

THE FUTURE OF THE THEATRE

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The future of the theatre by John Palmer

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JOHN PALMER



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TO
GRANVILLE BARKER

A POSTSCRIPT LETTER OF DEDICATION
TO GRANVILLE BARKER

“MY DEAR GRANVILLE BARKER,—I will publish only one reason, among many, why I have asked you to accept this dedication. In the pages that follow I sometimes rather ostentatiously disagree with you. Might it not therefore be concluded that I do not love your work? This would not do at all.

“I wish you could have been induced to write this book yourself. It is no use putting us off with excuses as to a busy life. You, who have everything to do, can find time for everything. That you could easily find time for as good a book as has yet been written about the modern English theatre is shown by the present condition of my proof-sheets. My sensations on receiving them could only be comparable with what poor Diabelli must have felt when Beethoven returned him his funny little waltz in C major with thirty-three gigantic variations, including a double fugue.

“You cannot see my theatre of the future with rents at £8000 or £10,000 a year, plus £5000 a year for advertisements. But I said I was going to be very hopeful, and to see what I wanted to see; and

I have most carefully prepared for the financial prosperity of good work by bringing into our theatres of the future the really educated public which at present avoids them. As you say, it is all a question of numbers and prices. I see the profitable numbers; and you, soberly refusing to 'pawn your experience to your present pleasure,' do not.

"As to a missing chapter upon actors, and your entirely reasonable defence of yourself as the interpretative producer—well, of course you are right. Here I am fain 'to shuffle, to hedge and to lurch.' Do not bind me too strictly to the letter of this wilful exaggeration of a good case. Take me as uttering here no more than a vigorous protest against producers who aim at being creatively important, and against dramatic authors who are so far out of touch with the theatre as to be compelled to leave to others the task of fitting their plays to the resources and personalities of a particular cast. I allow that, after an author has written all that can be written, there still remains the job of adapting a particular representation to such players and scenes as are at hand. If the author himself can do this (owing to the long divorce between English letters and the English stage he seldom can), so much the better for his play. You say yourself that 'a producer is only necessary when the author cannot or will not do the job himself.' This is all I ask.

"You wonder that I say nothing at all about Masefield. I admit that it is a conspicuous omission; but I firmly believe that the less we say about

Masefield at this time the better it will be for the English theatre. Masefield must not be made self-conscious by too much talk about him. Let us not prematurely insist he is a genius, in opposition to those who prematurely insist he is merely a very clever fellow. His work, so far, shows that he may equally well be one or the other. I should like to see Masefield accomplish the prodigious literary feat of Hauptmann, who forced into the service of poetic vision the naturalism of his German contemporaries. Parts of *Nan* and of *Pompey* show that Masefield is quite possibly upon the track of this achievement; but he cannot yet be fitted into a dramatic history of the next ten years. If Masefield came, at all naturally, into this critical study of forces now at work, it would be as a further illustration of what you yourself so admirably typify in your naturalist-poetic productions of Shakespeare and in your uneasy hovering between *Anne Leete* and *The Voysey Inheritance*.

"Wycherley, remembering La Rochefoucauld, has said that people who compose dedications but begin the praise of others which ends in themselves. Perhaps that is my real motive in addressing you. I would have my readers know that you approve of me warmly enough in general to differ from me seriously in particular. Therefore I argue with you *coram publico*, and very proudly subscribe myself.—Yours ever sincerely,

JOHN PALMER.

"LONDON, COVENT GARDEN,
October 1913."