

Presenting the Follies of 1923

The Reviewing Stand

By ALEXANDER WOOLLCOTT

LONG ago in the days when motor cars were phenomena one turned to look at and the racy thing to say was "Go way back and sit down"; when all America was in a bit of a glow because the insistent Kaiser had recently been so gracious as to send us a real live, bewhiskered prince to look at; when two somewhat dissimilar Democrats, Mr. Cleveland and Mr. Wilson, sat at Princeton silently watching the agitating behavior of the new President Roosevelt in the White House; when last week's Juliet was a deep voiced rail of an actress all tricked out in the pretty ermine-trimmed "Captain Jinks" and our next Juliet was a schoolgirl from Brooklyn and the present Hamlet was a not shinningly successful cartoonist who had never been on the stage at all—in so dim a long ago did the word first go forth that one of these fine days, Mr. Belmont would present David Warfield in "The Merchant of Venice." Then so many years slipped by with nothing coming of it that the prophecy fell into the dishonor of the things which no one believes. Yet the fine day came at last and, who knows? Perhaps now Mrs. Fiske will play Lady Macbeth. Perhaps there will be a repertory theater in New York after all. Perhaps the ticket speculators will be abolished and the world come to an end.

On the Thursday before Christmas David Warfield made his first appearance in our town in "The Merchant of Venice," emerging from the enterprise with rather more credit than any one else concerned. We have heard it said of the new Shylock that it was "just a little Jew peddler carrying on because he'd lost his license." And though we suspect that that capsule criticism was some one's effort to spit on the gabardine of Mr. Warfield's art, we seize upon it as an unconscious tribute to the chief merit of the performance. This Shylock apparently does not seek to seem a vaguely heroic protagonist of a troubled race but just to seem a certain harried old man having a rotten time in Venice. It is a vivid, eloquent, actual, human performance.

In his formidable preface to his published prompt book of the play Mr. Belmont goes to some length to disprove some of the things about Shakespearean production in general and "The Merchant" in particular which we had forgotten any one believed. And, in advance, he denies vehemently that he is one to "overload Shakespeare with scenery." Yet, this, to a mildly injurious extent, is, we think precisely what he has done. He has produced the play earnestly, carefully and sumptuously in the nineteenth century tradition, giving it a rich and elaborate setting in the Irving and Tree manner. Now his heavily encrusted Belmont and his massive and literal synagogue do weigh down the performance to the extent that it cannot dart from scene to scene as the playwright's fancy did, but must lump the earlier Shylock scenes into one act and the earlier Belmont episodes into another, instead of interweaving them. This shredding of the text, does, we think, steal away a little of its vitality. It is a little as though a singer, troubled by a fractious accompanist, should decide that the fellow must play after the song instead of at the same time.

In his pardonable horror of those somewhat mouldy archaeologists who are possessed that Shakespeare should be staged "in the Elizabethan manner," Mr. Belmont argues that it is a producer's privilege and duty in each generation to bring to bear on every classic all the galle that the theater has learned since it was written. But among the new secrets of the theater which Mr. Belmont has not used is the beauty which has been brought into it out of space by artists like Robert Edmund Jones, Lee Simonson and Norman Bel-Geddes. It must be recorded that as a thing to look at not once does his "Merchant of Venice" come within hailing distance of the merely visual beauty achieved in the Hopkins productions of "Richard III" and "Hamlet" nor, for that matter, of the loveliness that is being wrought on a formal, sceneless stage at the Garrick by working the scenery of lights on shifting, dissolving groups of beautifully costumed figures that are in themselves a decoration and a picture. Indeed, we think it is significant that the Venice at the Lyceum comes nearest beauty when, in the gathering twilight, its buildings become mere brooding hulks of darkness. It is scenery that is best looking when you cannot see it.

