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G.K. CHESTERTON AND THEATER

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Chesterton had a love affair with the theatre his whole life, a love which stemmed from his passion for toy theatre. He must have had so much fun as a child playing with a toy theatre. He mentions in his Autobiography that he and his father played with a toy theatre. Maisie Ward corroborates this fact in her biography of Chesterton. "The Chesterton children saw their first glimpse of fantasy through the framework of a toy-theatre of which their father was carpenter, scene-painter and scene-shifter, author and creator of actors and actresses a few inches high. Gilbert's earliest recollection is of one of these figures in a golden crown carrying a golden key, and his father was all through his childhood a man with a golden key who admitted him into a world of wonders."[1] In 1924 Chesterton admitted to playing with toy soldiers. In fact, it is the "best game in the world."[2] Toy soldiers is a good game for three reasons: "the real romance of the soldier, that he is brave and going into danger with a steadfastness (and nothing could be more steadfast than the expression of most toy soldiers); that he wears bright colours and glittering weapons; and last but not least, that he and his fellows are made to be arranged in lines and masses that suggest movement on a large scale; the excitement that there is any sort of procession."[3] Since Chesterton likens a toy theatre to toy soldiers, the same type of fun can be derived from both. Instead of just toy soldiers, a toy theatre can contain a panorama of colours and costumes. A play is judged excellent in a toy theatre if it provides a variety of characters, scenes, costumes and colors. There must be a lot of show.

A toy theatre can be an educational experience too. Besides

deriving pleasure from building and working with a toy theatre, a child can learn from a toy theatre. Children can build a toy theatre at home without too much expense. They would learn to paint and draw, sculpt and woodcarve, crafts which are sometimes very difficult to teach in school. By working and playing at home, a child can include other members of his family. Playing with a toy theatre can become a family sport and pleasure. Chesterton comments on the toy theatre as an educational tool for the family.

> For the moment I will conclude with one small suggestion; is it not rather a pity that this creative craft should be left to die, at the very moment when there is so much fuss about teaching all the very poorest children how to draw and paint and carve and cut out models? For the best game of all are the games that can be played at home; even if we think that in special social conditions they have to be learnt at school. To make the human family happy is the only possible object of all education, as of all civilization.[4]

The earliest date for an erection of a toy theatre in Chesterton's adult life is 1907. Maisie Ward states in Gilbert Keith Chesterton that "Gilbert had started a toy theatre before he left London, cutting out and painting figures and scenery, and devising plots for plays. Two of his favorites were 'St. George and the Dragon' and 'The Seven Champions of Christendom.'"[5] Gilbert and Frances Chesterton moved to Overroads, Beaconsfield from Battersea in 1909. In 1907 George Knollys wrote in Girl's Realm on Gilbert Keith Chesterton's toy theatre. There are pictures with this article of the theatre itself, the props and characters. An outline of "St. George and the Dragon" is included in the article and it leads the reader to believe that it was indeed a fantastical play. None of the plays which Chesterton wrote for his toy theatre have

been published in their entirety. Only the outline for "St. George and the Dragon" exists in this 1907 copy of Girl's Realm. Chesterton refers to this play several times in his writings, but he never wrote the drama down. When it came to his toy theatre, Chesterton was a very private person. At Beaconsfield he allowed only children in to view his productions. He had his own theatre in a building separate from the house on the Overroads property. Although Gilbert and Frances never had children of their own, Gilbert's happiest hours were spent with children. He would have rather entertained them than do anything else because in reality, he never grew up.

Since a toy theatre was important to him, Chesterton had definite ideas on its philosophy. There is a complete essay in Tremendous Trifles on toy theatre as well as remarks in Charles Dickens A Critical Study. Maisie Ward in her book on Chesterton includes more than a page of quotes by Chesterton on a toy theatre's rules and effects and they echo Chesterton's essay in Tremendous Trifles.

> I will not say positively that a toy-theatre is the best of theatres; though I have had more fun out of it than any other. But I will say positively that the toy-theatre is the best of all toys. It sometimes fails; but generally because people are mistaken in the matter of what it is meant to do, and what it can or cannot be expected to do; as if people should use a toy balloon as a football or a skipping rope as a hammock.
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> Now the first rule may seem rather contradictory; but it is quite true and really quite simple. In a small theatre, because it is a small theatre, you cannot deal with small things. You can introduce a dragon; but you cannot really introduce an earwig; it is too small for a small theatre.
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> The second and smaller rule, that really follows from this, is that everything dramatic should depend not on a character's action, but simply on his appearance. Shakespeare said of actors that they have their exits and their entrances; but these actors ought really to have

nothing else except exits and entrances.[6]

Chesterton believes that the main principle of art is one of limitation. One does not expand art; one cuts down as Chesterton cut his cardboard figures such as St. George and the Dragon. A producer of a toy theatre does not limit the events; on the contrary, he makes them grandiose. Even though the audience watches through a small window, large events can occur much easier than in a big theatre.[7] Chesterton is quite fond of mentioning the Day of Judgement as a good example of a production which can be easily staged in a toy theatre. Chesterton concludes the essay in Tremendous Trifles by saying that, "My toy theatre is as philosophical as the drama of Athens."[8] A toy theatre can teach all the morality necessary for modern man.

Since Chesterton had such fun with a toy theatre, it goes without saying that he wanted to be entertained when he attended the legitimate theatre. Chesterton's theater should be fun, like a child opening up a Christmas present. He is filled with awe, joy and discovery at the sight of a new toy.

