

## Theosophy and Dramatic Art

By Annie Besant

(From "The Theosophic Messenger" June 1912)



(This article is the major part of one written by Mrs. Besant in 1907 for *The Show World*, *The Twentieth Century Amusement Weekly*, and which was published conspicuously on its front page, with commendary statements and a good picture of the writer. Today, the increasing betterment of American stage, the wider sanctioning of the drama as a mode of teaching by clergy and layman, and the appearance of plays along strikingly theosophical lines, are significant "signs of the times," and, likewise, so many avenues for effective T.S. influence and service.)

Among the most potent agencies for influencing the public mind is the drama, and it is impossible to conceive a limit to the power it might wield if plays were nobly planned and nobly acted. It is the natural educator of the adult, as the school is the educator of the child. Eye and ear are made the avenues by which high thoughts and stimulating inspirations may reach the mind, and the contagion of heroism and self-sacrifice may be made to spread through a crowd and purify and elevate every person submitted to it. The wave of a common thought, of a common impulse, sweeps through a crowd of ordinary people and carries them away; how easily a panic may spread through a mass of people, giving birth to wild, unreasoning, terror-impelled action, is known to every one. As easily may be propagated through a crowd a noble emotion, and even though it may subside and seem to leave no trace, yet each who has been uplifted by it is truly sensitive and more responsive to a cognate emotion thereafter.

Theosophy in art is ever the prophet of the ideal, as against the mere copying of some outside fact. The fundamental error of Zola and his school lies in the view that exact reproduction of a transitory ugliness is naturalism. Nature is fundamentally an artist of the beautiful, and is ever at work repairing the hideousness created by man and changing them into new beauties. Not an ugly rubbish-heap, nor a disused quarry, but she will clothe it with vegetation, and change it into hills and dales, verdant with waving grass and fragrant with blossoms. Her effort are all towards beauty, and the ugly is only a transition-stage to some new fairness, or a misplaced object out of harmony with its surroundings. In every object Nature strives to express a thought, and the true artist – dramatic or otherwise – is he who seizes the thought and makes it more palpable to his less developed fellows.

The drama is art, and its special function is to portray human emotions and human character, and to direct this portrayal to the evoking of right emotions and the building of right character in the theat-

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re-goers, winning their sympathy for the noble and the heroic, arousing their indignation against the base and degrading. Analysis of character and of motives examination of social and political problems, is also a legitimate function of the philosophic drama, and many a social and legal injustice might be remedied by a dramatic presentation of it by true artists, all – both author and actors – fired with the ideal of brotherhood and deliberately seeking to express love and justice so that they may attract, hate and injustice so that they may repel. Popular drama must run on simple lines and should teach high thoughts and truths in simple and alluring guise, always taking true thought for granted, and expressing its results in attractive forms. The Mystery plays of the Middle Ages were one of the many ways in which the Church of Rome trained, taught and elevated the minds of the masses while seeming only to amuse.

Some very noble plays might be written on theosophical lines, and a typical series of incarnations would form a drama of enthralling interest, as well as one which would convey most salutary lessons, if the working of the law of Karma – the law of cause and effect – were carefully brought out in the events portrayed. Apart from such direct teaching of the facts of nature, the theosophical ideal in dramatic art would be satisfied in all plays that roused noble emotion, that showed the dangers of the absence of an ideal in life, that inspired pure and lofty thoughts, and cast discredit on all base thinkings and ways of life.

Much might also be done by the drama in presenting beautiful but nobly simple forms alike of dress and of home furnishings. A dress and furnishing reform might be brought about by plays in which every accessory was beautiful and fitting. Instead of the vulgar bazaar display called a drawing room on the modern stage, a room nobly proportioned, gracefully draped, in which every article was necessary and beautiful, would serve as a model which many would copy. Dress on graceful and dignified lines for leisure, or fitted for activity while beautiful in form and color, should replace the befrilled Parisian “Creations” which distort the human form into fantastic and grotesque outlines, and inspire the spectator with wonder as to what hidden apparatus can so deform the noble outlines of a perfect human figure.

Clever and clean jokes, mirth-provoking humor, the delightful phrases of a Mark Twain or a Bernard Shaw, the delicate fun of a Gilbert and Sullivan, all claim their place within the drama, but vulgar hors-play, empty nonsense, and every touch of indecency should be rigorously excluded.

In the City of the Future the theatre will have its rightful place beside the temple and the school, and its actors shall be true artists, servants of the beautiful, honoured as highly as the priest and the teacher.