

[Mount Vernon, Westchester Co. NY]

OTIS SKINNER IN THE PULPIT

The Actor Preaches to Universalists a Sermon on the Theatre

MOUNT VERNON, N.Y., March 8.—Otis Skinner, the actor, preached a sermon in the Mount Vernon Universalist Church this morning. His nephew, the Rev. Clarence R. Skinner, the rector of the church, told his parishioners with whom he talked last week about his Sunday programme that the family Bible of his uncle's mother preserves the records of three generations of pastors of the Universalist Church, so the actor probably would feel at home in the pulpit.

The church was crowded when Mr. Skinner entered the pulpit. He did not take any text from the Bible. His sermon dealt largely with the ethics of the drama. He said in part:

The drama stands recognized as one of the methods in which the human mind has in all ages striven to utter itself. There is a dramatic element in our common nature which literature and art and more especially the representations of the stage meet, minister to and satisfy—a normal demand by these supplied. First of all there can be but one reply to any inquiry as to the moral worth of the drama and its relation to the life of the community.

If the manner of the theatre is to be regarded as an art at all it must be of beneficent influence, for all art is uplifting. Without it we should [would] go down the byways of existence for the most part and know little but the sordid. Think of life without a song, without a picture, without a poem or a beautiful building or statue. We cannot imagine it if we contemplate the conditions that civilization has imposed upon us.

A charge brought against the theatre is that it represents vice. Of course it does. It represents virtue, why not vice? All people are not paragons of virtue. But for morals as such it is rank absurdity that we should use them in theatric or any other art. Nature, pitiless, beautiful, barbarous, soothing, murderous, exalting nature, is indifferent to them, why should art, the handmaiden of nature, who takes only hints and primal truths from her mistress, observe them? And yet our art must be moral for all this. an immoral art would be a horror.

It were vain and idle in the present day, after Shakespeare has transformed the stage into a high school of humanity, and Schiller and Goethe have crystallized it into a handmaiden of ethics and Christianity, to enter on any defence [sic] of its recognized authority as a moral agent. The stage in its highest conception is a powerful coadjutor of the Church in making men better, wiser and happier, and even in its less lofty attitudes it lights up with genial mirth the hard lot of the toiling masses.

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