

on the Australian Stage



Mr. H. H. WALLACE
in "The Fortune Hunter"



Miss ENID BENNETT
in "Excuse Me"

The Adelaide Literary Theatre

By RONALD FINLAYSON

FOUR or five years ago if anyone had walked into a concert room of the Elder Conservatorium on one of the closing nights of term he would have seen the queer little source whence has sprung the Adelaide Literary Theatre. A stage improvised of planks and forms; bicycle lamps for foot-lights; costumes home-made or hired; an audience sometimes amused, more often sympathetic; untrained actors atoning with their serious zeal for their sublime disregard of the prose of the theatre. And amid these surroundings one listened, perhaps to the marvellous tale of the pity of the Virgin for Sister Beatrice, or of the Shadowy Waters which bear on their tide the strange bark with the copper-colored sails. It was the class of play that interested. Such things had never been seen before. The poetry was there, and it could not succumb to the bald deficiency of training and apparel.



BRYCESON TREHARNE.

The young people who acted at the end of each term were the pupils of Mr. Bryceon Treharne, a teacher of pianoforte at the Conservatorium, and it is his name, more than any other, that will be remembered when the modern movement in the Australian Theatre is mentioned. It is easy to inspire a taste for literature in one's class, requiring only a sacrifice of time and perhaps of books; but to adventure into comparative publicity with only the immaterial equipment of enthusiasm, risking criticism, ridicule and hostility, makes demands on one's courage. So when the student who read literature with their teacher decided that literary dramas should no longer be read, but acted, they took a step of much moment, a step whose consequences the most hopeful and far-sighted could not then anticipate.

For two years the movement persevered in the Conservatorium, awakening interest wider and wider, yet keeping within the circle of privacy. No subscription; no admission charge; its only revenue from the sale of programmes. This covered the expense of costumes, arrangements of lighting (for the age of bicycle lamps passed away), and of books that were not lent by Mr. Treharne—though usually the actors copied their parts. The nature of the plays first produced is significant. The poetic drama was predominant. They lingered on the border line that divides drama and poetry, where the sense of illusion is won by beauty not by realism; where the conventions are so obvious that they cannot be concealed, but we must be charmed to forget them. These plays demand a minimum of action, and by their long declamatory passages, can well be managed by amateurs. The theatre produced such plays as *Deirdre*, *The Shadowy Waters* and *The Pierrot of the Minute*.

At the end of the second year increasing experience was bringing a degree of confidence. The majority of amateur actors was interested. The concert room was crowded, and in 1910 the movement overflowed into publicity. We had no anxiety to make money, we

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wanted to attract large audiences, and to escape the nets of commercialism. These ideals deprived us of most of the hopes, and so, of most of the fears of the money-making enterprises. We were, and are, all amateurs—in acting, in managing and producing; yet, so far, neither the alleged incompetence of the amateur nor the confessed derision of the professional has withered us. The scheme has fulfilled the original and ultimate test. It has worked. No one makes the management of the theatres his sole business. It is not everybody's business, but we have paid—in some opinions—an undeserved deference to the division of labor. Goethe, no doubt, remarked that whatever may be the form of political government the theatre must be controlled by a cultivated despot, and audiences at Weimar sometimes suffered discomfort from the practice of this opinion. Yet it may be that Goethe was right. Unfortunately, despite some self-satisfied murmurs from a notoriously self-satisfied centre, we believe that Australia has yet to find its Goethe. Rightly or wrongly, the theatre is committed to a Board of Management, and this Board of Management, much as boards of management have done from the commencement of time, has its executive officers, its chairman, its general manager, secretary and treasurer. The climax of contradiction to Mr. McMahon (of the Melbourne Repertory Theatre) and Goethe is reached in the casting committee. The Board decides the number of performances, their time and place, selects the plays, controls finance and advertising and a few other matters. The chairman and other named officials, each after their kind, are pursued by the familiar duties.

