

## Dostoevsky's Idiot

*The Idiot, adapted from Dostoevsky's novel by John Cowper Powys and Reginald Pole. The Little Theatre. April 9, 1922.*

THE content of Dostoevsky is never actuality. It is actuality seen through the heat of a fierce, tortured, poignant and enormous spirit. And so in *The Idiot* his matter had been brought up into intellectual memory, to use a Greek phrase of late Byzantine days; it is all rounded up, lighted anew, brought to where there may be a recognition of it as a part of our more abstract and invisible experience.

In a sort of parallel sense the version of *The Idiot* that Mr. Reginald Pole uses and the production that he gives to it, never seem quite theatre. It has its reality, but a somewhat baffling reality for the usual theatre-going eye, because it often lacks the familiar and accustomed method and effect; as in the plot, for example, which seems hardly a plot at all but rather moments out of some terrible intensity of living enacted before us. But it cannot be said that the play succeeds always in bringing the novel over, in making up out of it a theatrical unity. And as usual when someone tries to turn this Russian material into English literature, it takes on a note of degeneracy where in its own medium or even translated straight into English, it remains not degenerate but merely Russian, a world of things taken simply and used to reveal life. The piece wobbles between a frank admission of a play on one hand and the effort of conveying the novel on the other. The language it uses is too stiffish, is written up, and not always consistent with itself: and it lacks the flexibility that would be best capable of the intimacy and the shadowed and burning penetration of Dostoevsky's matter. This lack is what causes the effect you get now and then in the speeches of breaks, sudden jumps, incoherence; though the things said are not jumpy necessarily, and need only the right fluidity of language to show their coherence. But over everything the Dostoevsky origin throws the energy of its intensity; it appears in the characters and in the events; and it gives a centrifugal quality of feeling, an underrunning glow and stream of life that saves them. The acting furthers this salvation.

As for the production, that, on the whole, has not yet attained a sure impress, an unescapable unity, owing largely, you gather from its best moments, to the peculiar difficulties and circumstances under which it has been carried out. But in the décor Mr. Frederick Jones' use of black curtains throughout was often successful, remarkably so in the General's salon, where the sense of aristocratic amplitude and rich mountings was miles ahead of most realistic attempts that I have seen. And what a rest that first scene was in the railway compartment! No rattling, no passing landscape through the windows, to tickle the silly kodakery of our minds, no window at all for that matter, in sum no rubbishy details to make nonsense the background of the incident; but only an alcove in the black hangings, warmed and made natural with the kind familiarity of light, and in this place two men sitting, and the moment engaged strictly with the essential thing to be conveyed.

Miss Winwood's must have been the hardest rôle she ever tried, that of Nastasya, beautiful, good in all her instincts, wronged by every fate, dark, tragic, depraved, intelligent, desperate. It was a part that required of its

creator on the stage an inexhaustible stream of vitality and poignancy and an enormous technical control. And in Nastasya's passages with the prince, whose mystery and whose pity carried her away into her finest self, and in the scene where she and Aglaia compete against each other, Miss Winwood was mainly true and not seldom beautiful in her performance, though she dropped now and again to mere technical facility. In the first act, which was really more trying than the others, for all their fervour, Miss Winwood lacked darkness enough, lacked an underlying, terrible shadow of wounded life and passionate chasms of experience. But at the same time her playing during this scene caught brilliantly that desperate contempt and that cleverness by which Aglaia adapted her own tone to that of the suave and brutal gentlemen she dealt with. In this mood there was something very uncommon about Miss Winwood's performance that made me wish she might find for herself somewhere the rôle of one of those great courtesans of the Renaissance, a D'Este or Sforza mistress or the Venetian that Titian painted, and give us their exotic gorgeousness, their style and mentality, and their high poetry of courage and fatalism.

On one account at least I cannot say too much for Miss Mower. She has learned what almost nobody on our stage seems to learn, to listen. And it is through this that she makes so beautiful a contribution to the scene where the prince sits telling to those shocked and antagonistic guests his ideas of love and pity and of the religion of Christ and humanity, speaking out of an ecstasy almost and with divine transparency of thought. And while he is saying all this and just before she is to throw herself at his feet and cover him from the rest, the girl sits on the divan opposite, forgetful of the guests, listening to the man she loves but of whom she has been almost ashamed, so foolish and gauche he is in his ways, her chin slightly lifted, her eyes fixed on a place just above his head, as if she saw there somehow a kind of aura of him. And through that listening as much as anything else the scene lifts to its proper and unforgettable heights of mystical power.