> For what is the theatre? First and last, and above all things, it is a festival. The theatre is nothing if it is not sensational. The theatre is nothing if it is not theatrical. A play may be happy, it may be sad, it may be wild, it may be quiet, it may be tragic, it may be comic, but it must be festive. It must be something which is passionate and abrupt and exceptional, something which makes them feel, however gross the phrase may seem, that they have in reality got a shilling's worth of emotion. It must be a festival. It must, in modern phraseology, be a 'treat'.[9]

First and foremost a play must be a 'festival' or the play's a complete disaster. Theatre should not be 'like life'. Theatre should offer an answer outside the sphere of realism. Chesterton

is as anti-realistic as they come. Because much of modern drama of Chesterton's time is realistic, Chesterton is against most modern drama, a subject which will be discussed later. Chesterton wished to be entertained; he believed that people did not want to see what they had lived all day on the stage before them at night. People in general do not go to see modern realistic drama because they want to be entertained. In the essay, "The Meaning of Theatre" Chesterton continues the same thinking that was quoted above.

> To the primitive Greek the loud, wild praise of Dionysus was a treat. To the modern child the pantomime of 'Cinderella' is a treat. The true meaning of the theatre is thoroughly expressed in both. If it is a treat, a festival, it matters nothing whether it is comic or tragic, realistic or idealistic, Ibsenite or Rostandesque, happy or pitiful; it is a play. If it is 'like Life', if it represents the dull and throbbing routine of our actual life and exhibits only the emotions with which we commonly regard it, the internal merit matters nothing; it is not a play. That is the damning, but neglected error of so much modern realistic drama; the play fails to be a festival;; and therefore fails to be a play.[10]

By being entertained, Chesterton could cope better with a world that, even in the first third of the century, seemed to be falling apart. If more people believed in festival, maybe the world would not be falling apart as quickly. Some critics have gone so far as to call Chesterton 'Peter Pan' because he enjoyed the festival aspects of the theatre so much.

Since theatre in Chesterton's lifetime was not a festival, the incidence of comment on theatre is small. In fact, from 1912 to 1922 he did not comment on theatre at all. He hardly mentioned modern playwrights and their plays, except for George Bernard Shaw, because he did not care for them. He liked Shaw best when

he was melodramatic in his plays. He wrote voluminously on Shakespeare; his favorite play is A Midsummer Night's Dream. Shakespeare and Shaw were both lifelong obsessions. Chesterton was concerned with ideas rather than the technical aspects of their plays.

Chesterton's first published ideas on the theatre are found in The Defendent and they follow the idea that theatre must be a festival. When Chesterton formed this theory one cannot tell, but it does pervade all his remarks on any aspect of the theatre. The Defendent, published in 1901, contains an essay on farce called "A Defense of Farce." Since farce and pantomime are closely allied, Chesterton himself refers to both in the same breath. In the genres of farce and pantomime Chesterton saw an escape of the reality of life. By reality, he meant the darker side of life, the sorrow of existence. Chesterton admitted that art, since it is removed from reality, must compensate by having a "certain pugency and neatness of form."[11] Since theatre is a literary art, it must portray the human spirit in some way. But let us portray it joyfully.

> The artistic justification, then, of farce and pantomime must consist in the emotions of life which correspond to them. And these emotions are to an incredible extent crushed out by the modern insistence on the painful side of life only. Pain, it is said, is the dominant element of life; but this is true only in a very special sense. If pain were for one single instant literally the dominant element in life, every man would be found hanging dead from his own bed-post by the morning. Pain, as the black and catastrophic thing, attracts the youthful artist, just as the schoolboy draws devils and skeletons and men hanging. But joy is a far more elusive and elvish matter, since it is our reason for existing, and a very feminine reason; it mingles with every breath we draw and every cup of tea we drink. The literature of joy is infinitely more difficult, more rare, and more triumphant than the black and white literature of pain. And of all of the varied forms of the literature of joy, the form most truly worthy of moral reverence and artistic ambition

> is the form called 'farce' - or its wilder shape in pantomime.[12]

Both pantomime and farce show the humanity of life and that is why Chesterton felt so akin to it, since he was so humane himself.

Chesterton's other ideas on pantomime appear in a work published posthumously, The Common Man. The essay probably appeared much earlier in a journal. Chesterton neatly ties pantomime and his childhood toy theatre together. He rejoices that the scenery and costumes of a pantomime are just paint and pasteboard, artificial as it were. So what if they are not real. Theyaare only the trappins that accompany a story, a plot. They are what make pantomime a festival.

> In the Pantomime of my childhood, with its simpler scenery, there were tricks of mere stage carpentry which I enjoyed as much as if I were working them myself. There was one way of representing tossing waves, by rank behind rank of escaloped blue walls as groundpieces, moved in opposite directions so that the crests seemed to cross and dance. I knew how it was done, because my father did it himself before my very eyes, in my own toy-theatre at home. But it gave me such ectasy that even now when I think of it for an instant my heart leaps up like the wave. I knew it was not water, but I knew it was sea; and in that flash of knowledge I had passed far beyond those who suffer the fixed and freezing illusion, uttered by the pessimistic poet, that 'the sea's a lot of water that happens to be there.' In imagination there is no illusion; no, not even an instant of illusion.[13]

Chesterton had one of the greatest imaginations ever bestowe on a man. If there is indeed no illusion in exercising one's imagination, than Chesterton is admitting that he is always aware of reality. He just did not want reality in the theatre.