But just as the enchantments worked for the eye in "The Tidings Brought to Mary" do not reconcile us for one moment to the dullness of its performance nor to the cheap perfume of its text, so we find it impossible to become deeply interested in "The Merchant of Venice" as something to look at. We do immeasurably prefer Robert Edmund Jones to Ernest Gros, but we do not care much one way or another. There are critics who attach enormous importance to the questions of investiture and they become exasperated to incoherence by the loving and painstaking care Mr. Belmont pays to details which do not matter much anyway. They rage when they see he has gone as far as Venice to get just the appropriate materials for the gowns and rings and fans and parchments. They froth at the mouth when they discover that he has arranged to have the moonlit garden at Belmont give forth the unmistakable tonic fragrance of fresh cut chrysanthemums. They want it clearly understood that they rate such literalness on a par with the imaginative flights of the man who put salt on his toupee so that people should think he had dandruff. For our own part, we like these Beloscismos. They are traits of a worker in the theater who enjoys his work much as those bounding, incandescent darkies who dance in "Liza" enjoy theirs and with something of the same infectiousness. We can be entirely happy in such an opulent Belmont as his except when an ordinary performance therein reminds us that we would rather see a sovereign and magnificent actress playing Portia in a gingham apron on the tailboard of a truck than an indifferent one disporting herself in the richest and loveliest Belmont that all the other magics of the theater could create.

Our chronic indifference to scenery as such left us inert at the American premiere of "Johannes Kreisler," a mooning, mystic romance

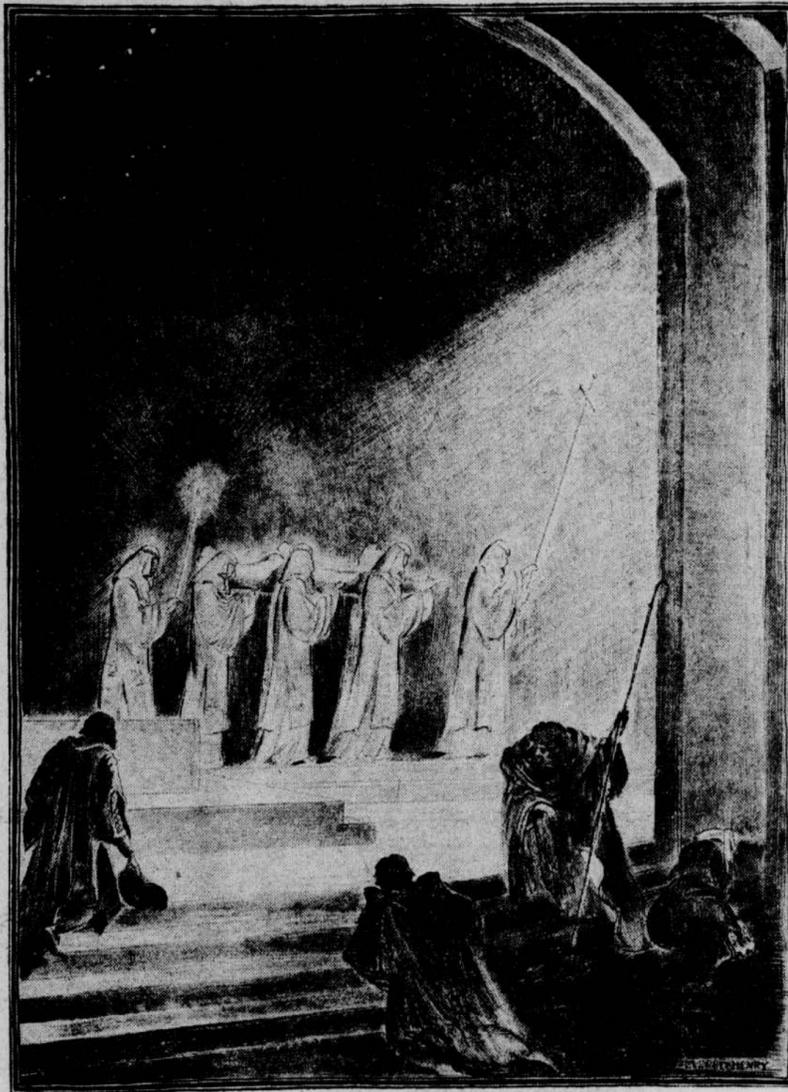
The First Nighter's Calendar

MONDAY.

"Will Shakespeare," a play by Clemence Dane, presented by Winthrop Ames at the National Theater. Described as "an invention," telling an imaginary tale of the poet. Otto Kruger plays the title role. Others in the cast are Katharine Cornell as Mary Fitton; Winifred Lenihan as Anne Hathaway; Haldea Wright as Queen Elizabeth, her original rôle in London; John L. Shine as Henslowe, theatrical manager, and Alan Birmingham as Kit Marlowe. Norman-Bel Geddes designed the six scenes and Deems Taylor composed the special songs.

