

The Drama

BY J. RANKEN TOWSE

FEW OF THE new plays seen in New York during the past few weeks—and there have been a good many of them—are worthy of consideration in a monthly review. In fact there has been a marked deterioration in the general quality of the local theatrical entertainment since the beginning of the season. "The Ambassador" of Mrs. Craigie, produced with uncommon completeness in Daly's Theatre by Mr. Daniel Frohman, is the only fresh piece which really belongs to the order of high-class comedy, and even this is marred by serious defects of knowledge or judgment. The plot, for instance, although it can lay claim to the distinction of originality and considerable ingenuity, puts a heavy strain upon probability in more places than one, while the central figure, Lord St. Orbyn, belongs to a type of diplomat to be found only in the pages of the modern romantic novel. Something more than an amatory disposition, a good drawing-room manner, a dash of cynical humor, an easy morality, and a catholic taste in the matter of acquaintance, is needed nowadays for the professional outfit of an ambassador. Mrs. Craigie would have been much more discreet if she had made her hero a simple duke, a position for which the qualifications are much more vague and much less exacting. It is difficult, however, to believe in the reality of a rook, such as Major Lascelles is described to be, who is unscrupulous enough to win large sums of money from a boy and, at the same time, sufficiently benevolent to surrender his booty and his victim, with a pleasant smile, simply because he is asked to do so by the daughter of a former friend. This is not the way of the world, and other examples might be quoted where the author's experience is clearly at fault. But on the other hand she often exhibits a shrewd comprehension of individual, particularly of female, character, and a true, if undeveloped, sense of dramatic situation. Her literary capacity, too, is revealed clearly and in entertaining fashion in her dialogue, which is easy, fluent, and natural, and sprinkled liberally with a pleasant spice of humor, wit, and satire. It would be easy to make a bright collection from her many epigrammatic sentences.

Several of her personages are human to a degree quite uncommon

in the contemporary drama. The most vital of them is her Lady Beauvedere, an admirable study of a woman married to the wrong man, widowed in early life, faithful through long years to the memory of her first and only real love, and doomed, while still young, to have the cup of happiness dashed from her lips for the second time at the very moment when she seemed most certain to secure it. She indulges in no heroics, utters no cry. Her social position and her pride make it incumbent upon her to accept her fate with a smile and, having striven in vain to rekindle the old flame in the breast of her fickle admirer, to bestow upon him the hand of her rival. It required the hand of a woman to draw a sketch so delicate and so true, and it is filled in and animated with most noteworthy brilliancy, refinement, and skill by Miss Hilda Spong, one of the cleverest and most versatile of our actresses. Another capital sketch is that of the pompous, dull, priggish, straight-laced, and utterly selfish young attaché, "Bill" Beauvedere, enacted with a singular fidelity, to which his mannerisms contribute, by Mr. E. J. Morgan. The Ambassador, Lord St. Orbyn, as has been intimated, is more of a theatrical puppet than a man, but he is the centre of several excellent situations, and has many telling lines to speak. Mr. John Mason plays him quietly, gracefully, and effectively, in a very workmanlike and artistic way. That he does not endow him with brilliancy or distinction is no fault of his. Where he has a chance to show feeling he exhibits no lack of sincerity. His carriage is excellent. Space will not permit individual mention of the cast, but it was in almost every respect worthy of the best traditions of Daly's Theatre: Miss Mary Mannering, who had not many opportunities for her best work as the heroine, Mrs. Walcot, Elizabeth Tyree, and Rhoda Cameron are all entitled to a word of special commendation. Both the play and the representation reflected credit upon the management.

The "Brother Officers," of Captain Leo Trevor, which Mr. Charles Frohman presented, with his regular company, at the Empire Theatre, is not a masterpiece of dramatic literature or construction, but is a thoroughly wholesome, constantly interesting, and often moving play, which appeals to some of the best instincts of humanity and stirs the feelings deeply, without being in the least degree mawkish or over-sentimental. The theme of it is the nobility of true manhood, and of self-sacrifice for love, and it is handled, not always very skilfully, but with pleasing freshness, simplicity, and sincerity. The hero is an army officer, promoted from the ranks for valor, who at first suffers humiliations on account of his ignorance of the ways of fashionable society, but wins esteem by his manliness and finally proves himself a gentleman in the best sense by resisting a cruel temptation and loyally standing by his friend even at the cost of losing the woman he loves. There is much that is old-fashioned, and not a little that is awkward in the play, but the principal characters are very human, and the humor and the

pathos are both genuine. A melodramatic episode in the third act is inferior in quality to the rest of it, although precious in the eyes of the ordinary play-goer, but the general tone is admirable and the outcome logical and consistent. Moreover, the opportunities for good acting are frequent, and some excellent work is done by Mr. Faversham as the promoted private, by Guy Standing as a gallant but weak young spendthrift, who redeems himself by confession and repentance, and especially by Miss Margaret Anglin, who plays the part of a generous woman with the rarest refinement of manner and charming delicacy of feeling. The entire representation was notably good, and other plays from Captain Trevor's pen will be awaited with interest.

The third piece worthy of commemoration is the "When We Were Twenty-one"—a rather clumsy and misleading title—of Mr. H. V. Esmond. This is a story of four old bachelors, the self-constituted guardians of a young scapegrace, who becomes infatuated with a woman, scarlet in more senses than one, and makes temporary shipwreck of his prospects by secretly marrying her. The first, second, and fourth acts are excellent domestic comedy, but the third, affording a glimpse of "fast" life, is an excrescence, although it can scarcely be called irrelevant. The characters of the middle-aged friends are well drawn and differentiated, and were played effectively by Messrs. Goodwin, O'Brien, Frank Gillmore, and Handyside. Mr. Woodruff also distinguished himself by a spirited and natural performance of the spoiled boy. Mr. Goodwin, in the part of the senior guardian, although as usual more successful in humorous than pathetic passages, displayed genuine feeling in his scenes with the rebellious prodigal, and created a marked effect at the moment of final reconciliation. Here his emotional acting had in it a suggestion of real fervor. He was happiest, however, in the semi-humorous wooing scenes, in which he was cleverly assisted by Miss Elliott. His diffidence in realizing the unexpected happiness almost thrust upon him was both true and amusing. The piece, with the exception noted, is lively, natural, entertaining, and sympathetic, and is certain to be popular.

Other plays of the month may be dismissed very briefly. The "Sapho" of Mr. Clyde Fitch presents little but the coarsest elements in Daudet's story, and the realism of Miss Nethersole's performance is not redeemed by the flashes of dramatic power which she occasionally displays. "The Degenerates" of Mr. Grundy is clever, of course, but grossly exaggerated and exceedingly unpleasant. Mr. Kerr's Duke is the chief feature of the performance. "The Surprises of Love" opens well, and is founded upon a novel and ingenious farcical idea, but weakens as it proceeds, and towards the close oversteps the boundaries of good taste. Miss Elsie de Wolfe enacts the heroine with considerable variety, vivacity, and skill, but is capable of better things. Mr. Belasco's "Naughty Anthony," in its last as in its first estate, is poor stuff.