Chesterton is fond of mentioning imagination. He approves of everyone using their imagination rather than reason. Living in an age which stressed reality more than the imagination, Chesterton

became very tired of the emphasis on reality. Chesterton believes in the three unities from Aristotle's Poetics: namely, the unity of time, the unity of place and the unity of action. The unities spark the imagination and not the rational capacities of man, according to Chesterton.

> The three unities of time and place, that is the idea of keeping figures and events within the frame of a few hours or a few yards, is naturally decided as a specially artificial affront to the intellect. But I am sure it is an especially true suggestion to the imagination. It is exactly in the artistic atmosphere, where rules and reasons are so hard to define, that this unification would be most easy to defend. This limitation to a few scenes and actors really has something in it that pleases the imagination and not the reason. There are instances in which it may be broken boldly; there are types of art to which it does not apply at all. But whenever it can be satisfied, something not superficial but rather subconscious is satisfied.[14]

Of all the dramatic genres, Chesterton wrote the most on tragedy. There is a reason for this fact. Chesterton liked to discuss the tragedy of life, tragedy in novels, tragedy of Shakespeare and tragedy in general. The last kind of tragedy concerns us in this paper. Chesterton defined tragedy in five of his books of essays. The most profound statement that he ever made on tragedy is: "Tragedy is the highest expression of the infinite value of human life."[15] The positive affirmation of the continuity of human life is one of Shakespeare's most important themes. Chesterton felt that this theme was the basis of tragedy and exists in one of the greatest tragedies ever written.

> One great idea on which all tragedy builds is the idea of the continuity of human life. The one thing a man cannot do is exactly what all modern artists and free lovers are always trying to do. He cannot cut his life up into separate sections... The basis of all tragedy is that man lives a coherent and continuous life. It is only a worm

> that you can cut in two and leave the severed parts still alive... This then is the basis of all tragedy, this living and perilous continuity which does not exist in the lower creatures. This is the basis of all tragedy, and this is certainly the basis of MacBeth.[16]

MacBeth struggles against something which is stronger than he is and tragedy does also. "For a tragedy means always a man's struggle with that which is stronger than man. And it is the feet of the gods themselves that are here trampling on our traditions; it is death and doom themselves that have broken our little toys like sticks; for against the stars of destiny none shall prevail."[17]

Chesterton always interjects his aversion of realism into any discussion of any dramatic genre. And so he does with tragedy. For Chesterton tragedy has to be felt as with any dramatic form. Tragedy invokes a catharsis on the part of the viewer and it is a personal and individual experience. A catharsis is not an actuality, but an emotion. "The essence of tragedy is a spiritual breakdown or decline, and in the great French play(Cyrano de Bergerac) the spiritual sentiment mounts unceasingly until the last line. It is not the facts themselves, but our feelings about them, that makes tragedy and comedy, and death is more joyful in Rostand than life in Maeterlinck."[18]

Tragedy and comedy are opposites as hate and love; yet, how easily one emotion can become the other. Chesterton talked about comedy and tragedy in one breath; plays are both tragedies and comedies at the same time. "I mean that the excitement mounts up perpetually; the stories grow more and more comic, as a tragedy should grow more and more tragid. The rack, tragic or comic, stretches a man until something breaks inside him. In tragedy it is his heart, or, perhaps, his stiff neck. In farce I do not quite

know what it is - perhaps his funny-bone is dislocated; perhaps his skull is slightly cracked."[19]

Comedy and tragedy breed equality. Every man is laughed at and every man suffers through tragedy. Drama is the great democratizing factor of men. It appeals to everyone regardless of heritage or history.

> There are two rooted spiritual realities out of which grow all kinds of democratic conception or sentiment of human equality. There are two things in which all men are manifestly unmistakably equal. They are not equally clever or equally muscular or equally fat, as the sages of modern reaction (with piercing insight) perceive. But this is a spiritual certainty, that all men are tragic. And this again, is an equally sublime spiritual certainty, that all men are comic. No special and private sorrow can be so dreadful as the fact of having two legs. Every man is important if he loses his life; and every man is funny if he loses his hat, and has to run after it. And the universal test everywhere of whether a thing is popular, of the people, is whether it employs vigorously these extremes of the tragic and the comic.[20]

Comedy is optimistic. It uplifts our soul. Chesterton felt that modern comedians never heard of optimism or humor, for that matter. Instead of being just comic, they were sad comics. The audience seeing them would not know whether to laugh or cry; probably they would sit in their seats dumbly just looking at the stage. "The heart can be touched to joy and triumph; the heart can be touched to amusement. But all our comedians are tragic comedians. These later fashionable writers are so pessimistic in bone and marrow that they never seem able to imagine the heart having any concern with mirth."[21]

Comedy proclaims the joy of life. It has depth and universality. Unfortunately, Chesterton does not think that modern comedy

possesses any of these traits. By modern Chesterton means comedy of the first third of the twentieth century when plays of Ibsen, Chekhov, Barrie and Shaw were being produced. "Everybody agrees that the comedies in question are what is called 'modern'; which seems to mean that they are comedies about cocktails and artificial complexions and people who walk about in a languid manner, when they are supposed to be taking part in a wild dance of liberty and the joy of life... The old comedy is like a scene of people dancing a minuet on a very polished floor; but it is a polished oak floor. The new comedy is like a scene of people dancing the Charleston on a sheet of ice - of very thin ice."[22] Modern comedy was worthless to Chesterton, so lifeless and so dull.

