

STAGECRAFT THE SECRET OF PLAYS OF MODERN TIMES

A Death of Plays.

Mr. Belasco's Comment and a Few Independent Observations—Action as a Requisite in Theatrical Art.

In the abundant and excellent "copy" lately provided by David Belasco for the use of newspapers, appears a discussion on the present-day need for plays which has an exceptional interest.

"The great question," he says, "that gives the manager more concern than anything else is 'What are we going to do for plays?' Great plays, I mean, plays that are really worth while. Just now we seem to have reached a period of stagnation. All the old playwrights are either dead or superannuated and the younger men lack virility. Germany has Sudermann and Hauptmann and there are a few others, but their genius is cranky and their plays are full of theories.

"I don't know exactly what the American theatergoers want. But I know they want something better than they are getting, as a rule. The farces, the burlesques, the extravaganzas are all very well in their way and there will always be need of them, but the public wants something more than that. They are only the entrées, the salad, the dessert, the hors d'oeuvres. The piece de résistance is left out of the feast entirely and the public is beginning to demand it. A confidante once told me he always instructed his clerks to eat all the candy and tarts they wanted. They soon get tired of them," he explained, "when they can have all they want." And that's just the way with the public. It has had a surfeit of frivolous stage entertainment. It wants something solid now, something to reach the intellect."

A Postulate Well Established.

This is merely Mr. Belasco's postulate. He has only laid down the threads of his plot, so to speak, the great concern of the manager is the lack of great plays. He does not know exactly what American theatergoers want, but he has discovered that they want something better than what they get. The stage has surfeited its patrons with sweets; it must now serve upbuilding, strengthening meat.

The Times is under no obligation to review the season's bookings in order to affirm this view. A few notable dramatic writings suggest themselves to everyone: Heyse's "Mary of Magdala," Stephen Phillips' "Francisco," Herod and "Byzance," "Old Heidelberg," as translated for Mr. Mansfield; Sardou's "Dante," and the classics, of which we are to have so many "revivals," are all exceptional and noteworthy, if not great.

But the great number of stage compositions being produced, the vast majority are made from books. The next large number is a product of the peculiar ability possessed by such men as Bronson Howard and Augustus Thomas. Clyde Fitch, when all is said and done, has written what are probably the only noteworthy dramas on the life of today. One play, and it may be significant that it has had a most precarious existence—had in it the elements of greatness, Mr. Zangwill's "Children of the Ghetto." Polite melodrama, plays of the most moderate literary quality, are still very much like patterns in wall paper and character studies cut to the personality of the actors for whom they are designed, these—with the few exceptions noted—constitute the great number of dramatic representations now to be seen on our stage. The few plays of serious interest, framed from classifying the plays written by Mr. Belasco himself.

Intellect and Action.

In expansion of this thought Mr. Belasco continues: "Of course," he says, "the heavy German style of intellectual drama will never suit the American playgoer. He demands some action, plenty of action. And that kind of play is possible. Shakespeare's plays are full of action; so are those of Sheridan and all the other old playwrights."

Action, then, and intellect are the distinctive requirements for the great modern play as they appear to Mr. Belasco. It should be said parenthetically that both these qualities abound in Mr. Belasco's own works. The chief point of interest in this second proposition is that a clear distinction is drawn between literature in the form of the drama and plays which are dramatic and literary at the same time.

The dictionary defines a play, in this sense, as "a dramatic composition for scenic representation by speaking or acting." A drama is "a composition in prose or in poetry, usually intended to be acted upon the stage, presenting a story by means of characters speaking and acting in situations contrived to develop a plot and with such accessories of scenery, stage machinery, costume, etc., as are fitted to create an impression of reality."

It will be noted there is here no mention of action as the chief quality of a play. On the contrary the chief aim of the drama is to develop a plot. How this is to be done is left to the ingenuity of the playwright, and the producer; and in Mr. Belasco's instance it must invariably be done through action. Shakespeare's plays are full of action, as he sees them. So indeed, they are. But it is no proof of Mr. Belasco's case, for the comedies and tragedies from Shakespeare's pen afford such abundant food for study as to make their action entirely subordinate to interest of another sort. This is, of course, even more true of his histories.

Action of Laziness.

