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WILLIAM GRANGE

Channing Pollock: the American Theatre's Forgotten Polemicist

Channing Pollock (1880—1946) is an obscure figure in the American theatre, whose well-structured plays reflected the quixotic idealism of their creator, his firm belief in traditional values, and his sense of moral urgency. His obscurity is unwarranted, for he was the foremost theatrical polemicist of his day, and the quality of his work far surpasses that of other, more well known polemicists such as John Howard Lawson or George Sklar. Moreover, he was associated in the performance of his plays with some of the most talented and noteworthy production personnel the theatre in New York City has ever seen. His reputation, such as it is, rests mainly upon four major works: *The Fool* (1922), *The Enemy* (1926), *Mr. Moneypenny* (1928), and *The House Beautiful* (1931). These are his "mature" works; they are addressed to a specific, unsophisticated, enormously large audience — "a vast public", as Pollock himself described it, "which is not walking down Broadway, waiting to get into shows. . . . It does not read criticism, and does not like what most critics like."¹ Most of it, according to Pollock, lived in Brooklyn, Long Island, or East Orange, New Jersey, "trying to pay off the mortgage and send junior through college", and can be persuaded to attend the theatre only when it can be convinced to do so for reasons other than cultural fulfillment. Preachers and teachers had reached this audience, he said, and a dramatist could reach it as well if he preached and taught "without seeming to do either".²

Pollock did not begin to preach and teach in the theatre until fairly late in his career. He was writing professionally at the age of sixteen when the *Washington Post* hired him as an assistant drama critic; in 1903 he began work as director of the Shubert organization's press department ("even though the Shuberts knew little more of drama and literature than cows know of the albuminous content of milk"³). This job enabled him to remain in New York and to concentrate on playwriting; between 1903 and 1906 he wrote *The Little Gray Lady*, *Such a Little Queen*, and *The Sign on the Door*, quaint comedies which enjoyed brief runs and then disappeared. From 1906 to 1915 he worked freelance and wrote criticism for weekly magazines and for the International Newspaper Syndicate; during this period he also collaborated with composer Rennold Wolf on musical comedies such as *The Red Widow*, *My Best Girl*, *The Beauty Shop*, and *Her Little Highness*. Produced by George M. Cohan, these efforts were largely successful and earned Pollock a substantial living. In 1915 he began an association with Florenz Ziegfeld in the capacity of dialogue writer and librettist. His success through the war years continued, but Pollock became increasingly disenchanted by what he perceived to be "nonsense" in the American theatre. "There is room in the theatre for . . . what is called 'entertainment'", he said, "but why can't audiences be entertained by the use of their mental faculties as well as by their suspension? There must be room . . . for plays that urge the eternal verities . . . and translate the best thought into action, and reduce it to terms understood by the average man."⁴

Alarmed as well by what he termed “the flood of filth in books and plays that came with and after the war, and a so-called ‘sophistication’ which was robbing us [Americans] of our aspirations and standards”,⁵ Pollock set about writing plays (beginning in 1920) which he hoped would stem the flood tide, and find the audience whose aspirations and standards were similar to his own.

His first major play was *The Fool*, whose title derived, he said, from a passage in Tennyson: “They called me in the public squares/The fool that wears the crown of thorns.”⁶ The title role is that of Gilchrist, a modern-day St. Francis and the scion of a well-heeled New York family. Gilchrist is an Episcopal minister, and has dedicated himself to living in imitation of Christ; in the process he suffers all manner of material deprivation while gaining a transcendent, Christ-like peace of mind. Throughout the play, Pollock portrayed numerous “Christians” in juxtaposition to Gilchrist, with the inevitable conclusion that hypocrisy runs rampant in the modern world.

Pollock’s next play, *The Enemy*, was even more polemical, although it treated a theme somewhat less prosaic than religious hypocrisy. Set in Vienna from 1914 to 1919, *The Enemy* presents two families, the Behrends and the Arndts; Carl Behrends is a young playwright in love with Pauli Arndt, the daughter of wise old Professor Arndt, whose pacifistic views infuriate Carl’s profiteering father. Pollock tells a familiar story of young love, separation, heartbreak, courage, and hope with the innovation that the story takes place on the Austro-Hungarian side of the battle lines. To these people, this was also a holy war for freedom; the “enemy” represented to them the same brutality, aggressiveness, and cruelty that it had for the other side. As in *The Fool*, scenes of conflict, reversal, and poignancy were presented with Pollock’s usual skill and effectiveness. In the last act, when the war is over and Carl has been killed in battle, Pauli’s baby has died of malnutrition and the profiteer Behrends has been awarded a gold medal for “services to the nation”, the playwright’s message is clear: “victory” is as meaningless as “defeat”. As the Austrian and English soldiers shake hands outside, Pauli says: “We’re all pacifists now, especially the returned soldiers.”

