
The Drama

BY J. RANKEN TOWSE

THE dramatic season in New York, which is to include the end of one century and the beginning of another, opened with an uncommon variety of entertainment of which the average quality was distinctly higher than that to which the autumnal playgoer has been accustomed in recent years. Especially gratifying to all those who have the best interests of the stage at heart was the successful revival of two Shakespearian plays, which proved that the legitimate drama is not entirely beyond the capacity of our modern actors, and that there is now; as

there always has been, in spite of all managerial croakings to the contrary, a large public demand for it, if decently and intelligently presented.



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MR. RICHARD MANSFIELD AS "HENRY V"

Rose and Sands

The favorable reception accorded to the Hamlet of Mr. E. H. Sothern was particularly significant. There can be no reasonable doubt that it was due in large measure to the abiding popularity of the play itself. It

is no disparagement of his highly meritorious performance to point out that it fell a long way short of the high standard established here by Edwin Booth, and still fresh in the memories of all but the very youngest. That it was graceful, thoughtful, sympathetic, and duly mindful of tradition while preserving a certain independence, may be granted very readily. It revealed, moreover, occasional flashes of dramatic power, as, for instance, in the "Oh, what a rogue" speech, and at the end of the play scene, but it never really rose to tragic heights,—was in fact rather melodramatic than tragic, and deficient in eloquence and intellectual suggestion. More than once, as in the scenes with the Ghost and the interview with Ophelia, it substituted mere vociferation for emotion. It failed to make the famous soliloquies impressive, but, on the other hand, it was often admirable in comedy passages, as in the talk with the players, in the verbal encounters with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and in the conversation with the grave-digger. But these excellences, positive and welcome as they were, can scarcely account for all the public eagerness to witness the play, even when reinforced by the attractions of a series of striking and beautiful stage pictures. The assistance rendered him by the supporting cast was not considerable. Miss Harned's Ophelia was pretty, of course, and often delicately wrought, but too modern in manner, and too artful. It exercised no spell and moved no tear. The King and Queen were but feeble puppets, and of the minor characters none shone except the Polonius of Mr. Varrey, whose delivery of the text was delightfully natural and luminous. Nevertheless the representation, as a whole, thanks to careful rehearsal and good stage management, was not unworthy, even considered solely upon its acting merits, and more than justified the praiseworthy ambition which prompted Mr. Sothern to undertake it. May he persevere and prosper!

The revival of "Henry V." by Mr. Richard Mansfield was a less doubtful enterprise. He is an actor with a large following, and the announcement of his appearance in a new Shakespearian character, with the promise of a superb spectacle as an additional attraction, was certain to draw the crowd. The success of the representation was never in doubt, and was due almost as much to the general work of the company as to the uncommon beauty of the scenery. To say that Mr. Mansfield is an ideal Henry, at all events from the theatrical point of view, would be flattery. His rigid, inelastic, plodding style, his stiff and heavy gesture, his calculated poses, and his monotonous delivery disqualify him for a part so impetuous, gallant, frank, debonair, and chivalric. His impersonation denoted courage, patriotism, martial ardor, and abundant self-reliance, and was brave in external show, but had little of the animation or sparkling daredeviltry that characterized that fascinating scapegrace, Prince Hal. The latter has suffered transformation as well as reformation.

Although Mr. Mansfield has a magnificent voice, and used it lavishly, his delivery of such stirring speeches as "Once more unto

the breach," and "Who's he that wishes so," had in it more of power than of fire. It was in some of the quieter passages, as in the night scene in the camp and in the wooing of Catherine that he was most



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MISS CONQUEST AND MR. DREW IN "RICHARD CARVEL"

satisfactory. But his acting was marked, as it always is, by purpose and intelligence and was at times very effective. To insist upon its defects would be ungracious in the face of his latest and greatest achievement as a manager. Space will not permit detailed description of the many splendid pictures which he provided, such as the throne room in Westminster, the view at Southampton, the walls of Harfleur,

MR. CRANE AND COMPANY IN "DAVID HARUM"

a night scene near Agincourt, and the interior of Troyes Cathedral. It must suffice to say that in solidity, drawing, and artistic richness of color they were worthy of Sir Henry Irving himself. Equally notable was the admirable drilling of the actors in the huge cast — which resulted in a rarely smooth, well-balanced, and intelligent performance — and of the vast army of supernumeraries. More striking tableaux than those of the battle of Agincourt, of the entry into London, and the royal betrothal have not been seen in recent times. Taking it for all in all, the revival, in genuine artistic quality, was far superior to that in which George Rignold was the principal figure in Booth's Theatre twenty-five years ago.

