

PLAYHOUSE IMPRESSIONS

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Playhouse impressions by A. B. Walkley

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A. B. WALKLEY

**PLAYHOUSE
IMPRESSIONS**

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IMPRESSIONS

Illustrated by
A. B. WALKLEY

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T. FISHER UNWIN
PATERNOSTER SQUARE

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PREFATORY NOTE.

THIS is a book of reprints. About half the articles are from the Speaker; the rest (except one from Black and White, and a fragment from the Illustrated London News) are from the National Observer and the Star. To the several editors who have courteously sanctioned their republication I tender grateful thanks.

As essays in dramatic criticism they do not pretend to be systematic or authoritative. Their sole aim has been to fix and record the fleeting sensations of the moment. Anything like a complete survey of the contemporary English stage would have been altogether beyond my purpose. I have been content to take the luck of the playbill, and so have often fallen upon ban-yan days. Hence one or two of our foremost dramatists are represented by plays which are certainly not their best. Others, whose names are placarded on the hoardings in the largest type, are not represented at all. Doubtless they have all, the popular and the unpopular, their several stations in the dramatic hierarchy; but it has been no affair of mine to "place" them. That is the function of judicial or dogmatic criticism—of which there are already, I submit, professors enough and to spare. The ideal critic is pictured by the crowd, now as a milestone "standing upon the antique ways," now as a finger-post on the "high priori" road. I have taken the less stately view of him as a vagabond,

who accepts his impressions as they come, and changes his moods with his horizons. Hence, like other vagromen, I have had an instinctive repugnance for the methods of the Bench. The enunciation of positive judgments, of absolute truths, I hold to be no part of my business: on the contrary, to be negative and relative was a point of honour. To have as many impressions as fortune willed—if irreconcilable, no matter—about the same work; to find the arguments for and against equally good; to be, in fine, multilateral, “*ondoyant et divers*”; these seemed to me the true objects of that “*art of enjoying masterpieces*,” which is one sort of criticism. There are more imposing sorts, I know, the practitioners of which figure as the depositaries of eternal verities, as examiners distributing or refusing “*testamurs*,” as official guardians of the public taste. One cannot, however, choose one’s own temperament or one’s own theory of criticism. It is to the lustre cast on it by M. Jules Lemaitre that the “*ondoyant*” theory owes its charm for the present generation. I make no apology for the frequency with which that most brilliant of contemporary critics is cited in this volume. My only fear (for I cannot pretend to estimate in my own case the full extent of his influence) is lest I have not cited him often enough.

A. B. W.



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THE DRAMATIC CRITIC AS PARIAH.

A LITERARY Ishmael, he cannot choose but despond. His isolation is complete and tragic. From the people he criticises it were unreasonable to expect sympathy. His fellow playgoers regard him as a wet blanket. These "know what they like," and therefore look askance at the man whose function it is to convince them that they do not know what they ought to like. His natural kin, the serious intellects, treat him with good-humoured contempt. For he seems to them serious in the wrong place. He is perpetually asking for ideas on the stage, for recognition of the drama as a serious art. They openly prefer an unidea'd theatre and recognize the drama only as a frivolous pastime. "Probably there is nothing that serious intellects hate so much as 'an intellectual treat.' To be made to sit out a performance at the Français or the Lyceum would be to a great many of us an unmitigated bore. I believe high-class music, high-class plays, high-class novels are produced mainly for people of moderate or medium intelligence; people whose brains and bodies are systematically under-

2 THE DRAMATIC CRITIC AS PARIAS.

worked. Men who have done a good day's toil with head or hands don't care for *Faust*; they want a Gaiety burlesque. The silliest song, the most rollicking fun, of the *cafés chantants* in the Champs Elysées or of the London Pavilion, is to many intelligent men a far greater relaxation than the best-mounted piece of Shakespeare's or Victor Hugo's. Or rather the one is a relaxation, and the other a nuisance."

These words of Mr. Grant Allen are noteworthy as the first appearance in print of a mental state, naked, and not ashamed, which is to be encountered at every dinner-table and in every smoking-room. They represent quite fairly, I am sure, the attitude towards the theatre of a large majority of the "serious intellects." The man who, for his sins, has to busy himself with dramatic criticism knows this attitude only too well. Let that man spend an evening—a privilege that sometimes falls to the lot even of such as he—in the society of university dons, men of science and the so-called learned professions. Then shall he learn what it is "to know his place." He will find himself treated like Mr. Gilbert's family fool, as a sort of buffoon to be joked with, dug in the ribs, importuned for orders (of which he is supposed to be a perpetual fount), or chaffed about fifteenth-rate actresses (of whom he is supposed to be the perpetual boon companion). That his occupation may be as serious, and as seriously undertaken, as that of any of his fellow guests, never enters their heads. They regard him as lightly as they would the ingenious gentleman at the Alhambra who spins plates on the end of his nose. That the drama is an art, like another, with a good to be encouraged and a bad to be eschewed, is no creed of theirs. What their creed is, Mr. Grant Allen plainly tells us. We "serious intellects" are only serious