The above quote reminds one of the comedy of Noel Coward, another playwright of the twentieth century. Chesterton sneers at Noel Coward and his comment is rather good. "For instance, it is more likely than not that, in eighty years, the little tricks and mannerisms of the new Noel Coward sort of comedy will seem utterly false and farcical. A new school of humour will produce a burlesque of the Noel Coward comedy, and every action will seem affectation."[23]

Chesterton has a firm faith in comedy of an earlier time when comedy entertained its audience. "Almost all the primitive legends of the world are comedies, not only in the sense that they have a happy ending, but in the sense that they are based upon a certain optimistic assumption that the hero is destined to be the destroyer of the monster."[24] What wishful thinking that the hero conquers the villain! How much more enjoyable would comedies be if the good guy won. Besides primitive comedy, and he does not elaborate on what is

primitive, Chesterton's favorites in comedy are the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. "But great comedy, the comedy of Shakespeare or Sterne, not only can be, but must be, taken seriously. There is nothing to which a man must give himself up with more faith and self-abandonment than to genuine laughter. In such comedies one laughs with the heroes and not at them."[25] Chesterton would have been thankful for a new tradition of modern comedy if there had only been the writers that agreed with his ideas. Chesterton would have needed a public to accept his own idea of comedy that was actually as old as man himself. He never tried to find this public because only one of his plays was ever produced, if indeed Magic fit into the rejuvenation of comedy. We shall see later.

Chesterton explicates melodrama by comparing it to farce. "Melodrama is a form of art, legitimate like any other, as noble as farce, almost as noble as pantomime. The essence of melodrama is that it appeals to the moral sense in a highly simplified state, just as farce appeals to the sense of humour in a highly simplified state. Farce creates people who are so intellectually simple as to hide in packing-cases or pretend to be their own aunts. Melodrama creates people so morally simple as to kill their enemies in Oxford Street, and repent on seeing their mother's photograph."[26] Chesterton follows the same themes with melodrama as he does with the other dramatic genres. First, melodrama should mirror life. If melodrama becomes factual or realistic, it would fail in its purpose. "The 'melodrama is much more like life. It is much more like man, and especially the poor man.' In short, melodrama, if it is dull, is dull because it is too accurate."[27] Again Chesterton infers that if

a genre is too realistic on stage, the purpose of that genre is defeated. A melodrama becomes dull if it becomes too realistic. It can be 'like life', but just so much and not too much. There is a limit which a play in any genre can not pass because then it becomes too realistic. Realism is a taboo according to Chesterton, but he never defines the line which a play must not cross. A writer or director must intuit that line.

Second, Chesterton does not favor Victorian melodrama as he does not favor Victorian farce. Victorian melodrama is artificial and as previously noted, Chesterton does not approve of artificiality in drama. "But The School for Scandal is artificial and is in some minor matters even absurd; that is, unintentionally absurd. There are always some stage properties of a period that look a little too stagey at a subsequent period. Nevertheless, when all this is allowed for, it must be admitted that the period of Victorian melodrama was a pretty ghastly period."[28] Chesterton is always happier with a more primitive drama, whether it is Greek, medieval, or Elizabethan. In the case of melodrama, Chesterton wishes for a return to the miracle play. His condemnation of modern drama is evident when he discusses the genre of melodrama.

> There is a queerer thing to be learnt from the stale and stagey melodrama. It is this: that if an old thing is old enough, and a new thing is new enough, nobody will notice if they are almost the same thing...It does definitely help, not merely the melodramatic trick, but the dramatic truth of a scene, that the audience should hear something that the stage company do not hear. The result is that this fiction has reappeared in ultra-modern drama, in the form of an entirely new psychological and metaphysical theory of the theatre. The characters will soliloquize as loud as they like, and utter asides that are not said aside... But it is odd that something that was laughed off the stage when it was at least barely

> possible, should return to the stage in triumph in the form of a stark, staring impossibility. It looks as if we should all have to go back to Miracle Plays - and possibly to miracles.[29]

Even though Chesterton does not admire Victorian melodrama, he does admire Elizabethan drama. He states: "The Elizabethan was rather the end than the beginning of a tradition; the crown and not the cradle of drama."[30] He enjoys comparing the great Elizabethan drama and modern drama respectively.

> Shakespeare (in a weak moment, I think) said that all the world is a stage. But Shakespeare acted on the much finer principle that a stage is all the world. So there are, in all Bernard Shaw's plays, patches of what people would call essentially undramatic stuff, which the dramatist puts in because he is honest and would rather prove his case than succeed with his play. Shaw has brought back into English drama that Shakespearian irrelevance. Perhaps a better definition than either is a habit of thinking the truth worth telling even when you meet it by accident. In Shaw's plays one meets an incredible number of truths by accident.[31]

This quote besides comparing Shaw to Shakespeare also elucidates some of Chesterton's ideas. For him the stage is indeed all the world, a world contrived to bring about truths by accident and not by design. Truths by design approach too closely the definition of realism, an idea which Chesterton abhors. In "Our Notebook" of the Illustrated London News, March 29, 1924, Chesterton writes on modern drama and realism. He does not condone realism at all. Modern dramatists are just ruining a fine tradition that precedes them. They seem to want to rebel against tradition and so are becoming very stale. "A convention is a form of freedom. That is the reality that the realists cannot get into their heads. A dramatic convention is not a constraint on the dramatist; it is a permission to the dramatist. It is a permit allowing him to depart

from the routine of external reality, in order to express a more internal and intimate reality. Just as a legal fiction has often been the defense of political liberty, so a dramatic fiction is the defense of imaginative liberty."[32]

