



Gratia A. Countryman and Family Papers.

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THE CAROLINA PLAYMAKERS AND THE FOLK DRAMA

The greatest fun in the world is acting. From the little girl parading in somebody's else clothes, or the little boy in cowboy outfit, or the show in the attic or the barn, clear up to the elaborate pageant or finished professional drama, the fun of acting shows itself as an almost universal delight. We've all tried it out sometime in our lives. *And loves it.*

The enjoyment of seeing other people act in a good play is a real enjoyment, but it isn't comparable to the recreation and happiness that thousands of amateurs get yearly in taking part in plays. Each year hundreds of thousands of persons throughout the country are memorizing parts, rehearsing, building scenery, arranging light effects, fitting costumes, and having all the joy of producing a play. Hundreds of churches that in years gone by were enemies of the stage, now have dramatic societies and present plays and pageants before their congregations. High schools have also become a new domain of drama. All of this underlies and contributes to the success of the Little Theater Movement, *is its very foundation indeed,* for the dramatic instinct is imbedded in us. *I have always been interested in the Little Theater*
This spring in New Orleans I attended a

performance of Bernard Shaw's "Caesar and Cleopatra" in the Petit Théâtre. This Little Theater is ~~re-~~modeled from an old building in the French Quarter, opening into a beautiful old Spanish courtyard, - a most picturesque setting. The theater, supported by subscribers, seats not over four hundred, and the play was admirably acted by semi-professionals. It renewed my interest in the Little Theater Movement. *and the fine work which is being done in many* Some of us who have heard the great actors of the old days, have deeply regretted the passing of the road companies that toured the country regularly. We have asked what is the salvation, if any, of the American theater. *And the spoken drama) going to be* Probably the answer is the hundreds of Little Theaters which are forming throughout the country. We hear of them in cities and in small towns. There are many more than most of us realize if we have not kept up with the movement. It greatly surprised me. Their marvellous growth has given opportunity to many men and women who enjoy acting either as a vocation or an avocation, and has proven that the American public has not lost its interest in fine drama.

One might ask how does the Little Theater differ from the regular stage, for the difference is something

more than size. Well, perhaps one difference is that the regular stage is a business enterprise and the Little Theater is a permanent home-town organization concerned only in making ends meet. The actors in the commercial theater are professionals; in the other they may be amateur or professional. There are many types of little theaters, *some pretentious and some very scrupulous* but practically every kind of local theatrical entertainment outside of the commercial stage belongs to the Little Theater Movement. And the Little Theater does not compete with the commercial theater except to the extent that it gives better and more desirable plays to smaller audiences. I think we may say that its function has been:

1. A wider and more critical appreciation of the drama.
2. Encouragement of originality in play writing, especially of local plays.
3. The fun of producing good plays.
4. The revival of the spoken drama.

The home-town theater just seems inevitable; it is here, all over the country. A renaissance of the theater is quietly taking place and maybe the time is not far distant when we will have a real civic theater supported in whole or in part by taxation.

Side by side with this renaissance of interest in the production of spoken drama is another equally interesting development. During the last twenty or thirty years many colleges have been adding to their curriculums a new Department of Drama. Whether this is responsible for the renaissance of the local theater, when the students go home, or whether the local theater is responsible and is demanding more talent and naturally turns to the colleges, it would be hard to say. But we think the college is probably the leader in this movement. Always the drama has been fostered by scholars and students from the Greek theater on. Tragic and comic dramatists flourished at Oxford and Cambridge before Marlowe and Shakespeare wrote, and during the century in which Shakespeare and his group produced their remarkable plays, Oxford and Cambridge and the Inns of Court seethed with theatrical activity. And who knows, it may be that the influence of Oxford and Cambridge dramatists on the Elizabethan drama, will perhaps be duplicated by the influence of these new college theatrical workshops which are being established so widely.

Last year I had the pleasure of going through Professor Baker's new million dollar theater and

workshop at Yale University. Professor Baker began his first workshop at Harvard back in 1907, and his drama class known as "Course 47" became famous all over the country. He has now moved to Yale where Mr. Harkness gave this beautiful theater with all its equipment,-- rehearsal rooms, class rooms, and everything complete. Here comes the best talent of the country for courses. Here have developed some of the best actors and stage managers of Broadway. It is a fascinating place. It surprised me, as it may you, to find that at least 150 colleges have established courses for the production of plays including the arts of stage design, costuming, make-up, stage lighting, as well as the writing of plays. Many are doing as fine work as that of Yale, and many have good theater buildings on their campuses: the Carnegie Tech. at Pittsburgh, Iowa University, Denver, Syracuse, Leland Stanford,-- but one cannot name the whole 150, nor even all of those that stand highest, for the college laboratory theater is spreading everywhere.

