

▶▶ America's Future in the Arts ◀◀

I HAVE been asked to write what I think about the development in America of the arts of the stage—musical performance, the theatre, the screen and “talkies.” This is the first time that I express myself for an American magazine. I am an observer, a visitor and not a native so it is possible that what I say will not always be right, but at least I am sure that I speak sincerely. If I seem to criticize, let it be remembered that America goes forward at such a tremendous rate of progress, in art as well as in business, that the criticism which is true today may soon be no longer deserved.

I have been coming to America to sing in opera and concert every season since 1921. More and more, I have seen, the magnet of America has drawn the musical performers of the Old World until there is nowhere on earth to be found such a magnificent development of the concert field. The most remarkable manifestation of this condition is to be seen in the orchestras which perform regularly in New York and some other musical centers. The greatest conductors, the finest ensembles, the best soloists are every-day fare. Any music-loving American may become educated in the best of orchestral music simply by attending these concerts.

I do not think that the same development is to be seen in the American theatre. The great actors who have visited here have not melted into the American scene and become a part of it, as have the great musicians, mainly, I suppose, because of the language difficulty, but also because music is universal in what it says, while foreign plays express conditions and customs not easily understood by a country so different as America.

But a more serious criticism is the fact that the American plays themselves do not appear to me to progress. To be sure, they cover a great many subjects, but, with a few exceptions, they do not sink their teeth into any of them! Even the few whose themes are not merely light and intended to amuse, tell little of the country—and this is something of which a foreigner may perhaps be a better judge than a native. A visitor learns so little of the spirit of

By FEODOR CHALIAPIN

As told to SULAMITH-ISH-KISHOR

Feodor Chaliapin has announced that he will not sing in opera again in this country—a decision, however, which does not include all professional appearances. Before sailing for Europe he set down this penetrating but genuinely hopeful view of the development of the arts in America. This is the only article which Mr. Chaliapin has ever written for an American magazine

the real America from these plays. Some plays which try to be serious are merely sentimental. Others are melodramatic. Very few of them try to make the audience think—or know how to make an audience want to think! I do not see the breadth and scope and vastness of America represented in her plays. Triviality seems to be the disease that is most prevalent.

AS FAR as acting goes, there are a number of very talented American actors and actresses—some even with genius. But I do not think that there is much possibility of developing a theatre for America equal to that of the Moscow Art Theatre. That must take a very long time. First, you must have plays worthy of the tremendous study which would have to be given to them; they must be so alive, so deep, so true, that years of rehearsing will bring out more and more beauty. But in trivial plays much rehearsing will wear the play content threadbare and reveal crippled character building. Then, too, it is a matter of the maturity of a nation. America has not lived long enough to have a spiritual history, such as Russia has. It has not the rich procession of historic event and the studding of these events with glamorous characters, from which material great dramas can be conceived.

Talent is one thing, and America has much of it. But still I think it requires an old and mellow people to produce supreme artists. Just as modern Russia was fused from scores of races,—the Slavs, the Scandinavians, the Tartars, the Caucasians, the Asiatics and scores of smaller native tribes,—so there must be a thorough fusing of the many races which make up America, the vast mingling and intermingling of a fully settled country, before its history can be more than bones.

Neither, to my mind, do the demo-

cratic conditions of American life, however excellent they may be from a social point of view, tend to create the colorful and suggestive contrasts which supply dramatic elements. A firmly outlined differentiation of classes tends to produce types, distinctive and recognizable, rich in scenic qualities. It creates conflicts of feeling, of taste, of ambition, of heated political partisanship. Leveling is no doubt a splendid thing for the individual; it is what all Europe is seeking for; the revolutions crick-cracking throughout the continent show that the aim of all the European peoples is to live as Americans do, all on one plane, with no seigneurs and no serfs. They strive to attain the American ideal of one class, “the man,” where all are equal as the people in a Turkish bath, with no difference to be noted except that this one is fat and that one is lean. But, for art, equality means flatness.

No, America will not succeed in imitating the Moscow Art Theatre. I am confident that it will do a great deal better than that. It will not continue to go to Europe for its plays nor for its actors. America is going to discover a form of theatrical art that will not be imitative, but will have an American physiognomy, with features as marked and as characteristic of America as those of the Moscow Art Theatre are characteristic of Russia.

WHAT makes me sure of this? The fact that America is becoming critical, both of itself and of others. When I first made my acquaintance with the New York public, it was like a boy of fourteen or fifteen, childish in its likes and dislikes, satisfied with the poorest kind of actress if she was pretty, or with the wretchedest play if it had enough love-making and shooting. But I have myself observed how it has grown. It is now like a young man, beginning to criticize, to apply the standards set by experience and thought; it thinks for itself, searches out meanings and values, and casts away that which does not measure up to these standards.