Action of the sort indicated by Mr. Belasco is a tribute to the intellectual laziness of the age. Our people, in the theater and out of it, must have their thinking done for them. Sufficient evidence of this is to be found in the new form given all our periodical publications. It is not enough that playgoers should hear portentous words clearly spoken. They must also be translated by means of sign language so that the deafest person in the audience may understand clearly.

Action is an undoubted requisite in theatrical art, but not in the sense indicated by Mr. Belasco. It is an attribute merely and not an end. The development of a plot, the expression of noble sentiment in language which is clear, delineative and musical, the emphasis of a valuable lesson, by whatever means attained, and not action, or even action and intellect, are the real ends of all true dramatic writing. Mr. Belasco is outspoken in explaining this lack of good plays. "It's commercialism that is to blame," he says.



MRS. LESLIE CARTER, in "Du Barry."

"A playwright must give his whole time to the work. He can't blither with tradesmen all day and write plays as a pastime in the evenings. But men aren't willing to do that. They say it doesn't pay. What if it doesn't? If they were real artists, if they loved their work for itself, they wouldn't care whether it paid or not. They would do it anyway. Yes, and maybe starve; but they would do something to be proud of. At any rate the great American play will never be written until men are willing to risk all for art's sake."

"You say the public demands something better than it is getting and will have it," some one observed. "Where is it coming from?" "Candidly," replied Mr. Belasco, "I don't know. But it is surely coming. What the people want they will have. The play producers must give it to them. There is no country in the world where the people pay as much to support the theater as they do in America, and they are beginning to know that they don't get their money's worth. 'People are better educated than they used to be. Books—I mean the best books—are cheap. Young people belong to literary clubs. They read. Their instincts are awakening. Don't you suppose they will demand a better drama? Will the extravaganzas, the farce, continue to satisfy them? They'll still want some shows of that kind for diversion, but they want food for their intellects as well. And the managers will have to give it to them. 'Where are these plays to come from?' It's a problem that must be solved, and solved soon."

Great Plays or "Stars?"

This is, however, only a part of the truth. Distinctly encouraging as it is that so prominent a producer should have gone so far, it is still to be regretted that his vision was not entirely clear.

Commercialism is to blame in many senses. Great plays are never measured to the talents of single actors. A play is a work of literature and something more. While producers, even those as artist in their inclination as Mr. Belasco, will purchase plays only for the exploitation of particular "stars," men who make plays for their living must live under unhealthy restrictions, and produce mediocre products.

If Mr. Belasco is right—and theatrical critics throughout the United States hope that he may be right, if, at least, the American theatergoer has come to realize the poor quality of his theatrical food, then, perhaps, managers will be put to the necessity of producing plays not written or measured for "stars." Without this freedom there must be very few good plays, and practically no great ones.

We hope we may hear from Mr. Belasco on this point. A. D. A.

Past and Future.

Miss Gailand's engagement at the Columbia provoked the interest it deserved. Her enactment of Juliet was altogether too distinguished for their living memory, even in the heat of summer, and her subsequent reappearance here in any role was certain to profit by the renewal of that interest. "Dorothy Vernon" is not a great play. It will be gratefully remembered, however, for the opportunity it afforded to see Miss Gailand again, to view the pageant of historic characters it portrays, and to enjoy the acting of Mr. Lose and the others of Miss Gailand's company.

"Raffles" was a fine study in the force of quietness. How much of its success depended on the art of Mr. Bell and Mr. Holland could hardly be estimated, but the performance was a fine entertainment, whatever the cause. Al Wilson continued in the good favor extended him last year. Chase's offered a bill of fair vaudeville. The Academy and the Empire presented characteristic melodrama, and the Lyceum continued on the even profit of its way with burlesque of its peculiar style.

Next week will appear one of the dramatic sensations of the period and a musical comedy heralded as an extraordinary success, "Du Barry" and "Nancy Brown." "York State Folks," announced for the Lafayette, has proven itself a worthy example of the much abused "plays from nature." The other bills are as usual.

So the theatrical course is run.

At the Theaters.

National—Mrs. Leslie Carter in "Du Barry."

