Theater Considered as A Moral Institution

by Friedrich Schiller

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Theater was born out of a universal, irresistible attraction to the new and extraordinary, a desire to feel oneself put into a state of passion, to use Sulzer's expression. Exhausted by higher mental exertions, worn down by the monotonous, often oppressive affairs of daily life, and bombarded by sensuality, man necessarily felt an inner emptiness which clashed with his eternal desire for activity. Our nature, equally incapable of remaining forever in a bestial condition or of continuously carrying on the intricate work of the Understanding, required an intermediate condition that would unite these two contradictory extremes, resolving their harsh tension into gentle harmony and facilitating the alternating passage from one state into the other.

This service is performed by the Aesthetic Sense, or the Sense of the Beautiful. But since the wise legislator's chief object must be to select the superior of two possible courses of action, he will not acquiesce in merely neutralizing popular sentiments, but will, whenever possible, use those sentiments as means to accomplish higher ends, endeavoring to transform them into a source of general happiness. And that is why he chose theater above all else, since it opens up infinite horizons to the spirit thirsting for activity, providing nourishment to the soul's every power without overtaxing any single one, and uniting the acculturation of mind and heart with the noblest sort of entertainment.

Whoever first observed that religion is the mightiest pillar of the state, and that laws themselves lose their power once religion is removed, has perhaps given us—without knowing or intending it—our best defense of the theater on behalf of its noblest side. This inadequacy, this unstable character of political laws, which makes religion indispensable to the State, also conditions the moral influence exerted by the stage. Laws, he was trying to say, revolve around duties of denial; religion extends its demands to true action. Laws restrict only those activities which tend to weaken society's cohesion; religion ordains those which deepen it. Laws rule only over the outward expressions of the will, and deeds are their only subjects; religion extends its jurisdiction into the heart's most hidden recesses, and pursues thoughts to their most inward source. Laws are slippery and malleable, as changeable as mood and passion; religion forms strong and eternal bonds.

Now, if we were to assume something which is not the case—if we conceded that religion possessed this tremendous power over every human heart, then will it, or can it completely develop our character? Religion (and here I am dealing solely with its divine, and not its political aspects) generally acts more upon the sensuous side of the population—indeed, it is probably because of this effect on the sensuous that its influence is so sure. Deprived of this, religion's power vanishes—and whence the influence of the stage? Religion ceases to exist for the greater part of humankind, the moment we destroy its symbols and mysteries, the moment we efface its renderings of Heaven and Hell. And yet, these are merely fantastic portraits, riddles without solution, terror-figures, and distant enticements. Consider now, how religion and law are strengthened as they enter into alliance with the theater, where virtue and vice, happiness and misery, wisdom and folly are accurately and palpably led out before man in a thousand images; where Providence solves its riddles, untangles its knots before his eyes; where the human heart confesses its subtlest stirrings while tortured on the rack of passion; where all masks fall away, the makeup is removed, and truth sits in judgment, incorruptible as Rhadamanthus.

The jurisdiction of the stage begins where the domain of secular law leaves off. Whenever justice is dazzled by gold and gloats in the pay of infamy; when the crimes of the mighty mock their own impotence, and mortal fear stays the ruler's arm—then theater takes up the sword

and scales, and hauls infamy before the dreadful tribune of justice. The entire realm of fantasy and history, past and present, stand at its beck and call. Monstrous criminals, long rotted to dust, are summoned by poesy's omnipotent call, to relive their shameful lives for the grim edification of later generations. Unconsciously, like empty shadows, the horrors of their own age pass before our eyes while we, horrified yet fascinated, curse their memory. Someday, when morality is no longer taught, when religion is no longer met with mere faith, when laws become superfluous, we shall still tremble as Medea totters down the palace steps, fresh from the murder of her child. Mankind shall still be seized with healthy terror, and all will silently rejoice over their own clear conscience, as Lady Macbeth, the dreadful sleepwalker, washes her hands and summons all the perfumes of Arabia to extinguish the hateful odor of murder. As surely as visual representation is more compelling than the mute word or cold exposition, it is equally certain that the theater wields a more profound, more lasting influence than either morality or laws.