And not only in these colleges are there full courses, but in about 40 other colleges dramatic

production is a student activity, but with training so thorough as to approach almost to class room instruction.

We would never have thought a few years ago, in my day at least, of a theater being a part of the campus equipment. But when one looks at the beautiful Yale building endowed by Mr. Harkness with a million dollars and sees the completeness of its equipment, with a fine little auditorium for the critical audience which comes by invitation, it seems the most fitting thing in the world that the art of Shakespeare should be taught under the best conditions in our Universities. Here in Minnesota our Northrop Auditorium, seating 4500, has not only stage space for our symphony orchestra, but complete stage equipment for any theatrical performance. And so the opportunity for stage production in our Universities varies from well equipped buildings, large and small, to open air amphitheaters, several delightful ones being built around the curve of a stream with the stage across the stream from the audience.

I quote from Kenneth Macgowan's "Footlights across America:" "It is fair to say that today

the faculty and the student body of our colleges have united in what is literally a new educational task. It is more than the manufacturing of play manuscripts by men and women who happen to be resident at seats of learning. It goes beyond undergraduate production of plays. It is the organization of teaching methods in every field of the theater from playwriting to direction, from scene design to acting. It brings new facilities and ideals to bear on the problems of the theater. It focuses the enthusiasm of thousands of our most vital young men and young women. It draws from them a co-operation which youth has rarely given to any other educational program. The results are being felt already, not alone in the narrow range of Broadway, but in the nation-wide activities of America's local theaters, and in thousands on thousands of our high schools where the audiences of tomorrow are being shaped."

And so, having just touched upon the province and growth of the Little Theater, and the great educational development of theatrical art in our colleges, I want to speak especially of two widely different colleges which have developed a particular type of drama,-- the folk drama. I mean

the North Dakota Agricultural College and the University of North Carolina. Of all the colleges, the one most outstanding success, and the one most interesting in many of its features is the one at North Carolina University, with the emphasis upon the folk-drama, under the instruction of Professor Koch. It was my pleasure this year to hear Professor Koch describe his work among the Carolina students. Already they have produced four volumes of folk-plays. Dr. Koch's career in this work is very interesting. He was in Professor Baker's classes at Harvard twenty-five years ago and went from there to the treeless prairies of North Dakota. By 1915 his Dakota Playmakers were writing and acting folk drama at the University of North Dakota in Grand Forks. These were simple plays portraying scenes of farm life, adventures of frontier settlers, incidents of cowboy trails, of the lonely sheep herders on the great plains, etc. Just simple subjects, sometimes crude, but often poetic and always near to the good wind-swept soil. It was real native folk drama. The students wrote them, acted them, and made all the stage settings, and finally toured the state with their new-made prairie plays. The

people received them with enthusiasm and knew them for their own. A remarkable development of dramatic interest followed, devoted to the native play and to the distinctly communal form of the pageant. This is still going on in North Dakota under Professor Arvold, of whom we shall speak later, although Professor Koch has been for some years in North Carolina.

There on the lovely campus of Chapel Hill, North Carolina, he is following the same line. He has found there richer material; the men in the mountains, the pirates of the old Atlantic coast, and the new life of the mill towns. There are still neighborhoods where the customs of the first English settlers still prevail, where folk tales still survive handed down by word of mouth. The population is almost pure Anglo-Saxon, less than 2% being of foreign parentage. It is a rich field from which the native drama might spring. The young student playwrights have drawn their plays from their own experiences and observation. Professor Koch describes in one of the volumes of published plays how his students work in their class of dramatic composition. The class gathers around a long table.

There is no text-book, no formal lectures on technique. The students are reading critically plays of good dramatic form; occasionally a scene is read aloud but without criticism. Then they discuss dramatic incidents about them, and the conversation often develops a plot which one of them will undertake to shape and write and rewrite and then form a cast and rehearse. Scores of plays are thus written in the year. Each term six are chosen for an authors' reading and then a Play Committee, together with the producing staff, chooses three for the next bill. The tryouts for the actors are open to any one, even the townspeople. About four weeks are allowed for rehearsals, which occur daily.

Out of these student playwrights have come some celebrated people such as Paul Green with his "In Abraham's Bosom" which won the Pulitzer prize, and the more recent playwrights, Hatcher Hughes with "Hell Bent for Heaven" and Lula Vollmer with "Sun-up."

These Carolina Playmakers tour the State. They have been welcomed all over North Carolina. They have now made twenty-eight tours, travelling in their own show bus, with their own home-made scenery atop, as do the Jitney Players in the East.

