

After the Play

MANUEL REICHER is repeating at the Garden Theatre this season the experiment which he began a year ago, and which he calls "the modern stage." Somebody who notices that the play already given, from the sixteenth to the twentieth of November, was Björnson's "When the Young Vine Blooms," and who discovers by reading Mr. Reicher's announcement that of the six remaining bills one is to be Hauptmann's "The Weavers," one Ibsen's "Rosmersholm," and one Tchekov's "Uncle Vanja," may ask why such performances are called modern. Björnson, Ibsen, and Tchekov are dead. Hauptmann is well over fifty. Has the stage nothing to show more modern than these?

Except in the case of Björnson the answer must be that the stage has *nothing more modern to show*. Nobody has bettered the art with which Hauptmann has made a group the hero of "The Weavers." Nobody has learned from Ibsen how to light up the present, how to color it and give it shape through a bit-by-bit disclosure of the past. And this technical miracle, nowhere more miraculous than in "Ghosts" and "Rosmersholm" and "The Wild Duck," is only one of the several miracles which Ibsen has taught no younger dramatist to repeat.

Ibsen's art does not seem old-fashioned even to one who is under Tchekov's spell, though Tchekov's leisurely pictures may make the dramatist's will seem a little too near the surface in Ibsen. No art of the stage is more concealed than Tchekov's. The least imitable and least explicable peculiarity of his imagination was the power it gave him of choosing from life and of arranging what he had chosen so that you don't feel that life has been arranged at all. What you feel most after reading "The Three Sisters" is the passage of time—how it flows and flows without bringing us any of the things we expected from it, how it alters our predicaments a little without improving them even a little. Where else did you ever get, to the degree in which you get it from the second act of "Uncle Vanja," that feeling of the long hours in the middle of the night, as a man feels them when he is sitting up and waits and watches? When have you felt the curious fatefulness—and momentousness of goings-away so immediately as you feel them in the fourth act?

By the help of Mr. Reicher's experiment we can prove to ourselves for the tenth time how much more modern a play by Tchekov may be, or a play by Ibsen or Hauptmann, than a play written to-day and treating the most contemporary subject. When nothing is new in plays but their subject they grow stale in a few months, but when a dramatist has talent enough and technical mastery enough to make us share his fresh and complex emotions, and to take us through them and yet to leave one strongest impression upon us, his play may stay modern for years.

Obviously the experiment Mr. Reicher is making is not upon Ibsen or Hauptmann or Tchekov. To add a few hundred or a few thousand Americans to the number of men and women who enjoy one of these dramatists is to add nothing of importance to his reputation. Mr. Reicher's experiment is upon New York.

Of course I don't deny that such an experiment, no matter how successful it seems, may not prove that a given number of abiding and transient New Yorkers have a pure passion for Ibsen and Tchekov and Hauptmann. Some of his spectators admire Mr. Reicher's acting so heartily that they would pay to see him in no matter what play he thought worth giving.

A good deal depends too upon the way in which "the modern stage" is marketed—upon where it is advertised, how much and how. It was a mistake, in my opinion, a discouragement of possible spectators, to tell them that unless they subscribed to all seven performances they could not see any performance. Having announced this policy, having said that "there will be no general box office sale," that "admission is by previous subscription only," it was a second mistake to reverse this policy by making this further announcement: "For the benefit of those who are unable to attend the full series of performances of The Modern Stage, a special membership card will be issued whereby the holder may select only such plays as he desires to attend." Of course this means nothing but a general box office sale plus a little red tape. Subscribers feel that a trick has been played on them, a trick by which none lost much and many lost nothing, but still a trick so obvious that their intelligence is a little affronted. Why disguise a reversal of policy so thinly?

Although such a trick is irritating I forgot all about it last month the moment Mr. Reicher himself came upon the stage. Bad luck had kept me from seeing him before, and my expectations, swollen by what I had read and heard about him, were in that condition where one expectation is that the others will be disappointed. Of course nothing of the sort happened. Within two minutes after he had appeared I had forgotten that the place he was in was a stage. He is not only natural himself but the cause of naturalness in others. His mere presence carries on the work he has been doing with his company, communicating to its members a greater naturalness than his teaching had taught them, allaying the vivacity of one or two who hadn't quite learned the lessons he had been giving. Some actors who go in for naturalness often seem to be saying, when they speak with their backs turned to the audience, "Kindly notice how natural I am." Mr. Reicher's acting never has the faintest taint of this self-consciousness. Not a trace of design shows in his ease. He is spontaneous even at that most treacherous moment for an actor, when he stops as he is making his exit, turns and looks back, not without significance, at the persons he is leaving behind. Mr. Reicher is one of the greatest masters of naturalness.

I do not know how he got his company together, but wherever he got them, he has succeeded in showing most of them how to stay well inside the borderland between what we call amateurishness and that professionalism, in its worst sense, which is like a thick varnish. The play Mr. Reicher chose to start with, "When the Young Vine Blooms," written the year before Björnson died, when he was seventy-six or seven, stays in the same borderland. At its beginning you are refreshed by the liberty of its differences from the kind of play you are usually condemned to see, by the naïveté of its closer approaches to lifelikeness, by the openness of its air. Very few first acts are as free from staginess.

