

DRAMA OF THE MONTH

The opening of the theatres after a long vacation comes to the professional theatre-goer with mixed feelings of weariness and pleasure. There will be much that is conventional, much that is feeble, and a good deal that is coarse before the season is over, but happily there promises to be enough containing vitality to keep one moderately content to study this popular form of art. The most conspicuous feature of the season is almost sure to be the large number of plays made out of novels, but it is far from

the most important feature. We have already had two of them—*Prince Otto* and *Richard Carvel*—and the others will follow in rapid succession. Among the productions of the classics in English, Mr. Mansfield's *Henry V.* promises to stand high, and Mr. Sothorn, before this article appears, will have put on an elaborate production of *Hamlet*. Sarah Bernhardt and Maude Adams, appearing in the same part in Rostand's *L'Aiglon*, will suggest undoubtedly to an enormous amount of comparison. *The Gay*

Lord Quex is sure to furnish a very near the top of intellectual interest as well as a popular one. In some respects more worthy of discussion than any of these, will be the few genuinely native plays, one of which, *Arizona*, has already been given, and disappointed reasonable expectations.

Among the things offered by the first two weeks of the season, those which pleased me most were not in our own language. The Irving Place Theatre, which, as usual, will probably have more high-class dramas than all the English theatres together, is not open; but two visits to the People's Theatre to see plays in Yiddish have given me more to think about and less to regret than any other trips of the new season. Of course, there is no use in talking about these plays at great length, because the number of BOOKMAN readers who will ever find their way to the Bowery playhouses is small. It would be better for them if it were otherwise. In *Rosie*, a version of Schiller's *Kabale und Liebe*, Mr. Adler as the old musician again proves

his right to stand very near the top of all the actors living in America, and Mr. Gold as a conventional Jew villain made a superb picture, worthy of actors' study. The end of this play offered an interesting escape from the problem of the unhappy ending. It followed Schiller rather closely. When it was first put on, some ten years ago, it ended tragically; the audience objected, and after a little the poisoned lovers were allowed to recover, as they do in some versions of *Romeo and Juliet*. The latest device, however, is to have the play proper, in four acts, end in tragedy, and then add a fifth act, for those who wish it, in pure farce, where the lovers are married and join in the general festivities. This has an obvious resemblance to the Greek method of following the tragedy with a farce; for even the Greeks were human.

In spite of the fact that readers may already wonder why I am not yet talking about *Richard Carvel* and *A Royal Family*, I cannot resist the temptation of telling the plot of *Nature, Man and*



SCENE FROM "QUO VASS ISS" AT WEBER AND FIELDS.

the Beast, or *East Broadway*, also produced at the People's Theatre. Misha Soloveitchik, a lawyer, admirably played by Thomashevsky, has been a Nihilist, and has become engaged to a woman who centres in Nihilism all of her ideals. They are married after coming to America. The free opportunities of that country make the practical Soloveitchik drop his theories and turn in to make money for himself, while the woman remains as idealistic as ever. The mundane side of the man's nature is shown by the fact that he bargained with the woman's father for \$5000 dowry, which has never been paid. He always admitted to the father that he was not addicted to romantic love, and felt only friendship for his daughter. When the woman learns this, she wildly breaks away from her husband and attempts to go off and support herself in the world; she becomes ill from exposure and dies; and it is the father who ill-treats her when she demands liberty for herself, and it is the earthly but honest husband who defends her.

Almost the first play of the year was

a dramatisation of *Prince Otto*, made by the star, Otis Skinner. Stevenson from the very beginning believed that there was a drama in this story, and he and Henley intended to make it together. He also pointed out, with entire justice, that it aimed much higher than most of his works. The theme is as permanent and elevated as it is dramatic and charming, and the characters have a refinement in contrast which Stevenson also pointed out. He commented on the charm of the hero and on the dramatic possibilities that Musset would find in him, as well as on the general movement that Dumas might give to the more crowded scenes. There is no doubt that *Prince Otto* contains one of the most delicate and successful character comedies of the language, and this comedy could be extracted without any abnormal exercise of theatrical skill. The ending presents the greatest difficulty. Stevenson felt that the *dénouement* of the novel would not do for the climax of the play. Probably it would not need to be much changed. In Otis Skinner's version the very stupidest possible substitute was discovered.



"PRINCE OTTO." ACT III.

The whole story means that two contrasted characters became happy by escaping from the intrigue at Court. Mr. Skinner ends the play by sending them back to the throne. Following the same instinct, he takes away all the subtle balance of charm and weakness in Otto and makes him a wooden stage hero. The yielding to temptation in the case of the papers of Sir John is left out, and its place supplied by a reading made at the express request of the owner of those documents. Otto defies the mob in the very spirit of a D'Artagnan; and so it goes all through the play, butchering Stevenson to create glory for Skinner. The opportunity remains.

