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During this month, Robins also worked on an essay on Ibsen for *Time and Tide* and delivered the lecture *Ibsen and the Actress*, each with a more feminist slant than the material here. *Ibsen and the Actress* was later published by Hogarth Press (1928) and reissued by Haskell House in New York (1973).

HENRIK IBSEN.

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THE DRAMA OF IDEAS.

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A DETERMINED ORIGINATOR.

The celebrations in Norway of the centenary of Ibsen, born March 20, 1828, are now at their height. The appreciation printed below is by one who was among the early interpreters of Ibsen on the English stage.

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(By Elizabeth Robins.)

The venerable custom of looking down upon the art of the stage was more honoured up to the 'nineties than it has been since. To say that any one person was responsible for the change would be to put the cart before the horse. The theatre has too great a part to play in civilization for that old attitude--part fear, part contempt--to endure. The one person most responsible for the more enlightened attitude of to-day is beyond doubt the man who was born in the small Norwegian town of Skien just 100 years ago. The noise of the conflict created by Henrik Ibsen's plays has long died out. His influence, whether realized or not, is a part of the inheritance of all who concern themselves with the art of the theatre.

If it is interesting to know what goes to the making of a master-dramatist, it may be well to consider some of

the influences that went to the making of Ibsen. Apart from what he brought into the world with him, the main factors in his shaping were the two that ministered to that passionate interest of his in the connexion between human character and fate. The first factor to serve this end was the stimulating variety in his own outward conditions. The second was the fostered intensity of his intellectual life. The variety included much of the schooling called hardship, followed none too soon by success, material ease, and honour.

A good deal of sympathy has been lavished on the conditions of Ibsen's early life by those who think that, in any sense serviceable to art, variety of experience is out of question in a small provincial town. Such critics are under the same type of illusion as those who limited the word tragedy to the fortunes of kings.

A boy born into a family of ample means who at the age of eight sees poverty close round his people, sees a large cheerful house opposite a fine old church exchanged for a derelict farm in the country, has very early an unforgettable basis for observation and comparison. The child Ibsen's devotion to drawing and painting seemed to indicate his one talent; but for people whose problem, now, was how to get bread there was no question of spending money in cultivating a *brodlose Kunst*.

APOTHECARY OF GRIMSTAD.

If, as Ibsen believed, knowledge of human nature is the dramatist's capital, few schools could better the range and variety of knowledge offered by the necessity of supporting oneself from the age of 14. For the next six years "one of the acutest brains in Europe," as Sir Edmund Gosse says, served first as apprentice and later

as assistant to the apothecary of Grimstad. To suppose this post was one of hopeless dullness would be to lose sight of the fact that little can come to the artist's mill--specially the mill, of an artist in embryo--that is not grist. Since young Ibsen could not afford to study painting he would study drugs and dispensing, with a view to being a doctor one of these days. Some of his profoundest writing bears impress of this early ambition. He stole hours from shop work to study for his matriculation at the University of Christiania, and he stole glowing moments from both to try his 'prentice hand at verse. Soon he was writing poetry that his countrymen have not let die.

Some of his ephemeral rhyming made very early a dangerous reputation for him. From the stage box of the apothecary's shop young Ibsen was looking on, with piercing precision, at the humours and hypocrisies of his fellow-townsmen. While he was still a boy of school age he was already writing lampoons and drawing caricatures of leading citizens.

All this, with some experience of falling in love, and his first essay in play-writing does not adequately represent the variety or the fullness of his early youth. Evidence of this is everywhere present in his later work. By far the greater part of his most productive life he was to live in foreign lands, hardly seeing his native country. With a single exception, the Norwegian scene and Norwegian character were to be his unchanging theme. Yet during the formative years, while he was laying the foundations of this future capital, his poverty was so great that the books he refused to do without could be bought only by stern economy in food and clothes--and Ibsen had a liking for good clothes, even for decorations, orders, &c., which he later defended with spirit. For six years at Grimstad he lived in a garret, "learning," as he says, "the psychology of rebellion out of his own heart."

Even if he had not told us that his mind and character were deeply affected by the stir of political unrest in Europe, Ibsen would have been called a child of '48. His play of this period, *Cataline*--far cry as it seems from the public events of Ibsen's youth on the one hand, and on the other from the subject-matter of *A Doll's House* and *Ghosts*--represented his reaction to mid-century Radicalism. From one stage of his development to another he was to be seized by the struggling thoughts of his age and made their mouthpiece.

THE NATIONAL THEATRE.

His later plays were epoch-marking and epoch-making, because, in addition to being a master builder of the dramatic form, Ibsen had been thinking with clearness and intensity about the life of his time. In face of bitter misunderstandings with the few friends he had come to value, he succeeded in making his intellectual participation in public affairs an outlet for his genius, instead of a blind alley of anger and helplessness. Nothing could divert him from his special business of poet-dramatist holding up a mirror to the age. He knew he could do this only through the theatre. But the theatre for such an enterprise as his did not yet exist. So potent an influence in the modern theatre as Mr. Bernard Shaw at one time believed that the "new theatre" (the theatre which we, like the Ibsen of 80 years ago, are still looking for) "will never exist till there is a sufficient supply of masterpieces." . . . "It is the drama that makes the theatre," Mr. Shaw said years ago, "and not the theatre the drama."

