

WHERE THE THEATER FALLS SHORT

THE LIMITATIONS OF THE STAGE IN THE MATTER OF VISUALIZING CERTAIN TYPES OF THE PLAYWRIGHT'S FANCY

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FEW competent critics would dispute the assertion that the drama, if not actually the noblest of the arts, is, at all events, the most comprehensive, since it can invoke the aid of all the others without impairing its own individuality or surrendering its right to be considered the senior partner in any alliance it may make. Poetry, oratory, and music, painting, sculpture, and architecture, these the drama can take into its service with no danger to its own control.

Yet even if the drama may have the widest range of any of the arts, none the less are its boundaries clearly defined. What it can do, it does with a sharpness of effect and with a cogency of appeal no other art can rival. But there are many things it cannot do; and there are not a few things that it can attempt only at its peril.

Some of these impossibilities and inexpediencies are psychologic subtleties of character and emotion too delicate and too minute for the magnifying lens of the theater itself; and some of them are physical, too large in themselves to be compressed into the rigid area of the stage. In advance of actual experiment it is not always possible for even the most experienced of theatrical experts to decide the question with certainty.

Moreover, there is always the audience to be reckoned with, and even old staggers like Henry Irving and Victorien Sardou cannot foresee the way in which the many-headed monster will take what is set before it. When Percy Fitzgerald and W. G.

Wills were preparing a prose version of "The Flying Dutchman" for Henry Irving the actor made a suggestion which the authors immediately adopted.

The romantic legend has for its hero a sea-captain condemned to eternal life until he can find a maiden willing to share his lot; and when at last he meets the heroine she has another lover, who is naturally jealous of the new aspirant to her hand. The young rival challenges *Vanderdecken* to a duel, and what Irving proposed was that the survivor of the fight should agree to throw the body of his rival into the sea and that the waves should cast up the condemned *Vanderdecken* on the shore, since the ill-fated sailor could not avoid his doom by death at the hand of man.

This was an appropriate development of the tale; it was really imaginative; and it would have been strangely moving if it had been introduced into a ballad on the old theme. But in a play performed before us in a theater its effect was not altogether what its proposer had hoped for, although he presented it with all his marvelous command of theatrical artifice.

The stage setting Irving bestowed upon this episode was perfectly in keeping with its tone. The spectators saw the sandy beach of a little cove shut in by cliffs, with the placid ocean bathed in the sunset glow. The two men crossed swords on the strand; *Vanderdecken* let himself be killed, and the victorious lover carried his rival's body up the rocks and hurled it into the ocean. Then he departed, and for a moment all was silence.

A shuddering sigh soon swept over the face of the waters and a ripple lapped the sand. Then a little wave broke on the beach, and withdrew, rasping over the stones. At last a huge roller crashed forward and the sea gave up its dead. *Vanderdecken* lay high and dry on the shore; and in a moment he staggered to his feet, none the worse for his wounds.

But unfortunately the several devices for accomplishing this result, admirable as they were, drew attention, each of them to itself. The audience could not help wondering how the trick of the waves was worked, and when the Flying Dutchman was washed up by the water it was not the mighty deep, rejecting *Vanderdecken*, again cursed with life, that the spectators perceived, but rather the dignified Henry Irving himself, unworthily tumbled about on the dust of his own stage. In the effort to make visible this imaginative embellishment of the strange story its magic potency vanished. The poetry of the striking improvement on the old tale had been betrayed by its translation into the material realities of the theater, since the concrete presentation necessarily contradicted the abstract beauty of the idea.

IN MECHANISM LURKS MENACE

Here we find ourselves face to face with one of the most obvious limitations of the stage—that its power of suggestion is often greater than its faculty of actual presentation and that there are many things, poetic and imaginative, which it can accomplish after a fashion, but which it ventures upon only at imminent peril of failure. Many things which are startlingly effective in the telling are ineffective in the actual seeing. The mere mechanism needed to represent them will often be contradictory and sometimes even destructive.

