

# A SCHEME FOR A STOCK COMPANY

BY CLAYTON HAMILTON

My Saturday morning course in the Contemporary Drama at Columbia University is attended by a hundred and fifty students, of both sexes, whose ages range from seventeen to sixty. They come from many different sections of the country, and may be regarded as fairly representative of the sort of public that is particularly interested in the contemporary theatre. Every now and then, before I bring up for discussion some unusually popular and celebrated play—such as *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray*, or *Candida*, or *Mrs. Dane's Defence*, or *Alice Sit-By-The-Fire*—I ask the class to tell me how many of its members have seen the piece in question; and I am always staggered and disheartened when only five or six hands go up in the entire room. More than nine-tenths of these particularly interested students of the stage have never actually seen these notable and standard plays, because they did not happen to be living in New York in those seasons when these pieces were first set before the public. It is only reasonable to suppose that the plight of my students is not at all exceptional, and to assume that there are thousands of other people in New York who, though seriously interested in the best that has been thought and said in the contemporary drama, have missed their only opportunity for seeing several of the most celebrated plays of recent years.

It is only in the English-speaking theatre that great plays are utterly withdrawn from currency so soon as they have come to be regarded—at least in a restricted sense—as classical. Our theatre is astonishingly wasteful. It tosses away to undeserved oblivion the best plays of the best playwrights it has called into its service. The theatre is conducted otherwise in all the countries

of continental Europe. If a great play happens to be written by a Frenchman, a German, a Russian, an Italian, a Norwegian, or a Spaniard, it is not thrown carelessly into the scrap-basket so soon as its initial run has been completed; it is permanently preserved, as a part of the dramatic repertory of the nation that has produced it. For many years, it will be acted ten or twenty times a season; and then, for half a century, it will be acted three or four times every year; for any play which, at the outset, has come into the theatre trailing clouds of glory and displaying intimations of immortality is a play that no continental nation can willingly permit to be forgotten.

But, in the English-speaking theatre, the career of a great play is very different from this. At the outset, it may perhaps be acted for an entire season in London or New York; the next year, it may be sent "on the road" in the United States or on a tour of "the provinces" in England; and, subsequently still, it may be acted fitfully by half a hundred cheap stock companies in little towns: but after that, the play is thrown away and never acted any more.

Since the modern English drama was inaugurated by Sir Arthur Pinero in 1893 [the date of the initial production of *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray*], at least a hundred plays have been written in the English language that are worthy of being seen and studied again and yet again; yet nowhere in the English-speaking world does there exist a theatre that is dedicated to the endeavour to keep these plays before the public.

Something, manifestly, should be done to remedy this "great refusal" of our theatre to recognise and reverence the accomplished fact of greatness. Some Villon should arise, to chant a tragical

ballade demanding an answer to the question, "Where are the plays of yesterday?" . . . *Man and Superman, The Mollusc, Mid-Channel, Michael and His Lost Angel, Hindle Wakes, The Admirable Crichton*—why should plays so eminent as these be left to gather dust upon the shelf when they might be gathering applause behind the footlights?

The answer is that neither in England nor in America does there exist a national theatre—like the Théâtre Français—which has been chartered to perpetuate the milestones and the monuments of the dramaturgic genius of the nation. Our people, furthermore, are singularly lacking in the instinct for conservation. In America—at least—we have no past; and this is probably the reason why we overvalue the present and bet too heavily upon the future. We lose our breath in chasing the elusive light of novelty, and lack serenity to settle down and contemplate the landmarks of the road that we have travelled.

It has been proved in practice that the repertory system—which works easily and economically in the national and municipal theatres of France and Germany—cannot be imposed successfully upon the public of New York. Our people are not accustomed to a change of bill from night to night; they expect the run of any play—however long or short its period—to be, at least, continuous; and the experience of Mr. Winthrop Ames at the New Theatre, and Mr. Granville Barker at Wal-lack's, and Miss Grace George at the Playhouse, convinced all three of these experimenting managers that any change of programme between a Monday and a Saturday was disconcerting and discouraging to the ticket-buying public. People who came to the box-office with money in their hands to buy tickets for a certain play would go away again when they discovered that another piece was to be given on the night in question. But no experimental manager has yet discovered an objection to a fre-

quent change of programme, provided that the run of each successive play shall be continuous, and provided also that the date for each successive change of bill shall be clearly and emphatically impressed upon the public.