THURSDAY.

"Chauve Souris" at the Century Theater, fourth and final program arranged by Balleff under the management of Morris Gest. Constantin Stanislavsky and the Moscow Art Theater players are to be guests. Among the new numbers and old favorites announced are "Zarya Zaryanitsa," "Porcelaine de Maine," "Parade of the Wooden Soldiers," "Tot Qui Connais," "Tartar Dance," "Malbrough S'en Va-t-en Guerre," "The Gypsies and the Black Hussars," "The Sudden Death of a Horse," "The Volga Boat Song," "La Soiree Intime" and "Napoleon's Love."



The burial of Violaine in "The Tidings Brought to Mary."

in which the leading parts are played by Arthur Ebbetts, George Cukor, Albert Marsh, Orloff La Ven, William Dean, Earle Stanley, William Lilling, Allyn Joslyn, Siegfried W. Lichstein, William Butler, Charles Fortier, Lawrence Arico, Herbert Hamilton, Earl Johnson, George Strookbine, Andrew Barrie, Edward Rolland, James Brady, Charles Leonard, James Powers, Robert Cavanaugh, Arthur Ellick, Eugene Handy, John Kelly, William Sadoff, Richard Dawkins, Conrad Mueller, Mrs. Walters, Jacob Ben-Ami, Lotus Robb, Erskine Sanford and Mannart Kippen. Except for the last four, these participants are the technical director, the general stage manager, the stage manager, the four assistants to the stage manager, the assistant orchestra director, the chief stage carpenter, the stage carpenter, the four assistants to the stage carpenter, the master of properties, the four assistants to the master of properties, the chief electrician and the chief electrical operator, the two assistants to the electrical operator, the mechanical engineer and the wardrobe mistress. The last four are actors. There are some beautifully staged and brilliantly acted vignettes in "Johannes Kreisler," but the play is in forty-one scenes. Indeed, the play was written because up in Copenhagen some one had invented a back stage contraption by which it would be possible to shift the settings so rapidly that forty-one scenes could be given without danger of the playboys of the western world falling asleep and tumbling into the aisle. Of course, we do not know why any one should want to write or see a play in forty-one scenes when, as a rule, the fewer the scenes, the better the play. The Selwyns have staged "Johannes Kreisler" with a royal lavishness, and yet all through its uneasy first night we were haunted by a phrase we had discovered the day before in a delightful article written by Booth Tarkington for the American Magazine. It is the article in which he tells about the French poodle, Gamin, who used to sit beside his chair on the boulevard in Paris. Once, startled by the sudden sight of a gargantuan Great Dane strolling by, Gamin, before he had time to think, sprang at the creature, although the stranger was powerful enough to have swallowed him at a gulp. But the Great Dane was startled, too, and fled across Paris, howling with fear. This exploit gave Gamin perilous delusions of grandeur and to it the fond Tarkington affixed the phrase "magnificently ill-considered."

Peggy Wood

THE premiere of Zelda Sears' "The Clinging Vine" recalled suddenly an afternoon in New York seven or eight years ago when, on a curbstone, we beheld James Forbes tossing his arms in the air like trestops in a storm. This somewhat semaphoric behavior was a set of gestures indicating how much he had enjoyed the performance of a new actress in the play called "Young America" then at the Gaiety. In Peggy Wood he had beheld a comedienne of such delicate touch and fine texture that a playwright could go home and invent a heroine after his own heart without being haunted

with the fear of her being coarsened by her first impact with a Broadway actress. That colloquy on the sidewalk long ago came back to us last Sunday afternoon when we saw Mr. Forbes smiling from ear to ear in the stage box at the Knickerbocker. In her curtain speech that day Miss Sears, after giving a brief history of Henry W. Savage and opera in America, cast her eyes on high and said: "For an actress who can sing and a singer who can act, may the Lord make me truly thankful!" Miss Wood has, indeed, worked hard and fruitfully with her singing since the days of "Hello, Broadway" and hers is one of the best voices available for light opera in America. Yet every time she sings we experience a mild, internal anger. For in the roles an actress of such spirit and skill should be playing there are no songs. She is enchanting in "The Clinging Vine," but what of it? Why, we would allow her to play Elizabeth Bennet in "Pride and Prejudice" and a greater confidence could hardly be expressed. What a Rosalind, what an Imogen, what a Viola she would make!