For the first year of publicity plays were produced in series of three, at about three monthly intervals—an unconscious memory of the end of term. But the memory faded, and in the following years, plays came singly in spaces of a month or six weeks. From nine evenings a year the number fell to eight, then dwindled to five. Neither

as possible our concern has been with the latter. Man by man the dramatists of the movement in England have appeared. Shaw, with his strutting self-advertisement and uncouth effective wit; Galsworthy, the operative dramatist with his antiseptic treatment



enthusiasm nor interest has diminished, but the desire for more finely finished performances has required a larger allowance of time. Hence we must widen the intervals dividing the plays. These five or eight or nine plays form the ordinary programme for the year, and a subscription of five shillings gives anyone a patent of membership and a reserved seat at each play. In the first season, by payment of five shillings, a member became entitled to two seats. The charge was doubled next year, the membership, with an admirable sense of proportion, subsided to half. But last year (1912), although performances decreased the audience multiplied. The interest of novelty has perished, while the intrinsic interest is growing. No doubt a reluctant recognition is awakening that Wilde, Barker and Ibsen are cheap at the price, or even at the 1s 6d. exacted from non-subscribing auditors and from members and public at extra plays not embraced in the year's scheme. Subscriptions, booking fees at the ordinary and extra performances, and the sale of programmes whose fair cheeks are not soiled by advertisements, compose the whole revenue that we can devote to the

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of the landlords, it pays for painting, advertising, hire or purchase of costumes, stage hands (at more than union rates); but the producers are not paid nor its actors, nor do the latter pay for the privilege of acting. Our actors, unlike the Irish players, do not "make the harmless little boast of a style of acting deliberately adopted," but they desire to moderate the self-consciousness, the mannerisms and restlessness, risings, crossings and "effective" exits and the other strange gymnastics of the stage. *En partant pour la Scribie* the actor had to pack his bag of tricks; they assorted with:—

A land where lovers go in fours,
 Master and mistress, man and maid,
 Where people listen at the doors,
 Or 'neath a table's friendly shade;
 And comic Irishmen in scores,
 Roam o'er the scenes all undismayed.

Whatever may be our opinion about the courtesy due to the machine-made drama, the natural drama of the Literary Theatre movement asks that the actors pay it the graceful compliment of an unaffected demeanor. Such training does not disqualify for the professional stage. Two of our actresses have passed into travelling companies. Miss Plunkett played with Irving, and as "Mummy Tyl" in *The Blue Bird*. Miss Kathleen Lawrence was understudy to Miss Susie Vaughan in *Ben Hur* and played the part during her illness in New Zealand.

Naturalness in acting has its parallel in simplicity in scenery. Settings, unobtrusive, squalid—so ill-natured critics have said—have marked the Literary Theatre from the primal days of the *Theatre Libre*. Can one doubt that the uses of adversity have been sweet? Prosperity so often teaches us to over-value the relatively trivial. And this false emphasis in the theatre has led to aggravated scenic effects, while the asceticism in Literary Theatre scenery has forced and retained the vital interest in the play and the acting. Some of the simple scenery we possess has been designed and made by ourselves. Fortune brought us one or two helpers, who had practical experience, and a certain virtue of enthusiasm, which did not desert even in the



DOROTHEA JACOB.

on a prospect of nocturnal rehearsals, and one, misguided by "the dim religious light" of the pious intellect, proscribed Sunday work. But now, in the shelter of a city room and a suburban hall the Theatre spends its public and private life. (Fortunately, suburbs and city in Adelaide are not parted by infinite space). Besides the demands

extremity of scene-building, is always with us. Elaborate sets are unattainable and no doubt unprofitable for a movement so maintained. Draping of the stage with dark green curtains has overcome in a summary fashion scenic difficulties apparently unsurmountable. Excision of scenery widens the range of plays that may be presented, prevents the incongruities and conflicts between dramatic interest and motive, and scenic interest and motive, duly emphasises the former at the expense of the latter, and materially reduces the cost of production. Yet the virtues of curtains are, to some extent, negative. Plainly, they do not suggest an atmosphere; sometimes they require explanation; now and again they are inexcusable.

Problems of the same order have oppressed us in the dressing and mounting of the pieces. Costume plays have been produced, among others, *The Rivals*, *The Duchess of Padua* and *The Winter Feast*. Dresses have been made or hired. Truth has not irradiated every detail of vestment or gown, yet, remembering that the slashing of a sleeve may mark the flight of a century, one must not expect the impossible. The accuracy of an antiquary obviously cannot be attained in furnishing plays that date behind this age, and has not been seriously attempted. The resources of the furniture hirer, here at least, are inadequate even to many modern pieces, and it is as well to buy some indispensable properties.