Mrs. Leslie Carter, in the title role of "Du Barry," will appear this week for seven performances at the National Theater. She is joined by the last opportunity local playgoers will have to see her impersonation of the role. Mrs. Carter will have the assistance of the same able company that surrounded her during the notable run of 382 performances of "Du Barry." In New York, May Brown-Howard, Ethel Hoag, Estelle as King Louis XV, Charles Gilligwater as Denys, and Claude Millward as

Cosse, Campbell Gollan as Jean du Barry, and C. P. Flockton as the lord chancellor. The original scenic investiture will be again seen here, together with the vast quantity of valuable bric-a-brac, collected in France. Mrs. Carter is said to bring to her portrayal of the Belasco heroine magnetism and art. Her work has been compared with that of Eleanor Duse and Sara Bernhardt, while many conservative dramatic reviewers have averred that this brilliant artist combines the emotional qualities of the French woman with the tragic intensity of the Latin actress. Mrs. Carter's striking comedy ability is a potent factor in her success.

The management desire to impress upon patrons that but seven performances of "Du Barry" will be given, and in consequence of the length of the play the curtain will rise promptly at 8 o'clock in the evening, and at 2 o'clock on Saturday.

Columbia—Marie Cahill in "Nancy Brown."

Marie Cahill will appear in "Nancy Brown" at the Columbia Theater this week. The plot of "Nancy Brown" is amusing and interesting. In the singing of each new song Miss Cahill dons a new gown and in these changes of toilette she is invariably accompanied by eight actresses whom, as a marriage broker, "Nancy Brown" is endeavoring to marry off to noblemen of title. An American drummer, Noah Little, wanders into the plot, laughs his way through it, and marries the Princess Barboe. Miss Cahill has been surrounded by

Dolly Reynolds, Bertha Wilson, Ellen Claron, Vera Claron, Selma La Salle, Laura Clark, Helen Freeman, Alice Stewart, Mabel Douglas, Lillian Graham, Nellie Dunn, Vella Bradford, Ida Smith, Nellie Wood and Florence Gray. Augustus Reed, L. F. Sampson, Maxwell Sargent, W. H. Adams, H. S. McGirr, Joseph Kravence, and Harry Hazleton.

Among the musical numbers sung in "Nancy Brown" are Marie Cahill's "Congo Love Song," "You Can't Fool All the People All the Time," "I'm Going to Change My Man," "Save It For Me," "Que Voulez Vous," "A Wise Old Owl," "The Soldier is the Idol of the Nation," "Cupid's Rumble," "In Gay Ballyhoo," "Come Fill Your Glass," "June," "I Could Be Happy With Either One," "The Katydid," the Croquet and the Frog," "A Little Birdie Told Me So," "The Royal Crocodile," and "Strange, Odd, Queer."

Lafayette—"York State Folks."

"York State Folks" returns to the Lafayette this week. The play is a study of everyday life in a typical country village, and Arthur Sidman's dryly humorous character types, chosen from among the people of the York State town where he spent his boyhood, figure in a plain sort of story, which appears to fascinate by reason of its simplicity. Cranky old Simon Peter Martin, who must rule or ruin; lovable Myron Cooper, the guileless and fun-loving organ-buider; jealous Lem Dunbar, who can do better in a horse trade than a love affair, and all the other quaint and interesting people of this



MARIE CAHILL, in "Nancy Brown."

Jackson, Millie Stevens, the three clever children and a vested boy choir of thirty which is utilized in the dream scene of the finale. The scene in "Maple Lane" by moonlight and the picture of the wagon shop are features.

Chase's—Vaudeville.

The Behman Show will make its annual visit to Chase's Theater this week, commencing at the Monday matinee. The company includes the Russell Brothers' company, George Felix and Lydia

George Felix and Lydia Barry will mingle burlesque and comedy in "The Dings of Johnny Jones." Edgar Bixley will appear in the act which captured New York only recently, and as this is his home, much is to be anticipated in his engagement. The Rossow Midgets, the greatest little men on the stage, will present an unusually attractive burlesque boxing and acrobatic specialty. Burton and Brooks in "An Evening at the Club" will indulge in facetious repartee. Little Charlie Rossow in his separate impersonations will introduce a toe dancing feature that will further elevate him in the estimation of his admirers. The Three Livingstons in acrobatic features, Sullivan and Pasquella in "The Newsboy and the East Side Girl," and Leon and Adeline complete the list of entertainers.

Academy—"Happy Hooligan."

