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The One Hundred Best Plays

A dramatic critic who answers to the name of Howard Herrick has recently prepared for the *New York Dramatic Mirror* a list of what he regards as the hundred best plays in the modern English repertoire, and this list is reprinted on page 7 of the *Evening Sun* today.

Mr. Herrick himself uses the word "best" in describing his selections, but he hastens to explain that he scarcely intends it to convey its customary meaning. That is to say, he does not presume to choose the hundred plays which show the greatest merits as works of art. All he pretends to do is to name these which have won the soundest and most abiding popularity with audiences of average intelligence in England and America, and particularly in America.

He bars out, at the start, all mere extravaganzas, such as "Superba," "Eight Bells" and the familiar English pantomimes, however successful they may be, and he also bars out all comic operas, musical comedies and one-acts, such, for example, as "The Mikado," "Florodora" and "Lend Me Five Shillings." But his standards are elastic enough to give a place to that theological circus "Ben-Hur," to a piece or two of the b'gosh type and to at least one fourth rate American melodrama.

The Ibsen Trio

It may be said for Mr. Herrick that his list shows a wide knowledge of modern stage history and not a little critical shrewdness. In dealing with the social dramas of Henrick Ibsen, for example, he picks out, with accuracy, the three that are most alive today. Ibsen wrote 14 or 15 plays in prose, and nearly all of them are of great interest to the student of dramaturgy, but only "A Doll's House," "Ghosts" and "Hedda Gabbler" have ever seized the fancy of American theatergoers, and of these only "Hedda Gabbler" seems destined to remain in the repertoire for long.

"Ghosts" is rather too horrible to suit our taste. We Americans do not want to be harrowed in the theatre. We go there not to study the problems of human existence, but to escape from them—an attitude directly opposite to that of the German or Scandinavian audience. That "Ghosts" is an impressive and poignant play, that it has interest and truth in it, and that it affords the players taking part in it an excellent opportunity to display their talents—all this we are willing enough to admit. But none the less the play makes us shiver—and it is seldom that we want to shiver.

The trouble with "A Doll's House" is that it is getting old-fashioned. When Ibsen wrote it, in 1878-9, it was violently revolutionary, but a great deal of water has gone under the bridges since that time. Today "A Doll's House" seems like a crude

compromise between the old fashion in play writing and the new. The two styles are clumsily glued together, indeed, at the end of the second act.

The first two acts belong frankly to the old order. The characters convey their meditations to us in soliloquies, there is an overstraining of coincidence, one notices in a dozen places the influence of Scribe and the other French manufacturers of “well-made” plays. In writing those acts Ibsen was obviously feeling his way. Revolt against the old conventions was stirring within him, but it had not yet taken form in definite ideas.

But by the time he got to the third act he had found his new creed. That act sounded the knell of the “well-made” play—at least as a serious work of art. Its extraordinary directness, its naturalness, its firm grip upon the emotions of the spectator make it a model for every play-maker who would set upon the stage a credible record of human events.

“Hedda Gabler”

“Hedda Gabler” has all the merits of the last act of “A Doll’s House” and none of the defects of the first two acts. It was written after Ibsen had perfected his new method—in the very prime, in truth, of his creative career.

Up to “Hedda” one notices a constant improvement in his technique, in increasingly firm grasp upon his story and his characters, a rising resourcefulness; but after “Hedda” the controversialist begins to triumph over the dramatist. The plays of the last phase are scarcely plays at all, in the usual meaning of the term, but “discussions,” as Bernard Shaw would say. “Little Eyolf,” setting aside the dramatic first act, is little more than a dialogue, “John Gabriel Borkman” is almost a monologue, “When We Dead Awaken” is frankly unplayable.

“Hedda Gabler,” then, is Ibsen’s best play, if we define a play as something to be acted. It will live longer than his great poetical dramas and longer than the rest of his social dramas. Its best days, indeed, seem to be still ahead of it. Twenty years hence, it is probable, no fair star will rest content until she has had her fling at the moody daughter of General Gabler, just as no fair star of today is sure of herself until she has taken a hack at Marguerite Gautier.

As To Pinero

Mr. Herrick’s selection of “Trelawney of the Wells,” “The Second Mrs. Tanqueray” and “Iris” as the three best plays of Pinero will probably please few admirers of that extraordinarily brilliant dramatist. “The Second Mrs. Tanqueray” made a great sensation in its day, for it served as concrete and somewhat impressive evidence of the measure of Pinero’s yielding to the Ibsen influence. It was, indeed, a sort of natural child of “Hedda Gabler,” and there was enough skill visible in its design to make an artistic as well as a popular success of it.

But we know today that Pinero’s powers did not reach their climax in “The Second Mrs. Tanqueray.” It shows us, in truth, more of Pinero’s faults than of his merits. That leaning toward ornate dialogue which one encounters so often in his serious dramas is nowhere in greater evidence than in this play. The characters seldom descend to

conversational English. Their sentences are not simple or compound, but complex. They are rather too quick of wit and smooth of tongue to be real.

Much better writing is to be found in a number of Pinero's plays not mentioned at all by Mr. Herrick. One of them is that delightful comedy "The Gay Lord Quex." Another is "The Thunderbolt," a play which failed in London and has never been done at all in this country. Yet others are the incomparable farces of the Court Theatre series—"The Schoolmistress," "Dandy Dick," "The Amazons," "The Magistrate," etc.

These last are really more than farces, for no matter how wild their action it never loses a close contact with reality. The characters do not run in and out of the doors without cause, as in the common farces of our stage, and they are not mere grotesques. The probabilities, in a word, may be strained almost to the breaking point, but that breaking point is never actually reached.

The Best Living Playwright

Pinero, like Shakespeare, is not a specialist. That is to say, he does not confine himself to one department of play-writing, nor does he seem to have more talent for one that for another.

He has written two or three of the very best serious dramas that England has produced in our time, and he has also written two or three of the best comedies. His sentimental pieces, "Sweet Lavendar" and "Trelawney of the Wells" are almost without rivals in their class; he has given us comedies of intrigue and comedies of character; he has written grim tragedies and merry foolishness.

And he turns from one to the other without apparent difficulty or effort. That delicious absurdity, "A Wife Without a Smile," a great comedy spoiled by unintelligent stage management—was sandwiched between two of Pinero's most serious social studies.

No other dramatist of the day, English or foreign, is a better workman. The critical high brows, dazzled a bit by the exotic glamour of certain German and French men, expend so much energy in praising those men that they have none left for Pinero. But as a matter of fact he has little to fear from his continental rivals. Not even Sudermann has given the theatre more impressive dramas, not even Hervieu or Brioux has a firmer grip upon characterization, not even d'Annunzio or Bernstein is more fertile in invention.