

# THE BEST PLAYS OF THE EARLY AUTUMN SEASON

BY CLAYTON HAMILTON

THERE is ample evidence that man must be, by nature, a theatre-going animal. Otherwise, it would be impossible to account for the apparent prosperity of the theatres in New York at a time when scarcely any plays are being shown which are worthy of an hour's attention from adults of intelligence and taste. Cultivated people who have climbed to years of discretion do not waste their time in the consideration of bad music, bad painting, bad sculpture, or bad architecture; but there always seems to be a public for bad plays. The passion for going to the theatre must be written down as irresistible, like the love of woman or that other weak and amiable habit of wasting time and money. In seasons when the plays are meritorious, the public enjoys a sense of satisfaction; but, in seasons when the plays are unendurable, the public attends the theatre none the less. From this curious phenomenon, we might deduce a proverb that the next thing most desirable to a good play is a bad play, and that the only absolute negation to the theatre-going impulse would be no play at all.

The current theatre-season was inaugurated on the night of August 6, when a traditional and antiquated farce called *Mary's Ankle*, by May Tully, was exhibited at the Bijou Theatre to the delectation of a large and apparently enthusiastic audience. This audience was awakened easily to laughter by reason of the elemental fact that every situation in the piece had been laughed at by the same sort of audience at least a hundred times before. Some time or other, when I can find a day with nothing else to do, I shall write a psychological essay on the subject of "Laughter as a Habit," and the theme will be that the ordinary person finds most funny

in the present whatever he has been accustomed to regard as funny in the past.

Between August 6 and October 1, precisely twenty-seven "legitimate" plays were produced for the first time in the first-class theatres of New York. This computation excludes "musical comedies" and all other types of non-dramatic entertainment. Of these twenty-seven plays, only one is likely to be remembered half a dozen years from now; and this sole exception to the current rule was an immediate and arrant failure. The other twenty-six may be divided into two categories, "for better or for worse"; but there is scarcely a play in the lot that is worthy to attract the serious consideration of a critic of the drama.

This is a bad record for two months; and the record is all the more regrettable because it comes at a period which is extraordinarily propitious for the development of a serious drama in America. For the first time in history, our native playwrights are now "protected" against any considerable competition from the better-trained and more experienced dramatists of Europe; and, since our theatre is more generously patronised at present than it has been in many antecedent seasons, it behooves our authors and our managers to seize the current opportunity to set forth something better than their recent best. The theatre is, and always must remain, a commercial institution; but—precisely in consequence of this admitted fact—it follows that the best time for trying to establish great plays in the estimation of the public is a time when the public has exhibited a willingness to patronise the theatre with unstinted liberality.

A dutiful dramatic critic, who has curtailed his own vacation to attend the

openings of all the early-season plays, is assailed, around October first, with many questions from many friends more fortunate than himself. He is repeatedly asked to recommend the best plays that are running at the moment, and is requested to warn his interlocutors away from the waste of an irrecoverable evening.

In response to many spoken and written interrogatories of this kind, the present writer will attempt to tabulate, in the order of respective merit, the six best plays among the twenty-seven that were produced in New York between August 6 and October 1, 1917, and to indicate, in each case, the reasons for their ranking.

#### "THE DELUGE"

*The Deluge*—which was written by a Swedish author, Henning Berger, and adapted into English by Mr. Frank Allen—was speedily withdrawn, because it failed to attract the drifting patronage of the public of mid-August, despite the fact that it was admirably acted and was very carefully produced by Mr. Arthur Hopkins.

This play was genuinely worthy of attention from cultivated people of adult intelligence. Though the author was a Swede, he had lived for several years in the United States and had enjoyed the adventurous experience of serving for some time as a bar-tender in Chicago. In consequence of this initiation to our local life, his play was set in the Mississippi valley.

The theme of *The Deluge* might be compared with that of Bret Harte's famous story,—*The Outcasts of Poker Flat*. A group of wastrels was gathered together and threatened with the imminence of death. Appalled by the environing conditions, these scoundrels and skulkers—who had been trapped like rats, in an underground saloon, by a rising of the waters of the Mississippi—turned over a new leaf and resolved to die like heroes,—cleanly and without reproach. But, when the flood subsided unexpectedly, they relapsed at once into

their habitual dispositions, and revealed themselves once more as the slackers they had always been before their lives had been endangered.

This play was developed from a serious theme, and it exhibited a serious analysis of the basic phenomena of human nature. Nevertheless, the dismal fact must be recorded that *The Deluge* was summarily rejected by the theatre-going public of mid-August, at a time when *Mary's Ankle* was still attracting a remunerative patronage.