Perhaps it may be advisable to cite another example, not quite so cogent as Irving's *Vanderdecken*, and yet carrying the same moral. This other example will be found in a piece by Sardou, a man who knew all the possibilities of the theater as intimately as Irving himself and who was wont to utilize them with incomparable skill. Indeed, so frequently did the French playwright avail himself of stage devices, and so often was he willing to rely upon them, that not a few present-day critics have been inclined to dismiss him as merely a supremely adroit theatrical trickster.

In his sincerest play, "*Patrie*," the piece which he dedicated to Motley and which he seems himself to have been proudest of, Sardou invented a most picturesque episode.

The Spaniards are in possession of Brussels, the citizens are ready to rise, and William of Orange is coming to their assistance. The chiefs of the revolt leave the city secretly and meet William at night in the frozen moat of an outlying fort. A Spanish patrol interrupts their consultation and forces them to conceal themselves. A little later a second patrol is heard approaching, just when the return of the first patrol is impending. For a second it looks as though the patriots would be caught between the two Spanish companies.

But William of Orange rises to the occasion. He calls on his sea-wolves, and when the second patrol appears marching in single file there suddenly spring out of the darkness upon every Spanish soldier two fur-clad creatures who throttle him, bind him, and throw him into a hole in the ice of the moat. Then they swiftly fill in this gaping cavity with blocks of snow and trample the path level above it. And a moment after the sea-wolves have done their deadly work and withdrawn into hiding, the first patrol returns and passes all unsuspecting over the bodies of their comrades—a very practical example of dramatic irony.

As it happened, I read "*Patrie*" some years before I had an opportunity to see it on the stage, and this picturesque scene had lingered in my memory so that in the theater I eagerly awaited its coming. When it arrived at last I was sadly disappointed.

The sea-wolves belied their appetizing name; they irresistibly suggested a group of trained acrobats, and I found myself carelessly noting the artifices by the aid of which the imitation snowballs were made to fill the trap-door of the stage which represented the yawning hole in the ice of the frozen moat. The thing told was picturesque, but the thing seen was curiously unmoving, and I have noted without surprise that in the latest revival of "*Patrie*" the attempt to make this episode effective was finally abandoned, the sea-wolves being cut out of the play.

In "*Patrie*," as in "*Vanderdecken*," the real reason for the failure of these me-

chanical devices is that the plays were themselves on a level superior to those stage tricks; the themes were poetic, and any theatrical effect which drew attention to itself interrupted the current of emotional sympathy. It disclosed itself instantly as incongruous, as out of keeping with the elevation of the legend—in a word, as inartistic.

A similar effect, perhaps even more frankly mechanical, would not be inartistic in a play of a lower type; and it might possibly be helpful in a frankly spectacular piece, even if this happened also to be poetic in intent. In a fairy play, a *féerie*, as the French term it, we expect to behold all sorts of startling ingenuities of stage mechanism, whether the theme is delightfully imaginative, as in Maeterlinck's beautiful "Blue Bird," or crassly prosaic, as in "The Black Crook" and "The White Pawn."

WHEN APPEAL TO THE EYE IS SAFE

In picturesque melodrama also, in the dramatization of "Ben-Hur," for example, we should be disappointed if we were bereft of the wreck of the Roman galley and were deprived of the great chariot-race. These episodes can be presented in the theater only by the aid of mechanisms far more elaborate than those needed for the scenes in "Vanderdecken" and "Patrie"; but in "Ben-Hur" these mechanisms are not incongruous and distracting as were the simpler devices of "Vanderdecken" and "Patrie," because the dramatization of the romanticist historical novel is less lofty in its ambition, less imaginative, less ethereally poetic. In "Vanderdecken" and in "Patrie" the tricks seemed to obtrude themselves, whereas in "Ben-Hur" they were almost obligatory.

In certain melodramas with more modern stories—in the amusing piece called "The Round Up," for example—the scenery is the main attraction. The scene-painter is the real star of the show. And there is no difficulty in understanding the wail of the performer of the principal part in a piece of this sort when he complained that he was engaged to support forty tons of scenery.

"It's only when the stage-carpenters have to rest and get their breath that I have a chance to come down to the footlights and bark for a minute or two."