Yet, as far as we know, her only Shakespearean role has been Juliet, and of that she has played only the balcony scene. The performance was given in a studio, with a small audience made up of such miscellaneous folk as Laurette Taylor, Ben-Ami, Heifetz, Morris Gest, Alice Duer Miller, Neysa McMein, Edna Ferba, Pauline Lord and the like, sitting uncomfortably but quite astonished on the floor. The Romeo was Sidney Blackmer and the Nurse was acted by one of those delightful players who appear all too seldom, but who on this occasion was somewhat too engrossed in a fear of forgetting the three or four words the Nurse must say. This deep concern recalled a small five-year-old back home who had to blow five notes on a horn at one juncture in some private theatricals. The thought that he might forget his cue so hung upon him that he did not sleep at all the night before and, indeed, when the time came, did forget. Well, one cannot judge a Juliet from the balcony scene. We could say at the time only that we had never heard that scene so exquisitely read. We can still say it.

"The Clinging Vine" is an amusing piece. So is Mr. Tarkington's new play "Rose Briar," most of which we enjoyed greatly and in which Billie Burke is more charming than ever she was. Yet both plays are founded on an assumption that runs counter to all our most painful experience in the world. Both comedies deal with baby-talk ladies. Both Miss Sears and Mr. Tarkington seem to have a creditable aversion to sirens of that type, yet, seemingly, it has been their observation that men succumb to such fascinations. It is their notion that when a girl begins to tell how frightened she is in the presence of dray bid men, the dray bid men thus addressed glows faintly and falls at her feet. It has been our own observation that the dray bid men becomes clammy with horror, takes on the harrowed aspect of one in whose ear a slate pencil is squeaking and at the first opportunity lopes out in quest of strong liquor.

Jesse Lynch Williams Learns Wisdom From His Son

JESSE LYNCH WILLIAMS, author of "Why Not?" the comedy which Equity Players, Inc. is presenting at the Forty-eighth Street Theater, is one of the few members of his generation who is tolerated by the "new generation." Even his own children approve of their father's work. Henry Meade, the eldest, who has already followed his father's footsteps as far as the staff of The New York Sun, where Williams senior began his career as a writer, says:

"You see, he has had the benefit of my instruction. As one of the kids in 'Why Not?' says, 'Father and I are so congenial.' In fact, without giving me the slightest credit or a per cent of his royalties, he plagiarized that line from me, though in our case it was not necessary to go to the expense of a divorce to discover our congeniality." The other day the playwright reported to his son that some of the older generation considered "Why Not?" cynical. "Tot!" replied Williams junior, "there is nothing cynical about the truth good naturedly told. That is what makes my generation so tired with yours. Most of them worship lies and call themselves idealists."

"So my idyll of divorce does not shock your crowd?" Williams senior asked. "Oh, we're all too young to be shocked. When your hypocritical lawyer enters upon the scene where your two couples are discussing their plans for a double divorce and double wedding they all say 'Hush! Hush!' That is so like your generation. The lawyer, I suppose, symbolizes Respectability and Established Order. And the 'Hush' tells the whole story of your generation's attitude toward the truth." "Yes, you certainly do talk." "We believe in the naked truth." "Quite so. Especially when naked." "Well, why not?" "What do your crowd think of the scene where we show up the church's

medieval attitude toward marriage and divorce?" "Speaking for myself, it was a disappointment. You ought never to have changed that line of Mary's. As I remember, it originally read: 'It is wrong to think, if I think I doubt. If I doubt I'm damned. The church thinks for me, I obey.'" "You're wrong there, Henry. That speech has the merit of being true—authentic, I mean. A member of my generation actually said those very lines in a real conversation. Like most literal transcriptions that speech would not give the illusion of reality and, therefore, would not be 'true.' Your generation should hear that in mind."

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The Talk of Broadway

By FRANK VREELAND

ALLA NAZIMOVA has been sedulously rehearsing in her new spoken drama during the last week on the stage of the Globe Theater and is liable within three weeks to burst into language. The Russian star, either on January 15 or January 22, may come out of the cloistered exclusion of the movies after several years. It is thus with every distinguished player, you know—they bound joyfully into the films, but after a time their emotions begin to grow pent up, and presently they are overflowing the footlights again.