#### "BUSINESS BEFORE PLEASURE"

*Business Before Pleasure*, by Montague Glass and Jules Eckert Goodman, may be signalised as a "commercial" comedy of quite extraordinary merit. This piece has made more money than any other offering of the early autumn season; and the reassuring fact must be recorded that its success has been achieved in consequence of the characterisation which has been displayed in the writing of the leading parts.

The central figures in the present piece are Abe Potash and Mawruss Perlmutter. *Business Before Pleasure* is the third play in which these characters have been exhibited before the theatre-going public; yet the present composition is more amusing than either of its predecessors. The abiding vitality of Mr. Glass's character-creations is now attested by the fact that he has succeeded three times in the theatre with three different collaborators,—the late Charles Klein, and Mr. Roi Cooper Megrue, and Mr. Jules Eckert Goodman. In each reincarnation, Abe and Mawruss have seemed more and more alive. There is no denying now that these creations constitute a permanent addition to the portrait gallery of our local and contemporary literature.

In *Business Before Pleasure*, we are invited to follow the fortunes of Potash and Perlmutter after they have decided to forsake the cloak-and-suit trade and to embark upon a more perilous but more profitable speculation in the moving-picture business. As Mr. Glass re-

marks, in a memorable line, "Everybody nowadays has two businesses,—his own and moving-pictures." The play offers, therefore, not only a successful repetition of two living characters that had already won their way into the affections of the theatre-going public, but it offers also a shrewd and almost subtle satire of that conspiracy against the innate weakness of the public taste that is known as the moving-picture business.

The dialogue of Mr. Glass is masterly. Time after time, for twenty minutes at a stretch, it is literally true that every line is greeted with a laugh. Much of this laughter is afforded by a jugglery of words which is facilitated by the fact that the medium of speech is not straight English, but the Jewish dialect. For instance, when Perlmutter has described the leading lady by saying, "She's a regular Kipling vampire," Potash quite innocently answers, "Well, show her in and lemme see her kipple." But even more of the laughter is due to *mots de caractère*:—that is to say, the lines would not be funny in themselves, were it not for the essential fact that the people speaking them are absolutely real.

#### "DE LUXE ANNIE"

I am inclined to regard *De Luxe Annie*, by Edward Clark, as second in interest among the still-surviving plays produced in August and September. Its merit, to be sure, is entirely technical; and those of us who love the mechanism of the drama are perhaps inclined to overpraise an author whose adroitness we admire even though he may be dealing with inferior material. The material, in this case, is of no importance. *De Luxe Annie* tells a story of that sensational variety that used to be published in the obsolete "dime-novel" and is now published in *The Saturday Evening Post*. But Mr. Clark has planned his play with a skill that is so exceptional as to seem almost uncanny.

The heroine is a criminal who is disclosed at the high tide of the successful practice of a novel and ingenious varia-

tion of the ancient "badger game." We are puzzled by the fact that she is evidently absolutely chaste and by the further fact that she appears to be a woman of education and refinement. She is being tracked by detectives; and we follow her through several thrilling scenes in which they are the pursuers and she is the pursued. Finally she is caught:—and then the revelation comes which the author has been saving for his climax. It turns out that Annie has been a victim of aphasia. Some years before the play began, she had been hit on the head by a burglar. This blow had made her forgetful of her past and unconscious of her own identity, and had afflicted her with the single criminal propensity which she had subsequently practised. It turns out also that the leader of the detectives who have been pursuing her is her own husband. Her trouble is relieved by a surgical operation; and by this device she is permitted to rejoin her husband—so to speak—as good as new. This entire narrative is enclosed between a prologue and an epilogue, in which the author cleverly forestalls an adverse verdict from the audience by explaining that the story itself is so sensational that any average person would regard it as incredible.

But the admirable thing about the play is not the subject-matter, but the ingenuity displayed by Mr. Clark in putting together the various pieces of his picture-puzzle. *De Luxe Annie* is a play that all playwrights will enjoy; for every craftsman is naturally interested in an ingenious exercise of craftsmanship.

#### "HAMILTON"

*Hamilton*, which was written by Mary Hamlin and George Arliss, is superior in many ways to the ordinary play of commerce that pretends to be historical. It presents a fairly accurate delineation of American life in the last decade of the eighteenth century, and exhibits such large figures as Hamilton and Jefferson, Monroe and Jay, without discredit to the dignity accorded to them in the estimation of posterity. The dia-

logue is excellently written. It is not only adequate to the exigencies of the action but is also impermeated with the tone of literary distinction. Furthermore, the plot is well made, and the climatic moments are sufficiently dramatic to keep the audience enlivened.

