

BELASCO TELLS HOW HE MAKES A PLAY

BY GARNET WARREN

SAYS HE HAS PASSED A LOVELY LIFE, FULL OF HARD WORK, SEEING MUCH AND FEELING MORE



"I am observing—I am observing all the time."

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It is a little room, that in which I waited for Mr. Belasco—not a comfortable little room, but an antique little room, with old prints and play bills curiously clocks and gilded, antique furniture with red upholstery. There are grotesque masks hanging from walls of old blue, old books and old mementos in glass cases, and little dark antique rugs upon the parquet floor.

It is a little room near the stage this, for all its strange air of monastic seclusion, and presently come a rustle of silk and the patter of two very high heeled shoes, and then Miss Frances Starr in full advance to her dressing room—Miss Starr arrayed in the full panoply of performance, with a very long train, and her maid bearing it aloft.

The pictures of old, dead actors stare down from their thin black frames, and one may become very philosophical and cease to envy even that little elegant, dress-fluttering, silky-swishing lady who has just passed with her maid and her high, high shoes and her applause; and one may think of the few years which will relegate her to a little black frame, too, to look just as dried and musty as the others. Thus may the obscure philosophize while waiting for Mr. Belasco.

The door opens and you clasp a hand of uncertain pressure, which comes out to you (Mr. Belasco's, to be particular), and you see a little, plump man with a chubby, pinky face and a mass of ironed, silver hair, and thick black eyebrows, and young, young eyes, deep and brown and liquid and velvety; sensitive, emotional eyes, never seen before in any human being above seventeen. Quite a fleshy nose has he, and the smiling mouth of some smooth-mannered, jolly little priest—and clothes like one, too, for you only see a narrow rim of a striped and collar between the pink of the face and the sheer black of the clothes beneath.

He smiles and hesitates, and talks lowly, softly and unobtrusively, and with smiling, embarrassed little deprecatory pauses. You wonder if anything may have gone wrong. You are unaccustomed to this from the interviewed, for they are usually lordly creatures and even their press agents keep you waiting in passages and gaze, with conscious superiority, from their illimitable heights down at your lowly station.

You tell him that you would like him to speak about the making of a play, of how he conceives one and constructs one, and while you are speaking you are watching him—how he regards you with that peculiar smile which seems so strangely unobtrusive, and how he rests his hand upon his cheek, and how his fingers twiddle about his silver mane. And then the eyes half close, and he twiddles, and he twiddles for perhaps a few minutes; and then you know yourself to be a very privileged person. He is no longer regarding you. His eyes are half closed—a master is speaking of his art.

"The great chest to which all dramatists must go," says he, in a sort of low, soft, introspective tone, broken frequently by pauses for reflection, "is Nature. It is the bigger drama from which you pick your smaller pieces of life. So you watch it all the time."

Mr. Belasco deserts the particular lot upon which up to that moment, he has been disappointed. Again he permits his fingers to stray through a second one. "You mean that you are always observing?" I commenced after another modest silence of about a minute, during which Mr. Belasco still continues to regard that space upon the wall and ruffles further his silver opulence of hair. I am wondering if I have another uncommunicative Croaker upon my hands when he moves his eyes from his favored point and looks directly at me as he says:—

"I am observing—I am observing all the time—I cannot help it. A man or woman, a style of diction



"The plot is an essential thing."

or a mannerism—I note it. As I pass through the city I am looking, looking," says he lowly, softly, but yet with a touch of tenseness—of the dramatic. One could detect a predominating polish in his words and tones, with yet a faint flavor of some colloquial thing, far, far away and distant.

The Waiting Girl. "I see some little girl near a pillar. Yes, there she is—waiting—waiting, and looking at the clock. Ah! she is waiting for her sweetheart."

Again the little clock in our own room is the centre of attraction. It ticks out the steps of the little girl. He is watching her intently. His voice is low and he follows her movements with his hand. "Yes, she looks—she inquires at the Bureau of Information—she gasps—she has been disappointed. Again the wait—the train—she takes her stand at the post and watches every one that passes. Ah! there he is—you can see him—the radiance in her eyes; he is telling her how he missed the train—he is leaning down—their faces are together. He takes her hand and snuggles it up here—you know, right up here, you know [takes imaginary hand and tucks it under arm in intimate, snuggling fashion]—like that—and then—just trots her off, don't you know." [Ininitely subtle motions of body indicative of trotting off.] A pause.