In another Illustrated London News article dated November 5, 1932 Chesterton writes on the characters in a modern drama and how opposite their dialogue and actions are to classical ideals. The classical ideal is one of completeness while the modern dramatic dialogue is fragmentary. "Now the fragmentary character of much of modern dialogue arises from an idea of spontaneity; an idea which has its spiritual value, but is at least quite contrary to the classical ideal of completeness. The modern dramatic person is so spontaneous that he starts speaking before he knows what he has to say, or whether he has anything to say. It is easy to pit one sort of dialogue against the other; to say that the new has the advantage of being rapid to reply that the old has the more obscure advantage of being reasonable."[33] Since the modern drama is fragmentary, so is the character. According to Chesterton there is not a complete character in modern drama. He cannot talk a complete language and "he cannot even complete a sentence."[34] Whereas classical dramatists wrote plays which expressed emotion, modern writers write plays which express only nervous exasperation. Chesterton does not appreciate Ibsen and the main reason is that Ibsen wrote problem plays which Chesterton thinks are plutocratic. Modern drama was not worth attending; therefore, modern theatre, especially the problem play, did not satisfy Chesterton's needs. He abhored the problem play as early as 1912. "But it is the whole point of the

problem play that it does not admit any positive morality at the beginning, but seeks to discover some original or unexpected morality at the end."[35] Another reason for which Chesterton dislikes Ibsen is that Ibsen puts the truth of everyday living on the stage for everyone to see. Chesterton felt that it was a nervous type of drama that only expressed nervous exasperation, certainly not a 'festival' or a 'treat'.

Along with his scorn of realism Chesterton condones verse drama. Verse drama when well done can be more creative than prose drama and more lyrical to listen to. "An essential aspect of this question of heroic comedy is the question of drama in rhyme. There is nothing that affords so easy a point of attack for the dramatic realist as the conduct of a play in verse."[36]

For some reason Chesterton is not verbose on playwrights other than Shaw, Shakespeare and Rostand. One of the reasons may be that he did not write on playwrights because he did not attend their plays. He could have more fun at home entertaining the neighborhood children with his toy theatre. The amount of words written on Shaw and Shakespeare could encompass two separate papers, but mention of Rostand will concur with Chesterton's main idea on theatre. Rostand's Cyrano de Bergerac is theatrical; it contains both tragedy and comedy as Chesterton describes them. But above all, the play is not realistic. He makes no mention of Chekhov, Osborne, Brecht, Auden or Rattigan on the subject of drama. He discusses Yeats and Eliot as poets, but not as dramatists. He comments on Priestley as a Unitarian and he mentions Galsworthy as a writer of realism and as a politician. He only approves of James

Barrie because he "introduced a sort of irony into fairyland."[37] He did not appreciate the drama of the twentieth century except sometimes Shaw and Barrie. The drama during his lifetime became more realistic than he could stand.

In writing about drama, theatre, tragedy, comedy, farce and melodrama Chesterton applies a rather unified and positive thesis to all of them. Theatre is supposed to be a 'treat', a 'festival', to be enjoyed and to be entertaining. Modern drama for Chesterton satisfied none of these needs and neither did Victorian drama. Realism is boring and no fun to watch on stage. The most fantastic experience is to be part of an audience in a toy theatre and watch the extravaganza on stage. Chesterton's own plays follow most of these dictums. When he follows them more strictly, the plays are more successful.

George Bernard Shaw urged his dear friend Chesterton to write a play. Shaw felt that Chesterton would make a fine dramatist; he also tried to stimulate Belloc and others. As early as 1908 he wrote to G. K. C. as follows.

> My Dear G. K. C.
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> What about that play? It is no use trying to answer me in The New Age: the real answer to my article is the play. I have tried fair means: The New Age article was the inauguration of an assault below the belt. I shall deliberately destroy your credit as an essayist, as a journalist, as a critic, as a Liberal, as everything that offers your laziness a refuge, until starvation and shame drive you to serious dramatic parturition. I shall repeat my public challenge to you; vaunt my superiority; insult your corpulence; torture Belloc; if necessary, call on you and steal your wife's affections by intellectual and athletic displays, until you contribute something to the British drama. You are played out as an essayist: your ardor is soddened, your intellectual substance crumbled, by the attempt to keep up the work of your twenties in your thirties.

> Another five yearsoof this; and you will be the apologist of every infamy that wears a Liberal or Catholic mask. You, too, will speak of the portraits of Vecelli and the Assumption of Allegri, and declare that Democracy refuses to lackey-label these honest citizens as Titian and Correggio. Even that colossal fragment of your ruined honesty that still stupendously dismisses Beethoven as 'some rubbish about a piano' will give way to remarks about 'a graceful second subject in the relative minor.' Nothing can save you now except a rebirth as a dramatist. I have done my turn; and I now call on you to take yours and do a man's work.[38]

He supplied Chesterton material for a play over a period of several years. In 1909 Shaw wrote to Chesterton.