But the war had left in its destructive wake the ruins of accepted values and patterns of behavior; the aftermath of war was, in both *The Enemy* and in Pollock’s mind, more destructive than the war itself. Pollock saw formerly accepted virtues like thrift completely rejected by Americans in the 1920s, and his third major effort, *Mr. Moneypenny*, was an attempt to repeat the Biblical admonition that the love of money was the root of all evil. Yet Pollock realized that the play appeared at a time when few Americans seemed to believe that such an evil existed: “A drunken man, I suppose, can see nothing extraordinary in drunkenness, and a very large proportion of our population was equally impervious to exhibitions of materialism and riotous vulgarity.”⁷

Pollock wrote *Mr. Moneypenny* “in the vein of satire”, a kind of “verbal cartoon”.⁸ More precisely, he borrowed some techniques from German Expressionist playwrights such as Georg Kaiser. Indeed, the play bears a structural resemblance to Kaiser’s *From Morn to Midnight*: the central character is a bank clerk who is bored with his job, his family, and his home in the suburbs. He imagines the realization of his fondest ambitions in the possession of great wealth when a Mephisto-like character named Mr. Moneypenny appears and transforms the clerk into a Wall Street financier replete with a Park Avenue apartment, important friends, night clubs, fancy restaurants, and brokerage houses — all displayed in a series of raucous, hallucinatory images. In the end, the clerk realizes he is not content with this new life, for the qualities of sincerity, genuineness, and plain common sense seem to have no place in

the materialist world; only when he drops out of the mad race for the dollar does he realize how well off he was in the first place. The final scene shows him back in the suburbs, sublimely happy in the act of drying the dishes, realizing that money itself is not evil, it is "what people do with it. These people . . . who have transformed life from a splendid striving into a greedy struggle . . . these people [who] have everything but an appreciation of beauty, simplicity, ideals, courtesy, and God!"⁹

Pollock further praised domestic life in his last play, *The House Beautiful*. In it, Jennifer and Archibald Davis buy a house in West Hills, New Jersey, and for the next thirty years their lives and the fate of the West Hills community are interwoven into what the playwright called "a saga of all the brave, honest, little men who march to work every morning and come home at night to the castle where the women they love keep the flag flying".¹⁰ Davis is a failure from a materialistic point of view, but he and his wife cling to their ideals in a world of greed and cynicism. When real estate operators try to turn West Hills into a cheap development for a quick profit, the Davises fight them tooth and nail — an effort which results in Archie's death. Yet his son carries on his ideals, and by the last scene Jennifer realizes that her life, though insignificant in the world's eyes, has been beautiful, and what she and Archie fought for was worthwhile. The play is thus a paean to the lives of people who had comprised Pollock's audience, an idealization of their everyday existence. To underscore the idealization, Pollock introduced a kind of fantasy element: after crucial moments in the lives of the Davises, the walls of their little West Hills house parted, trumpets sounded, and the modest, unassuming suburbanites found themselves in the court of King Arthur, with all the trappings of mediaeval chivalry. This device facilitated preaching the possibilities of gallantry and nobility within the narrow confines of day-to-day living. Archie Davis became a lion-hearted knight who defended his castle against the forces of evil; when Jennifer helped her husband put on his coat in realistic portions of the play, she imagined herself buckling him into his coat of mail. And when the train whistle blew, she heard the trumpets of the knights, summoning her lord to battle. "It's only hard if you think it's hard", she says, "and it's only a dry-goods box if you can't see the castle. I think it's beautiful and grand and romantic!"¹¹

Of these four major plays, *The Fool* enjoyed the greatest success at the box-office. Directed by Frank Reicher and produced at the Times Square theatre, the play ran for nearly a year on Broadway (it was performed 272 times in New York¹²), and a total of thirteen road companies toured it throughout the United States, Canada, England, and Europe. By the end of 1924, Pollock claimed, over 100 actors had been employed in *The Fool*, and over five million people had seen a production of it.¹³