Much better preserved in its delicacy than *Prince Otto* was the texture of a tale that appeared on the boards of the Madison Square Theatre a little later. *It and the Little Christina*, founded by Basil Hood on Andersen's story, is one of the sweetest little dramas imaginable, and it is admirably acted. The right people will not see it, because it is given as a curtain-raiser to one of the dullest and coarsest French farces of a period which abounds in those stupid productions.

A Royal Family at the Lyceum and *Richard Carvel* at the Empire are among those plays to which everybody can go without fear of contagion. They will catch there neither any moral disease nor any idea, moral or otherwise. The art of *A Royal Family* is slight, but it is better than that of *Miss Hobbs* or *His Excellency the Governor*, the two pieces of last year with which it would most naturally come into comparison. I enjoyed infinitely more the hodge-podge of genuine native humour dished up at Weber and Fields. There seems to be a general idea that such plays as *A Royal Family* and *Richard Carvel* appeal to a more refined taste than such an accumulation as *Fiddle de Dee*. This idea must surely be mistaken, for a refined taste is a real taste; and while the jokes at the little Broadway music hall never have any resemblance to a gem, many of them are filled with vitality, and reflect the fundamental nature of the American man. Possibly, also, the plays at the Lyceum and Empire reflect something fundamental; but if so, the qualities satisfied are not those which are invigo-

rating to think about. The crude is not necessarily unhealthy, nor is the innocuous always the refined. Some of the most salubrious foods are coarse, and the analogy can be pushed some distance in art. *A Royal Family* corresponds to the "pretty-pretty" school in painting, Weber and Fields to the rough but sound cartoons and jokes of *Puck* and *Judge*. Of course, their horse play is boring at times, and one should go there only when he is in a certain temper, wherein a primitive popular expression like this differs from works of art which are at once human and polished, and so can be read in varying moods. The subtle and cultivated author of *Poetry, Comedy and Duty* related, this past summer, that, being convalescent from a long fever, he could read the tragedies of Shakespeare; but the comedies, requiring more agility and being less universal, were beyond him. A comedy genre like that furnished by the Weber and Fields traditions is still further limited, of course, by its very local setting and its unvaried quality. Nevertheless, it is to *Richard Carvel* as life is to death. Yet both *A Royal Family* and *Richard Carvel* will surely prosper.

In the case of *Carvel* the interest lent by the wide circulation of the novel is increased by the novelty of seeing one of our best actors of comedy and society drama fixing himself up as a wooden hero, tossing about common humanity and thwarting villains. John Drew plays the part with infinitely more art than is usually wasted on such material. His first entrance alone, superbly graceful, is worth more than the play entire. His skill throughout enables him to carry off the rhodomontade as if he had no conception of how absurd it is. His striking intellectual face, with mobile clearness picturing every hint of thought or feeling that the dummy situations offered, made me wonder how much he valued such success. The dramatisation is a good one for such a novel. As the book has considerable ability and no originality or inspiration, so the play has been written or staged into effectiveness without merit. To Miss Ida Conquest I owe a debt of gratitude for doing as little as possible of the bewitching business with Dorothy Manners. Nothing in the wide category of literary crime is more heinous

than the way stereotyped novels repeat *ad nauseam et ad infinitum* (if that is good Latin) this terrible type—the capricious, wilful, “high-spirited” (especially that), witty but kind-hearted “treasure” and “witch” of a girl—whose acts and words as reported wholly fail to support this tremendous list of adjective charms. Through truth and sweetness and sincerity, Miss Conquest has, within about a year, become one of our prominent young leading women.

However, *Arizona* waits. It is a pity to have to quarrel with that also, but, in very truth, it is essentially of the same brand. Just as Mr. Churchill, seeing the popularity of American Revolution novels, laboriously and somewhat ably hewed one out, so Mr. Augustus Thomas, wishing to enter again the field of *Alabama* and *In Missouri*, took a number of property situations out of the theatrical storeroom, sprinkled over them some local colour which they did not assimilate, and served up the mixture, “slab and good,” according to the ver-

dict of the West; but its fate in New York is more in doubt. Some of the slang is stenographic and pleasing, and a few of the characters are not without intestines and other helpful organs, but the technical structure of the play is feeble. The cast is so large that the author, wholly unable to bring in his persons as the development of the story invites them, spends one tiresome act merely trotting them on, and when he does finally start, there is no one large and strong line of progress, but a number of confused, tangled and feeble threads. Some details might be praised for stagecraft, but the whole is among the galvanised-corpse plays. We shall see pretty soon whether Mr. Herne has given us a living American drama in *Sag Harbour*. Meantime, we must watch the workshop turn out its allotted stint, and when we absolutely need relief we can go from Broadway to the Bowery, or, if in the proper mood, expend \$2 for a seat at Weber and Field's.

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