

**THE ART THEATRE; A DISCUSSION
OF ITS IDEALS, ITS ORGANIZATION,
AND ITS PROMISE AS A CORRECTIVE
FOR PRESENT EVILS IN THE
COMMERCIAL THEATRE**

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The art theatre; a discussion of its ideals, its organization, and its promise as a corrective for present evils in the commercial theatre by Sheldon Cheney

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SHELDON CHENEY

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HELENA'S HUSBAND.

The
ART THEATRE

*A Discussion of its Ideals, its Organization and its
Promise as a Corrective for Present Evils
in the Commercial Theatre*

By
SHELDON CHENEY

*With Sixteen Photographs of Productions
at The Arts and Crafts Theatre
of Detroit*



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PREFACE

This book has grown out of an unusual combination of circumstances. The first impulse toward its writing came when I was interested, more than a year ago, in a project (lately deceased) for an art theatre in Berkeley. The problems arising then sent me searching through a mass of fugitive material. One result was a determination to prepare "a model plan for an art theatre in a small American city." In the light of later experience I am duly thankful that I did not complete the plan with my then purely theoretical knowledge.

Instead I went to Detroit, where I saw from the inside the inauguration of activities at the Arts and Crafts Theatre, and had to do, in a subordinate capacity, with all but one of the subsequent productions. Last winter, as partial preparation for editing the newly founded *Theatre Arts Magazine*, I visited most of the progressive producing groups and little theatres of the East and Middle West, thus finding opportunity

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for comparison and study of practically all the important manifestations of the new dramatic spirit in this country.

In spite of the indefiniteness of aim in such theatres, and the patent instability of their organization, I became convinced that in their activities lay the only real promise of a better dramatic art in this country. Because their roots were in native soil, I felt that here were beginnings of true community theatres—which collectively would be our ultimate national theatre. And because they were in the hands of artists, who, if immature and unsteady, were still sincere and forward-looking, these playhouses seemed clearly the forerunners of an American art theatre.

Their greatest fault was to be found in confusion of ideals and lack of organization and defined purpose. Each group was working blindly, without profiting by the mistakes of others, and without a definite basis for understanding the movement in its broader aspects. My first hope in this book is that it may provide accurate data about the most successful little theatres and art theatres; and that in its reconsideration of the ideals and aims of the movement, it may bring artists to a clearer conception of their creative duty—and perhaps inspire some with new enthusiasm and determination. Inci-

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dentally I wish the volume to provide an account and analysis of the achievement of the Arts and Crafts Theatre in Detroit during its first season—an achievement important enough in the history of the insurgent movement to warrant a permanent record.

My point of view differs from that of some other writers about little theatres, in that I consider them important only as steps toward something better. In all the excitement about *little* theatres we are in danger of losing sight of the higher ideal—the *art* theatre. I have tried to keep that ultimate ideal constantly in mind.

I am aware that my arraignment of the business theatre is too sweeping to be universally just. I know that there are exceptions to the rule of cut-throat business methods and art-blindness in the commercial theatre—that there are still actors who retain a dignified conception of their profession, and artists who have not prostituted their talents to commerce. But continued association with the theatre only strengthens my conviction that the arraignment is *substantially* true and just.

While this book is much more the result of independent thought and experience than was an earlier one, in which I tried to sum up modern tendencies in the theatre, I am still indebted to the writings of Huntly Carter, Gordon Craig and

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H. K. Moderwell. I owe thanks also to Maurice Browne, Sam Hume and other theatre artists with whom I have talked over art theatre problems personally. Mr. Eric T. Clarke has put me under obligation for many suggestions in connection with the chapter on Organization and Management; and to William F. Gable I express cordial thanks for personal encouragement and inspiration.

Small portions of the material here presented have appeared in the pages of *Theatre Arts Magazine*; but the book is substantially new—written almost entirely during the summer of 1917.

S. C.

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