I think it will not be long before you will take the first step necessary to the creation of a new American stage art:

the formation of a National Civic Theatre, civic not in name only, but really civic, subsidized by the Government, subscribed by the public, so that it will be entirely free to produce the finest works in the most conscientious way. You will have a Bureau of Fine Arts, with committees on the theatre, on music, painting, architecture, sculpture. For music, there will be a National Conservatory. The discovery and encouragement of young talent will not be left entirely to private organizations and individual patrons.

But the dramatic art form of the future for the whole world, is, I believe, the screen. When it is perfected—we shall see wonders!

I do not mean perfected merely in the technical sense, of course; sound-reproduction and the use of color will eventually be accurate, and some stereoscopic improvement will give us three-dimensional pictures. I mean perfected in the sense that its vast opportunities for dramatic representation will be explored and utilized to the utmost.

For example, it will be possible to make the screen the repository forever of all the great performances of the world. Great actors, great singers, great productions need no more pass away with the personalities involved. The screen will be a mighty storehouse of treasures of dramatic art, giving the world all that was glorious on the stage, keeping it for a hundred, for hundreds, of years.

That is why I am tremendously interested in the future of the screen.

If I had the necessary money, I would myself form an organization to produce for screen and sound the great operas. What possibilities! For example, take Boris Godunoff." It is next to impossible for the opera houses outside of Russia to create the real historic atmosphere, to perform the Russian characters as they should be performed, to give this great music-drama the magnificence which is its due. At present, whenever I am praised for my interpretation of this rôle, I feel sad because I realize that I am not able alone to give it its full grandeur. I am told that many people walk out into the corridors during the scenes of "Boris" in which I am not on the stage. This grieves me, because I feel that they lose so much which is beautiful. In this opera every character, no matter how

trifling, is a work of art, every phrase of music is full of significance and beauty. If one should take a clay bust of Moussorgsky, and sit on it while it is damp, and then put the mangled physiognomy on a pedestal and say, "This is Moussorgsky," that would be the same as saying that the productions of "Boris" given at the present time all over the world are the real "Boris" and the real Moussorgsky.

America knows me only as a singer, but Russia knows me also as a director. There I staged "Khovanschina," be-



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cause I saw that the other singers did not understand the new music of Moussorgsky, and if I had not staged it as well as sung in it, the public would never have understood it. For among the smooth graceful figures of the old art, the appearance of a *landsknecht* is strange and startling. People do not know at first whether it is good or bad. So it is that people do not yet know me.

If I had the opportunity, I would show the world the *true* "Boris Godunoff!" I would show it on the screen. I would have the sets designed to reproduce exactly, in the detail in which I know them, the old historic Russia, the Kremlin, the Cathedral, the monk's cell, the wayside inn. I would select and train actors to look and act to perfection their rôles, even the most trifling ones; then I would select singers and teach them to sing the parts with character and expression; I would train an

orchestra to perform the music with the fire and power which it requires. I would show what "Boris Godunoff" can be! With all the praise which has been lavished upon me, I still feel that people do not know what I *could* do.

The development of the screen as an art form means that there should be a great new field for musical composition. But America is much to blame in that most of the moving-picture music, even for the best movies, is done not by men stirred by creative instinct, but by men stirred by business. They are musical piece workers—men to whom one goes and says, "Make me so much and so much music, for a film of this or that kind; and how much will it cost per yard?"

This is almost literally true, for the sound specialists have figured out that there must be six seconds of music for nine feet of action. They claim that "the eye demands the right sound," and so their formula for "music" is more or less as follows: a hero must have music something like a *marche militaire*, a pretty heroine requires sweet, sentimental music, a villain must have sombre, threatening music, and so forth.

This is programme music in its most primitive and vilest form. Or else the musical piece-workers put together a patchwork quilt composed of scraps stolen from the standard composers. Much of it comes from Russian composers, because their work cannot be copyrighted in America. At

one movie I was astonished to hear the hunting theme from "Pskovitianka" ("Ivan the Terrible") of Rimsky-Korsakoff, in which I have so often performed, start up out of a medley of unrelated music. At another, the "Chanson Indue" was introduced—jazzed. Its source, from a scene in Rimsky-Korsakoff's opera "Sadko," seems quite forgotten, for some one remarked to me:

"Listen to that 'Indian Song,' Mr. Chaliapin! It is a melody of our American Indians,—the only one known, but a genuine one!"

No—as the moving-picture art grows, it will require real music, composed with an understanding of the art form of the screen in all its breadth and greatness. Perhaps some new American composer will arise who will find in the screen his inspiration for a new genre of opera.

