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The Theatrical Year

The theatrical season that has just come to a close fell far short of making the Baltimore managers rich, but all the same it was a great deal more prosperous than the season of 1908-0. There was, indeed, profitable patronage for nearly every first-class attraction that visited us, and some of the livelier musical pieces played to crowded houses. But by the same token, the bad plays, of which there were not a few, got little money at the box office. At the Auditorium, for example, a depressing series of dull, stupid pieces began with Christmas, and for weeks the house was empty. But the first good play that came along—it happened to be “The Easiest Way”—played to very satisfactory receipts, and since then a number of others have done likewise.

The chief event of the year, of course, was the spectacular bout between the managers and various volunteer play censors. The chief of the latter was J. Spencer Clarke, collector of water rents and licenses. Early in the season Mr. Clarke began ordering that changes be made in various plays, and a number of local managers obeyed him, though there was, and is, some legal doubt as to his authority to issue such orders. A number of other oppressors of impropriety joined him in his crusade, and for a while loud demands were heard that the city council pass an inquisitorial and preposterous censorship ordinance. But in the end, common sense prevailed, and the propaganda was abolished.

It is interesting to observe, in retrospect, that some of the plays attacked most savagely were quite harmless pieces, and that others of a great deal worse influence got by without a protest. One of those upon which the moral artillery was concentrated, for example, was “The Queen of the Moulin Rouge,” a combination of loud noises and poor wit. At the end of one of the acts, the scene represented a students’ hall in Paris, several floats were rolled upon the stage, and when each one reached the field of the spotlight, a door in it opened and a young woman in what are called skin tights was revealed. There was at once a loud shriek from the sensitive moralists, and the manager of the theatre was forced to eliminate the floats. As a matter of fact, there was nothing even remotely indecent about the damsels and their tights. Women wearing just such tights have been seen in the so-called “living pictures” of vaudeville for years and years, and no one has ever thought to object to them. It requires, indeed, a very delicate imagination to invest them with indecency.

Again, there was a furious protest against the German “Alma, Wo Wohnst Du?”, a protest which came, it may be said, entirely from moralists who had to confess that they didn’t understand the German language. The Germans who saw the piece thought it harmless enough. It

was, indeed, a farce of a type quite common in Germany, and its humor, if occasionally somewhat broad, was still very far from downright obscene. But the potter raised here seems to be remembered, for "Alma, Wo Wohnst Du?" has been recently forbidden in New York despite the fact that it once enjoyed a run of more than a year in that city. Strange, indeed, are the ways of moral experts! Incomprehensible, of a truth, are the rules of morals!

Yet another play that aroused the ire of the professional purifiers was Eugene Walter's striking drama, "The Easiest Way." To every person seriously interested in the theatre and conversant with its contemporary literature, "The Easiest Way" gave intense pleasure, for it was, in every sense, a work of art—an impressive and dignified drama, with the marks of extraordinary talent upon every line of it. It was pleasant to think that it had come from the pen of an American young man, for it was proof that the art of the theatre had gained firm root in America, and a promise that other good plays were to come. But the virtuosi of virtue saw in it only a loathsome conglomeration of vulgarity and worse, a disgusting muck, a filthy sewer.

It was amusing to note, later on in the season, that Henry Bernstein's astonishingly unmoral drama, "Baccarat," passed the self-constituted censors without provoking a single howl. In "Baccarat" the heroine was a married woman who deliberately sold her honor in order to raise money to save her criminal lover from prison. The audience was asked to weep for this wretch, to revere her as a martyr. Nothing more boldly demoralizing could be imagined, and yet the censors apparently thought the play extremely elevating, for they made no protest against it, and it was played for its full week without interference.

No doubt "Baccarat" escaped because its filth was presented sentimentally. It was, in brief, frankly maudlin. There was a constant effort to put the heroine's "sacrifice" in a pathetic light; and though unspeakable things were discussed on the stage, they were discussed by indirection and innuendo. There were, in a word, no frank, harsh "damns" in the piece, as there had been in "The Easiest War," and there was no open attempt to make vice hideous and its consequences obvious; and so the censors were unable, as it were, to get their hooks into it. At all events, they remained silent, and one of the most noisy of them witnessed the play with apparent satisfaction, and with his wife sitting beside him.

Next to "The Easiest War," the most important new play presented here during the season was John Galsworthy's "Strife," which the New Theatre Company played at the Auditorium very recently. "Strife" is a drama of the new order, a drama without the customary fustian and flapdoodle. There is no "lover interest"; there is no hero; there is none of the time-honored machinery. It is direct, straightforward, impressive; a truly poignant play; and the New Theatre Company played it superbly.

That company, in truth, conquered Baltimore with ease. Its performance of Shakespeare's "The Winter's Tale" upon a stage arranged to counterfeit the stage of Shakespeare's day, was a thing of innumerable delights. There was no strutting of a star; no overaccentuation. Instead, an evident effort to give a well-balanced performance was visible, and that effort, it may be said, was extremely successful.

Earlier in the season E.H. Sothorn and Julia Marlowe gave a week of Shakespearean performances. The weakness of this combination is the unimpressiveness of Mr. Sothorn. He is small physically, and so he appears to very slight advantage in heroic roles. But his defects are

counterbalanced by the striking spirits of Miss Marlowe. Her Juliet, despite a noticeable amplitude of [], is an extremely artistic and satisfying impersonation and her Ophelia is also full of skill. But both Mr. Sothern and Miss Marlowe appear at their best, perhaps, in “Much Ado About Nothing,” which they did not present during their last visit.

Of musical pieces there was no end, but not many of them were worth seeing. Most of them ran to tinsel and []. Not a single successor to “The Waltz Dream” appeared; not a single musical piece with good music, well sung. In vaudeville there was a bitter war between the dealers in the “polite” species and the managers of the [] houses. There is no need to go into the history and fortunes of that war. In a few years, it seems likely, the present craze for cheap vaudeville and moving pictures will have died out, and the competition of the 10-cent houses will then no longer make inroads into the profits of the more ambitious theaters.

(Source: Iowa State University, Parks Media Center, microfilm collection)