In doing so, it is merely assisting human justice; but yet another, broader field is open to it as well. The theater has the power to punish the thousand vices which justice must patiently tolerate; the thousand virtues which the latter must let pass without comment, on the stage are held up for general admiration. And here, at its side, are wisdom and religion. From their pure fountain it draws its lessons and examples, and clothes stern duty in charming and alluring robes. How it swells our soul with great emotions, resolves, passions-what a divine ideal it sets up for us to emulate! When good-hearted Augustus extends his hand to the traitor Cinna [1] who could already read the death sentence on his lips, and Augustus, great as his gods, says: "Cinna, let us be friends;" who among the audience, at that moment, would not also like to be shaking the hand of his own mortal enemy, in imitation of this god-like Roman? When Franz von Sickingen [2] on his way to punish a prince and wage war for others' rights, inadvertently turns his head and sees the smoke rising from his fortress, where his helpless wife and children have remained behind, and he-moves onward to keep his sacred word- how great does man become for me at that moment, how small and contemptible his dreaded, invincible fate!

In the theater's fearsome mirror, the vices are shown to be as loathsome as virtue is lovely. When, in night and tempest, old Lear [3] knocks in vain at his daughter's door; when, his white hair streaming in the wind, he tells the raging elements of his Regan's unnatural conduct; when his agony finally bursts from his lips with those awful words: "I have given you all!;" how despicable does ingratitude seem to us then! How solemnly we vow to practice filial love and respect!

But the stage extends its sphere of influence further still. Even in those regions where religion and law deem it beneath their dignity to accompany human sentiment, the theater is still at work for our cultural weal. Human folly can disturb social harmony just as easily as can crime and vice. A lesson as old as history itself teaches that in the fabric of human events, the greatest weights are often suspended by the most slender and delicate threads, and, if we follow actions back to their sources, we will have to laugh ten times before we draw back once in horror. With each day I grow older, my catalogue of villains grows shorter, and my index of fools longer and more complete. If the entire moral guilt of the one species of person stems from one and the same source; if all the monstrous extremes of vice which have ever branded him, are merely altered forms, higher grades of a quality which, in the end, we can all laugh about and love-why, then, would nature have taken some different route with the other species? I know of only one secret for guarding man against depravity, and that is: to arm his heart against weaknesses.

We can expect a great share of this work to fall to the stage. The stage holds up a mirror to that most populous class, the fools, and exposes their thousand

[1] Corneille, Cinna.

[2] Franz von Sickingen, by an unknown playwright.

[3] Shakespeare, King Lear,]II, 3, 4.

varieties to relief-bringing ridicule. What in the former case it affected through emotional turmoil and horror, here it accomplishes (and, perhaps, more speedily and infallibly) through humor and satire. If we were to evaluate tragedy and comedy according to the magnitude of achieved effect, then experience would probably decide in favor of the latter. Man's pride is more deeply wounded by ridicule and contempt, than his conscience is tormented by abhorrence. Our cowardice, when confronted with terror, crawls away in fear; but this very cowardice delivers us over to the sting of satire. Laws and conscience can protect us most of the timefrom crimes and vices; the ludicrous requires a more refined discernment, and nowhere can this be presented to greater effect than on the stage's forum. We might perhaps instruct a friend to assault our morals and our heart, but we can scarcely prevail upon ourselves to forgive him a single laugh. Our transgressions might abide a monitor and judge, but we can scarcely suffer witnesses to our private perversities. Only the stage is permitted to ridicule our weaknesses, since it spares our sensibilities, and knows no such thing as a guilty fool. Without reddening with embarrassment, in its mirror we can see our own mask fall away, and thank it secretly for this gentle reproach.

But its sphere of influence is greater still. The stage is, more than any other public institution, a school of practical wisdom, a guide to our daily lives, an infallible key to the most secret accesses of the human soul. I am the first to admit that its influence is not infrequently nullified by self-love and mental obdurancy; that a thousand vices still impudently step before its glass; that a thousand fine emotions are pushed away by the cold-hearted audience. I will even venture to say that Moliere's Harpagon [4] has probably never reformed a single usurer, that the suicide Beverly [5] has held few of his brothers back from the gambling table, that the robber Karl Moor's [6] tragic story will scarcely make the highways any less dangerous. But, even if we so qualify this great effect of the stage, even if we are so unfair as to deny it altogether - what a wealth of influence it still retains! Although it has neither eradicated nor diminished the sum of our vices, did it not first make us familiar with them? We will always have to live with vicious and foolish people. We must either avoid or confront them; we either seek to undermine them, or must become their victims. But no longer do they take us by surprise. Now we are prepared for their assaults. The theater has fathomed the secrets of how to root them out and render them harmless. It was the theater which drew the mask from the hypocrite's face, and revealed the traps which cabals and intrigues have laid for us. It has hauled falsehood and deception out from its twisted labyrinths, and exposed its awful face to the light of day. It may be that the dying Sara [7] does not deter a single debauchee; that all the world's depictions of the seducer punished will not quench his own fire; and that the coquettish actress herself does her best to allay this effect—is it not reward enough, that unsuspecting innocence can now recognize its snares; that the theater has taught it to mistrust its oaths and to shrink back from its attestations of love?