A moment's consideration shows that

this plaintive protest is unreasonable, however natural it may be. In melodramas like "The Round Up" and "Ben-Hur," as in fairy plays like the "Blue Bird," the acting is properly subordinated to the spectacular splendor of the whole performance. When we enter a theater to behold a play of either of these types we expect the acting to be adequate, no doubt, but we do not demand the highest type of histrionic excellence. What we do anticipate, however, is a spectacle pleasing to the eye and stimulating to the nerves.

In plays of these two classes the appeal is sensuous rather than intellectual, and it is only when the appeal of the play is to the mind rather than to the senses that merely mechanical effects are likely to be disconcerting.

Mr. William Archer has pointed out that in "Little Eyolf" Ibsen has for once failed to perceive the strict limitation of the stage when he introduces a flagstaff with the flag at first at half-mast and a little later run up to the peak. Now there are no natural breezes in the theater to flutter the folds of the flag, and the audience knows this. This, then, is the dilemma—either the flag hangs limp and lifeless against the pole, which is a flat spectacle, or else its folds are made to flutter by some concealed pneumatic blast or electric fan, which instantly arouses the inquiring curiosity of the audience.

Here we find added evidence in support of Herbert Spencer's invaluable principle of economy of attention, which he himself applied only to rhetoric, but which is capable of extension to all the other arts, and to no one of them more usefully than to the drama. At any given moment a spectator in the theater has only so much attention to bestow upon the play being presented before his eyes, and if any portion of this attention is unduly distracted by some detail, like either the limpness or the fluttering of a flag, then he has just so much less to give to the play itself.

Very rarely indeed can we catch Ibsen at fault in a technical detail of stage management; he was extraordinarily meticulous in his artful adjustment of the action of his social dramas to the picture-frame stage of our modern cosmopolitan theater. He was marvelously skilful in endowing each of his acts with a background harmonious for his characters, and he was careful to refrain from the employment of

any scenic device which might attract attention to itself. He eschewed altogether the more violent spectacular effects, although he did call upon the stage-manager to supply an avalanche in the final act of "When We Dead Awaken," but even this bold convulsion of nature was less incongruous than might be expected, since it was not exhibited until the action of the play itself was complete; in fact, the avalanche might be termed only a pictorial epilogue.

AS TO "CLEOPATRA" AND "MACBETH"

The principle of sternly economizing the attention of the audience can be violated by distractions far less extraneous and far less extravagant than avalanches. When a forgotten tragedy of "Cleopatra" was produced in the eighteenth century at the Théâtre-Français, the misguided poet prevailed upon Vaucanson to make an artificial asp, which the Egyptian queen coiled about her arm at the end of the play, thereby releasing a spring, whereupon the beast raised its head angrily and emitted a shrill hiss before sinking its fangs into *Cleopatra's* flesh.

At the first performance a spectator, bored by the tediousness of the tragedy, rose to his feet when he heard the hiss of the tiny serpent. "I agree with the asp!" he cried, as he made his way to the door.

But even if Vaucanson's skilful automaton had not given occasion for this disastrous gibe, any attention which the audience might pay to the mechanical means of *Cleopatra's* suicide was necessarily subtracted from that available for the sad fate of *Cleopatra* herself. If at that moment the spectators noted at all the hissing snake, then they were not really in a fit mood to feel the tragic death-struggle of "the serpent of old Nile."

A kindred blunder was manifest in a recent sumptuously spectacular revival of "Macbeth," when the three witches flew here and there through the dim twilight across the blasted heath, finally vanishing into empty air. These mysterious movements and disappearances were achieved by attaching the performers of the weird sisters to invisible wires, whereby they could be swung aloft; the trick had been exploited earlier in the so-called Flying Ballet, wherein it was a graceful and amusing adjunct of the terpsichorean revels. But in "Macbeth" it emptied

Shakespeare's scene of its dramatic significance, since the spectator waited for and watched the startling flights of the witches and admired the dexterity with which their flittings were controlled, and as a result he failed to feel the psychologic importance of the interview between *Macbeth* and the withered crones whose untoward greetings were to start the villain-hero on his downward career of crime.

