

Brilliant Spotlight On Link Between Religion And Drama



THE age-old relationship between religion and drama has been most brilliantly spotlighted in South Africa in recent times by the eminently

successful tour of the stage play, "The Forgotten Factor." Written, produced and acted by members of the Moral Re-Armament Movement, its message has been carried to over 50,000 people within the Union up to the present, and abundant evidence exists of its influence in what may well be termed the field of applied religion.

ESSENTIALS

DEALING with human relationships resulting from modern economic problems, it is an up-to-the-minute presentation of the essentials of Christian living.

As such, it carries a stage further the sporadic efforts that the Christian Church has made from time to time to commend the gospel by means of the drama. Possibly the earliest known instance of this is provided by the Palm Sunday procession, wherein clergy and laity re-enact ceremonially the scene of Jesus's entry into Jerusalem.

In English monasteries of the 8th Century and onwards there also grew up a custom of dramatically representing other scenes from the life of Jesus. These were known as tropes, and principally consisted of dialogues leading up to hymns of praise.

Going from the monasteries into the outside world, the tropes gradually developed into dramatic plays; though when the players came to be drawn from the laity principally, it was not long before the hilarity of the onlookers eventuated in the introduction of popular comic elements into the production.

One such play based on the miracle of St. Nicholas in providing dowries for the daughters of a poor man was frankly comic, and a certain amount of personal danger from well-aimed missiles sometimes attached to the hardy actor who essayed to play the part of the Devil in the ever-popular "Harrowing of Hell."

In the 14th Century there appeared the first of the well-known morality plays, wherein the struggle of good and evil for the possession of man's soul was depicted. This was done by personifying such qualities as Mercy, Peace, Truth and Righteousness, as well as their antitheses. The

best known of these morality plays still exist, and few Lenten periods pass without one of them, "Everyman," being produced nowadays in some English-speaking centre or other.

These morality plays had a great deal of influence in the development of the English drama; so that when they cease to be acted during the Puritan ascendance in

England, they continued to have some share in the growth of the secular drama.

Nearly 300 years had to pass, though, before any revival of the religious drama appeared in England. This we can probably date from the practice which originated at the close of the last century in producing plays and tableaux written around the Christmas story. The best known of these, perhaps, was connected with the parish of St. Hilary, in Cornwall, the Nativity play of which was performed in the parish church and achieved world-wide fame as a result of the play being broadcasted.

The stage is not the only vehicle for religious drama; though we doubt whether any form of religious drama will ever equal the famous Passion Play

of Ober-ammergau as a means of drawing audiences from all parts of the world. None the less, the stage can never hope to compete with either the film, television or broadcasting so far as its potential influence is concerned, a fact which religion has not been slow to observe, though its conspicuous successes in these fields have not as yet been very numerous.

SAYERS PLAY

IN broadcasting, the play cycle of Dorothy Sayers entitled, "The Man Born to be King," has been so outstanding that it has but served to show how unimpressive most other such efforts have been.

The same is true of religious films, the vast bulk of which have been either too amateurish or too dull for words.

What can be done with films, however, is presently to be seen in Southern Africa in the magnificent French film, "Monsieur Vincent," which portrays the life of St. Vincent de Paul. It is all the more interesting to know, therefore, that the producer of this brilliant film is said to be collaborating with Moral Re-armament leaders to produce a new film on one of their themes. Should this project succeed, a new chapter may well come to be written in the fascinating history of religious drama.

Religion
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