

Rip Van Winkle Goes to the Play

BY BRANDER MATTHEWS

I



HAVE been a playgoer from my youth up. At the early age of eight my mother's father, who was a Scot, took me to Laura Keene's to see "Jeanie Deans," Boucicault's dramatization of the "Heart of Midlothian"; and I can still recall my thrilling suspense when the mob battered in the doors of the Tolbooth and swarmed over the stage. This was in the first month of 1860; and my grandfather had wanted me to see "Jeanie Deans" because it was a Scotch play. Three years later, when I was scant eleven, I went with him to Niblo's Garden, where Edwin Forrest was appearing in "Macbeth," which was also a Scotch play.

In the next half dozen years I gazed with joyous delight at the Ravels, those expert pantomimists; and I think that this delight was renewed more than once, as I remember the dying agonies of the almost human hero of "Jocko, the Brazilian Ape," and also a more mystifying spectacle in which a man had his arms and his legs cut off one by one and then his head—only to become whole again and indisputably alive after his severed members had been laid out on a magic table.

Eheu fugaces, Posthume,
How the years glide away and are lost to me!

Before I had attained to the more mature age of fourteen I beheld the "Rose-dale" of Lester Wallack, that native of New York who persisted in being an Englishman; and I can tremble again in dreadful anticipation when I revisualize the nocturnal visit of the ultra-heroic hero into the camp of the sleeping gypsies, to sing the old song which lured forth the stolen child of the hero's lady-love. A little before I had been fascinated by this heroic adventure, or a little later, I had

the privilege of admiring Edwin Booth as Hamlet. This was at the Winter Garden, where Shakspeare's masterpiece was achieving its first run of one hundred consecutive performances. That was in 1864; and in the same year or the next I sat spellbound when Richelieu threatened to launch the Curse of Rome. The long and narrow playbill informed me that the scenery of both these plays, "Hamlet" and "Richelieu," had been painted in Paris, an expensive novelty in those distant days when the wandering tragedian was expected to make the best of the stock scenery of the local theatre, shabby as it might be and shopworn and infrequently appropriate.

In the summer of 1866 we went to Europe, to London—where I was captivated by an ethereal ballet at the Alhambra—and to Paris, where I paid my first visit to the Théâtre Français, which I was to know intimately ten and twenty years later. A few months later came the Exposition of 1867; and we went to two comedy-dramas of the triumphantly successful Sardou, then in the first flush of his long continued productivity and popularity. Much as I was pleased by the dramaturgic dexterity and the journalistic wit of the "Famille Benoiton" and of "Nos Bons Billageois"—a dexterity and a wit that I was too young to appreciate but not too young to relish—I think that I found a more obvious pleasure in two superb spectacles, "Cendrillon" at the Châtelet and the "Biche aux Bois" at the Porte Saint-Martin. Not until long after I had been charmed by the dazzling splendors of the "Biche aux Bois" did I discover that the prominent but unimportant part of the Princess had been played by a slim young woman who was in time to achieve world-wide notoriety as Sarah Bernhardt.

We returned to New York late in the fall of 1867 in time for me to see the "Black Crook," then nearing the end of its prolonged run, and to attend the open-

ing performance of its even more glittering successor, the "White Fawn," a performance that did not end until two o'clock in the morning. In the next five years, when I was advancing from sixteen to twenty-one, I became an assiduous first-nighter, a less arduous calling half a century ago, when there were only half a dozen theatres in New York, than it is now, when there are more than half a hundred. I was present at the opening and again at the closing of John Brougham's brief season at the theatre behind the Fifth Avenue Hotel, soon to be managed by Augustin Daly. In the fall of 1869, I attended the opening of Edwin Booth's Theatre, when the manager appeared as Romeo and his young wife as Juliet, with Edwin Adams as Mercutio and Mark Smith as Friar Laurence; and in the fall of 1909, almost exactly forty years later, I attended the opening of the New Theatre, an enterprise even more ambitious than Booth's and not more fortunate.