The theater sheds light not only on man and his character, but also on his destiny, and teaches us the great art of facing it bravely. In the fabric of our lives, chance and designplay equally important roles; the latter is directed by us, while we must blindly submit to the former. We have already come a long way, if the inevitable does not catch us wholly unprepared, if our courage and resourcefulness have already been tested by similar events, and our heart has been hardened for its blow. The stage brings before us a rich array of human woes. It artfully involves us in the troubles of others, and rewards us for this momentary pain with tears of delight and a splendid increase in our courage and experience. In its company, we follow the forsaken Ariadne [8] through echoing Naxos; we descend into Ugolino's [9] tower of starvation; we ascend the frightful

[4] Moliere,The Miser.
[5] Friedrich Schroder, Beverley, or, the English Gambler
[6] Friedrich Schiller, The Robbers.
[7] Lessing, Miss Sara Sampson—a very popular play in colonial America.
[8] Johann Christina Brandes, Ariadne at Naxos
[9] Gerstenberg, Ugolino.

scaffold, and witness the solemn hour of death. What our soul only senses as distant premonition, here we can hear audibly and incontrovertibly affirmed by the startled voice of nature. Under the tower's vault, the deceived favorite is deprived of his queen's favor; [10];now that he must die, the intimidated Moor finally drops his treacherous sophistry. Eternity leaves its dead behind, so that they may reveal secrets which the living could never divine, and the cocksure villain is driven from his final ghastly lair, for even graves blurt out their secrets.

But, not satisfied with merely acquainting us with the fates of mankind, the stage also teaches us to be more just toward the victim of misfortune, and to judge him more leniently. For, only once we can plumb the depths of his tormented soul, are we entitled to pass judgment on him. No crime is more heinous than that of the thief; but do we not all soften our verdict with a tear of compassion, when we imagine ourselves in the same horrible predicament which compels Eduard [11] to commit the deed? —Suicide is generally detested as sacrilege; but when Marianne [12] assailed by an enraged father's threatenings, assailed by love and by the thought of a dreadful convent's prisons walls, drinks from her poisoned cup—who among us will be the first to condemn this pitable victim of an infamous social practice?—Humaneness and toleration are becoming the pedominant spirit of our times; their rays have penetrated into the courtrooms, and further still, into the hearts of our rulers. What share of this divine labor falls to our theaters? Is it not these which have acquainted man with his fellow man, and have explored the hidden mechanism of his actions?

One noteworthy class of men has special grounds for giving particular thanks to the stage. Only here do the world's mighty men hear what they never or rarely hear elsewhere: Truth. And here they see what they never or rarely see: Man.

Thus is the great and varied service done to our moral culture by the better-developed stage; the full enlightenment of our intellect is no less indebted to it. Here, in this lofty sphere, the great mind, the fiery patriot first discovers how he can fully wield its powers.

Such a person lets all previous generations pass in review, weighing nation against nation, century against century, and finds how slavishly the great majority of the people are ever languishing in the chains of prejudice and opinion, which eternally foil their strivings for happiness; he finds that the pure radiance of truth illumines only a few isolated minds, who probably had to purchase that small gain at the cost of a lifetime's labors. By what means, then, can the wise legislator induce the entire nation to share in its benefits?

The theater is the common channel through which the light of wisdom streams down from the thoughtful, better part of society, spreading thence in mild beams throughout the entire state. More correct notions, more refined precepts, purer emotions flow from here into the veins of the population; the clouds of barbarism and gloomy superstition disperse; night yields to triumphant light. From among the myriad and magnificant fruits of the better-developed stage, I will select only two. Who could not notice the universal spread of toleration toward religious sects in recent years? Long before Nathan the Jew and Saladin the Saracen [13] filled us with shame and preached to us that the divine doctrine of submission to God's Will is not irrevocably tied to whatever we might imagine His nature to be, and long before Joseph II [14] combated the fearsome hydra of pious hatred, the theater had already emplanted humanity and gentleness into our hearts. The revolting spectacle of the priests' pagan fanaticism taught us to eschew religious hatred; within the frame

[10] Corneille, Count Essex
[11] Iffland, Ruined by Ambition.
[12] F.W. Gotter,Marianne.
[13] Lessing,Nathan the Wise.

