

JAMES O'NEILL'S Views on the BIBLICAL DRAMA

By James Crawford

JAMES O'NEILL'S mind was not in buoyant mood when I met him last Monday evening in the Hotel Majestic. He had just returned from a tour of the burned district, and the ruins had entered his soul.

"Not an old landmark left," he said, sadly. That's one of the disadvantages of conversing with a person who knew the San Francisco of the past and has recently gazed upon the debris that occupies places with which pleasant memories are associated. To us who went through those grim April days and have stuck to the town ever since the holes in the ground and the rubbish heaps have become sights so familiar as to be deprived of saddening effect, but to the folk who look upon them for the first time they convey the gloom that we once possessed. In the case of Mr. O'Neill this impression was exceptionally marked, for the artistic temperament is prone to morbidness and he knew the old town as few actors have had opportunity to know it. He dwelt here three consecutive years a quarter-century ago. One of his sons was born in a Market-street hotel.

"What a flood of recollections swept through my mind as I drove through the locality," that the player people once favored!" he said. "There are no buildings now where once stood my usual haunts, but the sites sufficed to recall many a half-forgotten incident. Thirty years ago, when I walked along Kearny or Bush street, I received friendly greetings every moment. Today not a single 'Hello, Jim,' saluted me."

Admires the Spirit of '06

"No, thank God. Cards and telephone numbers have been left at the theater box office by many of my old acquaintances. I drove down to visit one of them this morning—Henry M. Black, the carriage-builder—and found him, in his seventieth year, restoring the business that was wiped out by the fire. 'Henry, why are you getting into the harness again?' I asked, for I knew he has enough of this world's goods to obviate necessity of his working. 'Jim,' he replied, 'why are you still acting?' Then I understood the spirit that is rebuilding San Francisco. That man of three score and ten could no more sit down and supinely watch others work than I can abandon the stage while I have strength to remain with it. He is not building carriages because he has to earn a living, and I am not playing 'Monte Cristo' every night and rehearsing 'The Voice of the Mighty' every day because of pecuniary stress."

He is reputed to be in the seven-figure class of opulence, and he admitted that from 'Monte Cristo' alone he has drawn a clear profit of more than a million dollars during the twenty-three years he has been playing it. "Speaking of this new John the Baptist drama of yours," I said, "reminds me that Robert Downing once essayed something of the kind at our Central Theater."

When He Played the Savior

"That play was written by Mr. Elmer and has no connection whatever with 'The Voice of the Mighty,' which was sketched by Mr. Slavin and has been developed by myself, with the aid of my stage director, Mr. Forster. Indeed, we are still developing it, although I think it is now a tremendously strong production. And if certain calls are acceptable as evidence, the public agrees with me."

"You seem to have a liking for scriptural drama," I remarked, remembering that he is the only American actor who ever essayed the character of the Savior. He instantly divined my thought.

"You are thinking of the Passion Play at the Grand Opera-house here in 1880," he said. "I acknowledged 'twas so, and my request for some first-hand information regarding the world-famous event returned him to reminiscence. "It was during my second stay in the city that we did the Passion Play," he said. "I first came here in 1874 as stock star of the Hooley company, and in 1877 came back as a member of the organization that opened the Baldwin Theater. Barry Sullivan, the English tragedian, was specially engaged for the star of the occasion, and among those who supported him were James A. Hearne, Louis James, Willie Seymour, Jefferys Lewis, Ned Buckley, Nick Long, Mrs. Farren, Katie Mayhew and myself. Dave Belasco held the prompt book and kept his eyes open—as he has been doing ever since. If you take that list of names and make some inquiry you will ascertain that every one of them subsequently attained prominence in the profession."