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➤➤ Mind as God ◀◀

ANONYMOUS

This contributor to the series of religious experiences is a self-branded maverick. Life and reflection have evolved for her the poet Henley's doctrine: "I am the captain of my soul"

AS FAR back as my memory goes I have had religious experiences. Minor ones, probably, and not what specialists in the business would call such. But I can't recall a time when a pinch impended that I didn't make an automatic appeal, and receive a sense, way down deep inside, that something would turn up. And something always did. Not a voice from heaven directing events, necessarily, nor a flight of fiery chariots, nor a descent of meat-bearing ravens. But some very natural little circumstance or idea would project itself into my consciousness to alter the face of disaster, and straighten the tangle out.

The significant thing, to me, is that such circumstance or idea had inevitably to do with myself, personally. Not the other fellow. Not the state of the money market, or the temper of the world, or the aspect of the weather, or any other surrounding condition—primarily. Alteration always occurred inside. Hope, perhaps, or patience, or a kindly and trustful feeling toward the one that seemed responsible for my difficulty. And there has never been an occasion when such a change in me did not set in motion the particles composing such unpleasantness as existed, and rearrange them into a better pattern.

The ability to change inwardly I take to be universal, and to be the foundation for a certain statement that the Kingdom of God is within us. Far be it from me to assert that I have worked out sufficient variation from the old Adam design in which most of us were cast, to have instituted anything approximating the ultimate of harmony and peace and prosperity around me. But I have an absolute conviction that in exact proportion to inner recastings are the outer recastings of my universe affected.

Such inner changes are not always, or often, pious. It is impossible for me to conform to the requirements of a church, or, I am afraid, even to such civil laws as do not elicit whole-hearted response from my conscience. I am a woman and I smoke cigarettes, which is tabooed by the only church I ever belonged to. I am an American but I drink a cocktail before dinner if it is offered or there are the makings in the house. I am lined up, I suppose, in

the great Protestant division of this country's politics, but I would rather have had Mr. Smith for President than Mr. Hoover. Such divergence from organized plans for redemption leave me pretty much a maverick from any herd. There isn't a respectable "ism" or "ist" that could honestly examine me and take me to its bosom. And yet I maintain passionately that I am religious.

ONCE I joined a church. I was drawn to it by the service it rendered one in whom I was vitally interested. The person was my mother. She needed more than consolation or bodily healing and the church gave it to her, immediately and without stint. In doing so it worked a miracle for me as well and in the fullness of praise I joined.

My mother was of the maternal type that lives and moves and has its being in its children. When her children matured and wanted to live by and for themselves, tragic events took place. I was associated at the time with a company of theatrical people. Poor, battered, barn-storming folk—gay with the gaiety of despair at times, and always going hopefully from one obscure job to another—or frequently to no job.

My mother was with me. She couldn't let me go. Her boy had broken loose and ridden the bumpers to freedom. She clung the more tenaciously to her girl. She did everything that utter devotion and black dread suggested to justify the fact that she was with me, and that her life was drawn from mine. She sewed and nursed and got meals and stayed up nights. And always she trod the eruptive, terrible ground of fear lest even her heartbreaking labor and faithfulness were only preliminaries for a final casting off.

One day the character woman in the theatrical company said she was ill and must hunt up a practitioner.

"What do you mean—practitioner?" I asked.

"Christian Science," she replied. "It's not only that I'm sick. I could

stand that. But I'm discouraged. I've got to have help all around."

In those days Christian Science was spoken of usually in jest. An established form of witty profundity was to

say that it was neither Christian nor scientific. Always considerable of an intellectual snob I didn't want any for myself. But the feeling had come that something was going to turn up in the matter of my mother—and that maybe this was it. Accompanying the character woman on her mysterious errand, I made an engagement for mother.

If any woman reading this has had a mother with a will of her own and a decided case of personality, she will appreciate what I was up against when I went home with my announcement. My mother wasn't having any occult anodyne to reduce her to a state of resignation to her lot. She held the black arts in very low esteem. I was an ingrate and an unnatural child, who only wanted to ease her own conscience with a lie about having done all I could, before taking myself away and leaving her desolate. The long and short of it was that I could cancel the engagement.

I didn't, and eventually she went. She went because she loved me and I seemed to have my heart set on the crazy project. I accompanied her and sat in a parlor while she was in a study beyond. Her remark upon coming from the study was: "Well, if I could make money without raising a hand the way that woman does, I'd be cheerful too."

MY MOTHER'S state of mind didn't look very enlivening on the way home. But somehow I was enlivened. Sitting in that parlor, among antimacassars, and facing a picture of "Daniel in the Lions' Den" on the wall, I had been aware that I was changing inside. Apprehension for my mother was going out of me. I suppose it was fear, in that particular case, that had been laid. I went to work serenely and that night, as I came to the door of the rooms where we lived, I heard my mother singing softly as she rocked and waited for me. She was humming a tune popular at the time. Not a hymn or a psalm—just a tune. And I hadn't heard her sing for years.