They play in cross-road villages, in the mountains, and in neighborhoods by the sea, in old time opera houses and outlived town halls. Now there is a State-wide Carolina Dramatic Association, probably counting many of the former students among the numbers, and there is an annual drama festival which brings people from all over the State to Chapel Hill, the home of the State University.

The purpose of this State Association is to promote and encourage dramatic art in the schools and communities of North Carolina and to stimulate interest in the writing of native drama. A Bureau of Community Drama has general supervision of the activities of this Association and plans the spring dramatic festival. They arrange for a State-wide contest and so a foundation has been securely laid for the building of a real people's theater in North Carolina. And all through the influence of one man who believed there was real human interest in the simple lives of the people!

Why shouldn't we do it everywhere? Why shouldn't we cherish in all localities the folk stories for a new folk literature? The great musicians took the simple folk songs and dances as themes for great

compositions. Our country is rich in local color; think of the work of George Cable in the South, Bret Harte in the West, Mark Twain, Zona Gale,-- scores of them. Just recently Carl Sandburg has been collecting local songs in his book, "The American Songbag," from all over this country, because they were worth preserving as an expression of native local color, which might otherwise be lost forever.

In North Dakota Professor Arvold is carrying on in rural communities the same idea of local folk-drama. As you see both of these men began in North Dakota; apparently, as we might think, the most unlikely place to start such a new movement. Quite different from North Carolina which is composed of old Anglo-Saxon stock, the people of North Dakota are 72% foreign, a sturdy people whose vocations are chiefly agricultural; indeed 75% live on farms, not even incorporated into little villages,- a pure country population. These farming communities crave some social recreation. They need life, more interesting living. Some years ago the United States Department of Agriculture sent out thousands of letters to farmers' wives asking them what would

make farm life more attractive. From every section came the story of social starvation. Professor Arvold has believed that this social need must be met by the development of a community spirit, and that the impulse to develop it must come from the people themselves.

Professor Arvold is professor of Public Discussion and Social Service in the North Dakota Agricultural College. His students are practically all from the farm. So he has encouraged these farm students to write, and to write about their own experience just as in North Carolina. He has encouraged them to produce plays. Professor Arvold is perhaps more genuinely of the soil than Professor Koch of North Carolina. He has not been so much concerned in the artistic merits of the play as he has been in getting the farmer to do something to express himself in dramatic form. He found himself in a State of farmers, mostly foreign, with little social outlet. He knew they needed entertainment, social and pleasant contacts with their neighbors, and he has done a marvellous piece of social helpfulness through his Little Country Theater.

He says it started when two Icelandic farm students came one day and told him they had "thought out a play." They wrote it and fixed up their own scenes and with the help of other students produced it. It occurred to Professor Arvold then and there that there were hundreds of rural dwellers who had never found themselves, and that they might achieve greater contentment if they could learn to express the best that is in them. So he fitted up a simple theater in one of the college buildings, which is known as the "Little Country Theater" and here the farm students learn how to produce plays, folk plays. Its main significance has been social, to use the drama, original plays if possible, to get the country people to enjoy themselves.

He has set a large part of the State to producing plays in all manner of buildings. The influence of his Little Country Theater has been most contagious. Moreover it has been most far reaching. (Country Life Association will visit it this fall.)

"The drama is a medium through which America must inevitably express its highest form of democracy. It must be considered more in a sociological than in a literary sense. When it can be used as an instrument to get people to express themselves in order that they may build up a bigger and better community life, it will then have performed a real service to society. When the people who live in the small community and the country awaken to the infinite possibilities which lie hidden in themselves through the impulse of a vitalized drama, they will be less eager to move to centers of population. The question of unemployment will no longer puzzle the cities. The moral tone of the country will be improved and loneliness will cease to be a cause of insanity. Then the lure of the city will be a thing of the past. To help people find themselves and their true expression in a community is the great idea back of The Little Country Theatre. It will serve as a sociological experiment station. Every day its vision grows

bigger. In years to come, if the idea is thoroughly carried out, there will be more contented farm communities in the state of North Dakota because the people will have found their true expression in the community. As a dynamic force in spreading the gospel of social recreation among people who reside in this and other states its worth can never be computed. The social life which will eventually be built up around the community will be one characteristic of the inhabitants of that community. The soil must have a soul."

And so these two experiments/^{one}in North Carolina and one in North Dakota, to quote Professor Koch, are attempting to find fresh dramatic forms to express our Kingdom of humanity. And with these and other Universities providing laboratories for play production, we may hope to see this most natural and oldest of the arts living in a new and vital form.