Said Sullivan to Buckley

"Well, never did a theater start out more auspiciously. Our first bill was 'Richard the Third,' and the house was packed at every performance. By the way, did you ever hear that story of how Buckley was snubbed by Sullivan? No? Well, it's good enough to be resurrected. The Englishman was extremely dignified, you know, and while standing in the wings one night, awaiting his cue to go on, Buckley, who was then very young in the business, stepped up to him and in a most familiar way said, 'Sullivan, this is the most successful opening I have ever seen, and I've helped to open no less than seven new theaters on this coast.' In his deepest chest tone Sullivan responded, after having coldly surveyed the audacious

young man from heels to head and down again. 'In-deed, s-i-r-r, your information is ver-ry in-ter-est-ing. But in the course of your most remarkable career, s-i-r-r, how many theaters have you helped to close? Then he went on, leaving poor Buckley in a wilted state of mind.'

At last we got to the Passion Play. "I had seen the Oberammergau production," Mr. O'Neill said, "and as a devout Catholic it impressed me most profoundly. So when our company was called to reading rehearsal one morning and I found that my part was that of the Christ, and called for much quotation of his words, I refused to play it. Tom Maguire, our manager, insisted that as it was the leading part and I the leading man, my objection was unreasonable, especially as the lines were almost identical with those spoken by the Savior in the Oberammergau production. But my religious training balked, and I was determined to quit the company rather than yield."

How His Mind Was Changed

"Salmi Morse, who had made the translation, finally altered my decision by showing me a letter from Archbishop Alemany, in which that prelate had read the play and revised it, and thanked God that in this age a man could be found who had the brains and the spirit of reverence necessary to properly place such a work before the American people. And in a postscript the Archbishop added that he hoped to be spared to witness the play. My scruples could not withstand such testimony and indorsement as that, for the Archbishop held my highest esteem, and I consented to play the Christ."

"A sacred subject was never more reverently handled than my impersonation of that beautiful character, and any one who saw the play and is not a fanatic will tell you that its sacredness was respected in every detail of the production. After running three weeks it was suppressed by special ordinance adopted by the Supervisors. Although it was objected by some ultra-religionists, nobody could point out where it profaned any Christian tenet. No, I never attempted to play the part again. Morse endeavored to get it produced in New York, but the prejudice that stopped it here prevented it there."

"Is the Savior impersonated in your new play?" "No, but his coming is frequently alluded to in the dialogue. John the Baptist is the central figure, and the other leading characters are Biblical. I would like to have it understood that every endeavor that art can conceive is made to maintain a religious atmosphere throughout the play, and that only a person who is blinded by bigotry can find the least fault with its tone. But you'll see it and be enabled to judge for yourself."

Pirates Hurt 'Monte Cristo'

"So this is the last season of James O'Neill in 'Monte Cristo'?" I remarked, quoting his posters. "It is the last time James O'Neill will play 'Monte Cristo' on the Pacific Coast," he emphatically replied. "But as for the East—well, I have tried to get away from the character before, but the public simply wouldn't let me abandon it. I am sorry to say that since coming to this side of the continent I have found that the edge was taken off my production of the play by the piracy of cheap stock companies that have presented garbled versions of it for ten, twenty and thirty cents. A very considerable portion of the public do not seem to understand—or at least I cannot spare time to convince them—why they should be asked to pay \$1.50 to see 'Monte Cristo' when they have seen it, and probably will have opportunity to see it again, for one-fiftieth of that sum."

Even His Name Is Utilized

"They have stolen everything in connection with the play with the exception of my name, and some of the more ingenious of them have even made use of that by advertising 'Monte Cristo,' made famous by James O'Neill, with the words 'James O'Neill' displayed in such a way as to lead the casual observer to believe that I was to appear in the ten-cent production. Now, leaving the question of piracy out of consideration, 'Monte Cristo' cannot be adequately produced for ten times ten cents. The staging of the production has cost more money than a season's profits of the average ten-cent temple of drama. The people who pay ten cents to see 'Monte Cristo' get less than their money's worth, for the play can only be murdered if it is not produced with the elaborateness of scenic and mechanical effect demanded by the book."

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"How often have you played Edmond Dantes?"

"More than 5000 times."

"And, if the question is not impertinent, how much pecuniary profit have you derived from the character?"