In the two score years between 1869 and 1909 I saw every play and every player that deserved to be seen—and not a few that did not. A procession of actors of outstanding stature passed before my eyes, Forrest, Booth, Barrett, Jefferson, Florence, Davenport, Henry Irving; Charlotte Cushman, Clara Morris, Rose Eytinge, and Ellen Terry; Ristori, Salvini and Rossi; Barnay and Seebach, Janauschek and Modjeska; Fechter and Coquelin, Sarah Bernhardt and Réjane. And even longer is the bed-roll of the dramatists whose plays attracted me in the course of the revolving years—Boucicault and Robertson, Pinero and Henry Arthur Jones, Bronson Howard and Clyde Fitch, Gillette and Moody, Sardou, Dumas and Dennery, Sudermann and Ibsen. These playwrights and these players march again through my memory, glorious as an army with banners.

Then, as it happened, fifteen or twenty years ago, my visits to the theatre became less frequent; and in the past five or ten years they have been but few. It may be that my ardor had relaxed a little, although I doubt it. Circumstances made it difficult for me to go to the play even when I desired it. As the result of this enforced abstinence I have not been a diligent witness of the change which has

taken place in the American theatre in the opening decades of this century. My information about this change has been necessarily more or less second-hand. I lack the sharp impression of the thing seen with my own eyes. I found myself, so far as the drama was concerned, living rather in the past than in the present.

Fate willed it that early in 1924 the restrictions upon my theatre-going were removed, when I had slowly recovered from a long illness and when my physician advised me to mix with my fellowman as often as my strength would permit; he even went so far as to prescribe playgoing—a prescription which coincided with my inclination. So it was that after his long sleep Rip Van Winkle was able to awake and to see for himself the result of the things which had happened while he had been slumbering.

II

It is not the incorrigible garrulity of a septuagenarian which has prompted me to this autobiographic prelude; it is rather that I wanted the readers of this paper to perceive the peculiar experience I have had in the past few months. I cannot but think that there are aspects of our theatre at the end of this first quarter of the twentieth century that I may be able to analyze more clearly than those can whose eyes have not been sealed in sleep for almost a score of years. Even if I am wrong in thus thinking, I have at least the advantage of that longer perspective of playgoing which is the inextinguishable possession of the veteran lagging superfluous. So I propose to set down before they fade the impressions made on me in the past half-year by the American plays I have been privileged to enjoy, by the actors in those pieces, and by the methods of the producers who were responsible for the performance of them. I had best begin this report of a returned traveller by asserting boldly that these plays, these players and these methods are far more satisfactory than such things were when I was serving my apprenticeship as a student of the stage, long, long ago.

Until the last two decades of the nineteenth century there were few comedies or

dramas of American authorship which were not feeble in their workmanship and false in their portrayal of life. Before those two decades we were content to import our plays across the ocean from the English, who were then importing their plays across the Channel. We had to feed on the London perversions of Parisian pieces, a fare as indigestible as it was innutritious. Nor was our table much better supplied when we began to import directly from France and Germany and to do our own perverting. Olive Logan turned the delicious "Niniche" into an unappetizing "Newport"; and Daly played havoc with a host of German comedy-farces, disguising their foreign flavor with tasteless American sauce. I cannot declare too vehemently my belief that an adaptation whereby an alien story is maltreated in a vain effort to make it conform to our native manners and customs is the abomination of desolation.

On the other hand, a conscientious translation of an exotic masterpiece may be a thing of beauty and a joy forever. Such is Brian Hooker's consummately skilful rendering of Rostand's "Cyrano de Bergerac"; such also is the workmanlike translation of Ibsen's "Ghosts" made by William Archer. As New York is the most cosmopolitan of cities and also the most hospitable to visitors from overseas it is fit and proper that the most interesting plays of every alien tongue should be presented to our playgoers in their integrity, with only such condensation as our clearer skies and more bracing winds may make advisable. It is a good omen that while translations are not now infrequent, adaptations are rapidly losing favor. The finer the foreign play, the less likely it now is to be insulted by inartistic transmogrification. This is a great gain, not only because it increases our more exact understanding of what is being done by the playwrights of continental Europe, French and German, Italian and Spanish, Russian and Hungarian, but more especially because it provides us with helpful models for the sincere treatment of our own life.