Later on, although the play never quite loses these pleasant qualities, it reveals others not so pleasant, something obvious and blue-printy in the behavior of a mother and daughters when the ignored and undervalued father and husband leaves them, and they punctually undergo a too symmetrical change of heart. It is interesting to notice how the symmetry of these parts, which Björnson may have felt quite freshly when he wrote them, makes them sound stale. But in spite of this defect, in spite too of rather frequent inanities, the play has a freshness and unconcernedness that are worth seeing and seldom to be seen on the stage.

Q. K.

A Pole Discovered

Homo Sapiens, by Stanislaw Przbyszewski. Translated from the Polish by Thomas Seltzer. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. \$1.50 net.

A CONVENIENT excuse exists in America for all daunted public enterprise—the inertia of the public. This is particularly true and particularly characteristic of the book publishing business. Because the great public itself yields to inertia in the matter of reading new books—books having been made the very symbol of tedium by so-called education—the book publishers have tended to narrow their field of enterprise in an unadventurous manner. In other countries, conspicuously in Germany, there are many fields in which reasonably profitable circulation may be procured for a wide variety of current literature. Those fields are not merely harvested, they are cultivated with the greatest intelligence and devotion. Such is not the case in the United States. Considering its wealth and formal literacy, there is no apparent reason why Americans cannot be induced to consume a vastly greater number of books than they do now. The splendid development in periodical literature is witness to their possibilities. But the book publishers have never fully developed the technique of widening and deepening their areas of circulation. There is one very fertile streak, the Nile valley in which popular fiction flourishes. Manured, so to say, by the commonest instincts, circulation may be secured in that valley with a minimum of original effort. A number of successes are guaranteed there every season, and because it is rich and ready-made the majority of publishers do their best to profit by it. But outside that valley the American mind is not unlike a badly irrigated desert, from the standpoint of the flourishing of sales. There are a few cultivated spots. Serious books of certain varieties prosper in certain defined areas. Compared with Germany, however, the results are inferior. Yet the publishers and booksellers do not chafe at their failure. After striving rather amateurishly and unintelligently to make a new success here and there, they mainly acquiesce in the public habit, and resign themselves to doing business in the old uninventive and suppliant way.

For this reason one welcomes particularly the advent of a new publisher, Mr. Alfred A. Knopf, who is determined to develop a field much neglected till quite recently. That is the field of Russian and Polish translation. Mr. Knopf has started off this autumn with an admirable desire to bring to American eyes the works of men and women who, in the ordinary course of our publishing, might wait half a generation to be translated. Old names appear in his list—Gogol, Gorky, Andreyev, Kropotkin—but Garshin, Soloviev and Przybyszewski are unexpected and new. And in addition to specializing in Russian and Polish translations Mr. Knopf has acquired the rights to interpretative works such as “The Russian Problem,” by Vinogradoff, “Russia’s Gift to the World,” by J. W. Mackail, and “The Russian Novel,” by de Vogüé. All of these books are made up and bound with unusually good taste.

Mr. Knopf has done well to search Russia and Poland for works overlooked by the routine publishers, and it is to be hoped he will precede them into Germany, Scandinavia, Holland, Belgium, Spain, India, Japan and elsewhere. Some of his rivals will eventually penetrate to these countries, yet with nimbleness and daring Mr. Knopf may easily distance them. But when it comes to seeking circulation in America it will be a pity if he consents to sow his seed in

TIFFANY & Co.

DIAMOND RINGS
SQUARE, ROUND, MARQUISE
AND FANCY DIAMONDS

FIFTH AVENUE AND 37TH STREET
NEW YORK

the popular fashion. It will be a pity, to be more specific, if he procures these translations with an eye to the ready-made market and strives to get circulation for them in the ready-made way.

This mistake he seems already to have made in the case of “Homo Sapiens.” Pshee-be-sheff-skee, according to Mr. Knopf, is universally conceded to be Poland’s greatest living writer; and he advertises “Homo Sapiens” as “a very modern love story” and its hero as a Don Juan, “not even merely the most modern of men, he is the new, the coming man.” No enthusiasm for translations can frank this particular kind of nonsense. It is an attempt to plant “Homo Sapiens” in the Nile valley of best-sellers in a manner typically uncritical and questionable. It argues an eagerness for quick success along dubious lines that is absolutely incompatible with the best kind of publishing.

For it is not “universally conceded” that Przybyszewski is “Poland’s greatest living writer.” He is no more Poland’s greatest living writer than Compton Mackenzie is England’s greatest living writer, and “Homo Sapiens” is of itself enough to define him as a paste jeweller. As an erotic production, it has popular possibilities, and if to be erotic is the sign of “extreme modernity,” it is extremely modern. But it is erotic in rather a literary way. No one, I suppose, will contend that because the truth is usually suppressed about sex in literature, every outspoken version of sex in literature is therefore to be immune from criticism. A superheated version of sex, a version concocted in the imagination, is certainly no more agreeable to the true libertarian than to the pious parish priest. And “Homo