In this same revival of "Macbeth" an equally misplaced ingenuity was lavished on the apparition of *Banquo's* ghost at the banquet. The gruesome specter was made mysteriously visible through the temporarily transparent walls of the palace, until at last he emerged to take his seat on *Macbeth's* chair. The effect was excellent in itself, and the spectators followed all the movements of the ghost with pleased attention, more or less forgetting *Macbeth* and failing to note the maddening effect of the apparition upon the seared countenance of the assassin-king. In this revival of "Macbeth" no opportunity was neglected to adorn the course of the play with every possible scenic and mechanic accompaniment, and the total result of these accumulated artificialities of presentation was to rob one of Shakespeare's most poetic tragedies of nearly all its poetry, and to reduce this imaginative masterpiece to the prosaic level of a spectacular melodrama.

Another of Shakespeare's tragedies has become almost impossible in our modern playhouses because the stage-manager does not dare to do without the spectacular effects that the story seems to demand. Shakespeare composed "King Lear" for the bare platform stage of the Globe Theater, devoid of all scenery and supplied with only the most primitive appliances for suggesting rain and thunder; and he had three successive storm scenes, each intenser in interest than the one that went before, until the culmination comes in perhaps the sublimest and most pitiful episode in all tragedy.

At the original production three centuries ago the three storms may have increased in violence as they followed one another; but, at best, the fierceness of the contending elements could be only suggested, and the rain and the thunder were not allowed to divert attention away from the agonized plight of the mad monarch. But nowadays the three storm scenes are rolled

into one and the stage-manager sets out to provide a realistic tempest in rivalry with nature. The mimic artillery of heaven and the simulated deluge from the skies which the producer now provides may excite our artistic admiration for his skill, but they distract our attention from the coming together of the four characters so strangely met in the midst of the storm. The more realistically the tempest is reproduced the worse it is for the tragedy itself; and in most recent revivals the full effect of the painful story has been smothered by the sound and fury of the man-made storm.

The counterweighted wires which permit the figures of the Flying Ballet to soar over the stage and to float aloft in the air disturb the current of our sympathy when they are employed to lend lightness to intangible creatures like the weird sisters of Shakespeare's tragedy; but they have been more artistically utilized in two of Shakespeare's comedies to suggest the ethereality of *Puck* and of *Ariel*. The action of the "Midsummer Night's Dream" takes place in fairy-land and that of "The Tempest" passes in an enchanted island; and even if we wonder for a moment how the levitation of these airy spirits is accomplished, this temporary distraction of our attention is negligible in playful comedies like these, with all their scenes laid in a land of make-believe.

And yet it may be doubted whether even the "Midsummer Night's Dream" and "The Tempest," fairy plays as they are, do not on the whole lose more than they gain from elaborate scenic and mechanic adjuncts. They are of poetry all compact; and the more simply they are presented, the less obtrusive the scenery, and the less protruded the needful effects, the more the effort of the producer is centered upon preserving the ethereal atmosphere wherein the characters live, move, and have their being, the more harmonious the performance is with the pure fancy which inspired these two delightful pieces—then the more truly successful is the achievement of the stage-manager.

On the other hand, of course, the scenic accompaniment of a poetic play, whether tragic or romantic or comic, must never be so scant or so barren as to disappoint the spectators. The stage accessories must be adequate and yet subordinate; they ought to resemble the clothes of a truly well-

dressed woman, in that they never call attention to themselves, although they can withstand and even reward careful inspection.

This delicate ideal of artistic stage setting, esthetically satisfying and yet never flamboyant, was completely attained in the production of "Sister Beatrice" at the New Theater in New York, due to the skill and taste of Mr. Hamilton Bell. The several manifestations of the supernatural might easily have been overemphasized; but a fine restraint resulted in a unity of tone and of atmosphere, so subtly achieved that the average spectator carried away the memory of more than one lovely picture without having let his thoughts wander off to consider by what means he had been made to feel the presence of a miracle.

THE BELASCO DISCERNMENT

The special merit of this production of "Sister Beatrice" lay in the delicate art by which more was suggested than could well be shown. In the theater more often than not the half is greater than the whole, and what is unseen is frequently more powerful than what is made visible. In Mr. Belasco's "Darling of the Gods," a singularly beautiful spectacle, touched at times with a pathetic poetry, the defeated Samurai are at last reduced to commit hara-kiri. But we were not made spectators of these several self-murders; we were permitted to behold only the dim canebreak into which these brave men had withdrawn and to overhear each of them call out his farewell to his friends before he dealt himself the deadly thrust.