"I come again. I got out there under my shadow. front of him. He moves the visionary chairs and tables of that shadowy stage; he talks to the actors who walk there through those half shut eyes, and repeats their lines to them as though they stood before him in their flesh and blood. And then he will come out of his fine fire and smile at you quite diffidently, like some untried young man who is not absolutely sure of himself.

Here is a casket and a woman is following it. I say, 'Is she mother or wife or sister?' I watch her as she sobs.

"Ah! little white drops from the eyes, little red drops from the heart! And so I am watching, always watching, there behind the shadow!"

Mr. Belasco waves his visionary men and women away with almost sacerdotal tenderness—sweet vanished creatures of the mist—and deserts the clock and the gilded chair, while the black, black brows and the young, young emotional eyes face me again.

"And of the play itself?" I asked. "Yes, yes," he says, "the play." He closes the plump hand with the plain gold ring and the other ring with the two inconsequential stones, and his smallest finger twiddles about his lips. He puckers up his pink face in perplexity. He clasps his hands in front.

"Well, I make up my mind what period I want—now—all right!" Again the visions of his mind world come near to him and he seems to move among them and touch them. And I learn that there are two Mr. Belascos, the diffident, private Mr. Belasco and the professional, artistic Mr. Belasco, who gives himself utterly to his ideas and acts before you every thought he speaks. If he describes a scene it is in

him. Yes, I get up on the subject. What did they eat? Could they get beef and milk? You know.

"And now my plot. I think, I get in a dark room. If it be day time I close the blinds, the doors, make a prisoner of myself and—just think out, think out, think out. I find something—perhaps I have read an incident in a paper, or a book that gives a suggestion—it is the germ; and in the dark there I think, and think, and it grows." [More drumming—quick, active drumming this time; one wonders how the gilt is going to last.]

"Now, the plot is really the essential thing. There should be but one real plot, you know—call it the main plot; sub-plots should only be used as steps to it. Then the motive—there should be one tremendous motive. While the four passions may be used, only one must stand out, you see? It is most important, too, that you make very careful use of your hero and heroine; one must dominate. You cannot make them both do big things, though sometimes we merge them if the play makes it necessary. [Graphic illustration signifying merger.] They will make a sacrifice together—Romeo and Juliet—ONE—you see?"

"I wish you would say one thing, too," he says. "I think that in play construction the unities are incorrect. Time, place, action." He waves disdainfully. "We accept the unities because some old Greek has written them. I don't believe the unities are artistic. I think they are all wrong. I say they are unnatural. You see?"

I do, I see a man tensely emotional, who illustrates every sentence with graphic gestures, every personal allusion with vivid character studies. In gaining a wonderful playwright and producer the stage lost a wonderful actor.

The People in the Play.

Mr. Belasco passes his hand across his forehead as if to get his second wind, so to speak, and resumes:— "Well, now, I have got all now—the data, and the plot, the characters—everything. Now I start in writing. I sit down like this, see? [Settles himself a trifle more firmly in chair.] I say—yes, I will start here. I work myself up till I feel the character and then I dictate and accompany everything with business—just as I'm doing now, you know. I have a stenographer to take down every word and another to take down my business."

"The shadows of his mind world rise up again within his eyes. His voice gets louder and tenser.

"Now I am a strumpet of the streets—or do I want a drug or a handful of stuff? Can I bring the lover that I adore enough money to make him give me a cress and say, 'Good girl, you've done bully to-night'?"



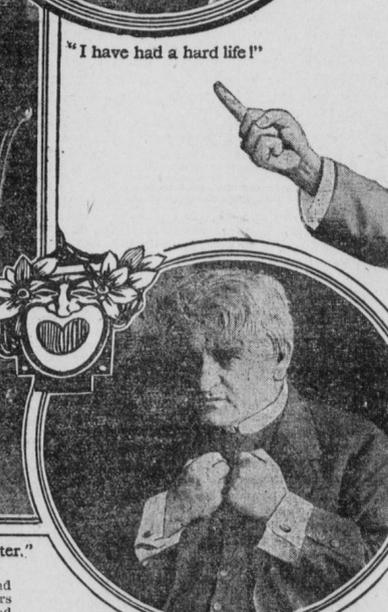
"I feel my blues—I feel my sunsets."



"I have had a hard life!"



"I work myself up till I feel the character."