The theater has virtually been set, but is not yet ripe to have its name betrayed here. The play, which is a tragedy based by Louis Anzacher on a drama by Ferencz Herczeg, is now getting along quite nicely under the name of "Dagmar," which may stay put. Prominent in the cast of nine will be Gilbert Emery, Greta Kemble Cooper and Donald Call, while the star's husband and director, Charles Bryant, promises in the way of a leading man a surprise for one and all. Just a friendly warning.

Nazimova will thus be wielding the drama simultaneously in two incarnations soon, on the screen in "Salome" and on the stage, and theatergoers will be enabled to decide whether they prefer her plain or colored.

Madge Kennedy, on the other hand, is another two dimensional actress who will soon be deflected from the stage back to the screen. Shortly after "Spite Corner" drops out of the running at the Little Theater next Saturday Miss Kennedy will sail a boat going to Japan. There she will thread together a new movie at the head of her own company, doubtless making prodigal use of the cherry blossoms which can be obtained so reasonably in Nippon.

The plans to have Leo Carrillo lead a double life in the flesh and in the films with "Mike Angelo" have not matured, so only his speaking likeness will be visible next week at the Morocco Theatre. Oliver Morosco made an effort to have him play simultaneously in the two mediums and the one comedy—something that had never been attempted before, even in the films, where all things seem possible. But arrangements could not be completed in time, and so another good story will have to wait a while.

One photoplay favorite who will not succumb from the films back to the stage is Douglas Fairbanks, despite the fact that his teeth were once quite well

known before the footlights. Incidentally he has discarded the practical theme on which he was to embark for his next picture, and instead he will have "The Tallman" turn over before the camera. President Oregon's private car, which had been sent for Fairbanks's use in his proposed trip to Mexico, and which had been quietly being in wait for him in the yards of the Pennsylvania Railroad, has had to return to the southern republic without having Doug leap regally upon it.

The week just passed has been one of the most monumental in theatrical history, even from the standpoint of a ticket speculator. After tepid attendance on Christmas, both afternoon and evening, business picked up with a rush toward the end of the week. And aside from the long-awaited appearance of Ethel Barrymore in "Romeo and Juliet," the opening of eight attractions on Monday evening presented the largest crush of dramatic talent ever known to fall upon Broadway all at once.

Then there have been the attacks on the Moscow Art Theater, as a result of which Morris Gest's advance sale has risen to a large sum, variously quoted from \$29,000 to \$50,000, depending upon the natural optimism of the informant.

A. H. Woods contemplates presenting "The Masked Woman" as a star as soon as completely revealed. It will be in one of those Edgar Allan Poe plays, which seems to be the only survivor of the epidemic of Poe plays a season ago. This was written by Edward Knoblock, and as Woods was lighting a cigar the other day he decided to call it "The Divine Spark." It deals with the writer's days in Fordham and his devotion to his wife, though Helen, the other woman, naturally appears in it prominently for the sake of those who crave excitement in the theater.

Woods was frustrated in his dark designs to capture "Johannes Kreisler" after he saw it in Berlin by Crosby Gaige, representing the Selwyns, who was first on line with the cash. But as Woods philosophically remarked, "It cost the Selwyns \$75,000 to see it here, whereas I only had to pay \$11."

"The Fool" was another Selwyn venture which Woods might have had, but he waved it away. He admits freely that it is the one play turned down by the Woods office which has proven a success, and is willing to concede receipts of \$500,000 to the producers. When he was asked why he rejected "The Fool" the manager answered: "Because I was the fool."

It was rumored last week that Laurette Taylor was bound for the George M. Cohan Theater with "Humoresque" shortly, but as "The Love Child" seems bound by the closest ties to that house the rumor failed to make good in the pinch. Pauline Frederick in "The Gaily One" will try conclusions with New York in about a month.

Now that David Warfield in "The Merchant of Venice" has been entrusted to the American republic David Belmont is taking steps to see that Lionel Atwill marches on the provinces in "The Comedian," by the same Sacha Guitly who shed his lustre on "The Grand Duke."

Incidentally every one around the Belmont establishment became so absorbed in the preparations for "The Merchant of Venice" that it affected the usually reserved stage crew. When some one asked the property man on the opening night after he had been busy all evening setting each detail in place how he felt, he replied feelingly: "My little body is awfully of this great world."

