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ALTHOUGH a play is written to be acted on a
stage and witnessed by an audience, it can be
read with complete understanding. The
reader, to be sure, must use his imagination to picture
the action of the players, to visualize their entrances
and exits, and to learn how to interpret character not
only from what the actor does but also from what he
says. In fact, if one is to become acquainted with
the drama it will be necessary to learn to read plays,
because revivals of good plays are few, and cannot
always be witnessed.

The drama dates back to the Golden Age of
Athens several centuries before the birth of Christ,
and the old Greek comedies and tragedies, in part at
least, are just as modern today as they were when
they were first given to the world. It must not be
forgotten, however, that the most brilliant period of
dramatic history belongs to England at the time of
Shakespeare. With these two periods for background,
modern drama is generally timed from the early part
of the nineteenth century, when Henrik Ibsen, the
Norwegian playwright, lived and wrote.

A play, like a novel, tells a story; yet there is a
great difference between the two. The work of the
playwright is more concentrated than that of the
novelist. Each writes about characters who say some-
thing and do something to move emotionally the
reader or hearer. Yet the dramatist, in his work, must
pack into a page of script what the novelist might use
in an entire chapter. One might say that in some
cases every page of a play has cost more care and a
more severe mental strain than a fifty page chapter
of a novel.

A play is little more than a story with a series of
incidents, a chain of events that can be either simple
or complex. The dramatist selects certain characters
to act out his story against an appropriate setting.
There are several ways he can tell his story in order
to accomplish his end. If he takes a plot that has
already been used, as Shakespeare frequently did, he
can invest it with new characters and dramatize it to
suit his own particular needs. Or, he can take a situ-
ation, complicate it and before the fall of the final
curtain, solve it as did Scribe, the French playwright.
This method employs the use of tricks and of certain
properties that fall into the hands of first one character
and then the other, until they right themselves for
what is generally known as a happy ending. These
two methods are associated with the romantic play
and stand in great favor with certain types of audi-
ences.

There are two other means, however, that the
modern dramatist may use. One way is to pit a char-
acter or a group of characters against certain applied
forces. This is the method used by Eugene O'Neill in
his famous seven plays of the sea, and by Somerset
Maugham in RAIN. The other method deals with
the use of a thesis or an idea, and drives its action
toward the solution of the situation introduced by the
author. In these two methods, not romanticism but
naturalism is employed; and in them — Ibsen's
DOLL'S HOUSE is an early example—are discovered
the seeds of modern drama, with man fighting himself
or battling the Universe.

Regardless of length, a play structurally consists
of three parts. First of all, there is that part where
the characters are introduced to the audience, when
an explanation of their past history is made, and where
their present relationships are explained. This part
one may call the exposition, because certain conditions
with which the story deals, are being exposed to the
audience. It usually takes up the greater portion of
the first act of the traditional three acts.

In order to explain this situation, a well known
play, such as W. Somerset Maugham's RAIN can be
used as an example. At the rise of the curtain in
RAIN the audience learns that five passengers aboard
an Australian-bound steamer have been stranded at a
coaling station in the South Sea Isles, because of a
case of smallpox in the ship's crew. These five pas-
sengers—a missionary and his wife, an American phy-
sician and his wife, and Sadie Thompson, an outcast
from a questionable section of San Francisco—are vir-
tually held prisoners at this forsaken outpost of civil-
ization until the quarantine has been lifted. So, by
means of this exposition, the audience becomes ac-
quainted with the characters, learns a portion, at
least, of their past, and is faced with their present
relationships.

The second step of the modern drama, tradition-
ally employing the last part of the first act and the
entire second act, presents the predicament in which
the past history and present relationships have placed
the characters. The predicament in RAIN arises
when Sadie Thompson meets and entertains rather
unscrupulously, members of the U. S. Marine Corps
who are stationed on the island. Most naturally the
missionary objects to Sadie's loud parties which are
held under the very roof of the hut-hotel in which the five passengers are quartered. Thus the predicament arises when the missionary attempts Sadie’s conversion. The result, not unexpected, reveals Sadie successfully exerting her wiles on the missionary.

