

GOD TAKES THE STAGE

The Blackfriars' Guild and the Catholic Theatre Movement

BRENDAN LARNEN, O.P.



T HAS often been said that 'the play's the thing.' Yet it has never been explained just why the play is the thing. The explanation may be that the play has ever been a monument to human frailty. There has been a constant quest on the part of mankind to escape the appeal of the transcendent drama which interrelates God and man. This elemental urge to escape the most vital reality of human existence commenced in the Garden of Eden. There Eve witnessed a vivid picturization of the power of pride and consequently forsook her real heritage.

Ever since, has man been influenced by the theatrical. The history of any nation as well as the biography of any human being can only be interpreted in such a graphic medium. Like many other things the Greeks had a word for this mode of human expressiveness; they called it *drama*, meaning *to do*. Since human life is action it is consequently dramatic. But the drama, besides being one of the oldest of the Arts, has always been the most appealing. Not only the erudite but the illiterate as well have found it ever intelligible. Even the deaf and the dumb have not been ignored in the appeal of the drama, for pantomime can always summon their interest.

The drama although it is the most primitive, has always absorbed the effects of the other Arts. Furthermore, it has consistently enriched literature with its products. The drama has also been the most useful of the Arts; besides serving as a means of entertainment, it has spent itself equally as a means of propaganda and a method of worship.

Within the past four centuries the worship motif has fled from the drama. Such was the natural consequence of a new philosophy, which attempted to assert the self-sufficiency of mankind. Accordingly the drama deteriorated, too, since human nature untrammelled has never proven itself an inspiring element in any artistic endeavor. Although dramatic technique has become more perfect in recent decades, the art of drama has not kept pace with such technical progress.

The mode of the drama is more deft, yet its content has reached back to primitive and unrestrained impulses for a theme.

Yet today more than at any other time, drama dominates human behavior and wields a great influence over human thought. Though the cinema has brought graphic drama to the masses, many believe that the common people in the past had no knowledge, much less any appreciation of the drama. Only recently Agnes Repplier observed in one of her scintillating books, *The Pursuit of Laughter*, that there was an era of unrestrained merriment when the friar orders fostered plays, particularly in rural England. Then, as now, licentious drama menaced the faith of the people, so the friars undertook a crusade against an immoral stage. Of their efforts only a few miracle plays now survive.

But the contemporary friars are still acutely conscious of the effect of the drama upon human existence. Thus the reason for the founding of the Blackfriars' Guild by Father Nagle, O.P., and Father Carey, O.P., can easily be seen. These two friar priests, with the generous cooperation of their provincial, Very Reverend T. S. McDermott, O.P., have renewed the pioneering efforts of their long forgotten brethren by creating an association of ladies and gentlemen who are pledged to rescue the drama from its fallen state. Though the modern theatre has become unquestionably wanton and evil, its step-child, the cinema, dared to be more so until the Legion of Decency stayed its pernicious challenge to permanent moral conduct. However, the theatre has remained somewhat secure from any such form of control, since the fear of a too rigid censorship usually arrests all effort to purge it of its dangerous influence upon human behavior. Anyway, censorship itself would be but a negative remedy. Yet since evil stays in the theatre, a remedy, positive if possible, is apparently necessary.

The Blackfriars' Guild dared to propose such a remedy. Its effort was not signaled by open competition with the legitimate theatre but rather with a sincere attempt to create Catholic drama. Its beginnings, some six years ago, were so modest that they were considered futile. They were recognized to be no more stable than the vivid pictures which earnest dreams can conjure. Yet within those six years its founders and its members quietly struggled to impress the country with their work.

The Blackfriars' Guild promised to create Catholic drama, which was another way of saying it wished to contribute moral drama to the literature of the theatre. Guild members planned to train Catholics as well as any others concerned with decent drama in the

arts of the theatre. They intended to awaken within everyone a consciousness of the moral responsibility of the theatre. These three principal aims of the Guild have been finally actualized.

For more than five years the Blackfriars' Guild in Washington and its affiliated chapters in other cities presented not only moral drama but significant drama as well. Three plays of its founder, Father Nagle, O.P., *Barter*, *Catherine the Valiant*, and *The Risen Generation* have been produced in many theatres throughout the country. Philip Barry's *The Joyous Season* and Emmett Lavery's *The First Legion* were not neglected, for they merit acclaim because of their Catholicity and interest because of their dramatic deftness and artistry. Many other plays, perhaps not as famed but as noteworthy, have engaged the attention of the Guild chapters. The presentation of such productions has given the Blackfriars' Guild a place of enviable eminence among the little theatre groups throughout the nation.

The Blackfriars' Guild also purposed to train players, and to equip other persons with a technical knowledge of theatre craftsmanship. For years this objective was realized in the various chapter productions which summoned the attention and praise of veteran dramatic critics. In Washington, D. C., the success of this aim was particularly emphasized when the local Guild chapter on two occasions exhibited its work in the open air Sylvan Theatre before an audience estimated at ten thousand. With such presentations the Guild was assured of unquestioned prominence in amateur theatricals. Yet the Blackfriars Guild has never intended its work to be amateur in the sense of being unskilled. Its amateur endeavor has been adequately described by Father Nagle as quite similar to that of the amateur sportsman. It is evident, then, that the Guild is above rather than below professional standards in its work.