The play's success was hard won. Pollock had enormous difficulty first of all in finding someone to produce *The Fool*; most producers to whom he sent the script in 1921 and 1922 dismissed it as "religious buncombe." Finally, Pollock convinced producer Archie Selwyn that *The Fool* would appeal to a certain audience if only that audience could be convinced to attend the performances; to drum up support for the production at the Times Square Theatre, Pollock traversed the countryside of eastern New Jersey and western Long Island in search of that elusive, enormously large audience. He addressed church groups, P.T.A. luncheons, womens' clubs, and garden parties. During the third week of the play's run, box-office receipts increased substantially, due in part to the fact that dozens of clergymen had preached sermons on *The Fool* the previous Sunday. The production continued to run in New York to near-capacity houses, earning Pollock large amounts of money — yet the playwright

insisted that the money meant little to him: "My lasting reward was a treasure trove of letters from people who wrote to say they had been helped by the play . . . Dozens credited it with healing old quarrels, ending divorce actions, and in one case preventing suicide."¹⁴

Pollock's least successful play was *Mr. Moneybags*, although it was certainly his most ambitious undertaking from the production standpoint. Directed by Richard Boleslavsky and designed by Robert Edmond Jones, *Mr. Moneybags* opened at the Liberty Theatre on October 17, 1928; it cost over \$ 100,000 to produce, featured two full orchestras, and included 112 actors in the cast. Unfortunately, the production ran for only six weeks, and closed after sixty-two performances.¹⁵ *New York Times* critic Brooks Atkinson called Jones's settings "strikingly effective" with "the elaborateness of a Max Reinhardt production";¹⁶ that was practically the only kind remark Atkinson made about the production, and opprobrium by other critics assured a short run, despite the production's appeal. Pollock's fiscal short-sightedness contributed to a short run as well, for he insisted that ticket prices be kept to a minimum. The best seats in the orchestra, for example, sold for only two dollars; as a result, box-office receipts simply could not keep up with expenses, even though houses were on the average sold to ninety-six per cent of capacity.

The House Beautiful was innovative from a design standpoint as well: Jo Mielziner created a setting which could transform itself from the milieu of 20th century suburbia to that of Arthurian legend in about five seconds' time. Mielziner's designs, "expertly, tastefully conceived and maneuvered",¹⁷ along with Worthington Miner's direction, "which sensitively made the actor's performance conspicuously attractive",¹⁸ contributed to a run which was nearly twice the length of its predecessor. Even so, Pollock felt that critics had once again conspired against him, and without their reproaches the runs of his plays in general, and of this one in particular, would doubtlessly have been longer. One of the most reproachful of the critics was Dorothy Parker, who ignored the production's talented personnel and its numerous virtues, and airily dismissed *The House Beautiful* as "the play lousy".¹⁹

Parker exemplified the "sophistication" against which Pollock felt compelled, in his plays and other writings, to crusade so energetically. He had a fundamentalist belief in the dictionary definition of that particularly odious word: "the process of perverting or misleading by sophistry; a leading or going astray."²⁰ He felt that Parker, Robert Benchley, Brooks Atkinson, and Richard Watts — just to name four of the "sophisticates" whom he grew to loathe — had intentionally perverted the New York audience, and had led it astray by creating a false set of values by which they judged plays. They had been instrumental, he felt, in creating a "cult of sophistication" through a "promotion of skepticism". To combat their influence, he instituted (along with *Publishers' Weekly* magazine) a drama criticism competition held among New York State high school students, perhaps in the hope that winners of the competition might someday become critics more attuned to the tastes of audiences for whom Pollock had written his plays. At least, he must have hoped that future critics would spare the abuse heaped upon him by Atkinson and others, which the playwright had described as "virulent. I should hardly have been treated with greater contumely if I had murdered my mother."²¹

Indeed, most of the critics seemed unnecessarily brutal in their estimation of Pollock's work. Robert Benchley, for example, described *The Fool* as "a Passion Play adapted for stock in Woonsocket, Rhode Island."²² Charles Morgan characterized *The Enemy* as "maudlin" and "indescribably dull", noting that one hardly cared if

“old Professor Arndt was a human being or a grammophone record.”²³ Critics seemed particularly outraged by *Mr. Moneybags*, since the play made materialism and sophistication its specific targets. The critic for *Vogue*, a publication often identified with the very values Pollock considered false and destructive, dismissed the play as a “raucous . . . collection of platitudes.”²⁴ Brooks Atkinson called the play “an unflinching report of the unspeakable depravities [Pollock] has observed along Broadway. One is somewhat apprehensive lest he be hoist on his own petard”, since “with distressing preciosity” the playwright “makes virtue shockingly odious.”²⁵ Atkinson considered *The House Beautiful* odious from beginning to end, because in the play, “bridge, cocktails, and *The New Yorker* smell of corruption to [Pollock]; he regards sex as unnecessary, and he appears to be against the twentieth century as a whole.”²⁶ This view paralleled that of David Carb, who called the play “a preachment wallowing in bathos.”²⁷

