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Nellie Bly on the Stage

She Wears a Scant Costume and Marches With the Amazons

*It Isn't Very Hard to Get Such a Job—The Girls Earn \$5 a Week—Tights that Did Not Fit—
Dressing in a Crowded Room—How She Behaved on the Stage—A Bad Beginning*

I made my debut as a chorus girl or stage Amazon last week. It was my first appearance on any stage and came about through reading among THE WORLD advertisements one that called for 100 girls for a spectacular pantomime, so I found myself one afternoon at the stage door of the Academy of Music. There were but two men there. I looked at them and they looked at me, and as nobody made any movement to speak, I asked:

“Where do I go in answer to the advertisement?”

“Mr. Kiralfy told me to say he had all the girls he wants,” replied one of them. Then, probably noticing my look of disappointment, he added: “But you can step in on the stage and see him yourself.”

The stage was bare and cold. A solitary gas jet only added to the dismal aspect of the place. The scenery even leaned up against itself as if it were tired. Near the front of the stage was a row of girls, twenty-four in number, watching the movements of a graceful little Frenchman, who twisted and danced before them. Standing around in rather forlorn groups were other girls, of all sizes, ages and appearances. Some were talking in a lively way, while others stood about silent and sad. A woman who received the least attention of all was a ballet dancer who was practicing.

I saw no one to speak to, so I followed the example of the other girls—stood and watched the rehearsal. Every two girls in the magic circle had a small gilded chair of mythological design. The Frenchman was teaching the girls to jump on the chair, then down, then to run around it, and up again and so on. It looked very uninteresting and simple, and yet the girls often made mistakes. The little master seemed to have unlimited patience, and at every false move gently showed the correct way. There was a remarkable absence of the “brutality” displayed against the poorly paid ballet girls which one hears so much about. The girls seemed to enjoy the exercise and the man was kind.

At last I saw a man emerge from the gloomy portals at the far side of the stage and come towards me, where I stood on one foot, holding the other, like an elephant, or a goose, as you please, up to rest.

“To whom shall I apply for a situation?” I asked.

“For what?” he questioned, looking at me with a kindly smile.

“In answer to the advertisement in today’s WORLD?”

“Will you please sit down and wait? I’ll see you in a moment,” he said, and he left me.

I looked around. I could see nothing but the perpendicular scenery and the stage door. My feelings were rather shocked. I remained standing.

“Do you like the chorus?” I asked, turning to a slender girl, with a shabby dress, a careworn face and mournful eyes enclosed in dark rings.

“Yes, I like it. It’s as easy as anything a girl can do.”

“Does it pay well?”

“I think as well as anything else. Girls in factories and stores work from 7 in the morning until 6 in the evening. They get from \$1.50 up to \$4. The very fewest number get \$5. On the stage we work a few hours every night, and we have two matinees and two rehearsals a week, and we get \$5. This is the best place.”

“I would like to have that job,” said another girl, indicating a woman with a towel around her head dusting the orchestra chairs. “She gets \$6 a week, and then when she cleans the actresses’ rooms they give her lace and old dresses, and sometimes a five-dollar bill.”

“Come with me; I want you names, said the man who had spoken to me, and we followed him ...

“I want to know how much you pay, first.”

“Five dollars a week,” he replied, while he suspended the pen.

“Well, then, we (indicating her companions) won’t come.”

“All right. Good day. Next!”

“They expected to get \$25 a week,” explained a girl.

We all gave our names and four of us were told to report for duty at the stage door at 7 o’clock that evening. It was only the rehearsals I wanted, but I decided, as this was all that offered, to see what it amounted to.

At 7 o’clock I walked past the crowd of men who surrounded the stage door into the Academy. I secretly wondered if they were the “eligibles” I had read so much of who swarmed about stage doors with their hearts and fortunes, flowers and diamonds to lay at the feet of their chosen idols. I did not see any evidence of any of these articles, but the crowd was there nevertheless.

There was no one on the stage or anywhere to be seen. The solitary gas jet was yet solitary. I could not find any one, so I took up my stand and stood. Presently from some mysterious part of the stage came the girls who had been engaged at the time I was. They began to complain because they had been informed that there were no extra suits for the extra girls—use.