[14] 14. Joseph II, Emperor of Austria (1741-1790), a participant in Benjamin Franklin's international republican conspiracy which created the United States of America, who also played a key role in Pope Clemens XIV's banning of the evil Jesuit order in 1773.

of this dreadful mirror, Christianity washed out its shameful stains. From the stage's forum, we might also combat errors in education with equal success; we are still awaiting the piece which deals with this noteworthy theme. For, judging from its consequences, no subject has greater importance for the future of the republic, than education; and yet, no area has been more neglected, and none so completely abandoned to the individual citizen's illusions and caprice. The stage alone would be able to confront him with touching, soul-stirring scenes depicting the unfortunate victims of neglected education; here our fathers could learn to forego their foolish maxims, and our mothers to temper their love with rationality. False notions can lead even the finest heart astray; and what a disaster, when these begin to boast a method, and systematically spoil the tender stripling within the walls of philanthropic institutes and academic hot-houses.

No less readily—if only the chiefs and guardians of the state learned to do this—the stage could be utilized to correct the nation's opinions concerning the government and those it governs. Here, legislative power might speak to the subject through unfamiliar symbols, could respond to his complaints even before these were uttered, and could quash his doubts without seeming to do so. Even industry and inventiveness could and would be imbued with fiery emotion on the stage's forum, if our poets ever deemed it worth their while to be patriots, and if the state would ever condescend to listen to them.

I cannot possibly neglect to mention the great influence that a fine standing theater would have upon the spirit of our nation. I define a people's national spirit as the similarity and agreement of its opinions and inclinations concerning matters in which another nation thinks and feels differently. Only the stage is capable of eliciting a high degree of such agreement, because it ranges throughout the entire domain of human knowledge, exhausts all the situations of life, and pokes its rays into the heart's every cranny; because within it, it unites all classes and social strata, and can boast the most well-beaten pathway to our heart and our understanding. If one principle feature could characterize all our plays; if our poets could agree amongst themselves to establish a firm alliance to this end; if their works could be guided by a rigorous selection process, and they applied their brush only to subjects of national import—in short, if we could witness the birth of our own national theater, then we would truly become a nation. What bound the Greeks so firmly together? what was it that drew its people so irresistibly to its stage? Nothing other than the patriotic content of their pieces; it was the Grecian spirit, the great, overwhelming interest of the republic, and of a better humanity which lived and breathed within them.

The stage posses another merit, one which I am all the more willing to claim, since I suspect that its legal contest with the prosecution has already been won. What we have heretofore undertaken to demonstrate—that the stage wields critical, determining influence over morality and enlightened thought—was a dubious quest. But even the theater's worst enemies concede that of all contrivances of luxury, and of all the institutions of public entertainment, it reigns supreme. But what it accomplishes in this repect, is more important than we are wont to imagine.

Human nature cannot bear the uninterrupted and eternal rack of daily business; and sensual excitement simply dies with its own gratification. Man, overwrought by animal enjoyments, fatigued from protracted labors, tormented by his eternal compulsion to remain active, thirsts for better and more select amusement—either this, or he will blindly plunge into wild revelry, accelerating his own demise and disrupting the peace of society. Bacchanalian debauchery, ruinous gambling, a thousand follies hatched from idleness—these are the inevitable consequences of the legislator's inability to rechannel these tendencies within the population. The businessman is in danger of developing stomach ulcers as his atonement for a life of selfless dedication to the state; the scholar is in danger of degenerating into a dull pedant; the common man, into a beast. The stage is the institution where instruction and pleasure, exertion and repose, culture and amusement are wed; where no one power of the soul need strain against the others, and no pleasure is

enjoyed at the expense of the whole. When grief gnaws at our heart, when melancholy poisons our solitary hours; when we are revolted by the world and its affairs; when a thousand troubles weigh upon our souls, and our sensibilities are about to be snuffed out underneath our professional burdens—then the theater takes us in, and within its imaginary world we dream the real one away; we are given back to ourselves; our sensibilities are reawakened; salutary emotions agitate our slumbering nature, and set our hearts pulsating with greater vigor. Here the unfortunate, seeing another's grief, can cry out his own; the jolly will be sobered, and the secure will grow concerned. The delicate weakling becomes hardened into manhood, and here the first tender emotions are awakened within the barbarian's breast.

And then, at last—O Nature! what a triumph for you!—Nature, so frequently trodden to the ground, so frequently risen from its ashes!—when man at last, in all districts and regions and classes, with all his chains of fad and fashion cast away, and every bond of destiny rent asunder—when man becomes his brother's brother with a single all-embracing sympathy, resolved once again into a single species, forgetting himself and the world, and reapproaching his own heavenly origin. Each takes joy in others' delights, which then, magnified in beauty and strength, are reflected back to him from a hundred eyes, and now his bosom has room for a single sentiment, and this is: to be truly human.