Had this been the view of his own time adopted by the famous Norwegian musician, Ole Bull, we might never have heard Henrik Ibsen's name. Ole Bull believed that a national theatre must be actively, hopefully *there*,

before the dramatist, however great in possibility, can begin to go to school--let alone produce masterpieces. Certainly Ole Bull was responsible for the beginnings of such a theatre in Norway in 1850. When it was one year old he engaged Henrik Ibsen, "to assist the theatre as dramatic author."

Ibsen was twenty-three. He had written one long play (refused alike by the Danish Theatre and by publishers in general), and a one-act imitation of *Oehlenschläger*, which had been played three times. Neither of these has been considered worth republishing in his collected works. But the infant National Theatre of Norway, poor as it was, presently found means to educate its dramatist. Young Ibsen was allowed to go abroad to study the art of theatrical production, on the understanding that he was to fit himself to add stage-management to the duties of his post at home. The account of Ibsen's interpretation of his mission deserves a place in theatrical history, and deserves--for the sake of its practical instructiveness and tonic spirit—a place in the counsels of any national theatre of the future.

He sees every possible play in French, German, Danish, and English. He goes thoroughly into the question of stage machinery, of scene painting, dancing, the terms offered to dancers by other theatres, the collection of music for his theatre at home and of books on costume. He considers it his business to make acquaintance with "everything of artistic interest."

A CLEAR PURPOSE.

One would think it must be difficult, for a modern who cares about the function of the theatre, not to respond to the greatness of Ibsen's caring. Yet few who talk of him to-day know that the man who wanted more

than anything else on earth to write his own plays and get them acted devoted so many of what are called the best years of life to producing other people's plays and laying the foundations of a rational theatre.

Ibsen knew a rational theatre was impossible until it should be fit to give original talent opportunity for growth. He knew the theatre should be not only a source of refreshment and be common pleasure, but of uncommon pleasure too; a stimulus to all the arts, perhaps, above all, a clearing-house of ideas.

He had spent nine precious years in the practical work of theatrical management when he again petitioned the Norwegian Government this time-for a grant that he might visit London, Paris, &c., to study dramatic art and literature. He was taking this step, as he said, "after ten years of literary activity," and very significantly adds: "also whilst preparing for the same."

Anyone who is under the temptation to think this an evidence of modesty rather than of intelligence need only remember Ibsen's adamant refusal to accept suggestion of change in either his ideas or, their form. If changes were to come they must come through him. To those who ridiculed "Peer Gynt" he said: "My book *is* poetry. And if it is none, then it will be. The conception of poetry shall be made to conform to the book."

The final paragraph of his petition to the King in 1860 *might* be used to-day by a young enthusiast for a national theatre:--

Of late years the opinion has become more and more prevalent that the development of art and poetry, in their various forms, cannot but concern the State. . . . The reason for the drama having hitherto received no State aid is not to be sought in any repudiation on the part of the State of the claims of this art; on the contrary, the State has, by giving its support to poetry, plastic art,

painting and music, distinctly implied its recognition of the drama, which is, by its very nature, a unification of all these other forms of art., Moreover, the experience of all other countries has sufficiently established the fact that dramatic art, in every age in which it has been cultivated, has, in a higher degree than any other, shown itself an important factor in the education of the people-- a very obvious explanation of which fact is to be found in the drama's more intimate and direct relation to reality; in other words, in its greater intelligibility and in its easier and more general accessibility to the whole people.

No one should be misled by Ibsen's later - commentary on the comparative failure to create in Scandinavia the kind of theatre he had laboured for.

As long [he says] as a people considers it more important to build meeting-houses than theatres, as long as it is readier to support the Zulu Mission than the Art Museum, art cannot really thrive, cannot even be considered as of immediate necessity.

Ibsen could not know that his own fortunes were to belie his scorn; that the people who had been so bewildered by the newness of his dramatic forms, and so terrified by their content as to refuse him a hearing, were to compete for the honour and glory of producing his plays, and were to crown him the greatest dramatist of modern time. Though the greater genius is so much more instinctive than conscious, Ibsen must have known that, while he was busying himself with the theatre as it then was, he was not only making the theatre that was to be. He was making Henrik Ibsen. Making him again and again--which is growth, but grief, too, and renunciation. From contemplation of the later Ibsen the mind goes back to the reserved and lonely child. He is said to have had only two games, one for indoors and one for the open, both self-invented.

BUILDING.

With pencils and an old paint-box, he seems to have given himself his first lessons in art. Bolting himself into a little room, "he would sit, not merely in the summer but in the winter, through the severest cold." It was found that he had "painted a great number of figures on cardboard in gaudy costumes, and afterwards cut them out and fixed them to little blocks of wood so that they would stand.". He would compose them "into various groups, some as if in conversation, others in attitudes to convey the idea that some important event was going forward." And, in truth, the little paper men and women were right.

The one outdoor amusement the future master-builder dramatist was ever known to care for was "building." His sister and friend says:--

I remember among other things a fortress, to my childish apprehension a work of art, which cost him and his younger brother long and severe labour. But the fortress was not to stand long; when it was finished he took it by storm and levelled it with the ground.

It would be hard to invent a clearer allegory for Ibsen's later mode of progress --for that passion of service to the building up of an idea, the loftiest he could at that stage conceive, and his rage of courage to destroy it, clearing the ground for home, or church, or tower that should rise higher still, till at last the only building that reached near enough to the infinite was the castle in the air—"too high for human beings."

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