In his attempt to reincarnate Alexander Hamilton, Mr. Arliss has probably contributed more in his capacity as actor than he contributed in his capacity as author. His performance of the title part is worth going many miles to see. Hamilton, at the period of the play, was younger by a score of years than Mr. Arliss is at present; yet the pervading note of this performance is the note of almost boyish youthfulness.

The finest thing about the play itself is that it discusses with extraordinary sanity a minor moral error of the central character. We are not only told that Hamilton was guilty of adultery, but we are also told exactly how and when and why. His sin is not condoned; yet it is used to form a sort of stepping-stone for the observation of those finer qualities of character which made him every inch a hero.

#### "THE FAMILY EXIT"

*The Family Exit*, by Lawrence Langner, is worthy of remark because it discusses an idea, even though this idea had been developed previously by Mr. Bernard Shaw. Ideas are rather rare in the region of Broadway; and, in most of the farces that are currently exhibited, the one most funny thing in life is assumed to be a falling over furniture.

Mr. Langner tells us—like Mr. Shaw before him—that the deadliest enemies of an individual who seeks to live a life that is simple and harmonious are his own immediate relatives and those of his wife. *The Family Exit* is a satire of the sanctimonious tradition that family assemblages—on Thanksgiving Day or Christmas, for example—are occasions of beauty, instead of being, as they actually are, occasions of sardonic horror. This play will be appreciated by every man who hates his relatives be-

cause they are the strangest of strangers, and who desires only to be left alone.

Mr. Langner also takes a fling at our immigration laws and at the mood of hypocritical morality which we have inherited from many generations of our British ancestors. His dialogue is very sprightly; and many of his lines are notable not only for their wit but also for their wisdom.

In pattern, *The Family Exit* may be defined by saying that it is not really a three-act play, but rather an agglomeration of three one-act plays, each dealing with the same theme and presenting the same characters. The construction is unskilful, and much of the writing is verbose. Nevertheless, the essential fact remains that Mr. Langner started out with something to say and that he managed, in the main, to say it entertainingly.

#### "POLLY WITH A PAST"

When Barrie had completed *Peter Pan*, he decided to send forth a very little girl to speak a prologue, in which it was explained that *she* was the author of the subsequent play, and that therefore the audience should not expect a grown-up composition. Many of our most successful current comedies appear to have been written from the point of view of girls in boarding-school; and it would be a rather pretty touch if the authors should set forward some hypothetical maid of seventeen as a sponsor for their compositions.

When *The Boomerang* was settling down to its record-breaking run, Mr. David Belasco told me that the average age of the theatre-going public was only twenty-two and that therefore it was necessary in the theatre to appeal primarily to the emotions of people who were very young. *Polly With a Past* has been written with a sedulous respect for this assumption. The subject-matter is of the sort that has been used innumerable times for "private theatricals" enacted in the corner of a drawing-room before an audience of well-fed and indulgent friends. The pattern of the

piece, however, has been put together skilfully; for both George Middleton and Guy Bolton—who collaborated in this project—have enjoyed many years of previous experience before the foot-lights.

*Polly With a Past* has been dexterously planned and admirably written. Furthermore, it is beautifully acted, and directed with extraordinary skill. Mr. Belasco has achieved another "triumph," and will be amply rewarded for it before summer comes again. But the play

is not "about anything,"—to use the easiest phrase that is available; and a grown-up human being who wanders in to see it, because he has been told—by some such person as the present writer—that the acting and the stage-direction are exemplary, may wonder—to express the feeling in a famous phrase of Molière's—what the devil he is doing in that galley. For, life itself—as shown by Mr. Middleton and Mr. Bolton in this play—is a playground for the adolescent, instead of a training camp for the adult.

## THE DECADENTLET

BY BEATRICE WITTE RAVENEL

I AM sensitive supremely  
 To the whole complex creation,  
 With the atmospheric harmony  
 My mood grows subtly blent.  
 Unassuming though, extremely,  
 Let me add with deprecation,  
 The *noblesse oblige*, believe me,  
 Of a finer temperament.

All my senses for sensations  
 Hover ambushed and predacious,  
 (Feelings tremulous and trepidant  
 Yet exquisitely whole).  
 Full of psychic dissipations  
 Like a fly-trap orchidacious  
 That devours appreciations,  
 Is my odd, exotic soul.

I am morbid, with a tender  
 Purple-escent mood of dolour,  
 Like the smell of mould and violets  
 Or a prescience thrice-refined.  
 How its explanation render  
 Or translate emotion's colour?  
 For the ways are long and slender  
 From my soul into my mind.

Well, the Future, self-confessing,  
 Sends me stealthy backward glances;  
 We've an understanding, undulent  
 And refluant as a wave;  
 And she flings me like a blessing  
 Some revealed perfume that chances  
 From unbudded buds caressing  
 My undug, delightful grave.