"Happy Hooligan" is announced as the attraction at the Academy this week. Almost everyone knows the farce comedy "Happy Hooligan" is based, to a degree, upon the mythical dolms and adventures of F. Opper's genial hobo, cartooned so effectively in New York and other papers. From some of these adventures Frank Dymally has built up a farce comedy, well suited to spectacular display. Since last season, it is said, new costumes and scenery have been purchased. A company of capable comedians and specialty performers has been engaged, and includes Campbell and Caulfield, W. H. Macle, Mae Phelps, Harry S. McKee, Alice Gilmore, the Boston Quartet, Mabel Stanley, Helen Donnelly, Lillian Robson, Eva Taylor, and Bessie Sharp.

Lyceum—Weber's Dainty Duchess Company.

The attraction at the Lyceum Theater this week will be a series of burlesque features supplied by Weber's Dainty Duchess Company, an organization which has appeared here several times with much success. Two sketches, "A Day and A Night" and "Mistakes Will Happen," figure on the program. In addition to these several vaudeville acts will be offered by Frye, Allen and Evans in "Nonsensical Nonsense"; the Musical Trio, in a musical act; Idylla Vynor, prima donna; Jordan and Harvey, Hebrew impersonators, and Hayes and Suits, singers and dancers.

Empire—"The Buffalo Mystery."

Julie and Elmer Walters' scenic production, "The Buffalo Mystery," will be the offering at the Empire this week. The plot is founded on the famous Burdick-Pennell tragedy at Buffalo last spring. The author has taken many liberties, but is said to have produced a melodrama of interest, showing a wealthy merchant's home, his several, the startling disclosures by his faithless wife and her lover, the murder of the merchant at midnight in his den of Oriental splendor, the love of the suspect's wife as she shields him from the hands of the law, and many other sensational features, including the wild dash over the cliffs into the quarry. The comedy element is said to be strong and supplied by an Irish "plain clothes man," an amateur detective, and a Dutch waiter. Heading the company are Malcolm Steward, as the suspect, Guy Durrell as the merchant, Claire Grenville, and Rose Stillman.

Viola Allen as "Viola."

Viola Allen is to appear as Viola in Shakespeare's delightful comedy "Twelfth Night" at the National Theater next week. This is to be the formal opening of her season. Miss Allen is said to have given the comedy a magnificent setting, and it is one that lends itself capably to scenic splendor. That Shakespeare intended this is beyond doubt, else he would not have laid the scenes in a royal duke's palace, or in

the gorgeous Italian garden of a splendid princess. While "Twelfth Night" is a rollicking comedy, it has a romantic love story. Indeed there is a "very varied" interest in the captivating drama, that of love, intrigue, sentiment and roistering fun. "Twelfth Night" with Viola Allen and such a company as supports her, with the added interest of a magnificent setting, should not fail to captivate and delight. Miss Allen's production of "Twelfth Night" was produced and is stage-managed by F. Percival Stevens, of Beerbohm Tree's His Majesty's Theater, London. The company is a notable one, and includes John Blair, Clarence Handyside, Scott Craven, Edwin Howard, Frank Currier, James Young, C. Leslie Allen, F. Percival Stevens, Nora O'Brien, and Zeffie Tilbury.

The Best Stage Heroine. Dramatic Material in "The Woman With a Past."

By MRS. LESLIE CARTER.

Some one has propounded a startling, yet interesting proposition in the query: "Why does the woman with a past make the best stage heroine?" This is not an easy question to answer, and I doubt if anyone would feel justified in subscribing unequivocally to the broad statement that such a woman really does make the best dramatic material, even though she has been frequently and effectively used by the most eminent playwrights. That the woman with a past has from time immemorial held a conspicuous place upon the stage cannot be gainsaid, and in discussing the proposition, I do not wish to be understood as defending her position so much as explaining it.

This may look like an evasion of the question, but it seems to me that there are sufficient and substantial reasons why a position may not be definitely taken either pro or con in judicially considering her value and utility upon the stage. Human life, with its follies, foibles, and sorrows, is the only legitimate source of inspiration for the true dramatist. It is the province of the stage to deal with persons, and so to combine, develop and arrange their actions and their sayings as to give dramatic force to the situations and climaxes that naturally result.

Where is the human life that is not full of "situations"—humorous, pathetic, tragic? Is there a man who has not, at some time in his career, been face to face with some great crisis? The dramatist makes use of just such material as this, re-enforced by that art which knows how to make the most of the matter in hand, with the purpose of proving some theory of life, some lesson in morality, some philosophy of existence.

