

The Open Court

A MONTHLY MAGAZINE

Devoted to the Science of Religion, the Religion of Science, and the
Extension of the Religious Parliament Idea

Founded by EDWARD C. HEGELEK

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RABINDRANATH TAGORE

Frontispiece to The Open Court.

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THE MESSAGE OF HINDU STAGE*

BY RABINDRANATH TAGORE

THE *Natyashastra* of Bharata is the standard work on Hindu drama. Bharata describes the stage in this book; but there is not to be found even the faintest reference to settings and scenery. It seems to me that drama does not suffer in the least by the absence of concrete scenery on the stage. The fine arts are morbidly jealous of one another. Each art shines the purest in its innate effulgent glory when it is absolutely and completely free from the presence of a rival art. As a faithful wife never casts wistful glances on other men, even so the muse of poetry smiles the sweetest only in the company of the imaginative.

We all act within ourselves when we read a play. If this mental acting fails to unfold the beauty of dramatic poetry, then that dramatist does not deserve any consideration. The drama that has to sell its soul to be congenial to the skill of the actor naturally meets with contempt. The art of acting must of necessity be somewhat dependent on the beauty of poetry in the play. But why should acting bow its head to other arts? To be consistent with its own sense of self-respect it can acknowledge only that much dependence on other arts that is absolutely necessary for its fullest expression. To do anything more is to degrade itself.

The words of the poet are absolutely necessary for the actor. He has to laugh with the words of laughter woven by the poet; if the poet is kind enough to offer him a little leisure for weeping, he weeps to draw tears in the eyes of the audience. But why, why pictures that idly hang behind the actor? He does not create them on the stage. They were painted by the painter according to his conception of things. The actor has nothing to do with them. They only obstruct the blossoming of his creative genius. No doubt with

* Translated from the original Bengali by Basanta Koomar Roy.

the borrowed help of the painter he thus fraudulently shirks his own responsibility by creating a false illusion on the minds of the audience. This only proves his own incompetence and cowardice.

The actor is not supposed to stand in a witness-box in a court room, so that every word he utters has to be sanctified with a solemn oath. Then why such elaborate scenic preparations to cheat the spectator that has come to enjoy the play with abundance of faith in his heart. He has not left his imagination at home under lock and key! There is a subtle friendly understanding between the audience and the actor that their respective imagination voluntarily co-operate for the proper understanding of the play. It is not difficult for a normal person to imagine a cottage, a couple of trees or a river on the stage.

That is the reason why I like our village jatra plays so much. The gulf between the actor and the audience is most simply and soulfully bridged in these open-air plays without settings and scenery. There is such an exuberance of confidence on both the sides that the purpose of the poet is most sympathetically attained. By dint of sheer sincere acting poetry is made to dance out of a fountain of beauty and enrapture the entire being of the spectator.

There is an invisible stage in the mind of the audience. Enchanted scenery is constantly being automatically painted there by the magic touch of imagination. That stage and that scenery are the goals that the true dramatist seeks to reach. No artificial stage and no artificial scenery can be worthy of the fancy of the poet.

In the West the audience demands presentation of the things mentioned in the play. It is afraid to take chances with imagination. It naturally makes a compromise in its willingness to imagine a mountain on the stage, but a picture of the mountain must, by all means, be furnished in the settings. So tremendous amounts of money have to be wasted for the production of scenic effects—for mere child's play.

The theaters we have set up in India today in imitation of the Western stage is a cumbersome and swollen monstrosity. It is a costly affair. So it is not accessible to all. The barbarous display of wealth by the producer crushes the refinement of the genius of the poet. If the Hindu spectator has not yet been vitiated beyond redemption by Western scenic aberrations on the stage; and if the Hindu actor has any genuine respect for his own art and for poetry; then it is high time for them to rise in a righteous revolt against this devastating innovation, and simply sweep aside the costly unnecessary scenic rubbish that contaminate and smother our stage today.