



Plays of the Italian Theatre: Verga, Morsella, Lopez, Pirandello

Giavanni Verga, Ercole Luigi Morselli, Sabatino Lopez, Luigi Pirandello

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FIVE Italian plays, showing the work of dramatists who wrote between the years 1860 and 1900. Each play is adapted for production in the small theatre, each is typically Italian, and each is a beautifully balanced unit. There is a tragedy of love, a comedy of childhood embedded in yet another and greater tragedy, while in each play we get a sense of dramatic power that gives to each distinction.

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An excerpt from the Introduction:

AMONG the features that make the study of Italian drama so interesting are the diversity of the types, the numerous differences that divide the critics and the more or less diffuse state in which the institution still finds itself. We are prepared for the cry of decadence that has filled half of the nineteenth century and not a little of the twentieth; to be a dramatic critic is almost synonymous, in all tongues, with bewailing the low state into which the drama has fallen. In Italy the matter has gone much farther; there have not been lacking scholars who deny the existence of a genuinely national stage, and since Tullio Fornioni, in 1885, started the ball a-rolling it has been given powerful shoves by such writers as Mario Pilo, Salvatore Barzilai and V. Morello. Only this year Signor Guido Ruberti, in his closely packed two-volume book upon "Il Teatro Contemporaneo in Europa," renews the discussion and in his section upon the realistic Italian drama (1,211) declares bluntly, "The truth is that Italy has never had a truly national theatre."

He goes on to state, in the ensuing commentary, that there is, in the very nature of the Italian people, a certain quality that is anti-dramatic in effect; the spiritual and material difficulties experienced by the nation while other countries were conquering a greater or less degree of liberty caused it to turn in upon itself, accustoming it perforce to a "singular mental habit of adaptation and conciliation; a remarkable equilibrium that succeeds in fusing within itself the most diverse tendencies, harmonizing them in a supreme ideal which is neither skepticism nor austere faith, neither absolute indifferentism nor unreflecting passion, yet feeds upon and communicates all these." The Italian conscience, moreover, unlike the Anglo-Saxon and the Slav, finds its great problems settled in advance by its creed, thus removing, or at least greatly modifying, one of the mainsprings of dramatic action. In the powerful scenes of passionate crime the critic sees but added proof of the primitiveness of his people; upon them, he tells us, the currents of modern thought make little impression.

For much of the delay in the achieving of a national theatre the influence of France is blamed, the same France in whom Spanish-American critics fear a similar denationalizing influence and who, according to Brazilian writers, is Gallicizing the immense Portuguese-speaking republic to our south.

Again, the presence of so many well defined regions, each with its own psychology, its own pride, its own determination to preserve its spiritual autonomy, acts as a hindrance to the formation of a distinctly

recognizable national drama. The Italian dialect stage is an important institution; Rome, Sicily, Milan, Bologna, Venice, Naples — these are, from the dramatic standpoint, fairly nations within a nation, and even the better known Italian dramatists are proud to write for them. Of the writers represented in this collection, for example, Verga and Pirandello are intimately related to their native Sicily, as is Sabatino Lopez to his Tuscan birthplace.

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