

Baltimore Morning Herald
January 28, 1901

Plays and Players

*New York Divine Gives His Views on the Church and the Theater—
Mr. Kernan Off for Buffalo.*

In the course of an article in the Metropolitan Magazine for February the Rev. Robert Stuart MacArthur, pastor of Calvary Church, New York, has some interesting things to say concerning the church and the theater. He takes the ground that the dramatic instinct is able to challenge comparison for universality and potentiality, and says that the church is unwise to attempt to destroy a pure, a noble and a universal human instinct.

The Rev. Mr. MacArthur says frankly enough in his article that he himself does not attend the theater, waiving his right in the interest of his influence as a pastor, and out of some regard for the prejudices of the weaker brother. The acting of the greatest actors would be to him, he says, both intellectual recreation and inspiration, and would be ancillary to him rhetorically and oratorically, but he sets aside these in deference to the considerations already named. He believes that the church ought to have a definite answer to the question of its attitude to the theater, and the question should be discussed fairly and frankly.

“One of three possible attitudes,” says the minister, “the church may readily assume—the oppositive, or the conformative, or the transformative. Which of these positions shall the church take?”

In regard to the first, that of open hostility to all forms of theatrical entertainment, the Rev. Mr. MacArthur sensibly says that the dramatic instinct is a gift of the creator, and that, although it may be perverted from its original purpose, this very fact ought to lead clergymen to recognize its divine origin and to strive to exalt it to its noblest possibilities. Such an instinct,” he says, “is a revelation of a divine purpose, and to oppose such an instinct is to antagonize a divine bestowment and intention.” The oppositive attitude, he says further, alienates a great number of men and women whom the church ought to help and who, in turn, could greatly help the church. It is unfair to put a whole class under a social and ecclesiastical ban because of the sins of a part of that class. It is time, he states, that the traditional hostility gave place to wholesome discrimination between the worthy and unworthy.

In regard to the conformative attitude, he says that this is a question of the attitude of the church to the world. “Regarding this relation,” he says, “we have the words of an inspired apostle: ‘Be not confirmed to this world.’ We also have the words of the divine Master Himself: ‘I pray that thou shouldst not take them out of the world, but that thou shouldst keep them from evil.’ The church should not conform to the world, but should strive to conform the world to her exalted standards of thought and life.”

The Rev. MacArthur concludes that the true attitude of the church to the theater should be transformative. It requires a far higher order of piety to transform the world than to abandon it. He says:

“The church finds the dramatic instinct in the world, and organized into theatrical exhibitions. What shall it do with these facts? Much of the noblest genius from Aeschylus to Shakespeare, and from his time to our time, is devoted to the drama. No power can destroy this instinct; no power can stem this dramatic tide.”

After showing something of the futility of attempting to stop dramatic growth, he continues:

“It is doubtless true now that a larger percentage of the educated classes are taking part in the higher types of dramatic representation than ever before. Certainly the church ought not be indifferent to these facts. The recreation of the people, as truly as their activities, must be an object of solicitude, not only to thoughtful statesmen, but also to consecrated churchmen. The true progress of a people is inseparable from their diversions, and the nature of these diversions is an object of patriotic and religious concern. Indiscriminate denunciation accomplishes no good. Wise discrimination is commendable in itself and will be transforming in its influences. We have theaters which are bad, bad only, and bad continually. Their influence is social pollution, intellectual deterioration and spiritual atrophy. Every parent must use his influence to prevent his children from being immersed in this atmosphere of moral rottenness. Every pastor should warn, beseech and command the members of his flock to avoid such spiritual contamination, even as they would avoid physical leprosy and other revolting and incurable diseases.

“There are other theaters vastly different in their actors, plays and atmosphere. These may be attended in moderation without injury and with benefit by many persons in all our communities. Theaters and plays must be judged as novels and other books are. We must learn to be fair in our criticisms, and so to denounce the bad and to commend the good.”

The view of the theater taken by the Rev. Mr. MacArthur seems to be eminently fair and impartial. He takes the stand that many ministers do in private, even if many do not see fit to express their true opinions. True, there are many plays which are bad in their influence, which seem to be put on the stage because of their indecency, rather than for any other reason, and the worst feature of this class of dramas is that the wily manager, wriggling around the bush, advertises his attraction as “a great moral lesson” because it shows the results of evil, and that virtue is its own reward. This is, of course, a method of chasing the devil around the stump. There are also many good plays, and the theater is, on the whole, a fine institution, capable of an immense amount of good. As an educational factor it cannot be overlooked. It can be made an agent of great good. The dramatic fire is God given.