We have not had a first-class stock company in New York for more than a dozen years. Is there any irremediable reason why such a company should not be organised at present, for the specific purpose of recalling to the attention of the theatre-going public a series of great plays by great authors—all of which have been written since 1893 [and therefore in conformity with the conventions of the contemporary theatre], and all of which have been written by British or American authors [and therefore in conformity with standards of taste to which our theatre-going public is accustomed]; is there any real reason why a stock company, that should never present a single play which had not already been approved by the public and praised by every critic as a masterpiece, should fail to be supported by the thousands and thousands of people who are interested eagerly in studying the best that has been thought and said in the contemporary drama?

A scheme for such an institution has recently occurred to me; and though I have not as yet found time, in the midst of many labours, to work out all of the details, I am ready at least to outline the essential principles of the undertaking. I offer this prospectus freely to any manager who may be willing to put it into practice; and I should be very glad to lend a helping hand toward the establishment of the sort of stock company that I have in mind.

First of all, it would be necessary to rent a theatre outright for a season of thirty weeks, beginning in October. Perhaps some semi-abandoned playhouse that is not so very distant from the centre of the theatre district—like the Garrick, for example—might be secured at a rental that would be comparatively low. Next, it would be necessary to assemble a well-balanced company of

experienced professional actors. The acting should be of a high order of excellence; and there should be no dallying with beginners or with amateurs. That it is not by any means impossible to collect the sort of company that I have in mind, was proved by Mr. Winthrop Ames in his experiment at the New Theatre and again by Miss Grace George in her more recent experiment at the Playhouse.

During the season of thirty weeks, precisely fifteen plays should be produced, and each play should be performed two weeks, and two weeks only, regardless of its comparative success or failure. The entire programme of fifteen plays to be presented should be announced before the beginning of the season, and subscriptions should be asked for on the strength of this announcement. Every item on the list, without exception, should be a play originally written in the English language, since 1892, by some author of acknowledged excellence—a play, moreover, which ran for many weeks or months when it was first produced, and is now regarded by a consensus of both popular and critical opinion as a masterpiece according to its kind.

These requirements are high; but it is by no means difficult to find plays that fulfil them. Here, for instance, is a list of fifteen plays, of many kinds, that might be offered as the programme for the initial season:—*The Second Mrs. Tanqueray* and *The Gay Lord Quex*, by Sir Arthur Pinero; *Mrs. Dane's Defence*, by Henry Arthur Jones; *Candida* and *Man and Superman*, by George Bernard Shaw; *The Admirable Crichton* and *Alice Sit-By-The-Fire*, by Sir James Matthew Barrie; *The Mollusc*, by Hubert Henry Davies; *The Silver Box*, by John Galsworthy; *Don*, by Rudolf Besier; *Hindle Wakes*, by Stanley Houghton; *The Easiest Way*, by Eugene Walter; *The Truth*, by Clyde Fitch; *The Witching Hour*, by Augustus Thomas; and *The Poor Little Rich Girl*, by Eleanor Gates.

This list has been written rapidly

and almost at random; and it would be very easy to draw up several other programmes of fifteen well-remembered plays that would be equally attractive. If a stock company of experienced and well-known actors should offer to produce these fifteen plays [or fifteen other plays of equal interest] in thirty weeks, would it be very difficult to secure subscriptions for the season on the strength of this announcement? The public would be assured in advance that every play would be worth seeing, and that every play would be well acted; and the management would be certain in advance that every play would be reviewed with critical approval by a press that could be counted on, for once, to be unanimous.

Every encouragement should be offered to induce the theatre-going public to subscribe for the entire season of fifteen plays. Thus, the seats in the orchestra might be sold to subscribers for a dollar and a half and to non-subscribers for two dollars, the seats in the balcony might be sold to subscribers for a dollar and to non-subscribers for a dollar and a half, and the seats in the gallery might be sold to subscribers for twenty-five cents and to non-subscribers for fifty cents. Season tickets for the balcony and gallery, admitting the purchaser to one performance of each of the fifteen plays, should be offered in blocks of ten or more, at even cheaper rates, to students of our colleges and schools and workers in our social settlements.