In his illuminating study of the epochs of French drama, Brunetière asserted that "every nation is most easily inter-

ested in subjects from its own life present or past, or from those of kindred races." An exotic theme has always to wait for a tardy welcome, whereas every attempt to mirror our own characteristics is likely to be more immediately profitable. Half a century ago there were attempts to mirror American life which were profitable although not estimable. "Solon Shingle," "The Gilded Age," "The Mighty Dollar" were poor things even if they were our own,—artificial, arbitrary, amorphous and empty, with no roots in reality and with no tincture of literature. They were acceptable to our playgoers because they contained highly colored caricatures of American character; and they were acceptable for the moment only in default of any more veracious rendering of even the superficial aspects of American manners.

In the final weeks of the theatrical season of 1923-4 I saw a dozen plays of native authorship; one of them had its scene laid in a foreign land and another was based upon a foreign original; ten of them dealt with American life and character. I may as well list the titles of these ten plays before I comment on them; they were "Hell-bent fer Heaven," "The Merry Wives of Gotham," "The Show Off," "In the Next Room," "Helena's Boys," "Expressing Willie," "The Goose Hangs High," "Meet the Wife," "The Potters" and "Rain." They were all more or less successful; and each of them deserved such success as it attained. I do not wish to imply that they were all of them masterpieces of dramatic art—or even minor masterpieces; but in their several degrees they gave me the special pleasure that I seek in the theatre. Nor do I desire to suggest that they were of equal merit, for of course they varied widely in value. Some were slight and superficial, but all were clever; and no one was flagrantly false to the facts of life, even if more than one was unable wholly to conceal its artifices. Taken by and large, they displayed a freshness of topic, a fertility of invention, an ingenuity of plotting, a neatness of construction and an adroitness of craftsmanship, which would have been sought in vain in even the best of the native plays of half a century ago.

Two of them, "Rain" and "Hell-bent fer Heaven," were veracious interpretations of human nature, inspired by imagination, inviting and rewarding comparison with the work of the most dexterous living dramatists of Europe. These two plays, and some of the others also, are good auguries for the future of the American drama. I have reasons of my own for liking "Hell-bent fer Heaven," but these reasons do not inhibit me from expressing my high respect for "Rain." Both dramas deal with religious fanaticism and both enlarge our understanding of our fellowman and of our fellow American; and to say this is to say that they deserve well of those who rejoice at the intensifying rivalry of the play with the novel. After all, the ultimate purpose of fiction in the study or on the stage is to hold the mirror up to nature and to people our memories with human beings who are worth remembering and whom we cannot forget.

There is no need to dissect in detail these two plays or the other eight; but attention may be called to one quality they have in common: they are, all of them, well written, in clear and clean English, vigorous and unpretentious, uncontaminated by "fine writing" falsely so called. Without parading it they possess "literary merit"; and I make bold to believe that several of them will prove to be permanent additions to American literature, as readable as they are actable. Some of them are serious in theme and in these the dialogue has the stark directness of tense emotion; but none of them is solemn, since their loftiest moments are accentuated by humorous touches, as is the case of real life, where tragedy and comedy are inextricably intertwined. They all eschew the old-fashioned and outworn "comic relief" which forced the funny characters to succeed the graver, whereby we were presented first with a streak of fat and then a streak of lean. Making a more artistic use of the comic spirit, they introduce us to men and women who are not mere figures of fun, but recognizable human beings occasionally laughable because they are always human. Sometimes they attain to the higher levels of true comedy, which compels us to think even while we laugh.