Frank Keenan has come to town

and has commenced casting for the play in which he got San Francisco to rally around him a few weeks ago. The theater, it is said, has already been hand picked, but is hiding its electric light under a bushel of anonymity.

The Keenan play was written by Frank M. N. Dazey, son of C. F. Dazey, who will always have a place in the world's history as the author of "In Old Kentucky." While a Second Lieutenant with the A. E. F. young Dazey contributed two poems to the Stars and Stripes, which became favorite songs with the soldiers, regardless of the fact that they had been written by a shavetail.

The regular legitimate theater into which A. E. Erlanger and Piercen Ziegfeld, Jr., have been converting the New Amsterdam roof will be finished in two or three weeks and ready for musical comedy high jinks. "Lonely Wives," now bawling down on Broadway under the title of "Diana Comes to Town," was picked along the Rialto as the likely offering with which the steam heat would be turned on here. But it now appears that another rumor has gone bad.

Two plays which recently took the road into their confidence are not likely to be gathered to the bosom of New York at least during the present chill weather. One of them is "The Moreland Case," which is reported to have found the way of the tryout to be hard. "The Amber Fluid" wasn't even uncoiled on the road.

In the burial of "The Romantic Age" recently lies another of those tragedies of hope deferred which break not every once in so often. One of these who had a large interest in the show was Ted Harris, who under the name of Horowitz some time since had done office work and rustled photographs for a publicity plotter. He hoped with the Milne comedy to shoot up to the eminence of plush furniture, like Mike Godfrey and Mike Mindin. Until that time he wished to keep the name of Horowitz in reserve, serving under Harris. Now it looks as though he would have to wait a while longer before signing \$1,999 checks with the name of Horowitz.

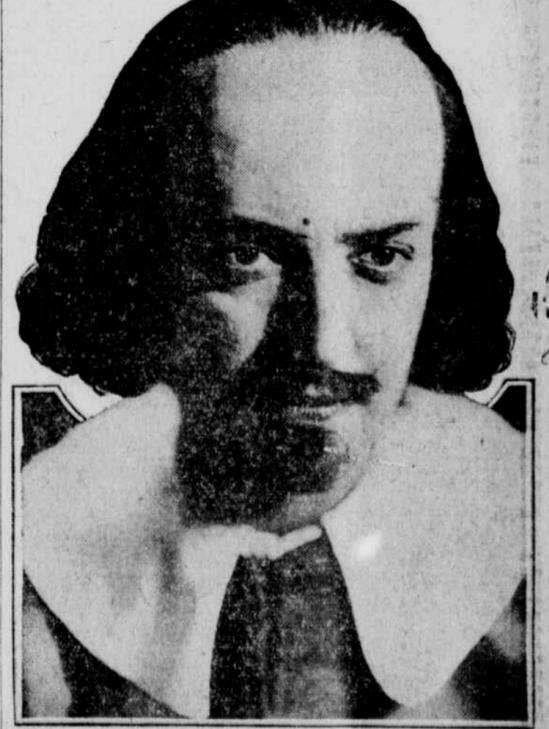
Lee Kugel has decided to take his new thriller, "Zero," into Chicago, since the various mysterious effects promised by the author came to pass without calling on the help of the movies to get characters to dissolve into thin air, etc. So this play will put teeth on edge at the Great Northern Theater on January 3.

The play is by Joseph F. Rinn, hitherto best known as a magician and a dabbler in spiritualism, who exposed some of the tricks of Paladino and other advance agents for Little Bright-Eyes. He set forth to demonstrate in a play that creepy effects could be achieved by any one who knew the proper materials to mix, even if he didn't claim he was in tune with the infinite. How far he went toward this goal is thus disclosed by a reviewer in the Patriot at Harrisburg, Pa., where the play recently sought to encourage shivers.

After "The Bat," "The Cat and the Canary" and plays of that kind, what could be more baffling?

"Zero." There was about this creepy play which opened a three day run at the Orpheum last night an appeal to the reason as well as to the nerve centers. It was presented by a cast which included such finished players as George Nash, Effie Shannon, James Crane, Ned A. Sparks and George Probert, who gave small evidence that the play was in its stage.

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Otto Kruger in "Will Shakespeare," coming to the National to-morrow night.