"I go about murder in the same way."

I had come at half-past nine o'clock. I looked at the little clock above. Its hands pointed now to a quarter after ten, and Mr. Belasco had only finished composing his play! He is voluble, flexible, interested. His emotionalism flares out with each word he utters. I am afraid he may grow tired before he has unraveled his whole stage scheme of things. So I ask about his human instruments—his actors and actresses. How does he train them for their parts? "I study them," he says. "Study them—study them all the time." He looks out into vague distance; doubtless they are all trooping there before him. "What do their characters run to? Now this actor—what has been his life? Has it been vice, woman and cards? This man again—does he drink? Is he quick tempered?"

"Just the same with the woman. I study her. She may be called upon to play great, sublime parts. If she has had a life of excitement I try to calm her—yes [pause] I try to calm her. And so I come down to the theatre. Now we are on the stage—yes, yes."

Mr. Belasco looks off once more, off into the phantasy of his creations. The visionary properties lie about him in their stageland gloom. The little room with the gilded chairs in which I sit is far away indeed, now.

"Y—e—um [hand goes up to mouth, little finger goes within lips]. Is it best to have that sofa there?—um—um—Now you are playing Agnes."

The well remembered chair of gilt in the corner that once had been the girl waiting at the station for her sweetheart now becomes Agnes.

All Careful Study.

"Oh, yes, I study her—I study her temperament. Yes, yes, I look at my girl; I think I am going to make that girl Agnes. I say now, girl, you sit on that chair. No, no, I don't want you to wipe your eyes on that handkerchief—just do it like this [descriptive pantomime with one finger]. I develop that way. I don't believe in crowding it—just little things that a woman would do. I may change the whole thing to-morrow. Pfen-en-en-ew!" Mr. Belasco sends forth a levithian puff. He pauses, then continues:—

"Now, girl, there's that speech—do you get the sense of it? Yes? Now try it. Now, I say. Let us watch our little adjectives; a little adjective means a lot. How much emphasis do you want on it? No, no; that is too much—there, leave it, leave it. Do not underline your adjectives. Now read it, and try to feel it—feel it, see? Don't take it in a cold blooded way. I say 'Always listen to me but don't imitate me—feel it like I do—but don't imitate me.' My golden rule is not to destroy a personality. I cannot change it; only God can. I appeal to their imaginations, their emotions, their intellects. I say, 'Have you got it under your corsets, girl? Have you got it under your waistcoat, boy? If you feel it take it and do it in your own way.'"

"I cannot prepare. I cannot prepare," he says. "For form's sake I make some directions in the manuscript—a picture here, a fireplace there; but I am liable to change them all next day. I take things as they come. I don't go at them in a cold blooded way. I feel more than I see. I feel my blues—I feel my sunsets."

"Are you always trying to conceive fresh stage effects?"

"In a play I try to do nothing that I accomplished yesterday. I always believe in advancing—marching on. In my diction, in my productions, in my lights, in my atmosphere I try to learn, to advance. No matter how good a thing appeared last season, the following year I seem to see more, and I never repeat."

Mr. Belasco pauses. He rests at the end of a lap, so to speak, in this Marathon of mine. The clock hands have crept to eleven.

I ask him if he could analyze the secrets of his skill?

"Work, work," said he; "work and—temperament, for no matter how hard you labor, play writing must be instinctive. It is intuition, instinct, temperament, inspiration. Like the poet and like the musician, it must be God-given. That and—yes—a lifetime passed in the theatre. It is the most difficult of the arts. You must be drafter and mechanic in one. All the books in the world cannot teach you, unless God has touched you with His hand and said, 'My son, you are fitted for play writing.'"

Mr. Belasco rests his whitened, rebellious head upon his hand as he ceases speaking. He is silent for a long, long time and then he says, in low tones:—

"I have passed a lonely life. I have very few friends. Moods affect me. I have had a busy life. I started to labor while almost a baby. I have worked

in cellars and garrets; I have worked in candle light—but I worked. I see much; I feel more. Yes, I have passed through a hard life. Sometimes I wonder how I could have kept my head afloat. I have had no backing, no help. All that I have had has come from those who have passed their dollars through that little hole outside. Yes, I have worked my best!"

The voice dies away; the great artist sits there. The eyes look farther than the gilded table, though. They are looking down the corridors of time and through the mists of memory.

"If God has not touched with His hand and said 'My son—'"