A third step finishing the story of the plot explains the results of the predicament, always placed in the traditional third act. In RAIN the last step shows the seduction of the missionary and his suicide on the beach. The steamer then lifts anchor, takes its passengers aboard and sails for the Australian port of call.

These three steps have been called the exposition or introduction, the complication, and the solution. For the most part plays are so constructed, whether they are the traditional three act plays, the eight act STRANGE INTERLUDE by Eugene O’Neill or the one act play, such as Mr. O’Neill’s THE MOON of the last few years.

Regardless of the length of the play, however, the art of the dramatist, as has been said, rests with his ability to tell much in as short a length of time as possible. His problems are to practice economy of words, to portray characters flawlessly, and to explain situations briefly. Here, no doubt, rests the ability of a great playwright.

The success of a play, at the same time, also depends as much on the manner in which it is produced on the stage as it does on the way it is structurally executed by the author. During the last ten or fifteen years, a few plays have been made in production technique. Of course in the early Nineteen Hundreds a few plays were produced with the accent resting on the spectacle angle. BEN HUR, for example, was conspicuous for its chariot race, run on a specially constructed treadmill placed on the stage. A real dust storm was a feature of THE GREAT DIVIDE, and CREATION, a spectacle of Biblical nature, depicted with elaborate moving scenery the creation of the Universe. These were oddities as much as anything, and some of them, alas, were far from good drama.

Recently, however, modern science has contributed advancements in setting and lighting features of the theatre. Max Rinehart, a German producer, for example, has devised a revolving circular stage which is placed on the regular stage floor. Settings divide this stage floor in half, so that when one-half of the circle is turned toward the side of the audience where a play is being acted, the other half of the circle is facing the rear of the stage and is being set or prepared for the next scene. Naturally this enables a play of many scenes to be run off with great rapidity. The revolving stage was first used in this country in 1930 with the New York production of GRAND HOTEL. Also in recent years Joe Milziner has made a name for himself by designing charmingly artistic interior sets for the stage and by abolishing the old time back and side “drops” which lent the air of unreality to the setting.

In the modernly constructed theatre even the stage itself has taken on different proportions, being lower and closer to the audience than the old fashioned stage. In several recently constructed experimental theatres it is elevated only a couple steps above the floor on which the audience is seated, and the orchestra pit has been abolished. Eugene O’Neill’s MARCO MISSIONARY can be produced properly only in a theatre where there are steps leading from the stage into the audience; for the acting is done not only on the stage but also on the steps and in the aisles of the theatre.

The advances along with other new ideas in stage setting, have brought equally modern innovations in lighting. Naturally with the disappearance of the orchestra pit, the old fashioned footlights have disappeared. For in the modern theatre practically all the lighting is done by means of overhead and side lights on the stage. No spot light from the gallery’s edge follows the star about the stage. If such a spot light is used it is placed and operated behind the scenes. “Baby spot” lights, now used very effectively, are small spot lights that throw a concentrated ray upon the actors and are operated entirely from back stage with the result that splendid intercross lighting effects can be gained when they are properly placed and used.

Great is the pity that the availability for witnessing a legitimate stage performance has been allowed to fade and almost die in the cities throughout the country which were once considered theatrical centers. At the present time, apparently, New York is the center of the theatrical world, where all plays, good and otherwise, have their beginning and sometimes their end, sooner or later. Yet, during the past theatrical seasons a few legitimate plays have been taken to the road very successfully.

Incinerator Turns Garbage Into Electricity

Garbage and refuse are converted into electricity in the largest incinerator in the world, now in service in New York City. After garbage trucks have piled up the refuse, giant metal jaws grab huge loads of the material, run along overhead tracks, and dump it into a concrete trough at the mouth of the incinerator. A trapdoor is then opened to let the material fall down in the incinerator furnace. The burning refuse produces heat to create steam, which in turn drives a set of turbines for the generation of electricity. Before the completion of the incinerator power plant, garbage collected in New York City was piled into scows and towed out by tugs to be dumped into the Atlantic Ocean.