

THE ENGLISH WELL-MADE PLAY AS A DRAMATIC GENRE

According to John Russell Taylor in his book The Rise and Fall of the Well-Made Play, the form dominated English comedy for a period of about one Hundred years and serious drama for somewhat less than that. In the late forties the commercial theatre in England was still under the influence of the well-made play. Perhaps the most successful play of that era in England was Terence Rattigan's The Winslow Boy, which Taylor describes as "a full-dress revival of the well-made drawing-room drama, with a secret which is finally revealed and a big scene a faire leading up to a dramatic reversal at curtaintime : not only does it recall the Archer-Sheep case of 1908, but it does so in dramatic terms much closer to those of Mrs. Dane's Defense than anything else."¹

The well-made play as a distinct theatrical form is usually seen as having begun with the work of Augustin-Eugene Scribe in France in the early nineteenth century. His plays may be seen as a late outgrowth of the French neo-classical tradition and as a reaction against the rather formless romantic drama and melodrama which were popular at that time. Scribe's "prime originality lay in his realization that the most reliable formula for holding an audience's attention was a well-told story."² His plays emphasise a tightness of construction and smooth coordination of all parts. These structural parts, according to Stephen S. Stanson, are seven in number :

(1) a plot based on a secret known to the audience but withheld from certain characters .. until its revelation ... in the climactic scene serves to unmask a fraudulent character and restore to good fortune the suffering hero, with whom the audience has been made to sympathize ; (2) a pattern of increasingly intense action and suspense, prepared by exposition ; (3) a series of ups and downs in the hero's fortunes, caused by his conflict with an adversary ; (4) the counterpunch of peripeteia

(1) John Russell Taylor, The Rise and Fall of the Well-Made Play, London, Methuen and Co., LTD., 1967, p. 150.

(2) Ibid. p. II.

and scene a faire, marking, respectively, the lowest and highest point in the hero's adventures, and brought about by the disclosure of secrets to the opposing side ; (5) a central misunderstanding . . . made obvious to the spectator but withheld from the participants ; (6) a logical and credible denouement ; and (7) the reproduction of the overall action in the individual acts. -

This kind of precise formula, this strict mould within which Scribe, and to some extent his major followers, Sardou (1831-1908), Labiche (1815-1888), and Feydeau (1862-1921), cast their plays, was destined never to achieve the popularity in England that it did in France. Their plays were translated and performed, but the important English playwrights of the last half of the nineteenth century did not seek to imitate the French school. Instead they studied the French models and adapted what was useful in them to their theatrical purposes. What emerged from this was a variant form, considerably more difficult to define in precise terms, which may be referred to as the English well-made play.

The English well-made play has two main characteristics. First, it relies heavily on techniques of construction which differ to some degree from Scribe's. Construction, in the literary sense of tight, balanced over form, is hardly present at all in Scribe. Construction, to him, is essentially the art of putting interesting elements in sequence and establishing causal links between them. As Taylor puts it, "Scribe's art, above all, is the art of making connections, and beyond that for all he is concerned construction can go hang."⁴ His instinct for making connection is based purely on what will work in theatrical terms, on what the audience will accept at that particular moment. Thus, his sense of construction is theatrical rather than literary. As such, his influence on the English drama was one of moving it away from the self-conscious literariness of the early nineteenth century, the attempt to recapture Elizabethan grandeur by increasing theatricality. Scribe's structural influence was largely in the area of narrative techniques where he showed how to join together theatrical elements in such a way as to keep the audience constantly alert and looking ahead to what was going to happen next. But the English

(3) Stephen S. Stanton. "Introduction," *Camille and other Plays*, New York, Hill and Wang Mermaid Dramabook, 1957, pp. XII. XIII.

(4) John Russell Taylor. *Op. cit.*, p. 15.

well-made play also demanded a certain "literariness" in its makeup; it demanded the kind of formal, balanced construction that Scribe was able to ignore. For Scribe, it was enough if the loose ends were tied up by the time the final curtain fell. The English well-made play demanded a tighter control over the form of its product, an even, balanced construction with each element in its right place, rather than the loose type of construction that Scribe utilized.

The second characteristic of the English well-made play is that it normally deals in a realistic way with the problems and events in the life of the middle class. This contrasts quite strongly with the French models, if not necessarily in the subject matter, at least in the way it is treated. Both Sardou and Feydeau, for example, wrote plays dealing with the middle class, but neither of them could in any way be considered as dealing realistically with the situations they tackle in their plays. Thus, it is this fusion between bourgeois realism and the theatrical construction techniques of Scribe that characterize the English well-made play. In the 1870's Tom Robertson (1829-1871), the well-known English playwright introduced this form of the well-made play into English drama. The emphasis on realism and middle-class values stems directly from a tradition begun by him and based very much on his own personal tastes and biases. Some forty years later when William Archer (1856-1924), the Scottish drama critic, wrote his Playmaking: a Manual of Craftsmanship the most important single attempt to define the nature of the English well-made play. In his book, William Archer, delineated a form considerably different from the type of play written by Eugene Scribe. For Archer the most important features of a well-made play were neatness and balance in construction, essentially a "literariness" that the French dramatist would not have bothered with, and the successful creation of the appearance of reality. Thus, the well-made play as it is conceived by its most important English practitioners during the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth century demanded a tight, logical, balanced construction linking together a series of dramatic events in a way that was probable and that kept the audience in anticipation of what was coming next, and also demanded that the play creates the illusion of real life. The implication of this sort of restrictive definition of the dramatic form is that playwrighting is a craft which can be