In this scene as in the first where he sits in a rapt quietness charged with implications, Mr. Pole's acting had genuine poetic feeling and technical fluidity, a fine musical ear, good diction and the air of great cultivation. In the part of the prince he is not always even, but he gets remarkably into the whole of it the important and carrying thing, which is an effect of a nervous vigor in the midst of physical decay, of a quivering spiritual vitality; of an aristocratic simplicity, a terrible candor of mind that is essentially distinguished; and of a mystery of attraction, almost hypnotic, that centers in the frail body.

*The Idiot* carries to success intentions not unrelated in spirit to what Miss Wiborg tried in her *Taboo* a week ago; which, though a failure, confused, often unwritten, lost in a maze of material, had yet a germ of something fine, a discernment of the magic and the shudder of life, a hint, too, of glaring, direct theatricality, that made it more welcome than a thousand of those well-made, man-ager-baiting pieces that young dramatists are sometimes able to put over. And an event like this production of *The Idiot* is significant because it encourages us to hope for more of a thing so necessary in the theatre: the emergence of idea, of an effort at matter that will strain and tug against dramatic limitations as we have them, at matter charged with more life, more indomitability, more shadows and more wings. For our social

ideas this Russian stuff may seem anything but sane, with so much suffering and so little done about it, so much felt and so little managed. But when it comes to the bottom, to the fundamentals of what we are, how sane it is! It tells the truth—which is the only sanity in the end—the truth not so much about society, which has no profound truth, of its own, but about that human nature on which society rests. And so from this performance emerges a great quality of spiritual delicacy and force and excitement. And is it not high time, too, that people in the theatre learned to look more for this heightened and mystical veracity, for more of something above incident and childish interest in who's who and whose and where and just what? It is time they looked for more of that quality that emerges from Dostoevsky's work, and not a little from this performance of it, the quality of a something through which the shock and pressure of our invisible living impregnates with itself the outer substance of life, as the light of the sky impregnates with itself the waters, to use D'Annunzio's figure, *la luce del cielo impregnava di sé le acque*. Only through this does the craft of the theatre become art; through this it keeps alive and grows.

STARK YOUNG.

## Oh, Tricksy April!

The morning wind came tickling us  
With fingertips of silk.

"Get up, get up, Ridiculous!  
And fetch the morning milk!"

"To sleep so long's a frantic thing  
For pretty wives and bards,  
When callers wait below like Spring  
With buds and birds for cards!"

My throttle parched with delicate thirst,  
Jane's hair began to curl,  
And down we tumbled, manners first,  
To find that April girl.

Her sun was scent and sea on us  
While fools might count to ten,  
We stood like moons made glorious  
To know they're new again.

Her air was dew and light to us  
One instant far too kind,  
And all my poems ridiculous  
Turned cartwheels in my mind.

Then there was cloud like stinking smoke,  
The damned sun shut his eye,  
And all the rains of Noah broke  
Out of the weeping sky.

Oh we were drenched and we were wild  
And we were streams and pools!  
And every drop laughed like a child  
At two such April fools!

We didn't growl at being bit.  
We chuckled, "Since it's so,  
We'll light the fire we should have lit  
Three April hours ago.

Much bread and jam will soothe our souls,  
And, after breakfast's done,  
We'll kiss each other by the coals  
As well as in the sun.

And if you wear your flower-bell look,  
And if a bee I be,  
All day will be a picture-book,  
All night a Christmas-tree.

Not all of Heaven's watering carts  
Can ever make them cowed  
Who sleep against each other's hearts  
Like cherubs in a cloud."

STEPHEN VINCENT BENÈT.

## THE BANDWAGON

### A BARBER'S CONFESSION

"I have a friend who has a collection of famous men's hair which is worth many thousands of dollars. I didn't think of it in time."

How many of us, in humble or high station, are overlooking every-day opportunities?—*Forbes Magazine*.

### AND STILL KEEP THEIR PROMISE

But if her (Russia's) representatives are invited to participate on equal terms under vague promises to behave after the manner of civilized nations they can play one side off against the other and make capital out of conflicts of interest and opinion.—*The Independent and Weekly Review*.

### THE DOINGS OF THE MACGREGORS

Mrs. Sydney MacGregor, who reached town Saturday with her husband from some place up in Ontario, went to the McAlpin Hotel, where they got a room and bath. The MacGregors have been married sixteen years. Sunday afternoon Mrs. MacGregor thought she would take a bath. The thought was mother of the act. Mr. MacGregor went out for a walk.—*The New York World*.

### INCLUDING THE G. O. P?

Nearly all elephants lie on their left sides when sleeping.—*The National Republican*.

### TEACHING THE YOUNG IDEA HOW TO ROOT

Gradually, we shall learn to root (perhaps we should say: to educate) such sheer animality out of human nature.—*Dr. Charles Fleischer in the New York American*.

### THE DOUGH BOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD

The difference between the value of the dollar and the value of the mark is the sacrifice made by the American soldier. He created that value: If he had not done so, it would have no value.—*The Chicago Tribune*.