There are some few plays today, which are seen even in the so called high class houses, that are unfit for presentation even in the most depraved society. There are speeches which would not be allowed in any drawing room. And yet the same people who would frown down an improper remark in the drawing room will applaud such a sentiment when it is offered in a play. The real remedy for the playhouse rests with the people. The majority of the first class attractions at present are unfortunately in the hands of a few speculators. No sentiment or artistic ambition disturbs them. There, in a nutshell, is the reason for the avalanche of filthy plays which have descended upon a long suffering public.

Edwin Booth, the leading actor of his time, went on another principle. He was strong enough and great enough to dictate to a certain extent. In this way he was a great educator. At

one time a minister, wanting to see him in Hamlet, asked if he could not use the stage door, as he did not wish to be seen going in the theater. Booth refused and implied that there was no door of his theater that God could not look on.

What is needed as much as anything else to put down the bad plays is healthy leadership on the stage and true dramatic criticism, a factor which ought to reflect the sound, intelligent taste of the audience.

Mr. James L. Kernan, proprietor of the Auditorium, Monumental and Holliday Street theaters, will leave Baltimore today or tomorrow for Buffalo, where he has procured a new theater. He goes to Buffalo to make arrangements for his house and to close certain matters of business in connection with the new theater.

The acquisition of a house in Buffalo will strengthen the Empire Circuit of theaters considerably, as the circuit will not be able to book for all playhouses. According to the contract signed by the managers of all the houses in this circuit any show which plays an opposition house on the Circuit will be tabooed by the managers. This will probably have some bearing on the situation in Baltimore.

Mr. G. A. Wegefath, who recently took hold of the Front Street Theater, will remodel the house and expects to run it as a burlesque house. He also controls the Court Street Theater in Buffalo, which has now practically no opposition, and the Bijou in Washington, where Mr. Kernan owns the Lyceum Theater. So it will be seen that these two managers will have opposition houses in three cities. Mr. Kernan is in on the ground floor of the burlesque syndicate and if a show plays at Mr. Wegefath's houses it cannot book at any house in the syndicate. This will have the effect of shutting certain shows out of several towns and will be a sword to hold over the heads of managers of traveling shows. Mr. Kernan states that he has not purchased the Buffalo House with any idea of running an opposition to Mr. Wegefath, but that he simply wishes to be on the spot for the big business that will be done during the Pan-American Exposition.

"Barbara Frietchle, Clyde Fitch's play, which was so popular last season with Julia Marlow in the title role, is to be revived in New York, with Effie Eilsler in the leading part. Mr. Charles Frohman will make the play a big military spectacle this year, and will employ some 250 people in the production.

"Unleavened Bread," a dramatization of the novel of the same name, was produced in New York Saturday with Miss Elizabeth Tyree in the leading female role, that of Selma White. There has been no attempt in the play, it is said, to soften down the harshness of the character of the woman, who starts out in life by marrying, divorcing her husband, and marrying again, going in her travels to New York and Washington. It is probable that when Judge Grant wrote this book he intended it simply as a satire on a certain class of American women who are constantly trying to climb without having the mental and social equipment for the operation, but the work has been taken seriously. The play is said to be harsh and somewhat trying, but well acted and staged.

Miss Carolyn Gordon has replaced Miss Minnie Ashley as Dudley, the English maid, in "San Toy," and is said to have done well. She worked at a disadvantage, playing against the memory of this popular young woman. Miss Ashley's eyes gave her so much trouble that she had to give up the role.

Clyde Fitch's new play, "Lover's Lane," will have its first production next Tuesday at the Manhattan Theater, New York. It is said to be a departure from Mr. Fitch's usual work, as it is very simple and straightforward. Mr. Fitch will have four plays at New York theaters when this is produced, a record of which the young playwright may be proud.

Word has been received in Baltimore that the injury to Mrs. Robert T. Haines, who was bitten last week by a pet dog, is not serious. There will probably be a slight scar, but no bad effects otherwise.

Miss Leonora Bradley, of the Castle Square Theater Company, Boston, who has been visiting Mrs. Ellen Martin at 714 North Howard street, has returned to her work.