Beneath all the feverish activity of the Guild runs a stream of deep spirituality, as is evidenced in the program of the Washington Chapter, designating September 18 and 19 of this year as days set apart for its annual retreat. Furthermore most of the members of the Washington Chapter are tertiaries of the Dominican Order and are consequently attentive to greater spiritual development. It is the aim of the Guild to urge most of its members to join the Third Order.

The final phase of the Blackfriars' Guild program, namely, to arouse a consciousness of the necessity of significant but decent drama has also been effected. This has been wrought directly and indirectly. Under the sponsorship of the Catholic University of

America, the Guild conducted a school of theatre arts during the last Summer Session. The new department summoned students from the clergy, the religious sisterhood and brotherhood, and from the laity. These were educated in both the theory and practice of the theatre arts. To them was communicated the enthusiasm of the Blackfriars' Guild for the creation of Catholic drama. They were intimately associated with the directors of the school, Fathers Nagle and Carey, the two Dominican friars who guided the Blackfriars' Guild from a groping and insignificant association to one of national and impressive prominence. Thus were these students equipped to return to their local organizations with a discerning knowledge of theatrical work and an ardent urge to promote an apostolate upon the stage.

The Guild was host to the Eastern National Catholic Theatre Conference during the first week-end of August. Under its guidance over 600 delegates convened from all parts of the United States to assert their views regarding the creation of a National Catholic Theatre, to design a definite program whereby that theatre might be established and to pledge their loyalty to the ideals which such a theatre demands. The Blackfriars' Guild has awakened the cultural consciousness of the Catholics of America by sending forth almost 100 students to enlarge upon its work regarding a Catholic theatre. It has also united all the Catholic dramatic organizations under the leadership of the Executive Committee chosen at the National Conference, with Rev. Dr. John H. Mahoney, of New York, serving as President; Charles Costello of Hollywood, California, as Vice-President; Rev. T. F. Carey, O.P., of Washington, D. C., as Secretary; and Mr. E. F. McDevitt, of Washington, D. C., as Treasurer.

With such a group of sincere and interested persons to guide the destinies of the Catholic Theatre Movement, its future success is unquestioned. All have pledged that the organization shall not outreach its aims, namely the presentation of wholesome, substantial and moral drama. Like the enviably successful Abbey Theatre of Dublin, the Blackfriars' Guild has begotten a Catholic Theatre which cannot fail, for it, too, has an integrating ideal. Unlike the Abbey, however, the ideal of the Catholic Theatre is not natural but supernatural. Though it does not propose to transform the stage into a pulpit, it is determined to restore the stage to God. It is determined to offset the ruinous philosophies which menace modern drama. It is equally determined to create a Catholic motif in the theatre arts. It does not intend to remain aloof from the literature of the drama, rather it hopes to inspire and encourage works which shall enrich that literature. Already, tentative plans have been designed by the Blackfriars'

Guild to conduct a playwriting contest. Decades may pass before an ageless work of drama emerges from the movement; yet all the efforts in that regard will not be futile, for the value of a classic is priceless.

The first definite step in the program of a National Catholic Theatre movement will begin this Fall. The Catholic University has invited the Blackfriars' Guild to continue its school of theatre arts. The department will function under the direction of Rev. G. V. Hartke, O.P. As was the case in the summer session the University will consider certain branches of the course to be significant enough to merit credits towards a graduate degree.

The Catholic Theatre movement has attained to a secure existence since it is developing within the clergy and laity as well as within the religious sisterhoods and brotherhoods an effective knowledge of the drama, controlled by the Catholic norms of art and morality. It is thus inviting artistic genius to express itself once more in terms of religion, as was true when all the world was gay with the bright light of Faith. As gigantic cathedrals, unaged paintings, priceless statuary were once wrought in the name of God, so today a new era of dramatic art is being brought forth to enrich the stage with the splendor of religious beauty.

Although the Blackfriars' Guild has already proven itself successful wherever it has been established, although it has merited all the local praise which has been accorded it, it yet remains to prove itself as a national organization. Its universal success, however, does not depend upon the personnel of the Guild. Only the public at large, particularly the Catholic public and all who have a sincere interest in the artistic and beneficent achievement of the theatre, will determine the successful destiny of the Catholic Theatre movement. The many thousands who support both the amateur and the legitimate theatre have the power to wield a controlling influence. Within them also is the desire to patronize a decent theatre. Consequently they cannot consider themselves imposed upon when the Blackfriars' Guild solicits their interest and cooperation in the newest Catholic cultural movement of the age.

Finally it may be observed that no more vital Catholic Action endeavor can be found than in the theatre. Already left wing thinkers have foisted their opinions and doctrines upon the public through the drama. A Clifford Odets, before he succumbed to Hollywood revenue, vehemently declaimed against economic injustice. A group theatre, sponsored by Communists, was born in a garret and eventually brought its red fanfare to Broadway. But no Catholic dramatist has

made a plea for social justice, neither has there arisen in the cultural life of Catholic America a playwright to awe an audience with the tremendous universality of the Mystical Body of Christ. Why such is true can be easily explained. There are no significant Catholic dramatists. Neither are there available any definitive Catholic dramas. Such will no longer be true, however, for the Blackfriars' Guild issues a challenge to both drama and dramatists. Within the near future there will be plays and playwrights to reemphasize the relationship between God and man in terms theatrical. Once again, then, will there flourish upon the stage artistic gestures of worship in the form of arresting Catholic drama. Then Catholic Action will have invaded the last stronghold against its influence. The play will once more become the thing whereby the conscience of humanity may be aroused to the demands of God upon mankind.