> Now to business. When one breathes Irish air, one becomes a practical man. In England I used to say what a pity it was you did not write a play. In Ireland I sat down and began writing a scenario for you. But before I could finish it I had come back to London; and now it is all up with the scenario; in England I can do nothing but talk. I therefore now send you the thing as far as I scribbled it; and I leave you to invent what escapades you please for the hero, and to devise some sensational means of getting him back to heaven again, unless you prefer to end with the millennium in full swing.[39]

The scenario dealt with St. Augustine after re-visiting England and Chesterton and Shaw were to share the copywright and the royalties. Three years later Shaw was still urging Chesterton to write a play from the scenario as well as stimulate Chesterton to write his own play. This letter he wrote to Mrs. Chesterton.

> The convenience of time depends on a design of my own which I wish to impart to you first. I want to read a play to Gilbert. It began by way of being a music-hall sketch; so it is not 3½ hours long as usual; I can get through it in an hour and a half. I want to insult and taunt and stimulate Gilbert with it. It is the sort of thing he could write and ought to write; a religious harlequinade. In fact, he could do it better if a sufficient number of pins were stuck into him. My proposal is that I read the play to him on Sunday (or at the next convenient date), and that you fall into transports of admiration of it; declare that you can never love a man who cannot write things like that; and definitely announce that if Gilbert has not finished

> a worthy successor to it before the end of the third week next ensuing, you will go out like the lady in A Doll's House, and live your own life - whatever that dark threat may mean.[40]

Needless to say, Chesterton did write a play two years later. He never finished the original scenario on St. Augustine and the scenario which Shaw was to read Easter of 1912. The latter scenario became Androcles and The Lion.

Magic was written in 1913 which was subsequently followed by The Judgement of Dr. Johnson and Surprise, a number of years later. Magic and The Judgement of Dr. Johnson were both produced on the stage while Surprise was published posthumously. Magic was a moderately successful play; it ran from November of 1913 to at least February of 1914. The critics, for the most part, liked it. Shaw wrote a play in honor of the hundredth performance of Magic. "The Music Cure(1913), described as 'a piece of utter nonsense,' was produced at the Little Theatre, London, January 28, 1914, in honor of the one hundredth performance of G. K. Chesterton's Magic."[41]

Chesterton was not a playwright in the true sense of the definition. "Drama is a thing of conflict and all of Chesterton's thought was dialectic. Drama is compressed and heightened form, a ritual of action and symbolic words; and Chesterton's critical mind worked always in symbol, preferably in symbolic narrative. His abrupt repartee and gesture often seem too thin, too rapid in the leisurely-paced, introspective form of the novel, but they are perfectly suited to the stage."[42] He wrote plays to be read, not to be acted. His plays are enjoyable to read because it is fun

to imagine the staging, the costumes, and the characterizations. The reader must have a good imagination and a knowledge of the technical aspects of the theatre to comprehend what Chesterton is trying to say in his plays.

Magic is far from being realistic. The idea is fanciful and fun to imagine. According to Patrick Braybrooke: "As a play Magic was a delight. It managed to be keen drama without the aid of the usual attributes of drama. It managed to be a fantastic comedy which was real. It showed that, had he wished (and it may not be too late even now) Chesterton could have been one of our leading dramatists... Magic postulated that magic did may of the old tricks of old and that we are trying to do them afresh and are dismally failing, because we use balck magic. In Magic Chesterton used the theatre as the mouthpiece of his philosophy."[43] The title Magic is indicative of what supposedly happens in the play. Indeed, the reader is never sure if the Conjurer did perform magic or not. Patrick Braybooke in Gilbert Keith Chesterton wonders if Chesterton himself believed in magic. "The play is in some ways a difficult one; we are left wondering whether or not Chesterton believes in magic; if he does, then the conjurer need not have been so upset that he had gained so much power of a psychic nature; if he does not, then the conjurer was a clever fraud or a brilliant hypnotist."[44]

Mr. Braybrooke discusses in his book the idea that Magic is a dramatic vehicle for a theological argument. "I rather fancy that Magic is a theological argument, disguised in the form of a play, that relies for its effects on clever conversation, the moving of pictures, and a mysterious person who may have been a conjurer and

may also been a magician."[45] Julius West, in G. K. Chesterton, goes a step further to say that the ideas of Chesterton's Orthodoxy are found in Magic.

> There are two works which the critics of Chesterton must take into special consideration. They are Magic and Orthodoxy; and it may be said that the former is a dramatized version of the latter. The two together are a great work, striking at the very roots of disbelief. In a sense, Chesterton pays the atheist a very high compliment. He does what the atheist is generally too lazy to do for himself; he takes his substitute for religion and systematizes it into something like a philosophy. Then he examines it as a whole. And he finds that atheism is dogma in its extremest form, that it embodies a multitude of superstition, and that it is actually continually adding to their number. Such are the reasons of the greatness of Magic.[46]

That quote represents a rather long and involved argument for Magic fulfilling religious purposes. Chesterton was a religious man, a future Catholic and his essays on religion are famous. However, West's argument is only one way of criticizing Magic. I tend to agree with Braybrooke and the following statement. "It is, I think, undoubtedly a problem play, and I doubt very much if Chesterton knows what was the agency that did the trick, but I rather think that 'Magic' is a great play, not because of the situations, but rather because the more the play is studied the more difficult is it to say exactly what is the lesson of it."[47]

Magic's distinction is based on the fact that it can be viewed as a vehicle for theology, magic and life. I believe that Magic is Chesterton's affirmation of the fantasy that occurs in life. The Conjurer speaks to Patricia about her brother; "Remember he has read fairy tales as much as you have. Fairy tales are the only democratic institutions. All the classes have heard of the fairy

tales."[48] One must remember that Chesterton wrote fairy tales for children. At the end of the play the Conjurer professes his desire to marry Patricia. She consents, but they decide that it is not practical. They discuss their own fairy tale.