“Are we to go on without any knowledge of the play?” I asked.

“Yes, we’ll have to try to get beside some girls who will be good enough to help us.”

I did not see how we could do it and not break up the show, but as I was bent on having fun I did not much care what form it took. The performers began to arrive. Almost all the girls carried little parcels of baskets. These I found contained their “make up.” At last, Mr. Kiralfry came and seeing us he came up and spoke.

“There is nothing to do until after the first set so you can go up and watch the play.”

He left us and then I saw a long string of men coming in, one after the other. They were making a noise like a cat, and I recognized them as being the men at the entrance whom I mistook for devoted lovers. They disappeared under the stage.

At last I and my friend were called to prepare for the stage. A few garments were given us and we were shown a room to dress in. It was already well filled with girls in all stages of dress and undress. “This room is full enough. Go somewhere else,” cried one girl, crossly, and

with the exception of the three prettiest girls, they were all angry because we crowded in with them. I spoke to two of three, but they did not reply—simply looked at me with quiet scorn. I had some idea of the dressing but my luckless companion had none.

“How do you get these things on?” she asked, in surprised disgust.

I looked at her. She was trying to get her thin silver tights on over her shoes and undergarments.

“You must take off your shoes,” I explained, as no one else offered to.

“Indeed I will not,” she said, vehemently. “It’s very rude; I will not do it.” But in a while she did take off her shoes.

“How do you get the tights on?” she cried again.

“You cannot get them on over all your undergarments,” I told her, and even the angry girls laughed as they looked at her. I forgot my own appearance in laughing at hers. She got the tights half on, then she got the little short waist around her shoulders and the shoulder scarf around her waist. She put the band of white hair, which only encircles the head, on, and had no helmet. This allowed her black hair to show and make a queer picture. She got a spear and a shield, and so she made her way down to the stage looking like an Amazon who had been badly whipped in a fight.

I fared but little better. My garments were too large, my ballet slippers were easily four sizes too long. I put the rouge on my face and found I had forgotten my powder. The white wig was too small and would show my black hair underneath. My helmet was too large and would slip back. I was a sad sight.

“You will be too late. The curtain is up,” cried someone, and I rushed after a girl down the stairs and to the wing. I was only conscious that there was a crowd of people going out and I was among them, giving a hitch every now and then to my armor. A blaze of light, a crash of music and with an inward laugh at my own boldness in attempting something I know nothing of, I was facing a New York audience in the Amazon march. I did not feel like an Amazon. Down we swept towards the footlights, while I wondered what our next move was to be.

“You started with the wrong foot,” said a girl at my side. I did not know which foot I started with, so I said, “Which foot is it?”

“Oh, any one will do for you,” was the satisfactory answer, while I mused on how funny it must look from the front to see one brave Amazon out of step with the whole army. Backwards we went, and my helmet slipped on the back of my neck.

“Your black hair is showing,” whispered another girl. This was not reassuring, and did not tend to give me courage to try to do better. I gave a jerk to my helmet while the horrible thought struck me. What should I do if my helmet fell off on the stage and I was left with my sham wig and black crown before the audience? Once again we went to the front, and I congratulated myself on being in step when a girl in a very emphatic manner whispered:

“You have your shield on the wrong arm!” That reduced me again, and I resolved to change it in face of the audience, when she whispered:

“Face about.”

I turned my face to her and found every girl had her face turned the other way, and if I kept on I would have to march backward while the rest went forward. I would not do this, so I simply took my time and turned in the right direction. I began mildly to wonder why the gallery gods did not notice my strange action. As we marched in a circle around the stage I changed my shield and poised my spear lightly on my side. (I had been carrying it under my arm.) Again we

went to the footlights. A girl whispered for me to “stand at D,” and I obeyed. I heard a voice from the wing cry:

“My ---- ----! What is wrong?”

I look with a smile to see what is wrong, and I see that the other girls are marching to one side; they have divided and I, being in the center, am left alone in front! I followed with more haste than grace after the nearest girl. Then we did movements which I had not the least knowledge of, so I was more than a little relieved when they marched to the wing. I was glad to get off. I found my poor companion still in a state of undress. Together we sought the dressing-room, and I forgot my own discomfort in laughing at her remarks. I am out of a stage engagement at present.