For the most part their humor is good humor, not pitiless, but consoling; and their wit is pleasantly mirthful, not acid or acrid. Their dialogue is easy and seemingly natural, often felicitous with an unexpected turn of phrase. Moreover, the talk whereby the action is carried on is not bespattered with verbal spangles, with what are loosely termed "epigrams," cynical sayings clipped from a note-book and wilfully pinned into the dialogue. The characters speak for themselves and out of their own hearts, they are not mere megaphones through which the author promulgates his own ideas, insistent on our attention to the moral or the thesis he believes himself to be inculcating.

III

AFTER saying my say thus succinctly about ten American plays which I have recently enjoyed I am glad to be able to praise with as little qualification the players who made these dramas and these comedies start to life on the stage. Taken together, these dramas and these comedies were more adequately and more delicately acted than they would have been by the actors of my youth. The praisers of past times (whom we always have with us) look longingly back to what they call the "palmy days" of acting; they assert that we have now no performers of dominating personality with the consummate skill and the commanding authority of Charlotte Cushman, Edwin Booth, and Joseph Jefferson. They declare vehemently that although we may have twenty separate dollars we have not now a single double eagle—overlooking the fact that we need silver every day, whereas gold is necessary only on rarer occasions. It is a fact—I can testify to it—that in the palmy days we were likely to have the double eagle accompanied by a handful of pennies with the inevitable result that the gold coin suffered from its contact with the copper pieces. Macready's diary is an unceasing wail over the careless incompetence of the actors who supported him; and when Edwin Booth opened his own spacious and splendid theatre in 1869 there were not lacking shrill animadversions on the inferiority of the company he had himself engaged.

One reason for the difference of opinion between the praisers of the past and the praisers of the present lies in the divergence of their point of view, of their standards, of their ideals. This is due to the many changes in the physical conditions of performance. In the days of Macready and of Booth the theatre had an "apron," thrust far out into the auditorium, and on this projecting platform, surrounded on three sides by the audience, the robust and full-lunged performer spouted the magniloquent speeches of an ultra-rhetorical drama—speeches "that you could sink your teeth in." In our day, the apron has been cut back; the curtain rises and falls in the proscenium arch, that has thereby become a picture frame, behind which the actors of our time—constantly cautioned not "to get out of the picture"—speak the straightforward words of our unrhetorical plays. This alteration of the playhouse has forced a corresponding modification of the methods of the player. Our actors may have lost something of the largeness of style demanded by the older type of play, but they have made up for this by their conquest of simplicity of utterance and by their subtler refinements in characterization. They are not in close contact with the spectators; and they are no longer called upon to deliver confidential asides to the audience. They do not now "take the stage," striding across it triumphantly, after a bravura speech; they are less likely to act each for himself and sometimes at the expense of the others present at the time; they have learned the value of team-play; and the result is a more harmonious whole.

In the stock-companies of sixty years ago every performer was rigidly restricted to his own "line of business"—leading man and leading woman, old man and old woman, low comedian and light comedian, heavy man and singing chambermaid. Therefore the parts they impersonated were types rather than characters; they were parts cut according to traditional patterns, painted in the primary colors, so that the spectators could recognize at once what manner of man or woman each of the actors was supposed to represent. This practice may have made for boldness and breadth; and perhaps it was more or less necessary when plays were pitch-

forked on the stage in slapdash fashion with scant rehearsal and even scander direction and when an actor might appear in three pieces in a single evening and in a dozen in a single week. Moreover, if there was a part in an important play which was not within the compass of any actor in the company, it had none the less to be undertaken by somebody, however unfitted he might be. Special engagements were infrequent and rarely possible; and the manager had to make out as best he could with the material he had. As a result, there were likely to be always one or two round pegs in square holes.

To-day the author and the manager can call to their assistance a "producer," who is the successor of the happy-go-lucky "stage-manager" and who is more competent than his predecessor and more powerful in his control of the performance. The producer studies the manuscript; he advises with the author; and he decides upon both the strategy and the tactics required to make explicit all that is implicit in the manuscript. He recommends the several actors and actresses who can best be trusted to impersonate the several parts—that is to say, who will look and speak as the characters ought to look and speak and who will be able to rise to the full height of the situations in which these characters reveal themselves. This is called "casting to type"; and although it is sometimes carried to unhappy extremes, it results more often than not in a far more satisfactory rendering of the important figures of the play than was possible in the stock companies of yore with the cast-iron law of "lines of business" and with leading men and leading women who were not seldom far too advanced in years to be acceptable as youthful heroes and heroines.