If we had been made witnesses of this accumulated self-slaughter we might have been revolted by the brutality of it. Transmitted to us out of a vague distance by a few scattered cries, it moved us like the inevitable close of a truly tragic tale.

In the "Aiglon" of M. Rostand, Napoleon's feeble son finds himself alone with an old soldier of his father on the battlefield of Wagram, and in the darkness of the night the hysterical lad almost persuades himself that he is actually present at the famous fight, that he can hear the shrieks of the wounded and the groans of the dying, and that he can see the hands and arms of the dead stretched up from the ground. This is all in the sickly boy's fancy, of course, and yet in Paris the au-

thor had voices heard and caused hands and arms to be extended upward from the edge of the back drop, thus vulgarizing his own imaginative episode by the presentation of a concrete reality.

Not quite so inartistic as this, and yet frankly freakish, was the arrangement of the closet scene between *Hamlet* and his mother when Mme. Sarah Bernhardt made her misguided effort to impersonate the Prince of Denmark. On the walls of the room where *Hamlet* talks daggers to the *Queen* there were full-length, life-sized portraits of her two successive husbands, and when *Hamlet* bade her look on this picture and on that, the portrait of *Hamlet's* father became transparent and in its frame we perceived the ghost. This is an admirable example of misplaced cleverness, of the search for novelty for its own sake, of the sacrifice of the totality of impression to a mere trick.

"*Hamlet*" is the most poetic of plays, and the "*Aiglon*" does its best to be poetic; and therefore the less overt spectacle there may be in the performance of these pieces the easier it will be for the spectator to focus his attention on the poetry itself. Even more pretentiously poetic than the "*Aiglon*" is "*Chantecler*," upon which the ambitious author has also lavished a great variety of stage-effects—as though he was not quite willing to rely for success upon his lyrical exuberance. In M. Rostand's "*Aiglon*" and "*Chantecler*," as in Mme. Sarah Bernhardt's "*Hamlet*," there is to be observed a frequent confusion of the merely theatric with the purely dramatic—a confusion to be found forty years ago in Fechter's "*Hamlet*." That picturesque French actor made over the English tragedy into a French romantic melodrama; he kept

the naked plot and he cut out all the poetry. He lowered Shakespeare's play to the level of the other melodramas in which he had won success—for instance, "*No Thoroughfare*," due to the collaboration of Dickens and Wilkie Collins, or the earlier "*Fils de la Nuit*," acted in Paris long before Fechter appeared on the English-speaking stage.

This *Son of the Night* was a pirate bold, personated, of course, by Fechter, and in one act his long, low, rakish craft, with its black flag flying, skims across the stage, cutting the waves and dropping anchor close to the footlights. The surface of the sea was represented by a huge cloth, and the incessant motion of the waves was due to the concealed activities of a dozen boys. The play had so long a run that the sea-cloth became worn dangerously thin. At last at one performance a rent spread suddenly and disclosed a disgusted boy just as the pirate ship, with the *Son of the Night* on its deck, was coming about.

Fechter was equal to the emergency. "Man overboard!" he cried, and, leaning over the bow of the boat, he grabbed the boy by the shirt and pulled him on deck.

Probably very few of the spectators noticed the mishap, and if they had all observed it, what matter? A laugh or two, more or less, during the performance of a prosaic melodrama, is of little or no consequence. A disconcerting accident like this in a play like "*The Son of the Night*" does not cut into any vital current of sympathy, for this is a quality to which the piece could make no claim. But in a truly poetic play a mishap of this sort would be a misfortune in that it might precipitate the interest and interrupt the harmony of attention needed by the poetic dramatist.

SLUMBER SONG

WHEN Sleep withholds from weary brain
And tired eyes her kind repose,
My spirit seeks a loved domain
Where tranquil scenes disclose.

I linger in a mountain dell,
Where sings a languid summer stream;
Afair I hear the faint herd-bell
Chime in my waking dream.

I hear the droning of the bees,
The drowsy hum of insect joy;
And in the shade my Fancy sees,
Asleep, the shepherd boy!

Lincoln Adams