If I am right in thinking that my own students at Columbia are not exceptional but representative, and that there are thousands of people in New York who are eager for an opportunity to make acquaintance, or renew acquaintance, with the acknowledged masterpieces of our modern English drama, it would not be difficult to secure sustained support for a season of fifteen plays of the quality that has been indicated by the tentative list which I have ventured to suggest. The force of habit is as strong in theatre-going as it is in every other exercise of energy; and

I believe that these people would soon acquire and enjoy the habit of sitting in the same seat, on the same evening, every other week, to see an adequate performance of a play whose merit is known to be unquestionable.

A considerable amount of the working capital of this hypothetical institution would be furnished by subscriptions—after the plays had been selected, and the company had been engaged, and a prospectus [announcing both plays and company] had been published. But, of course, the major portion of the capital would have to be supplied by some commercial manager who believed in the idea, or borrowed from certain public-spirited citizens of the type concerned in the directorate of the Metropolitan Opera House. An initial investment of not less than one hundred thousand dollars would be necessary, in order that the director of the undertaking should be able, at the outset, to lease a theatre for thirty weeks and to engage a company of experienced actors for the same period. I believe, however, that the first season would return a profit of at least ten thousand dollars, or ten per cent. on the original investment; and I believe, also, that the percentage of profit would be increased in subsequent seasons.

Frankness compels me to confess that, when it comes to high finance, I feel myself being dragged out, by an undertow, beyond my depth; I am not accustomed to think easily in thousands; but I know, at least, that the sort of institution which I advocate could be conducted much more cheaply than the average theatre on Broadway.

In the first place, it is cheaper to lease outright a semi-abandoned theatre for a period of thirty weeks than to secure admission to an active theatre, and to continue tenure, for the same period. In the second place, the rate of royalty that has to be paid to a great author for a great play which is more than three years old, is considerably less than the rate of royalty that has to be paid to an inconsiderable author for a new play

that may turn out to be devoid of merit. By a blanket arrangement that could easily be made with the agents who have been deputed to represent the authors, the fifteen plays enumerated in the list which I have ventured to suggest could be produced at a fixed royalty of two hundred dollars a week; and this is much less than the royalty that has to be paid for any new play that is not an arrant failure. In the third place, a considerable saving could be made in the matter of adjusting the salaries of the actors. Many excellent performers who customarily demand two hundred dollars a week for their services would be willing to join the sort of company I have in mind at a salary of one hundred dollars a week. On this point, I speak with knowledge, for I have talked with several actors about the proposition. Any actor who might join this hypothetical company would be assured of thirty weeks of continuous employment, instead of the usual two weeks; he would be assured of an entire season on Broadway; and he would also be assured of a certain opportunity, within a single season, for playing fifteen different parts, each written by an author of acknowledged eminence, before the eyes of every manager and critic in New York. In view of these three inducements, which would be absolutely guaranteed, there is scarcely an experienced actor in the profession who would not willingly accept a considerable diminution in his customary salary. The reason why many actors demand a salary of three or four hundred dollars a week is merely that, after they have rehearsed for nothing for three weeks, the play may fail and they may be summarily discarded from employment, with only two or three weeks' pay for five or six weeks' work. These same actors could be signed up, at half salary, for a metropolitan season that was guaranteed to last for thirty weeks.

The expense for scenery in the sort of theatre that has been suggested would be extremely slight. In most cases, the very scenery that was employed in the

original American productions of the plays could be rescued from the storehouse at a merely nominal expenditure for transportation. Furthermore, the current cult of scenery, which has perhaps been over-emphasised in recent seasons, would be properly subordinated to a recognition of the primary importance of the contributions of the author and the actors.

Two reasons have actuated the suggestion that a change of programme should be made not weekly but fortnightly. In the first place, it has frequently been indicated [as in the case of *Candida*] that a great play, whenever it may be revived, can crowd the theatre in New York for at least sixteen performances. In the second place, it is desirable to avoid any overworking of the actors. An established play—in which the “business” has already been worked out and recorded—can easily be rehearsed and acted by a company of experienced performers within the short time of a single week. If a fortnightly change of bill should be established, the actors would not be required to rehearse at all during the first week of the run of any play: they would begin rehearsals of the subsequent production only at the outset of the second week of the play that was being currently performed in public.

