

REVIEWS

THE PLAY

THERE is perhaps no problem so urgent in the modern theatre as that of language, in any play that is more than a semi-photographic domestic comedy (though even here, convention plays its part), and above all in any play with an historical setting.

The most current method is to use the colloquial speech of to-day, and this, too often, means newspaper clichés, and a mode of thought and expression wholly alien to the age and characters. One jibs at hearing Richard of Bordeaux talk of 'internationalism' and 'pacifism,' and indeed, in the whole play there is not a line that gives pleasure to the ear.

The same jarring note sounded in Sherwood's *Acropolis*, which had a brief run before Christmas—briefer than it deserved, for the theme was a mighty one, with modern resonance: the defeat of Athens, and still more of the spirit of Athens, by Sparta; the one standing for beauty and the arts, and the flowering of free democracy; the other, for the all-demanding State, warlike, efficient, with its own glamour, but whose victory meant the end of a civilization. The play was, however, marred by astounding crudities; above all, by the portrayal of Pheidias as a Victorian agnostic, who goes to his death after a speech recalling Exeter Hall.

In *The Rose Without a Thorn* (now playing at the Vaudeville) it is a disappointment to find Clifford Bax has made a domestic episode of a subject made for tragedy on a vaster scale—Katherine Howard, gallant, generous, yet a wanton, whose moment of amorous folly supplied the rack and block with victims, brought the downfall of the great house of Norfolk, and assured the final victory of Cranmer over the Catholic party. The sense of nemesis implied by these wider issues is wanting, but throughout, the characters speak the King's English, sometimes very nobly. And yet, one has still the impression of concepts at variance with the age depicted. The fact is, that the very use of prose gives an expectation of realism; if an historical play is not to be simply an archeological reconstruction (of which the dramatic value would be doubtful), what is needed is a diction that will raise the whole piece on to an ideal plane, out of the domain of time. The dramatist must be a poet.

The older tradition maintained that all such plays should be in verse; the result was often less a poetic drama than that very different thing, a dramatic poem, and we wonder on learning that Tennyson's and Browning's tragedies were actually written for the stage. Their diction was too remote from common speech, and Shakespeare sat like a lion at the head of the

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way; Clemence Dane is one of the very few who have trodden it unscathed. While on the other hand, Yeats is almost alone in having made of blank verse something personal and new, reflecting shadowy waters. For the Irish the problem is simpler, because the daily speech has still something of the quality of song, and the freshness springing from contact with the realities of the soil. It will probably be the Irish playwrights who will show the way to the new rhythm that will supersede blank verse as blank verse superseded the old rhyming couplets of the mystery plays.

In this respect the performance of Claudel's *Annonce faite a Marie* in English dress by the Catholic Stage Guild has been of peculiar interest. It is far more a Morality than any form of historical play; in spite of the definite historical allusions that would place it in the early part of the XV century, the setting, as Claudel states in his stage directions, is that of the 'purely conventional Middle Ages.' It is a play to be enjoyed in a contemplative rather than a discursive state of mind—resting in its beauty, in the almost biblical cadences, in the sense of an underlying significance to which it would be a mistake (and difficult) to give analytic precision. (One has the same impression with many of Shakespeare's plays: though in Shakespeare the action on the purely human plane is more strictly dramatic and complete). The play moves to the rhythm of the earth, who 'gives the perennial answer of bread and wine'; good is brought forth from evil, the broken is restored, the rejected one becomes the vessel of redeeming grace. All things are made new, just as the dead child of evil Mara and worldly Jacques is brought to life, or rather, reborn, new-mothered by Violaine on Christmas night, when in the Christ Child mankind is born anew—Violaine, who had become a leper through compassion and a saint through suffering, whose dowry was always Mont Saint Vierge, a supernatural heritage.

The Catholic Stage Guild deserves all praise for a most artistic production, and praise is especially due to the producer, Robert Speaight, who also gave a satisfying rendering of the part of Pierre de Craon; to Roger Furse, the designer of scenery and dresses; to Veronica Turley and Patricia Hayes, who as Violaine and Mara brought out the full beauty of conception and word, and to George Wray, who was so imbued with the spirit of the piece that the Father, Anne Vercors, in Part I where he takes his leave on pilgrimage, brought to mind the scriptural 'householder . . . who went on a journey,' and in Part II seemed to assume a sacerdotal majesty that gave the scene its full significance.

B. BARCLAY CARTER.