But the most vitriolic of all the reviews was written by Dorothy Parker, writing for that same *New Yorker* which Atkinson had described as one of Pollock’s “favorite taboos”. In addition to attacking the play (as already noted) with as much sophisticated wit as she could muster, Parker went on to rail against Pollock and his audience: “It is difficult to do anything about Mr. Pollock”, she complained, “for say what one will — and one has — about his works, people attend them by the drove. I don’t know what people they are, but there are enough of them to cram a theatre for months. . . . So there is little to be accomplished by railing.”²⁸

Parker was mistaken; she, along with other critics, accomplished what must have been a long-sought goal among their number: the removal of Channing Pollock, by whom they were all deeply embarrassed, from the New York theatre scene. *The House Beautiful* was “my last play, so help me God!” cried Pollock; he went on the lecture circuit in 1931 and remained there until his death in 1946. But the critics had accomplished more than the removal of one playwright; they had removed as well that massive, if unsophisticated, audience from the New York theatre, and helped preserve in the minds of many ordinary people to this day the perception that theatre is an elitist exercise, a perception against which theatre practitioners in this country must continually struggle.

Pollock himself, no longer engaged in the struggles of getting his plays produced and being forced to deal with “theatre habitués and sons of habitués”, continued his preaching from lecterns all over the United States, appearing frequently on network radio, and writing prolifically; his articles appeared in nearly all the popular magazines of the day, from *Collier’s* to *Life* to *The Saturday Evening Post*. In 1938 he was awarded a Doctor of Letters degree from Colgate University, and four years later received a Doctor of Laws degree from Northwestern University. Since he had never even graduated from high school, Pollock was justifiably proud of these honors. Yet he insisted, upon these occasions, that real education was perhaps best defined as “the acquisition of character, cultural interests, and the power to think logically.”²⁹ That kind of education is rarely secured in institutions, and since he was mostly self-taught he probably felt best qualified to define the term. “The highest honor any university could confer”, he said, “would be Doctor of Living.” In the end, there is no doubt that Channing Pollock felt qualified to confer that degree upon himself.

¹ Channing Pollock, *Harvest of My Years* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1943), p. 295.

² Pollock, *Harvest*, p. 272.

³ Pollock, *Harvest*, p. 131.

- 4 Pollock, *Harvest*, p. 271.
- 5 Pollock, *Harvest*, p. 271.
- 6 Pollock, *Harvest*, p. 287. The Tennyson poem from which the title of the play derives is *In Memoriam*.
- 7 Pollock, *Harvest*, p. 306.
- 8 Pollock, *Harvest*, p. 304.
- 9 Channing Pollock, *Mr. Moneypenny* (New York: Brentano's, 1928), p. 158.
- 10 Pollock, *Harvest*, p. 311.
- 11 Channing Pollock, *The House Beautiful* (New York: Samuel French, 1931,) p. 141.
- 12 Edwin Bronner, *The Encyclopedia of the American Theatre, 1900—1975* (New York: Barnes, 1980), p. 162.
- 13 Pollock, *Harvest*, p. 295.
- 14 Pollock, *Harvest*, p. 299.
- 15 Bronner, *Encyclopedia*, p. 321.
- 16 J. Brooks Atkinson, rev. of *Mr. Moneypenny*, *New York Times*, 17 October 1928, p. 26, col. 2.
- 17 David Carb, "Seen on the Stage", rev. of *The House Beautiful*, *Vogue*, 77 (15 May 1931), pp. 76—77.
- 18 J. Brooks Atkinson, rev. of *The House Beautiful*, *New York Times*, 13 March 1931, p. 20, col. 4.
- 19 Dorothy Parker, rev. of *The House Beautiful*, *The New Yorker*, 21 March 1931, p. 36.
- 20 Pollock in this instance quotes from the *Century Dictionary* on page 316 of *Harvest of My Years*.
- 21 Pollock, *Harvest*, p. 294.
- 22 Robert Benchley, rev. of *The Fool, Life* (New York), 80 (9 November 1922), p. 18.
- 23 Charles Morgan, rev. of *The Enemy*, *New York Times*, 19 August 1928, Sec. VIII, p. 1, col. 1.
- 24 Carb, *Vogue*, p. 77.
- 25 Atkinson, rev. of *Mr. Moneypenny*, *New York Times*, p. 26, col. 2.
- 26 Atkinson, rev. of *The House Beautiful*, *New York Times*, p. 20, col. 4.
- 27 Carb, *Vogue*, p. 77.
- 28 Parker, *The New Yorker*, p. 36.
- 29 Pollock, *Harvest*, p. 335.