



The Young Girl at the Matinée

By Edward Bok



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A MAN or woman with any sense of the fitness of things cannot go to an average matinée performance of what is nowadays called the "problem play" without a feeling that there is something radically wrong in either the watchfulness or the point of view of hundreds of American parents. One will see at these matinées seats and boxes full of sweet young girls ranging from twelve to sixteen years of age. They are not there by the few, nor by the score, but literally by the hundreds. I am leaving out of the present discussion of this question the young boys who have no more business to be at these performances than have the young girls. Perhaps, because of my sex, I am more concerned about the presence there of the young girls. Be that as it may, it is enough to make a man burn with shame and indignation to see hundreds of young girls sitting in the theatre, and, with open mouths, literally drinking in remarks and conversation to which no young girl in her teens should listen.

I AM not a prig on this question of the theatre, by any means. I am not a fanatic who can see no benefit to be derived from seeing a good clean play. There is as much real education in seeing a good play as in reading a good book. I go to the theatre and enjoy going. And I would not for a moment, even if I could, advocate the closing of the doors of the theatre to the young girl. Nor would I confine her enjoyment of the theatre to pastoral plays such as "The Old Homestead," or to religious dramas such as "Ben Hur." For my own part, I derive precious little pleasure from seeing the characters of the Bible brought to life on the stage. But I think there is a distinct line to be drawn at the kind of play which a young girl—I mean the girl who is in her teens—should be allowed to see. The case is not altered because she goes to a matinée. That simply does away with late hours: not with the principle of whether she should be there at all. Nor does it alter the case one iota that she is chaperoned. If she is, it makes the mistake the more flagrant. A young girl, before she reaches years of discretion, should have her amusements carefully selected for her. Of course she will resent this, but the independence of the American girl does not mean that she has license to go where she will, see what she chooses to see, or listen to what she should not listen. At sixteen she must be denied what she does not understand, but what at twenty-six she will understand.

THE girls must not be blamed for their presence at these matinées. We cannot expect discretionary judgment from them. But we can and have a right to expect it from their parents. It is begging the question to say, as parents have said, that they were ignorant of the class of play to which they had taken their daughter or chaperoned some other parents' daughter. There is always a way to find out the character of a play beforehand, and if the mother cannot ascertain this the father always can. Nor is it excusing the offense to say that our girls must learn certain truths for themselves, and to ask, "Is not the theatre a better school than the street?" In nowise. Neither place is a fit school for such lessons. It is a cowardly trait in a parent that leaves to the theatre, a girl's companions, or any other outside influence to teach what is the duty of that parent herself to teach. If the play is to be used as a makeshift for parents to teach the great moral lessons of life to young girls, then, indeed, has parenthood come to a sorry pass! Nor is it meeting the question to say, with resignation, "Well, then, we must keep our young daughters from the play altogether, for all our modern plays have the problem note in them." That is not true. Despite the croakings of the pessimists that the modern drama is declining in character, there are as many clean, sweet and refreshing plays on the American stage to-day as there ever were. I believe it does a moral, healthy girl no harm to occasionally see a good play. On the contrary, it does her good. The extreme measure of forbidding young girls to go to the theatre is, to my mind,

just as dangerous and mistaken as the other extreme of letting them go without restriction. The medium ground is ever the common-sense ground. The mimic life as depicted on the boards of the theatre is attractive to every young girl. To deny it to her altogether is to make a mistake, unless she is likely to be foolishly carried away by what she sees. A rightful, healthy pleasure to which youth is entitled should not be made prohibitive. That merely results in sowing the seed of discontent and making the pleasure denied the more attractive and the more desired. But to let our young girls attend the matinées, as apparently they do nowadays, without any discrimination, is sowing mighty dangerous seed. It is absolutely amazing and distressing to see the army of young girls coming out of the matinée performance of a play which many an adult hesitates to see—in fact, which thousands of mature men of healthy taste absolutely refuse to witness. It does not make these plays more permissible to young girls because they invariably have strong moral lessons. No young girl needs to have her mind soiled by having it dragged through realistic dirt and mire for two or three hours to learn a moral lesson which her mother should have taught her at home. There is no legitimate excuse on the part of any mother for allowing her young daughter to see any portrayal of life that makes light of the marriage tie or sets the married relation at defiance. Absolutely no good comes to any girl from seeing such a portrayal. The only excuse for going to the theatre is that we may be cleanly amused or intellectually refreshed or strengthened, and when a play fails to serve either one of those ends it fails to serve its legitimate purpose.

