

PROPAGANDA OR ART- OR BOTH?

The writer of this article has already caused a flutter in the dovescotes of London theatre circles by his outspoken views on the function of the theatre in society and by his daring and brilliant production at the Embassy Theatre, in London, of "The Age of Plenty," a propaganda drama of America's workless.

Mr. Van Gysegem visited the Soviet Union this year.

A GREAT deal of nonsense is written and spoken about "Propaganda" plays. Some mysterious and completely impassable barrier is placed between Life and Politics.

How can they be separated?

Our English stage, for instance is at the present moment occupied with the complicated and terrifying sex relations of present-day life. What are the causes that bring about these complications? Nothing but our puerile marriage and divorce laws, and the withholding of sex knowledge and tuition by the Church and State.

But, of course, it would not do for us to admit this. Oh, dear me, no!

These nasty, horrid plain causes must be shut away in a drawer and the key turned, while the effects are wrapped in a mysterious pink haze and given all the trappings of Art to make them palatable pills for the theatre-going public.

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FORTUNATELY for all true lovers of the theatre, there is one country at least, where all falsities have been swept aside, and an attempt made to start again on a sound basis. The function of the theatre from the Soviet viewpoint is quite clear—that it must be a truthful reflection of the reality that surrounds it.

In doing this faithfully, in dealing with causes as well as superficial effects, the theatre inevitably becomes an active weapon in the struggle of the workers—just as a play about sex relations here, if it dealt with causes, must inevitably be a weapon in the struggle for sex reform.

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DOES this mean that the Classics are not played in Soviet theatres?

It is an unfortunate theory held by a surprising number of people even now, that the classic plays of Russia and other countries are neglected under the Soviet. The reverse is the case.



A scene from the realistic presentation in Moscow of "Desire under the Elms" by the famous American playwright Eugene O'Neill

While I was in Moscow a number were being played, including Gorki's "Lower Depths," Schiller's "Kabale und Liebe," Ostrowsky's "The Storm," Shakespeare's "Hamlet."

I saw the Georgian Theatre on a visit to

The Soviet Theatre

by ANDRE VAN GYSEGHEM

Moscow from their native Tiflis, play Schiller's "The Robbers" with a vitality and grace that made the dull old play leap into life, and would put to shame even the most virile of our productions in London.

I saw the hypocrisy and pettiness of pre-Revolutionary Russian bourgeois society exposed with pitiless frankness by the treatment of a play by Alexis Tolstoy.

Yes, all these plays were subject to analysis and research with the purpose of discovering the social conditions of the time that provoked the author to express it in such a form.

Even Shakespeare's "Hamlet" is studied by Soviet producers from a sociological angle; it becomes, under this treatment, the drama of a society, of individuals caught in the wheels of that society, and not a tragedy centred round the emotional state of one man.

Will this damage its poetry—need the grandeur and sweep of Shakespeare's verse be obliterated because of this? Of course not. If it comes to that, I've seen this same grandeur and sweep very competently obliterated by some English companies playing it on traditional lines.

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IS the theatre forced on Russian audiences?

How can that be?

The theatre arises out of the demands of the audience, which is the only right and proper way.

This being the case, it is obvious that the type of play that will be in demand at the moment is the play that deals with the lives

of the people themselves; the progress of the giant work of construction shown through the life in a certain factory or industrial area; the difficulties that beset the worker at every hand, the reactionary elements that obstruct the path of progress and have to be overcome; or the difficult time of the War of Intervention ending in the triumph of the Red Armies.

In a land that has accomplished the impossible in fifteen years, there can be no dearth of material for the dramatist.

Judging by the faces of the audiences I saw—packed, eager faces, straining to catch every detail and reacting quickly to every mood of the play—there can be no doubt that they were enjoying themselves.

And there you are answered—all you people who think that the theatre is for entertainment only—they were entertained, mentally and emotionally.

If the fact remains that your tastes are different, that your favourite form of entertainment is to wallow in the sentimental hotch-potch that passes for theatre over here, don't blame the Russians; but give a little quiet thought to the reason for this taste of yours and you may come to the conclusion that they are not so far wrong in Moscow after all.

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