A permanent stock company of no more than a dozen artists would suffice for the casting of most of the plays that would be listed in the programme. Other actors might be engaged, as guests, from time to time, to supplement the cast of any particular production. Though the entire list of fifteen plays should be promised to subscribers in advance, and no renegation of this programme should afterward be counte-

nanced, it would not be necessary to establish in advance the order in which the various plays should be exhibited. By such a reservation, it might be possible [for instance] to arrange a date for the promised two weeks’ run of *Candida* at a time when Arnold Daly did not happen to be acting in any other play. Mr. Daly might then be invited, as a guest of the permanent stock company, to resume, for that particular fortnight, his original rôle of Marchbanks. This principle has been established for many years in the municipal theatres of Germany; and it has recently been exemplified in New York by the gracious gesture of the Washington Square Players in inviting Mary Shaw to resume her original rôle of Mrs. Alving in their projected revival of Ibsen’s *Ghosts*.

In suggesting a rather random list of fifteen plays for presentation in the course of the initial season of this hypothetical stock company, I have not attempted to arrange them in the order of production. The season, of course, should open with a pleasant comedy; and, thereafter, plays of serious complexion should alternate with plays of lighter mood. But it is only at one single little point that my own mind, in this regard, has already been made up. I should like to see the season terminated by an eloquent performance of *Alice Sit-By-The-Fire*, the masterpiece of Barrie—so that the almost intolerably lovely speeches of Alice in the final act should seem to serve as a sort of valedictory to the public after many months of beautiful endeavour; and I should like to hear these speeches read once more—as they were read of old—by another great guest who would be welcomed by the company and by the theatre-going public.—Ethel Barrymore.



## SOME STORIES OF THE MONTH\*

BY H. W. BOYNTON

IN *The Madness of May* Mr. Nicholson is altogether spirited and delightful, a romancer and master of fantasy released from the bondage to which his will has too often reduced him—the bondage of being a sober interpreter of American life and character. Fancy has its own interpretation, and there is more human nature and truth in this holiday excursion than in many of this writer's earnest journeys in quest of the real. And the book has its "idea," gracefully bound up with its nonsense and its sentiment and its very adroit and amusing plot. Of course the whole thing may be pricked and exploded easily enough, by those who like to destroy beautiful bubbles. Regarded in the stern light of reason, the potential villainy of the Deerings, father and son, is not highly probable; but thereby hangs the tale, and Mr. Nicholson presents it to us with a smile and a shrug, as the kind of thing called for by the conditions. He has more than once expressed his ironical enjoyment of the absurdities of convention: "The long arm of coincidence

beckons us," cries the R. Hood of this narrative. We shall test for ourselves all the claptrap of the highest-priced novelists. And plenty of contrivance follows, but not by way of burlesque: all our coincidences, in fact, are satisfactorily resolved and accounted for before we have done with them. The story must not be told here, lest its fairy savour be spoiled for new readers. It is a story to be read by all honest lovers of romance in terms of whimsy.

*The Light in the Clearing* is another fine and characteristic performance by an old favourite. Mr. Bacheller sees life always through a glow of kindly emotion. He is sentimental, if you like, but we do not suspect him, as we must suspect some of our professionally "glad" story-tellers, of cultivating and purveying sentiment as a commodity. He has a sincere faith in human goodness, in honour and the simple virtues as they may be raised to a high power of effectiveness by strength and purity of will. Hence the zest with which, in the present tale, he revivifies the figure of an American who failed to achieve the height of official greatness only because his ambitions were upon a less spectacular plane. It is Silas Wright's purity and nobility of character, his eminence in his own time as a touchstone of the moral and social virtues, which inspire Mr. Bacheller to show him to us in his natural setting. In his Preface he quotes with approval the summary by Wright's colleague in the Senate, Benton of Missouri: "He refused Cabinet appointments under his fast friend Van Buren and under Polk, whom he may be said to have elected. He refused a seat on the bench of the Supreme Court of the United States; he rejected instantly the nomination of

\**The Madness of May*. By Meredith Nicholson. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.

*The Light in the Clearing*. By Irving Bacheller. Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company.

*Slippy McGee*. By Marie Conway Oemler. New York: The Century Company.

*Peter Sanders, Retired*. By Gordon Hall Gerould. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.

*If Wishes Were Horses*. By the Countess Barcyńska. New York: E. P. Dutton and Company.

*Changing Winds*. By St. John Ervine. New York: The Macmillan Company.

*The Ford*. By Mary Austin. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.

*Aurora the Magnificent*. By Gertrude Hall. New York: The Century Company.