NOR have we any right to condemn either actor or manager because such plays are put upon the stage. If we so condemn we would condemn Shakespeare and all the great dramatic masters. The mission of the stage is to hold the mirror up to human nature, and to show the different phases of life, the passionate as well as the passive. But it is not compulsory upon us to attend these plays. If we choose to attend them when we have reached years of understanding and discretion, that is for us to settle with our own consciences. But it is not for a young girl in her teens to assume the right to witness such performances, and no parent is justified or safe in allowing her to attend them. Until a girl knows what she is about, until she understands what she sees, until she has the judgment to intelligently select for herself, she should be guided by those to whom years of experience are supposed to have brought wisdom. The modern "problem play"—that is, the play which concerns itself with the graver and deeper problems of human passions—is not put upon the stage for the young girl. It has a rightful place on the stage. But it has no place in the life of a young girl. It has no message to her; it either means nothing to her, or it means the wrong thing. Instead of intelligently understanding what she hears and sees, she hears and sees but misunderstands, and in that immature misconception lies the grave danger for her. There is a happy medium ground between the bloodless cut-and-dried and wishy-washy pastoral play and the "problem play," throbbing with human passions. Such plays there are, and in sufficient number, to entertain the young girl. There are, perhaps, not as many of this kind as of the others, but in that very fact lies the significant truth that it is not necessary for the young girl to be constantly in the theatre. Those of us who are older use the theatre for purposes of refreshment after a day of weary battle with the problems of living, which the young girl knows not of. To her the theatre is simply a temple of amusement, and she has not such a crying need of pleasure that she should be a weekly habitué of the matinée.

WE SEEM, in some quarters, to have a peculiar idea about the theatre. We calmly say that the theatre has no right to produce plays which our children cannot safely see. We refuse the right to the dramatist of high motive to approach the grave problems of life. We say, "No, our children must not see these things." Of course, they should not. But, pray, is that a good reason why such plays should not be written and

produced? Where is our responsibility in the matter? Must we place every restriction upon the writers and none upon our children? Should Shakespeare never have written "Othello" because it is better that a young girl in her teens should not see it? Surely this is carrying the thing pretty far—a bit farther than common-sense teaches. The grave passions of life must ever throb and pulsate through our literature, whether in the form of book or play, if there is to be a literature worthy of the name. But it does not follow that this literature should be open to the young before they have reached years of understanding. The father or mother who denies the right to an author to deal with the problem of living in all its phases, when such an author approaches his task with high ideals and gives publicity to his convictions in the proper place, puts an embargo upon the wrong shoulders. It is for the author to write as he feels he is commanded to write, but it is for us to determine whether we shall listen to him or not, or allow our children to listen.

THE tirades against the theatre which periodically envelop us, and use up valuable white paper in the public prints, always seem to me to serve so little purpose. They only seek to attract the curious and the vicious. If a play that reproduces things vile and squalid and mean is deliberately put upon the boards of a theatre, as is unquestionably done by men of pessimistic minds, it will thrive in proportion as patronage is given to it. Just so long as people will go to see it, or direct attention to it, just so long will it prosper. But let it be ignored, and it will die of itself, and quickly, too. No manager will keep a play on the boards of his theatre that is acted nightly to empty seats. We can always depend upon a manager's business acumen if upon nothing else. What the theatre is in the character of its plays, and will be, is in our hands to determine. There is nothing in this world that hurts us quite so much and so effectively as to be ignored, and that is just as true of a play, or of a book, as it is of ourselves. The more we rail against bad plays and bad books, depend upon it, the more of them we shall have. There is always a large percentage of a public that can be depended upon to go where there is a scent of danger or of vice, and nothing sends them in such a direction in larger numbers than a public attack. The only effective work in such a case is individual work. If you cannot approve of a play don't go to see it. If you cannot approve of a book don't buy it. It should make no difference to you whether others go to see the play or buy the book. What is wrong to you should remain wrong even if you are the only one in the world to think so.

SO IT is with the plays that we should allow our young to see. We must not seek to shift the responsibility upon the dramatist or the theatre that rightfully belongs to us as fathers and mothers. Let the dramatist write and the theatre present. We select, and mark you well that as we select so will we influence the writing and the presentation. The theatre will give, and only give, what the public supports. One fact is certain: it is high time that we see an end to the presence of the young girl at the "problem play." If it be true, as it is said, that parents do not know of the presence of their daughters at these performances, then the crime is even greater, since a double sin is allowed to be committed. There is something radically wrong with a mother when she does not know where her daughter goes, or where she is when she leaves her home. No state of affairs is quite so bad as when that is true. It is the most damning evidence of a mother's neglect or incompetency. But whatever the reason, the question of the play which the young American girl shall see cannot be too carefully looked after or intelligently considered by the American mother. It is plain that these young girls by the hundreds attend these "problem plays." It is also plain, or should be, to any man or woman with even the average regard for the fitness of things, that these young girls should not be there. And it is still more plain that not they, but their parents, are to blame for their presence. Hence, it is a matter that can be brought squarely up and fairly home to fathers and mothers whether they will go on and let their young daughters play with fire and run the risk of being burned.



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