"More than a million dollars during the twenty-three years I have been playing it. It cleared for me \$38,000 in thirty weeks of last season, and I did not appear west of the Missouri River."

Yet he is industriously endeavoring to shelve the sure money-getter in order to make room for an experiment. That's how artistic desire sometimes subordinates the mercenary spirit.

Corner in Music Artists

Los Angeles sends the interesting news that an organization has been incorporated to manage all musical attractions on the Pacific Coast, with offices at Salt Lake City, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Portland and Seattle. This combine has a subscribed capital of \$50,000 and contains some prominent men in the music field of America. Among the leading stockholders are C. H. Shaw of Portland, F. D. Hawkins of Salt Lake City and L. E. Behymer and A. G. Bartlett of Los Angeles. Mr. Bartlett was for years at the head of the Bartlett Music Company of Los Angeles and is the possessor of considerable wealth. He very likely will be the greatest financial backer of the concern. For years dissatisfaction has been expressed by leading Eastern music managers that the Western managers would handle only attractions which were termed a "cinch," but never showed inclination to introduce to the Western world artists of less fame and equal artistic accomplishments. Some of the Western managers contended that they did not desire to lose money just to give the Eastern managers opportunity to place all their

Behymer May Be Sent Here

For San Francisco Mr. Shaw has selected L. E. Behymer of Los Angeles in case the present booking agency should not be willing to agree to his plans, and should Mr. Behymer come here J. L. Allen will take charge of the Los Angeles office. Mr. Allen is possessed of experience and executive ability and has worked with Mr. Behymer for some time.

Erecting New Playhouses

The Orpheum management expects to give its next Saturday night show in its new theater on Ellis street.

What Other Theaters Offer

Henry Guy Carleton's witty and diverting comedy, "The Butterflies," will be presented by the Colonial Theater Stock Company tomorrow evening on an elaborate scale and with a good cast. Frank Bacon will have fine opportunity as Hiram Green, the wealthy and illiterate Chicago pork packer. Wilfred Roger will be seen as Frank O'Sullivan, W. C. Graves as Andrew Strong, Harry Pollard as Barrington Green, R. Perato Galindo as Roseco Bilsor, Orval Humphreys as Coddie, Izetta Jewell as Miriam Stuart-Dodge, Maud Adelle as Mrs. Stuart-Dodge, Jane Jeffery as Mrs. O'Sullivan and Bessie Bacon as Suzanne Elsie Green. May Edouin and Fred Edwards, in "A Bachelor's Dream," and Emilia Rossé, acrobat, are the only people retained for the Orpheum bill this week. The newcomers are the eight "Vassar Girls," instrumentalists, singers and dancers; Howard, in "The Messenger Boy and the Theatrical"; the Gotham City Quartet, versatile entertainers; Wynne Winslow, the favorite soprano; the Three Leightons, presenting "A One-Night Stand in Minstrelsy"; and Jimmie Lucas, "The Boy with a Dozen Dialects." New motion pictures will be shown. At the Davy Theater, the Kolb and Dill Company in "Bankers and Beggars" have drawn good business during the holidays, and there is warrant for prediction that the piece will run several more weeks. The musical numbers are catchy and the comedy has improved since the opening performance. C. H. Shaw is now on his way East to engage all the artists for next season. He will very likely be preferred by the big managers, because he is able to guarantee a larger number of concerts than any other manager. Besides, he has a large amount of money behind him, which always counts with the musical powers in Gotham. On his return he will announce the artists he has secured, and then it will be known definitely whether there will be changes in the musical management of the various cities on the coast. It is certain that Messrs. Shaw, Hawkins and Behymer have great plans mapped out, and San Francisco will be included in them. Should Mr. Behymer be placed here, he will very likely work as intelligently and as energetically in the interest of art and artists as he has done in Southern California, which has to thank him for its present enthusiastic musical condition. Special efforts will be made to have a fund by means of which it

"A Sacred Subject Was Never More Reverently Treated Than My Impersonation of That Beautiful Character," Said Mr. O'Neill