(5) William Archer. Playmaking: A Manual of Craftsmanship, New York, Dodd, Mead and Co., 1928, p. 3.

successfully attained just by adhering to a set of rules. Archer subtitled his book A Manual of Craftsmanship, and even though he states in his sentence "There are no rules for writing a play."⁵ the bulk of his book suggests that a person can in fact, become a competent playwright by following the rules he sets. The well-made play, then, is seen as a vehicle, a dramatic "form" into which thematic "content" may be poured. Archer does not speak much about the theme of the well-made play, although he regards the selection of a theme as the first stage in the creation of a play; he does, however, suggest that the universality of the theme of the play will have an important bearing on the lasting value of the play. To quote Archer's own words in this respect :

A play manifestly suggested by a theme of temporary interest will often have a great but no less temporary success. For instance, though there was a good deal of clever character-drawing in An Englishman's Home, by Major du Maurier, the theme was so evidently the source and inspiration of the play that it will scarcely bear revival. In America where the theme was of no interest, the play failed.⁶

It follows from this, then, that if one has two plays which are equally well constructed, the one which deals with a theme of more universal interest will be the better. There may be some truth in this seems a questionable basis for criticism. For instance, what does one a play like Shakespeare's King Lear which, although it contains most of the elements of a well-made play, also contains a number of elements which do little to advance the story line and which would therefore be dismissed as irrelevant by the standards of the well-made play? Yet the content of King Lear seems universal and important by Western standards and the play is considered to be a major play. A play like Waiting for Godot (1953) which was written by Samuel Beckett (b.1906) in the tradition of the theatre of the Absurd, completely ignores the standards of the well-made play, yet its thematic concerns are important enough to make it more important than most of the plays which are constructed according to well-made standards. Techniques of construction, whether those of the well-made play or any other standards not dictated by the demands of the subject matter should be suspected as criteria for judging the worth of a play.

Still, the well-made play flourished in England, and a number of playwrights wrote plays of considerable artistic merit within the general confines of the form of the well-made play. Such playwrights as Oscar

(6) Ibid., p. 18.

Wilde (1854-1900), John Galsworthy (1867-1933), Sir Arthur Wing Pinero (1855-1934), George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950), Somerset Maugham (1874-1965) and Noel Coward (1899-) produced good examples of the artistic success to which the genre was capable of attaining. But the reason for this, it seems to me, is that in each of these cases, the well-made play clearly and perfectly expressed the subject matter under consideration. The well-made play is linear in its development. It demands and receives concessions from its audience as it prepares them for each step in the development of its situation, then it leads them to accept a situation that they quite possibly would not have been willing to accept at the beginning of the play. Such scheme of development lends itself, for example, to the presentation of argument in Shaw's plays and when Shaw sticks to the well-made play, as in Man and Superman and Major Barbara, he is successful. The value of the well-made play is the presentation thematic material that is essentially linear in its development.

Other playwrights working at that time did not use the form of the well-made play when it did not suit their artistic purposes. Anton Chekhov (1860-1904) the great Russian playwright, for example in his major plays uses ironic juxtaposition rather than linear development because his aim is not to tell a story or to present an argument, but to create an atmosphere and a powerful image of the cultured and leisured class. In England, much the same thing was attempted by Granville Barker (1877-1946) who was never commercially successful as a playwright and who was famous mainly as a manager and a director. Yet his play The Madras House (1910) is probably the best example of English non-linear playwrighting from its period.

Such playwrights were few, however, and the well-made play established itself as the accepted norm in the English theatre. The standards of logical linear development linked with bourgeois realism became the standards by which twentieth-century English critics judged the plays they saw, and most of the plays conformed to those rules. Certainly this was not the case in the Continent where Brecht (1898-1956), the German playwright; the French surrealists; Pirandello (1867-1936), the Italian dramatist; Beckett; and Jonesco (b.1912), all broke down the rule of the well-made play. But these influences did not extend to England in any appreciable way until after 1950.

Critical Works

Stanton, Stephen S. "Introduction to Camille and Other Plays," New York, Hill and Wang Mermaid Dramabook, 1957.

Taylor, John Russell. The Rise and Fall of the Well-Made Play, London, Nethuen and Co., LTD., 1967.