five or thirty magazine reviewers, present under duress, and that was it. On one occasion a saddened management scurried down the aisles to ask the reviewers to bundle together in the center of the house so that the actors might be encouraged to go on.

Nobody—but nobody—is willing to subject himself to any contemporary theatrical experience he can get out of. A rival medium has but to rear its head to draw off yet another portion of that public which had once been regarded as the theater's. The invention of the motion picture saw hordes of happily released playgoers fly in enchantment to something that pleased them more. Radio found people curling up comfortably at home, yearning not at all for the excitement of a theatrical night out. Television is a splendid excuse for making the breach permanent. No one has yet devised an entertainment form poor enough, dull enough, or monotonous enough to send anyone back to the apparently poorer, duller, and more monotonous theater.

For one reason or another, the contemporary American cannot be persuaded that the legitimate drama is a tolerable form of entertainment. All sorts of persuasions are repeatedly tried. The newspaper reviewers, for instance, flirt with perjury in the nightly effort to make the theater seem gay. One recent Broadway season was, by common consent, the worst in the memory of man. The plays which went to make up this season were described in the daily press as "stunning," "magnificent," "exuberant," "distinguished," "exhilarating," "enormously en-

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joyable," "enchanted," "extraordinary," and "filled with wit, talent, and splendor." The playgoer remained skeptical.

Hurt and unable to imagine that it is in any way lacking in what advertisers call "personal daintiness," the theater likes to picture itself as the victim of economic forces, and so works very hard to lure the reluctant customer through lowered prices. A New York organization known as City Center offers popular stars at very low prices, and is normally unable to play twelve days to capacity or to scrape through a season without a substantial loss. A survey by the show-business weekly, *Variety*, indicates that it is the cheapest seats in the balcony which have gone begging in recent years.

In short, the fun-loving American finds the theater infinitely resistible—and at any price. He vaguely acknowledges its superiority over the media he actually patronizes. He apologizes profusely for his inability to keep up with it. He makes a point of knowing who Tennessee Williams is by carefully studying the theatrical columns of *Time*; anything he misses will be supplied by his wife, who will have been briefed on the shows she hasn't seen by a woman's-club lecturer who is paid to see them. Caught up in a theatrical conversation, he will expand handsomely on a performance he will never forget, probably a performance of *Lightnin'*.

A rat catcher came to my house yesterday, to catch rats. Discovering that I was a newspaper reviewer, he snapped his fingers in an "of course" gesture and went on to say how long he had read me and, in particular, how completely he had agreed with my review of *Oklahoma!* I have been on a newspaper for four years. *Oklahoma!* opened twelve years earlier. It was, of course, the last show he had seen and conversation had perforce to radiate from that point. Nor are the rat catchers of the world the only social group to have seceded from the theater. In the course of lecturing to groups deeply committed to cultural activity of all sorts, I am everlastingly invited to dwell on the merits of *The Barretts of Wimpole*

Street, and in another five years I confidently expect to be asked what I think of Harvey. Even the intellectual avant-garde continues to busy itself with the dashing experimentation of e.e. cummings' him (1921). A President of the United States, confronted with a dramatic group which had strayed into the White House, beamed merrily and made the strangers at home with a glowing account of the finest "play" he had ever seen—Mrs. Miniver.

The average American, from President to rat catcher, knows that the theater exists, though he is not quite sure why. Buzzing about on the fringes of his consciousness is a peculiar activity supported by specialists, worthy of encouragement if the encouragement can be given in absentia, apparently valuable in some dim educative, intellectual, or historical way, like Williamsburg, Virginia, or Shaker furniture, or the novels of Thackeray. The notion that, when he is looking for a good time, he might deliberately choose playgoing over poker, golf, movies, detective stories, or bourbon on the rocks does not seriously enter his head.

He has been to the theater—once or twice. He has been going with a girl and isn't quite certain how else they are going to pass the earlier hours of the evening. He has been invited to a dinner party which must, dinner being over, be carried out of the house—somewhere, anywhere—so that the maid can go home. He has come in from out of town, is lonesome and of high moral character, and has finally spent the evening at a show he can talk about when he goes back out of town.

The problem that faces the contemporary American theater is this: once the customer has been there, it doesn't occur to him to go back. The visit will have had a certain ritualistic value; but it will not have brightened the man's life, caught his fancy, stirred his soul, or fired a brand-new passion. If the visitor never sees another legitimate play so long as he lives, he will feel no sense of loss.

I don't think this is an economic problem, a competitive

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problem, or a sociological problem. I think it is a playwriting problem. I don't think the fault is in our stars; I think it is on our stage.

It is very difficult, though, to convince either a professional or a playgoer that this is so. The professional prefers to assume that the drama is first-rate but that the audience is feeble-minded. The audience, half suspecting that it is feeble-minded, obligingly agrees that the drama is first-rate and stays away from it.

All of us, whenever we make note that the American theater is unpopular, indulge in a crafty mental reservation. We are willing to acknowledge that the theater is unpopular in the sense that people don't go to it. We are not willing to admit that it is unpopular in the sense that people don't like it.

Yet we shall never solve the problem of shrinkage unless we first solve the problem of affection. I'd like to put this book to the task of asking what there is about the contemporary theater that leaves audiences indifferent to it, what happens on our stages that flatly bores the good folk out front.

There is no point in pretending that this is not going to be an argumentative book, or that overemphasis isn't going to crop up pretty frequently in the chapters that follow. The face of our theater is so familiar to us that we shall never see its features without blowing them up a bit, one by one. And it does seem to me that we had better do some arguing—quick.

PART ONE

The Way Things Are

