

A REFORMED STAGE.

BY THE EDITOR.

WE hear again and again the complaint that the theater is not what it ought to be, and different critics place the blame in different quarters, now condemning the theater trust, now the newspaper reviews, now the corrupt taste of the public, and sometimes also the spirit of the age which does not produce enough originality among our poets. We grant that there is a truth in all these strictures but as a rule they are true of all ages and the principal question remains, what can we do to cultivate the taste and to encourage the development of a good drama?

The drama is a most powerful means of educating the people to keep before their eyes high standards and to give them a pleasurable diversion for the evening which would be enjoyable as well as wholesome. It is natural that managers of theaters and all others who make a living by them care less for the ideal of dramatic art than for the monetary returns. The theater manager is a business man, and we can not blame him for looking to the business end of his enterprise. Therefore the question with regard to him is not so much to change his attitude toward the drama but to make it worth his while to produce pieces of high standard, and not to pander to the taste of the vulgar.

The newspapers depend upon advertising, and they too have their own interests. Nevertheless we must grant that they frequently say the truth fearlessly and criticize what deserves rebuke.

The taste of the public, frequently censured as vulgar, is in my opinion not so bad as it might appear. It is noticeable that Shakespeare's plays are always attractive, at least for a while, and if a play has the reputation of being good it generally proves an attraction that will pay the manager. The difficulty of the public consists in not knowing what is good and not having the means to discover it before they go to the play, and afterwards they have no means of expressing their approval or disapproval of what they have seen.

Under these conditions it seems to me desirable to create a stage which would be independent of business conditions, and have this stage run for the sake of art. I trust that in time it would become a paying institution just as the Symphony Orchestras of Boston and New York struggled only for awhile but soon became enterprises based upon sound businesslike financial conditions. The truth is that if people are assured that a play is good and of a high standard, that there is no pandering to a vulgar taste because it might pay, they will patronize it much more readily than otherwise, when they know the manager cares only for the pecuniary returns.

An endowed theater would establish a standard, and poets who aim at high standards would find there a place where their products would be recognized, and so it would encourage beginners just starting their career with high ideals. From among them we are sure there might arise a new Shakespeare who would possess the vigor of his English predecessor and yet be an expression of our own life and our own ideals which after all have somewhat changed since the days of Queen Bess.

An endowed theater, however, might be a voice crying in the wilderness, and in order to make a success of it a Mæcenas of dramatic art would need the assistance of the public, and this might be procured in a way which has been voiced in a letter written by Mr. J. E. Williams, a local manager of Streator, Ill., who with reference to the theater question expresses his view as follows:

"There are plenty of serious minded men and women in every community who love the better things in the drama and who would be glad of an opportunity to work for its advancement. Not a week passes but some one asks me when we are to have the next good drama, and when I am unable to promise one there is visible disappointment. I believe it would be possible for such people to form an organization that would in time be able, if not to dictate terms, at least to seriously modify the plans of producing managers.

"I propose, therefore, the formation in every town of a 'theatergoers' league,' which should be composed of patrons of the theater who have regard for the better forms of dramatic and musical entertainment. Its object would be to give expression to the demand, now latent and inarticulate, for better plays and better performances. Its methods would be to select certain of the better offerings for its patronage and to agree in advance to provide a profitable audience for such attractions as it approved. Each league would have its committee on selection, which would look over the theatrical offerings for the year and agree on the attractions it would recommend

for patronage. The committee would confer with theater managers and indicate in advance the offerings that would meet the approval of the league. The guaranteeing of an audience would have a financial value to the theater manager, which might be recognized in a concession in prices to the league, but the main object would be the securing of good attractions and the exercising of a selective influence on theatrical offerings.

“‘What we buy we create.’ The maxim of the Consumers’ League, which has exercised so strong an influence in driving out sweat shop goods, applies with equal force in theatricals. We buy the inane, the vulgar, the trashy, not because we choose to, but because it is thrust on our attention and we weakly yield to the craving for some kind of exciting diversion. Not having an organ through which to think or choose, we succumb along the line of least resistance. The theatergoers’ league would give us an organ through which our wants might become conscious and our wills become effective. It would help us to form a better taste than we have now, for the food it would provide would stimulate the appetite for better and better quality. The effect of such a demand on the purveyor of dramatic wares is obvious. It would compel him to supply its needs or give way to some more competent producer.

“As a theater manager, I think the proposal is entirely practicable. I am sure that if such a league in my town would agree to patronize certain attractions I would do everything in my power to secure them, and so would every other local manager. I know of nothing in which so little social effort would yield such immense social benefits. The amount of social spirit required to operate such a scheme as this is trifling compared with the amount that would be wasted if turned toward futile attempts at endowed theaters and the like.”

The letter of Mr. Williams possesses an unusual amount of common sense, and it seems to me that a combination of the two ideas, an endowed theater and clubs of patrons of dramatic art throughout the country would assuredly produce good results. It would develop a national drama, and American life would be richer and more elevated for having this use for dramatic expression so important in the history of republics. It may be that as Athens could not be thought of without its drama, so the life of the great republic of the West will still find the noblest and best expression of its aspirations on the stage, and we do not doubt that the stage will become a power, whose influence may be felt in politics as well as in private life.