Francisco and Portland is difficult to foretell. A talk with Mr. Shaw revealed the fact that he is willing to deal with the San Francisco and Portland management in these matters, but that in case he meets with opposition regarding the booking of all his artists he will simply place a representative in these cities to manage the affairs of the association. Behymer made the trial in Los Angeles and Southern California with his "philharmonic course," in which a number of people subscribe a certain amount toward listening to five or six great artists. Thanks to this philharmonic course, Gogorza, the Spanish barytone, and Gabriowitzsch, the pianist, were enabled to make more money in Southern California than in this city and Oakland, where they depended upon the public at large. Now the Great Western Lyceum Bureau will combine its two features of subscriptions for lesser known artists of great merit and the world's greatest geniuses, and with the financial backing it now possesses will form a power in the musical life of America. How this new combination will affect the local management in San

will be possible to advertise all artists in a most lavish manner, and Mr. Behymer states that the combine has secured capital to build a concert hall in this city which will seat about 2000 people.

While it is premature to foretell the future of this new organization, it is a fact that such a combine has been organized and the papers have been filed in Los Angeles showing an important event in the musical development of the Pacific Coast cannot be denied.

Lambardis Have Made Good

There is no longer any question as to the success of the Lambardi Italian Opera Company's engagement in San Francisco. At the end of two weeks the daily box office statements show that "business has worked up" and no better report than that is sought by any manager. Artistic merit has brought appreciative pecuniary reward.

The third week's offerings will be up to the standard set by those gone before. They are announced as follows: Monday and Friday nights, Rossini's favorite light opera, "The Barber of Seville," with Adellina Tromben as Rosina, Salvesneschi as the count, Bergami as Don Bartolo, Cannetti as Don Basilio and Adolfo Pacifico as Figaro; Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday evenings, Puccini's musical setting of Sardou's famous play, "La Tosca," with Adaberto as Floria Tosca, Filippo d'Ottavi as Mario and Scifoni as Scarpia. This is one of the finest productions that Lambardi carries as regards scenery, costumes and accessories. Wednesday and Sunday evenings and Saturday matinee, "Cavalleria Rusticana" and "Pagliacci," with Russo or d'Ottavi as Turridu, Scifoni or Pacifico as Alfio, Giorgi as Santuzza and Millon as Lola in "Cavalleria" and Antola as Tonio, Patti as Canio, Maria Millon as Peppino, Scifoni as Silvio and Bianca Nunez as Nedda. "Rigoletto" will be the Sunday matinee offering, with Scifoni as the father and Tromben as the daughter. Giordano's "Fedora," with Adaberto; "The Masked Ball," with Giorgi, Campiflore and Nunez, and "Don Pasquale," with Tromben as Norina, are the offerings for the fourth week.

"The Voice of the Mighty"

In the first act of "The Voice of the Mighty," which James O'Neill and company will present at the Novelty Theater tomorrow evening, the scene is laid in the wilderness, with the seeking of John the Baptist by high priests, soldiery and populace, and John's preaching and inveighs against the general immorality of the time and rulers. The second act brings the apostle to Jerusalem, before the temple, where he denounces Herod and Herodias and is made a prisoner. The third act, taking place after a supposed lapse of one year, opens with the temptation of John by Herodias, the murder of Philip and the triumph of the preacher over the night and power of Herod. The fourth act, on the day later, brings the festival of Herod, the dancing of Salome, the confusion and pledging of Herod and the demand for the head of John. In the first tableau the arrival of the Nazarene in Jerusalem and the triumphant palms in the distance and the waving of palms in the distance and the reverential homage of prince, prophet and populace within the palace, John leading the devotion. The role of John is said to suit Mr. O'Neill's style of acting to a nicety. Ethel Dunn will be the Salome, Teresa Dale the Herodias, Kate Fletcher the slave, Numa, Edward Donnelly the Herod, and Philip, the brother of Herod, will be played by Alexander Leonard. The special music written for the production will be sung by a chorus of twenty voices.

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