The producer is also responsible for the scenery, which is prepared especially for every new play, and which is less flamboyant than the stage settings of three score years ago; it is intended to be unobtrusive and to suggest (rather than to supply) an appropriate background for the action. Furthermore, the producer has now at his service a heterogeny of devices which enable him to achieve a discriminating delicacy in the lighting of the stage, an illumination which can be modified with a subtlety unsuspected by the

spectators but none the less potent in evoking their emotional response as the story unrolls itself.

The producer has a function similar to that of the conductor of a symphony orchestra. He sets the tempo of the performance and he modifies this at will, accelerating the movement at one moment and retarding it at another, alternating his fortissimo and his pianissimo, stimulating the sluggishness of the laggards and curbing the excessive zeal of the more venturesome and individualistic, and finally (if he is a master of his art) attaining a unity of effect, a harmony of tone, a proportion and a symmetry, which force us to forget that we are seeing acting and bestow on us the illusion that what we are beholding is not fiction but fact. The producer, like the orchestral conductor, is a member of a new profession; and it is he who, with his skill, his sympathy, his observation and his imagination, makes possible performances as perfect as those of "Rain" and "Hell-bent for Heaven"—a perfection which was not only impossible but hopelessly inconceivable in the palmy days of old. We are profiting now by the development of the art of the producer, an art evolved from that of the earlier stage manager,—just as the skyscraper has been evolved from the log-cabin. To him we owe the smoothness, the certainty, the apparent inevitability, of the performances of the ten American plays which I have listed. The plays were good in themselves, each after its kind; and the performances were worthy of them.

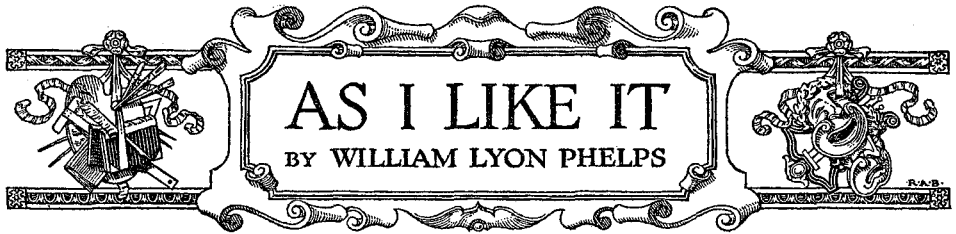
IV

OF course, our modern method, like everything else in this transitory world, has the defects of its qualities. The actor does not now find it as easy to acquire versatility; he is likely to be confined to parts of a similar type; and he may be called upon to appear in the same character in the same play for several hundred nights, whereby his work tends to become monotonous and unprofitable. Furthermore, he has fewer opportunities of appearing in the classics, in the plays of Shakspeare and of Sheridan, and of thereby acquiring the breadth and the authority which come from the assumption of characters less realistic than those

of our contemporary drama. I confess to having had a fear that the delivery of blank verse might become one of the lost arts and that even the robust prose of the older comedies might be beyond the scope of actors who have had few or no opportunities to essay themselves in stalwart and richly colored characters. But I have taken heart of hope, since the altogether admirable revival of "Cyrano de Bergerac" has shown me that the secret of blank verse can be imparted to inexperienced actors and since the revival of "She Stoops to Conquer" made it plain that performers accustomed to the plays which require them not to get out of the picture, were able to acquit themselves nobly in plays where there was no picture to get out of.