> Conjurer: I have put my honour in your hands... oh, yes, I have a little left. We began with a fairy tale. Have I any right to take advantage of that fairy tale? Has not the fairy tale really and truly come to an end?
> Patricia: Yes. That fairy tale has really and truly come to an end. (Looks at him a little in the old mystical manner.) It is very hard for a fairy tale to come to an end. If you leave it alone it lingers everlastingly. Our fairy tale has come to an end in the only way a fairy tale can leave off being a fairy tale.
> Conjurer: I don't understand you.
> Patricia: It has come true.[49]

Everyone begins life in a fairy tale. Children are brought up on them and they should treasure them as long as they believe them. Unfortunately, the fairy tale quickly leaves as children grow up to be adults. And so it happens in most of the events of life: falling in love, marrying, bringing up children and working. Life is faced straight on, but it is easier to cope iwth it if there is a little magic in our lives and the remembrance of fairy tales in our heart. This is an uncomplicated explanation of Magic, but it fits in Chesterton's thesis of drama.

Chesterton admitted in 1924 that he knew little about the world of the theatre. In a Preface to J. T. Grein's The New World of the Theatre, he wrote this about himself and his play Magic. Chesterton takes a rather humble attitude for a fairly knowledgeable critic of the theatre. "Compared with the writer of this book, and even with most of the readers of it, I know very little about the theatre or about plays in general. I have only written one

play; and I know even less about that. I regard it with that sort of panic-stricken agnosticism with which a man often regards his one intervention in a world he does not understand; I felt disposed to desert it on a doorstep or to use the traditional plea that it was a very little one."[50]

Magic and his last play, Surprise, are indeed 'treats'. They both mirror life and could both be played in toy theatres. Neither play follows the definition of realism; both contain elements of tragedy and comedy as Chesterton defines them. Surprise even goes so far as to have puppets in part of the play and a comic act and a tragic act. The reality of life triumphs in the end and it is tragic. The puppets make a happy and fanciful act while the real actors play a sad and un-imaginative act. One would think that Chesterton would mention puppets in his essays, but he does not. He would have approved of them because they are fun and children love them. Chesterton probably admired Punch and Judy shows.

Surprise has been lauded by critics such as Gary Wills. "The Surprise, published posthumously (1952), was written in 1930; it ranks with Chesterton's finest creative works - with Magic, The Man Who Was Thursday, The Wild Knight, and The White Horse."[51] It is my belief that Chesterton put himself in the role of the author and the following excerpt from Surprise sounds as if Chesterton is speaking himself. The author(in the play) speaks: "Will you see my play? It is a part of my confession. Don't you know how it is, with our wretched trade? We poets never tell the truth, except when we tell it in fables. I should try to tell the truth, in respect for the Sacrament of Penance; but I should always be weighted down

with the thought of how little I had to tell."[52]

The Judgement of Dr. Johnson is a rather big disappointment to those who have read Magic and Surprise. The best criticism that I found happens to agree with my opinion of the play. The Judgement of Dr. Johnson is too similar to the bad writing of George Bernard Shaw. "In 1927 Chesterton took up again the form of drama. The Judgement of Dr. Johnson is not as effective or significant as Magic; a mere exercise in the Shavian manner, it reworks the points made in Candida. But Shaw's men were simply weak and his women effortlessly strong; in Chesterton's play the men are fools, but with depths in their folly, and the woman shows her superior strength in the ability to suffer, not in the airy insouciance of Candida."[53] I do not mean to infer that Candida is bad, but Chesterton wrote bad Shaw. The Judgement of Dr. Johnson is not Chesterton because Chesterton was in no way the type of writer Shaw was. The play approaches realism because in this case some of the characters did live. The play could be a treat if it were well done and not an imitation, but is not a treat when it is read. The audience would have to know something about Dr. Johnson and Boswell to appreciate the humour, an experience Chesterton himself would never have approved of. Besides, this play would have been a disaster if it had been produced in a toy theater. When it was produced in a legitimate theater in 1932 it was a critical success but not a public success.

The Man Who Was Thursday was transformed into a play by Chesterton's sister-in-law Mrs. Cecil Chesterton. Chesterton wrote the Preface to the play when it was published into book form.

The play never received critical acclaim and it is my belief that Chesterton himself felt that the novel was ruined when it was transformed into a play. In 1906 Chesterton wrote this comment: "That a good novel should make a good play is not only rare, it is intrinsically unlikely. If it is a good novel it will probably make a bad play... Thus, conversely, it commonly follows that a good novel makes a bad play because it is a good novel. It may be urged that Shakespeare himself was an adapter, and that he took the plot of his plays from old or contemporary romances. It is quite true that Shakespeare made his dramas out of novels. But then, with his abysmal and starry sagacity, he always made them out of bad novels."[54]

Chesterton's thesis of drama remained constant throughout his life and his works. From the beginning book of essays, The Defendent to The Common Man which was published posthumously, Chesterton held the same beliefs on the theatre. This paper began on the subject of the toy theatre because of Chesterton's belief in the feasibility of a toy theatre. It appears in all of Chesterton's ideas on every aspect of the theatre. Even Magic and Surprise, his two best plays, are both 'treats'. Life is so full of pain and sorrow that people wish to be entertained when they come to a theatre or when they read a play. The realism of their own pitiful lives must be erased in order to derive a little fun out of life. One wonders if Chesterton had not been so adamantly opposed to realism and found a middle road between the fantastic and the realistic, his dramatic criticism and his own plays would be more popular and would have survived to be read more often. Only buffs of Chesterton care to know what he thought about melodrama, tragedy, comedy and

pantomime. The world would be a little wiser if they took the trouble to read what he did think about theatre. The criterion for his permanence in our world is a passage from Chesterton himself.