The dramatist is the creator of his own little world of characters, and he must, naturally, draw from his own observations, experience, and reading, as well as that of his immediate friends. In consequence all sorts of conditions of character find their way to the stage, and it is the province of the greater or less importance, in the development of dramatic literature.

The Place of the Good Woman.

The good woman figures as the central and important figure in countless plays, but in order to develop dramatic possibilities it is essential that this goodness should be subjected to some kind of trial and danger in order to demonstrate the triumph of virtue over temptation. It is the province of the strength of character over weakness, of self-denial over selfishness.

As long as human life is crowded with incidents involving these very elements, the presence of the woman with a past is not absolutely unnecessary to precipitate a crisis. Varied emotions govern and sway life, and it is the way that these emotions are met and handled that adds zest to living. It is self-evident, then, that the good woman has an important place and important work to do upon the modern stage.

Consider now the woman with a past, and admit that there is much to be said for her. It being the business of the conscientious dramatist to deal with human life and its problems as he finds them, he cannot ignore her importance, because he finds he can utilize her in a thousand different and effective ways.

The life of such a woman abounds in dramatic incidents, terrible crises and startling climaxes, and what is chiefly important, most of them have arisen upon the stage in her own mind. This is, indeed, rare material for the dramatist in drawing character and for the actress in realizing it.

Have you ever considered the possibility that the "woman with a past," as portrayed in many modern plays, may have been misunderstood? It seems to me that the mere fact that she is characterized as having a "past" obviously indicates that she has risen to a different position and probably a far better future.

Believe me, it is a mistake to contend as many do, that such women are placed upon the stage in order merely to show the refined and virtuous classes of society the other side of life and character. Theatergoers are the most intelligent people to be found in any community, and they never fail to single out the obvious lesson of what is being acted before them.

The Bad Woman Not Glorified.

The bad woman is not glorified upon the stage. She is almost invariably the pivot around which the vortex of whirl, vital moral problems are made to whirl. Disappointment, suffering, sorrow, regrets, hope, fear and all the conflicting emotions that play upon the heart strings are her portion. It is the very complexity of her character that compels the attention of the dramatist and exercises a fascination over the actress whose ambition it is to portray real life in its most intense moods. There can be in but one deduction from seeing such a character. The lesson is the old story of the "wages of sin," and not a playgoer in a thousand with a scrap of tenderness in his heart would feel for her anything but pity, sorrow and forgiveness. So long as people are human, just so long will the lesson of life be learned through the bitterness of mistakes and the anguish of sorrow and remorse.

It is because this woman must face and battle with such women as these that she is torn by bitter regrets; because she must inevitably pass through the crucible of suffering; because of her mistakes and vain ambitions stand as a warning to humanity—these are a few of the reasons that make her existence dramatic, and



SOME MODERN VIOLAS IN "TWELFTH NIGHT."

her manager, Daniel V. Arthur, with a company of merit, including Julius Steger, George C. Boniface, Jr., Harry Brown, Alfred Grant, Roy Atwell, George Moran, Henry Vogel, George J. Damerel, Edwin W. Lewis, Henry Burgess, Clara Palmer, Donah Benrimo, Helen Sherwood, Josephine Karlin, Alice Knowlton, Maud Francis, Ruby Paine, Louise Egner, Beatrice Flint, May Brown-Howard, Ethel Hoag, Estelle Rogers, Beth Titus, Sarah Spotswood,

little York State town are portrayed with fidelity. The original cast comes to the Lafayette, and includes James Lackaye, a Washingtonian, and a strong favorite, in his powerful portrayal of Simon Peter Martin; Rex L. Royce as the old musician, Ernest Lamson as Lem Dunbar, Harry Jackson and the veteran Arthur Gregory as the sleepy workmen Harry Crosby as the fresh "Uncle Tom's Cabin" advance agent, Eleanor Sidman, Marie Falls, Kat

Barry, Edgar Bixley, the Rossow Midgets, Burton and Brooks, Little Charlie Rossow, the Three Livingstons, Sullivan and Pasquella, and Leon and Adeline. The Russell Brothers, like McIntyre and Heath, are familiar figures in vaudeville, and their annual appearance is hailed with satisfaction. The Russell Brothers' company includes John, James, John, Jr., and Annie, who appear in George M. Coban's latest farce, "A Romance of New Jersey."