Although the Literary Theatre movement, partly by inadvertence, partly by design, has exerted considerable influence on acting, dressing and scenery, it is not in these surroundings of the drama that we seek its sign and essence, but in the programme of plays produced. From the discontent with the theatrical literature of a period arose the efforts towards reformation in the class of plays then written and acted. The nature of the plays was altered, and in circumstances and settings parallel modifications appeared. Since the establishment of this protestantism in the Theatre, a time of cleavage more or less clear has become evident between commercial and literary plays. So far

as possible our concern has been with the latter. Man by man the dramatists of the movement in England have appeared. Shaw, with his strutting self-advertisement and uncouth effective wit; Galsworthy, the operative dramatist with his antiseptic treatment



ZOE REID.

of social problems; George Moore's delicate analysis of women and his serving people loosening by their inevitable advent the tension of crisis. The "Five Towns" folk of Arnold Bennett and their affairs, effectively simple, unaffected in naturalism in *Cupid and Common-sense*, his well-arranged combinations of character in *What the*

Public Wants. Rann Kennedy's plays, presenting the dramatic contrast of *The Winter Feast*, horrible with heathen ferocity and hate, and *The Servant in the House*, making visible the Christian faith in the person and creed of its founder. The middle-class dramas of Granville Barker, so middle-class in their want of definite order and issue—the defect of the subject—so unhomey in their ironic thrusts of criticism, their glow of whimsical wit, Wilde's idolatrous imitation of the Elizabethans, the lovely sensuous melodies of *The Florentine Tragedy* and the gorgeous decoration of that fragment, *La Sainte Courtisane*. The unearthly charm of Yeats, the Celtic glamor of Synge and Lady Gregory, the enveloping atmosphere of the Irish school that softens and refines their roughest pictures. The Glasgow dramatists, too, who as yet have scarcely sounded a distinctive note, have not been neglected. Indeed, beyond the limits of purely poetic drama, it is difficult to name a single English author of eminence uninterpreted by the Theatre.

With the Continentals matters are



JEAN ROBERTSON.



DOUGLAS WALSH.

otherwise. Many of their plays are inaccessible, guarded in the fastnesses of their own languages; many more are unpresentable because of their enviable licence of speech and treatment. We will ever be strangers to Brieux's *Damaged Goods*, with its clinical exposition of syphilis, to Capus' *Deux Ecoles*, although for its wit, an arch-angel might forgive the fascinating parade of the mistress-wife problem, to Wedekind's *Spring's Awakening*, with its grotesque Gothic spirit and its bare display of the arcana of adolescence. One regrets the exile of such plays, but the horns of our dilemma are their exclusion or the suicide of the Theatre. Susceptibilities in matters of sex are extraordinarily developed here, and the least fescennine play may be evilly construed (*The Wasters* of Mr. Arthur H. Adams points the arrow). Yet, in spite of these restrictions, the little circle of foreigners represented is not insignificant. Anyone acquainted with the literature of the modern theatre will look vainly for Tolstoi and Bjornson, for Hoffmansthal and Tchekov and Gorky, for Currel and Hennique, Hauptmann and D'Annunzio. The omissions

are painful, but there is an anodyne in the names of Maeterlinck and Brieux, Ibsen and Schnitzler, Turgenev and Fulda, Sudermann and Strindberg.

And when one remembers the brief existence of the Theatre, its unaided growth, the disabilities of place and circumstance, the indifference that shrugs, the hostility that sneers, it is no slight achievement for this body to act some sixty plays during the five years currency, and to have played, studied and read at its club some twenty plays more. This club was founded in 1911. It desires to draw together the various branches of the Theatre, the board, actors and the members, to discover and educate new or untrained actors, to excite a sincerer interest in the plays produced and the drama in general by papers, lectures and unprepared criticisms. It seeks, indeed, to give a more organic unity to the scheme. Whether its intentions will be fulfilled or will pave the way to a place where many excellent things have preceded it is still to be seen.

