THE PLAYWRIGHT NOVITIATE

By David Belasco

A SHOEMAKER might throw down his awl and without previous experience succeed in some other calling; but he could not succeed as a playwright. The dramatist's profession, more than any other, calls for preparation, for study, for concentration, for singleness of purpose. Yet it is a truism that everyone is writing plays, and no one outside a manager's office can quite realize the enormous output of plays of every known variety—and many that are unknown—that are being turned in to the producers by people who are ambitious to see their words given burning utterance by real creatures of flesh and blood behind the footlights.

My readers are simply snowed under by the avalanche of play manuscripts which descends upon them in an ever increasing rush. I have four people who read plays for me constantly, and I myself devote hours and hours without end to the same occupation. Yet the supply to be read is growing, and the demands for opinions come thicker and thicker with the mails of every day. I keep a night table beside my bed, and on it stands a pile of manuscripts three feet high. All of these are plays that have passed my readers and have been brought to me for final judgment. As the newcomers arrive my boy lifts the pile and places them at its bottom. Additions are always made this way, and in my reading I begin at the top and work down through the pile. The requests for opinions are so numerous that I have to maintain this strict routine so that no preference may be shown in the order of reading.

Everybody a Playwright

WOULD you know where these plays come from, who are their authors? Look about you. It is inconceivable that some one of your acquaintance is not at the present moment confidently at work upon some play which will soon be confided to the tender consideration of some producer—perhaps to myself, as likely as not. And with what pride! The peacock has nothing in the way of vanity on the young, new, fledgling playwright. And these conditions hold true in every walk of life.

The woman of society, tired for a time of social activities, without hesitation flies to the writing of a play, thinking thus to achieve the fulfilment of a hastily conceived ambition to shine as a literary person. The business man, perhaps because he is impressed with the dramatic aspect of certain transactions that have fallen within his experience, with something of diffidence, perhaps, takes up the writing of a play; the scholar, the teacher, the propagandist, impressed with the opportunity the theater affords for the spread of ideas, hurriedly take up their pens and write what they fondly believe to be plays. They are all at it,—politicians, newspaper men, mechanics, clerks, dressmakers, firemen and policemen, motormen, grocers, butchers, cooks, any number of them,—all are writing plays.

I do not say this in jest. It is sober fact. There is not a calling I have named, and I do not believe that the census man on his recent rounds enumerated many, that are not represented in the authorship of plays that have been sent me for approval. Your cook is a prominent playwright and so is your lady's maid. The plumber playwright long ago ceased to be a novelty. The chauffeur playwright is an established fact, and I suppose the aeronaut playwright will be with us before long. These statements may seem extreme and absurd; but the fact is serious, it is appalling.

I may say here that it is, of course, out of the question that all these people should succeed in their purpose of writing practicable plays, much less successful ones. The greater number of these hastily enlisted aspirants have not even an elementary conception of the qualifications requisite for one who is going to make a business of playwriting. The drama, more fully than any other representative art, gives us a picture of life. It counterfeits with marvelous closeness, despite its artificial limits, the conditions of reality, and does this with preciseness and attention to minute details absent from all other forms of representation. For this reason I think we are safe in assuming that the demands of the drama upon its creators are greater than those of any other art. The dramatist's must be the master mind which knows everything; his the world's heart which feels everything; his the upper soul which experiences, transcends, everything.

Must Be Omniscient

THE playwright should take the universe for his field. He should pass through the world with all seeing eyes, missing nothing. He should study life as he finds it under all conditions, whether normal or abnormal. And he should learn to recognize those conditions, so that when he sends me a play to consider I don't find his mental processes on one page rational, and on the next page such as can be explained only by abnormality. Especially should the dramatist study the life that may be seen in the street and on the highway. There is a great picture of humanity painted here, a panorama, and it shifts constantly. He should make friends with the seamy side of life, and thus learn the true colors of character as they are brought out in the fire of adversity. He should mingle intimately with people of all classes,—the day laborer, the clerk, the mechanic, the woman of the streets, the servant, the coquette, the shopgirl, the man of business, the adventurer, the young girl in her teens, and the old granddad of them all. He should know how these people differ in their methods of portraying emotion.

It is a curious thing, but this point seems never to occur to the raw playwright. He tends to make all of his people express themselves in much the same way. I find this to be the case often in the plays brought to me—and for some reason or other all of them seem to come to me.

The playwright should know that there is no one way for the expression of any given emotion that will hold true for all sorts of people. Every person has his own unconscious manner of expressing feeling, and when the dramatist wishes to portray a certain type of man or woman or child acting under a specific emotion he should know at once just what this particular kind of man or woman or child would do when laboring under this emotion, whether it be grief, or curiosity, or horror or fear, or happiness. He should know that this woman will become excited in the face of sudden sorrow, that she will scream and weep, and become hysterical and uncontrollable, and that this other woman will be calm and silent and perhaps dry eyed. The dramatist should know just which sort of woman his woman is.