> In studying any eternal tragedy the first question necessarily is what part of tragedy is eternal. If there be any element in man's world which is in any sense permanent it must have this characteristic, that it rebukes first one generation and then another, but rebukes them always in opposite directions and for opposite faults. The ideal world is always sane. The real world is always mad. But it is mad about a different thing every time; all the things that have been are changing and inconstant. The only thing that is really reliable is the thing that has never been. All very great classics of art are a rebuke to extravagance not in one direction but in all directions.[55]

If the above quote has any truth in it, which I believe it has, one can believe that Chesterton's ideas on theatre and his own plays will stay eternal and always fantastical. If the world loses or forgets them, it will be worse off for it.

NOTES

[1]Maisie Ward, Gilbert Keith Chesterton(New York: Sheed & Ward, 1943), pp. 12-13.

[2]Gilbert Keith Chesterton, "The Best Game in the World," The Merry-Go-Round, 1(May, 1924), 299-80.

[3]Ibid.

[4]Chesterton, "The Best Game in the World," The Merry-Go-Round, 1(June, 1924), 320.

[5]Ward, p. 260.

[6]Ward,,pp. 26-61.

[7]Chesterton, Tremendous Trifles(New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1909), pp. 182-84.

[8]Chesterton, Tremendous Trifles, p. 184.

[9]Chesterton, Lunacy and Letters(New York: Sheed and Ward, 1958), pp. 39-40.

[10]Chesterton, Lunacy and Letters, p. 40.

[11]Chesterton, The Defendent(London: J. M. Dent Sons Ltd., 1901), pp. 123-24.

[12]Chesterton, The Defendent, pp. 124-25.

[13]Chesterton, The Common Man(New York: Sheed and Ward, 1950), pp. 58-59.

[14]Chesterton, Fancies Versus Fads(New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1923), p. 110.

[15]Chesterton, Tremendous Trifles, pp. 45-46.

[16]Chesterton, The Spice of Life(Beaconsfield: Darwen Finlayson, 1909), p. 82.

[17]Chesterton, The Outline of Sanity(New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1927), p. 78.

[18]Chesterton, Varied Types(New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1903), p. 76.

[19]Chesterton, A Handful of Authors(London: Sheed & Ward, 1953), p. 139.

[20]Chesterton, Charles Dickens A Critical Study(New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1907), p. 247.

[21]Chesterton, Heretics(London: The Bodley Head, 1905), p. 208.

[22]Chesterton, Generally Speaking(London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1928), pp. 172,175.

[23]Chesterton, Avowals and Denials(London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1934), p. 143.

[24]Chesterton, Varied Types, p. 73.

[25]Chesterton, Five Types(London: Arthur L. Humphreys, 1910), p. 46.

[26]Chesterton, Charles Dickens, p. 185.

[27]Chesterton, Heretics, pp. 282-83.

[28]Chesterton, Avowals and Denials(New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1935), p. 153.

[29]Chesterton, Avowals and Denials, pp. 156-57.

[30]Chesterton, "The Humor of King Herod," The Uses of Diversity (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1920), p. 97.

[31]Chesterton, George Bernard Shaw(London: The Bodley Head, 1910), p. 252.

[32]Chesterton, "Our Notebook," The Illustrated London News, 29 March, 1924, p. 532.

[33]Chesterton, "Our Notebook," The Illustrated London News, 5 November, 1932, p. 702.

[34]Chesterton, "Our Notebook," 5 November, 1932, p. 702.

[35]Chesterton, "Our Notebook," The Illustrated London News, 13 January, 1912, p. 40.

[36]Chesterton, Varied Types, p. 76.

[37]Chesterton, The Common Man, p. 89.

[38]Ward, p. 226.

[39]Ward, pp. 234-35.

[40]Ward, p. 240.

[41]Archibald Henderson, George Bernard Shaw: Playboy and Prophet (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1932), p. 512.

[42]Gary Wills, Chesterton Man and Mask(London: Sheed & Ward, 1961), p. 125.

[43]Patrick Braybrooke, Gilbert Keith Chesterton(Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1922), p. 152.

[44]Braybrooke, p. 78.

[45]Braybrooke, p. 76.

[46]Julius West, G. K. Chesterton(New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1916), p. 75.

[47]Braybrooke, p. 78.

[48]Chesterton, Magic(New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1903), p. 45.

[49]Chesterton, Magic, p. 88.

[50]Chesterton, "Preface," J. T. Grein, The New World of the Theatre(London: Martin Hopkinson & Co., Ltd., 1924), p. vii.

[51]Wills, p. 205.

[52]Chesterton, Surprise(London: Sheed & Ward, 1952), pp. 15-16.

[53]Wills, p. 205.

[54]Chesterton, "Our Notebook," The Illustrated London News, 16 June, 1906, p. 878.

[55]Chesterton, The Spice of Life, p. 43.

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