TRIALS OF A THEATRICAL MANAGER

BY WILLIAM A. BRADY

ALL the bad dramas in the world multiplied by two never received half the unfavorable criticism that falls to the share of a single theatrical manager. Criticizing the managers is the favorite form of amusement on the part of bill posters, actors, playwrights, article wrights, ushers, scene painters, and the public. The famous Patsy Bolivar was a lucky man compared to a theatrical manager, although I have always had a sneaking suspicion that Bolivar must have been a manager, too, at that.

The popular impression of the theatrical manager is that he is a carefree individual whose chief occupation is the smoking of fat, fifty-cent cigars and the throttling of the hopes of every worthy dramatist, actor, and public pocketbook with which he comes in contact. The world's mental picture of a manager is about as pretty a thing as a porcupine eating a piece of mince pie. I have at times been accused of being devoid of a sense of humor; but, believe me, no man could be a theatrical manager for more than an hour unless he had a sense of humor that was raised to the limit!

The popular unpopular side of a manager is a household word from the Atlantic to the Pacific and from the Gulf to Lake Michigan. I have often wondered whether these households would not like to have a look at the other side of the photograph, at some of the things a manager has to put up with. By way of preface, I can assure the reader that the trials of one manager are wholly typical of the trials of everyone of the others. I will start by telling you a few secrets about the actor business, and if, after hearing them, you decide a manager does not have to keep that sense of humor constantly on the job, I shall set myself down as having pleaded this case in vain. The actor to the bar, then, in this specific "trial" of a theatrical despot!

A NUMBER of years ago I had under my management a well known actor whom I was starring at the head of a company. Like many of the actors with whom I have dealt during my period of business activity, this one believed that my sole object in life was to harass him, to keep him from his just rewards, to pay him much less than he deserved, et cetera, et cetera. "If I were a manager, I should at least treat actors decently," he used to tell me at intervals of every two hours. I tried to convince him that, inasmuch as I was hoping to make money out of him, it would be folly for me to try to keep him down, as he believed; but his only reply to that sort of logic was, "Oh, bosh!" A few years later this same actor became a manager on his own account, and every actor who ever played under his management said he was the worst slave driver they had ever worked for. But to return to the case of this star while I was managing him. (To be accurate, I think I should say while I was trying to manage him.) The theatrical manager who can manage an actor is deserving of a niche in a hall of fame, right next to Napoleon, Frederick the Great, Wellington, Jack Johnson, and the other war lords.

During a trip abroad I saw in London a young American actress in a tiny part who, I believed, would make the actor a splendid leading woman in a forthcoming production in which he was to star. I cabled him to this effect without mentioning the actress's name. He cabled back to me, "Will not play with such an unknown actress." Mind you, he did not even know her name!

I returned to this country, still thoroughly imbued with the idea that the young actress I had seen in London was exactly the woman for the role in the play in which my actor friend was going to appear. I pleaded with him; but, without advancing a single argument in support of his opposition, he dismissed my reasons with a "Nothing doing." I sincerely felt that the play would gain a great deal with the young actress in the leading woman's role, and finally hit upon an idea to get the better of the hard headed mummer who, as the public thought, was under my management. He was 'way beyond it, in truth! I could never get to him without a ten-foot fishing pole.

Accordingly, when the rehearsals were due to begin, I sent abroad for the young actress, brought her over—and kept her in hiding. Then I set about finding three of the worst and fattest actresses I could locate, and these I sent in turn over to the theater where the actor was rehearsing. Finally, after a week had passed, the actor came bursting into my office.

"For Heaven's sake!" he yelled, "are you trying to ruin me? I've rehearsed each of those women you sent over, and they are awful."

I calmed him. "I'll tell you what I'll do," I drawled with apparently serious deliberation. "I know where there is another actress who may be good enough. I don't know, though. But I'll send her around to you."

The next day I sent over the young actress whom I had suggested to the stubborn actor in the first place.

"She's great!" he confided to me that same evening. "If you managers had sense enough to pick out actresses like her at the start, instead of trying out a lot of bum amateurs, you'd get along ten times as fast as you do."

I handed him a very mild cigar as a sort of curtain raiser, and then confided something to him. But he doesn't believe it to this day; although the actress, who has since become a star on her own account, has told him the story herself.

Of course, there are some splendid exceptions to the general actor rule; but in the main they are pretty much alike. They work two hours and a half a day and sit around the rest of the time talking about the "water wagon" and as to the position of their seats on or off that vehicle. They do not take their profession seriously enough. Instead of studying, they criticize the managers. Insincere, there is no H in their "art." The hard workers succeed and make themselves worth while to themselves, to the managers, and to the public. The loafers strut and pose and tell the managers how they should run the drama.

I WILL now permit the actor to pass out of the door for awhile, and let the playwright come into my office and stand on the carpet for a few minutes. What would you say if I told you that among a theatrical manager's greatest trials are the playwrights? You have heard the other side: now listen to mine!

The general cry of the playwright is directed against the "commercialism" of the managers. "The managers are crushing me!" he shouts from the rooftops. As a matter of fact, the playwrights are themselves the most commercial element in the American theater today. Why? Because they are under the influence of the playbrokers, merchants who traffic in dramatic wares and bargain in the manner of the craftiest tradesmen. You hear playwrights chattering away about art and that sort of thing. Do not believe them any more; at least, many of them. What they are after is money with a capital M. And they are after it hard. Nothing matters so long as the dollars pour in.

After a playwright has had one success, he is pounced upon by the hungry playbrokers, who salve him up from head to toes, who whisper to him confidentially that he is "the coming American dramatic leader," who tell him that, if he places himself under their ten per cent. management, they will see to it that he gets more than is coming to him.

The next day the young playwright purchases a bigger derby, buys himself a gold headed cane and fancy waistcoat, and comes around to see the manager who has given him his first and only successful production. In his left hand he carries a copy of one of Clyde Fitch's contracts that the playbroker has slipped him with a wink. "If you do any of my plays henceforth," says the playwright, "this is the sort of contract I'll have to have with you. I must stage my own plays."

A manager has more trouble with playwrights who want to stage their own plays than a streetcar conductor has with women who want to get off backward. As a matter of record, like in the drygoods or some other business, it is one thing to sell goods to the proprietor, and another thing to "dress" the window or display the goods to the best advantage. An architect is not always able to tell you in what parts of the house baskets of flowers and the gilt furniture will look best; and it is the same thing with the playwright. But the playwright, being unlike any other mortal, won't believe you. "If Fitch" (a dramatic genius in every way) "could stage his plays, why can't I do so with my plays?" That is the manner in which young Peter Jones argues; only he forgets to put into his mind and sentence the bracketed qualifying phrase.

The young playwrights also insist on reading you their plays themselves. Although there are only about three men in the business who really can read plays,—for it is a very difficult task,—every young playwright honestly believes he is something of an actor and can best impress you with the strength of his manuscript. Most young playwrights who have read their plays to me have done more to hide what good there was in those plays than a hundred bad actors could have succeeded in doing. And yet, when for their own good you suggest to them that they had better let you read their plays yourself, they go round and tell their friends you are trying to "do" them.

After a playwright has had his first play produced, he forthwith thinks he has become everything connected with the theater, including the costumer. Not long ago, I accepted the second play of a young author who insisted upon superintending the production. The play was a mighty good one; but after he had been staging it for a couple of weeks it was a helpless mess. Then he came around and asked me to help him out. I whacked