There are so many, countless things a dramatist should know—millions of them! And so I say he should travel, he should read, and above all he should study. This last I find is the one thing at which the would be dramatist most often balks. He is not a student, and he is not willing to become one; he will not study. Ninety-five out of a hundred do not seem ever to feel the necessity for study, do not seem to understand that without it no one can have that broad knowledge of life which is requisite for its proper counterfeiting in all its multitudinous spheres and phases.

Even in Trifling Details

AT every turn the life of the stage requires specific knowledge, and the lack of it often leads to ludicrous and pitiful results. Recently I saw a play in which one of the characters was supposed to be poisoned by taking opium. What was my astonishment to see the burly fellow who played this part instantly double up like a jackknife, his arms and legs writhing, his face in contortions, his lips working, and the most fiendish groans coming from his mouth. I have no doubt that the actor was highly pleased over what he considered his realistic picture of a poisoned man—in his ignorance of the easily acquired knowledge that opium soothes the body instead of distorting it with pain. Yet the fault lay behind the actor; it went back to the author, who should not have prescribed an opiate for his character when violent poisoning was the intended effect.

So it goes. The dramatist must be a man of parts. He must have some knowledge of medicine, some of science, some of philosophy. He must understand music. No man can be a dramatist who does not understand music, if not as a musician understands it, then at least through inborn love and appreciation of it. No man can be a dramatist who is not an artist; for the playwright has to paint pictures,—the various scenes in which his actors move and live, the various character portraits they present. Even more must he be an artist, since every movement upon the stage, every change of position, every rearrangement of a group, every addition or withdrawal of a character, breaks up one picture and paints another, so that in course of his play the dramatist must make hundreds and hundreds of such little pictures, each one of which must be perfect in its way, artistically true, a little gem. And he can do this only if he has the feeling of an artist. So too must he know something of architecture and of mechanics and of gardening and of landscape work and of the dozens and dozens of things that enter into the building up of the stage picture, the composition of the stage effect.

So the dramatist must be a god and a devil and a villain and a hero and a purist and a libertine and all the other attributes in one. He must shake hands with life every hour in the twenty-four. He must feel as his characters feel, suffer as they suffer, rejoice as they rejoice. Through all and above all he must be a superior critic of his own best endeavors, applying an inexorable test to himself and all his creations, a being of double nature, subjectively experiencing, objectively connoting.

First Have a Drama

THE new playwright should first make certain that he has a story to tell the nature of which is drama; that is, a real story which unfolds in a dramatic way vital experiences in the lives of his characters, and not merely a loosely connected succession of distantly related incidents, as is so frequently the work of the tyro at dramatic construction. Then, in the telling of his story, he should employ such agencies, and only such agencies, as are essential to its proper realization by the people across the footlights, the audience; always bearing in mind that if he is going to reproduce during two hours' acting upon the stage a series of events that in reality covers an enormously greater period of time, he must bar all unessential details. The incidental accompaniments of real life drama should only rarely be included. In other words, the drama is the extracted essence of life put up in condensed form for quick assimilation, and there should not be too many wrappings to the package.

If I could use but one word in which to sum up the advice of which young playwrights seem to stand most in need, the word I should choose is, concentrate. It is the besetting sin of the young dramatist that he will not concentrate. I say this advisedly. Of the many thousands of plays yearly sent for my approval by far the greater portion are rendered valueless from a producing viewpoint through their lack of concentration.

Busy with the Blue Pencil

THIS fault is shown in many phases of play construction as practised by the raw hand at the business; but especially in one particular does it put a hopeless blight upon the work that contains it. This is in the playwright's inability to concentrate the sympathetic interest of the audience upon that character or set of characters which in the natural order of events should receive it. It is a fatal defect to have two or three heroes, heroines, or villains, all more or less equal in importance, and all exerting pulls upon the sympathies of the audience. The playwright should single out one couple from among the characters in his piece, and concentrate upon them the attention, the interest, and the affection of his audience, and he should ruthlessly thrust into the background any figure that steps forward and threatens to disturb the priority of interest the leading characters enjoy.

Said a young dramatist whose play I was editing, "Why, you have practically killed off one of my best characters! That girl was one of the most interesting personages in my play."

"So she was," I replied, "and she drew all the attention from your heroine, who ought to receive it."

The lesson may be read in all successful plays, and it is one law of the theater that will not brook violation. In "Zaza," for instance, the interest is centered in Zaza and her lover, Bernard Dufrene, and, despite the fact that Florianne, the Duc de Brisac, and some of the other characters seem to offer great possibilities for dramatic emotional development, they are relegated to the background. Even Madame Dufrene, the wronged wife, whose story must have proved of special interest, gets no hearing. All else is held in shadow while the dramatist's illuminating searchlight plays over the emotions of the central figures of the drama.

Here, again, we read another lesson. After all, there can be only one real center to any drama. Of the leading couple one figure must always outrank the other in its appeal to the audience and in its hold upon its sympathies. One figure must tower above the other, must be supreme. In this case it is Zaza, and we find our-