There is yet another unavoidable disadvantage of the system of "casting to type" in a company engaged only for the "run of the play." Meritorious pieces can no longer be kept in stock, so to speak, ready for revival at a week's notice. When the special company is once scattered, there is little chance of getting it together again; and a revival of the piece in which it appeared has to be a special production, almost as onerous and as risky as its original performance. As Señor Ibanez has put it sharply, "a sort of tunnel, a tunnel of forgetfulness, as it were, opens at the end of every dramatic run; and into this tunnel all plays, however brilliant their careers, ultimately make their way; and only the masterpiece, the exceptional production, succeeds in reappearing at the other end—years, and perhaps generations, afterward." This is as undeniable as it is unfortunate; and as I call the roll of the ten American plays I have seen in swift succession, I find myself wondering whether I shall ever be able to see them again. Perhaps there are only two in the list, "Rain" and "Hell-bent fer Heaven" which the next generation of playgoers will have the privilege of enjoying in the theatre, the only place where a play can disclose its full power.

And yet, when all is said, I am convinced that the methods of to-day are better than those of yesterday and that (since we cannot have everything) we have good reason to be content with what we have.



AS I LIKE IT

BY WILLIAM LYON PHELPS

I CAN hardly write the words fast enough to tell all my readers who love books and stories of the sea to run, not walk, as the Fire Commissioner commands, to the nearest bookshop, and there secure a copy of "Under Sail," by Felix Riesenberg. I had sailed around old Cape Stiff with John Masefield, with Richard Henry Dana, and with other deep-water men; but never did I more keenly enjoy the thrilling experience. There are several reasons for this; the *A. J. Fuller* was a full-rigged ship, kites and all, and thank heaven, had no auxiliary; her captain, Charles M. Nichols, still living, while a disciplinarian, was as square-rigged as his vessel; the bucko mate, Mr. Zerk, still living and operating in Hawaiian waters, was often brutal and cruel, but a consummate master of seamanship; the crew were on the whole thoroughly good fellows; nothing on board was absolutely bad except the food.

The ship left New York December 5, 1897, went round the Horn to Honolulu, and docked in New York again, September, 1898. Felix Riesenberg, eighteen years old, was a foremast hand in the port watch and, while an excellent seaman, happened to have two other qualities: the imagination of a poet, and the ability to write down his experiences in a prose style so vivid that every reader will share them.

This book held me in captivity from beginning to end. It is a masterpiece of narration, description, and characterization. And although I am a landlubber, how thoroughly I understand the ache in the boy's heart when the long voyage was over—an ache deeper and more enduring than any of the thousand aches that visited his young body! I say this book deserves to stand on the same shelf with "Two Years Before the Mast," with "Moby Dick," with "The Nigger of the Narcissus," with "The Wreck of the Grosvenor," with "The Ebb Tide," and with the other classics of the sea. Even

the very form of the book is nautical; she carries a bone in her mouth; for the foreword is written by that accomplished seaman, Captain David W. Bone.

Transportation by steam was an advance in efficiency; but like so many other advances in science, what beauty, what infinite beauty, it destroyed! The one hope for the return of sails to the sea is their cheapness, and with all my heart I hope they will come back. I shall always be thankful that my first voyage to Europe was on a small steamer that carried and used canvas, with a deck so low that in heavy weather—of which we had plenty—we had not only the sensation of being on the sea, but of having the sea on us. One tremendous green comber knocked me clear across the deck, and laid me flat in the lee scuppers.

Recently I asked a man, who had arrived from Europe on one of the frivolous hotels that are now used as ferries, whether there were any rough days. "I haven't the slightest idea," said he; "I never saw the sea from port to port." It appeared that he was on one of the enclosed decks some sixty feet above the water. There is an insulting contrast between the artificiality of the modern floating palace and an element so primitive as the ocean; it is like a dining-car passing through infinite miles of sagebrush.

In reading "Under Sail" I am again filled with admiration for the amazing courage and skill of the old seamen; I think of their unspeakable hardships and miserable wages. How much more work it took to get their A. B. than to win the academic one, and how forlorn their future after they earned it!

Yet the wages of seamen were fixed, like everything else, by supply and demand; from the rational point of view, it would seem incredible that men could be found to undertake such drudgery combined with peril, when they knew in advance what awaited them, including the disgust-