A feature of the present season is the number of plays founded upon popular novels. Such adaptations now seem to furnish the principal occupation of the playwrights. Half a dozen or more of them were produced one after the other in September, and several of them are likely to enjoy prolonged vitality. Among these is Mr. E. Rose's version of "Richard Carvel," in which Mr. John Drew has won a personal success of a very decided kind. As a dramatization it is not particularly ingenious. The first act is chaotic, being encumbered by a host of irrelevant personages, who have no visible connection with the later action. The second and third are fairly effective melodrama — at all events the stage is kept alive, — but the arrangement and location of the incidents are barely plausible, while the fourth act is mainly devoted to a long and attenuated love scene, which would not amount to much in the hands of a less adroit player than Mr. Drew. As a whole the piece is scarcely worthy of his ability, nor is he in all respects well suited in the principal character, but his handling of it proves that he is still in process of artistic development and that he is capable of much more vigorous dramatic work than is to be found in the drawing-room comedy in which he has established his reputation. His Richard lacks, or did lack, the charm of romantic ardor and picturesqueness, but leaves nothing to be desired in the way of earnestness, virility, liveliness of action, or general boldness of treatment. His technical execution, of course, is as neat as ever, and there is no apparent reason why, with additional practice, he should not find profit and distinction in this new field.

Mr. Otis Skinner has been recognized for some time as an actor better qualified for romantic characters, by his training and experience, than most of his contemporaries, and he justified this opinion by his spirited and interesting performance of Prince Otto, in the play which he made for himself out of selected episodes in Stevenson's well known story. Although rather crudely constructed, the piece is effective theatrically and affords him ample opportunities for the display of his varied abilities as the reckless, jovial hunter, the resolute prince rudely awakened to a sense of his responsibilities, and the ardent lover. His impersonation fell a little short of the romantic ideal in the attribute of personal distinction, but was versatile in manner, boldly picturesque

in action, and ardent and tender in the love passages. In the strong situation of the third act, where the prince denounces the traitors and takes the reins of power into his own hands, he exhibited fine dignity and honest passion. More than once he aroused a genuine enthusiasm in his audience. Altogether his double achievement as author and actor was highly creditable, and it is pleasant to know that he is to return soon to the local stage. It would be interesting to see him in the legitimate drama, in such a part, for instance, as Henry V.



MRS. LE MOYNE AND MR. EDESON IN "THE GREATEST THING IN THE WORLD"

Of the stage version of "David Harum," there is very little to be said. Fortunately the character of Harum himself has been treated with circumspection, and as he dominates every scene and talks for the most part in the language of Mr. Westcott, much of the essence of his humor is preserved. Mr. Crane identifies himself pretty closely with the shrewd old horse-trader and financier, bringing out the comical side of him skilfully enough, if he rather overlooks his higher characteristics. He is exceedingly happy in his recital of the Christmas story of Billy P. and the circus, blending humor and pathos very deftly. There is no apathy while he occupies the stage, and his

Dave is likely to rank among his most popular assumptions. Another book-play,—“Caleb West,”—founded upon Hopkinson Smith's tale, reproduced the flavor of the original story in places only and was handicapped by frequent periods of feebleness and triviality. It had, however, one powerful and moving scene, the restoration of the erring young wife to her home, and in this Mr. George Fawcett created a marked effect by a very genuine outburst of honest passion.

Only brief mention can now be made of the charming fanciful comedy, “A Royal Family,” in which Captain Marshall, who is rapidly coming to the front among modern dramatists, tells a pretty and romantic love story in delicate and witty fashion and makes much fun at the expense of the fictitious divinity with which kings are supposed to be hedged about. The literary quality of this delightful little piece is admirable, and the treatment of old themes fresh and clever. Moreover the part of the heroine is very nicely suited to the gentle, dainty, sympathetic style of Miss Annie Russell, who has made a great hit in it.

The “Sag Harbor” of Mr. James A. Herne is a realistic and able study of life and character in the old Long Island village of that name, and deals with the love of two brothers for the same woman, and the mistake of the woman in marrying the elder from a sense of gratitude, while loving the other. The individual characters are drawn with a sure and vital touch, and it is this fact that gives the piece its value. In the management of the story there is less plausibility, the situations being strained almost to the breaking point. The author, in striving to emphasize the magnanimity of his hero, puts the wife and the lover in a hopelessly false position. Nevertheless the play is an able bit of work in its veracious representation of local types, and is both humorous and pathetic. It is entitled to a prominent place in the list of genuine American plays. Mr. Herne himself plays the central character, a benevolent old mariner, who creates and allays all the trouble, with wonderful verity.

The play which Miss Ford and Mrs. De Mille have written for Mrs. Sarah Cowell Le Moyne, “The Greatest Thing in the World,” is an uneven and in places crude bit of dramatic composition, but affords some fine opportunities to the actress. The theme, the transforming and elevating power of love, is a good one. Mrs. Le Moyne plays the part of a mother who offers her hand to an unfavored suitor, thereby sacrificing her every hope of happiness, as the price of his silence with regard to a crime committed by her son, whom she had regarded hitherto as the soul of honor. This situation, taken by itself, is strong and moving, and Mrs. Le Moyne creates a notable effect in it, especially in her interpretation of a hidden anguish asserting itself through every effort of personal pride to conceal it. In the later outburst of passionate reproach with which she overwhelms the guilty youth, the deepest and truest note of emotion was not surely sounded on the first night here, but the actress stirred the audience with the volume and emphasis of her declamation, and saved the wan-

ing future of the piece. She played the lighter scenes with admirable skill; brightly, naturally, gracefully, or tenderly, as occasion required, pleasing the eye with her refined and graceful carriage and action, and the ear with her polished diction. Such success as the play may win in this city, or elsewhere, must be attributed mainly to her personal achievement.

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