For the narrow circle of those who already are eager after the arts, it has opened another door of opportunity. They may enter yet another room in the palace of Art; but, such is the miserliness of Time, they must leave long unvisited their former resorts. Interest is so easily transformed, so hardly created, that there is little consideration in the mere effecting of a change, while there is notable credit in adding new adherents to the previous group. Chiefly it is for these that the association and organisation demanded by dramatic work exert their salutary influence; for these that the booksellers set on their shelves copies of plays hitherto unheard of or unread; to these that the consciousness of sharing more and more worthily, as comprehension and capacity increase, in the world-wide movement, gives so keen a pleasure. But the inner circle is still incomplete. It may grow ever wider, and the gap continue unfilled, and this missing arc is the Australian dramatist.

Plays there are that begin to fill in the blank. We have acted Mr. Arthur

H. Adams' play, *The Wasters*, a study of the Australian middle class, his brief and charming fantasy, *The Pierrot in Australia*, and his strong little play, *Doctor Death*; we have acted Mr. Louis Esson's *The Woman Tamer*, an arresting but pleasant study of the criminal class, and a one-act drama by Mr. Wilfrid Neill, one of our own members. Other plays of varying merit have reached us, and there are others that display considerable talent now in print; but all these are merely arrivals. We await the advent.

Beyond the limits of immediate influence and interest there extends the wider range of members and public who go to the plays, some of whom are often inappositely amused and appreciative, ineptly serious or wearied, often naively scandalised by the most innocent, the least familiar ideas and sentiments. Though this element is thinning out it can never entirely vanish. It is impossible closely to discern, exactly to estimate how vividly the various teachings of the plays, open or implied, affect this wider circle. The effects of teaching, even directly to a definite and single end, is generally elusive, becom-



RONALD FINLAYSON.

ing obvious only after a series of years. How then, can we expect to find deeply graved and unmistakable the traces of an artistic movement professing no absorbing interest in any particular



RAY WALSH.

methods of commerce, morals, civics or economics, but which aims to produce as artistically as it can, plays of an æsthetic value, regardless, so far as it may, of their attitude to life? And although this wider influence must remain perhaps for long insensible and for ever obscure, yet for those immediately concerned, the apparent gain in capacity and width of interest, and the gain for all in opportunity, is surely a sufficient justification and not an absolutely inadequate reward for the movement which Mr. Bryce-son Treharne (all honor to him) commenced in 1908 in that little room of the Conservatorium of Music.

The Ultimate Goal.

By BERTON BRALEY.

Oh, where are the freaks we once saw for a dime?

They're playing in vodyville now.

They're sighing no more for the old circus time;

They're playing in vodyville now.

And the highly trained seals and the erudite hog,

And the clown who behaved like a talkative frog

(He's springing his jokes in "refined monologue"),

They're playing in vodyville now.

And where are the "pugs" whom we used to see fight?

They're playing in vodyville now.

It's easier training and much more polite;

They're playing in vodyville now.

And the bandits so bold who were once robbing trains,

And the lady who beat out her fond husband's brains,

And the picturesque cowboy who once roamed the plains

—They're playing in vodyville now!

The wonderful pitcher who couldn't be beat,

He's playing in vodyville now.

The painter who used to paint signs with his feet,

He's playing in vodyville now.

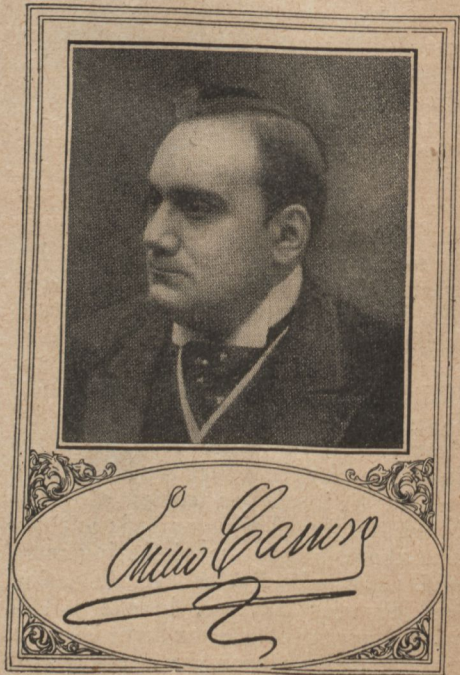
The figures of scandal or love or renown,

The king who is suddenly minus a crown,

You will probably find, upon tracing them down,

They're playing in vodyville now!

—*The Green Book*



The Latest Portrait of Caruso.