

**THE WORLD OF THE
THEATRE IMPRESSIONS
AND MEMOIRS, MARCH
1920-1921**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649764235

The world of the theatre impressions and memoirs, March 1920-1921 by J. T. Grein

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JAMES BY
J. T. GREIN
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LONDON: WILLIAM HEINEMANN

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2595
G75

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Illustrated London News.*



19362

INTRODUCTORY.

Before presenting this batch of criticisms in all the impersonality of their original journalism, I suppose I must introduce myself and shew my credentials. This is rather a difficult matter ; for, like other folk, I may not see myself quite as others see me ; and my theatrical credentials are of such a kind that it is impossible for me to draw them up myself without either seeming egotistical or doing an injustice to the importance of the movement I had, and still have, at heart.

In this dilemma I had resolved not to introduce myself at all when it occurred to me that I might extricate myself by taking the opinion of my old friend Bernard Shaw. He is my contemporary and was my colleague in those days when, as I think, I did the State some service. If he cannot introduce me nobody can. I wrote him an artless enquiry as to what he thinks I ought to say about myself. Here is his reply :—

“MY DEAR GREIN : It is now very close on thirty years since you madly began an apparently hopeless attempt to bring the English theatre into some sort of relation with contemporary culture. Matthew Arnold had suggested that step ; but nobody in the theatre took the slightest notice of him, because nobody in the theatre knew of the existence of such a person as Matthew Arnold. That was what was the matter with the theatre then. There was nothing wrong with the acting : I cannot remember any actor or actress then occupying a leading position who could be called an amateur or a duffer : they had all been “ through the mill,” and could make intruders who had not, look ridiculous. The theatres were better managed than they are now : the front of the house was not always controlled by the bar ; and at the best theatres all petty cadgings like charges for programs and cloak room fees were abolished. The public was so seriously interested in the theatre that it booked seats months in advance : in fact, it was by the booking that a manager knew when his run was coming to an end. Photographs of actors and actresses cost a shilling each ; and at this price the Stereoscopic Company did a big trade in them. At every point except the one point of culture and contact with the life of the time the theatre was in a more dignified

position than it occupies to-day. If you and I could have set the Bancrofts, the Kendals, the Rorkes, Hare and Wyndham and Irving and Forbes Robertson and Ada Rehan, to work in live contemporary drama, the London stage would have led Europe triumphantly. Forbes Robertson's *Cæsar* proved it."

"As it was, these artists were kept up to the mark by the continual effort to pass off literary scarecrows as heroes and heroines. The generation which succeeded them at the *fin de siècle* acquired this art and acquired nothing else (never having had the chance); so that you got actors and actresses who had an enchanting power of persuading you that they could say and do the most wonderful things when the moment came; but the author had to be particularly careful to get the curtain down before it came; for when you called on them, as Shakespear does for instance, not for suggestion, but for execution, they knew better than to give themselves away by trying. Shakespear then became physically impossible. As the notion of performing his plays as he meant them to be performed never occurred to anyone but Mr. William Poel, who was regarded consequently as the absurdest of cranks, the Bard had already become a mere stalking-horse for the scene painter, the costumier, and the spectacular artists generally. His plays were presented in mutilated fragments, divided into acts with long waits between, in which form they were so horribly boresome, being mostly unintelligible, that only the most powerful personal fascination could induce playgoers to endure him. As long as this fascination was associated with great executive power, Shakespear did not always "spell ruin," as the phrase went then. Whilst the actor could not only look as if he could say tremendous things, but could actually say them tremendously when he got the chance, it was possible for Barry Sullivan, who turned his back on London with disdain because he lost £800 in three months and was not used to such treatment, to die worth £100,000. But when the fascination was divorced from executive power, the Shakespearian game was up for the young of the old school. It was the young of the new school who discovered that Poel had really struck the trail. Then you got Granville Barker,

Drinkwater, Bridges Adams, and Fagan establishing genuine Shakespear on the English stage, and extracting from the play the fascination for which their fathers would have looked to the actor alone."

"Now you may ask what this has to do with you, who never meddled with Shakespear. I assure you you had a great deal to do with it. When you first desperately stuck an advertisement into the papers to say that an unheard-of enterprise called the Independent Theatre would on a certain Sunday night and Monday afternoon perform an unheard-of play, totally unlike any play then current in the theatrical market; when the papers thereupon declared that the manager of the theatre ought to be prosecuted for keeping a disorderly house, and that you and the foreign blackguard named Ibsen who was your accomplice, should be deported as obvious undesirables, you made a hole in the dyke; and the weight of the flood outside did the rest. When you declared that you would bring to light treasures of unacted English drama grossly suppressed by the managers of that day, you found that there was not any unacted English drama except two acts of an unfinished play (begun and laid aside eight years before) by me; but it was the existence of the Independent Theatre that made me finish that play, and by giving me the experience of its rehearsal and performance, revealed the fact (to myself among others) that I possessed the gift of "fingering" the stage. That old play now seems as remote and old-fashioned as *Still Waters Run Deep* or *London Assurance*; but the newspapers of 1892 raged over it for a whole fortnight. Everything followed from that: the production of *Arms and the Man* by Miss Horniman and Florence Farr at the Avenue Theatre, Miss Horniman's establishment of Repertory Theatres in Dublin and Manchester, the Stage Society, Granville H. Barker's tentative matinées of *Candida* at the Court Theatre, the full-blown management of Vedrenne and Barker, Edie Craig's *Pioneers*, and the final relegation of the Nineteenth Century London theatre to the dust-bin by Barrie. At present the cry in the papers is that the theatre is hopelessly out of date, that it needs fresh air, new ideas, scrapping of traditions and conventions. The most famous apostle of the new theatre has declared publicly that what has been

holding the theatre back for twenty years past and making all reform impossible is not Sardou but Shaw. If only we could give the young lions a ride on Well's Time Machine and take them back to 1892!"

"Well, more power to their elbows! I am always delighted to hear a clamor for new ideas, or indeed for ideas of any sort, in the theatre. So, I have no doubt, are you. But the clamorers will hardly see a revolution like the one you began by making the hole in the dyke. It is the second revolution that England owes to a Dutchman."

G.B.S.

After this, the less I say about myself, the better. I am very well content to be the man who made the hole in the dyke. In letting Ibsen in I let the ocean in; and I certainly now look round sometimes in bewilderment at the extent to which the old landmarks have been obliterated. Nevertheless it remains true that *plus ça change plus c'est la même chose*. There are still plenty of people and plenty of theatres, plenty of audiences and plenty of actors (to say nothing of authors), who are still just where they were when they hooted me in 1890. I do not feel that my warfare is accomplished yet, either as manager or critic; and so I still urge my views on the public as to the present and future of the theatre—in this volume, for instance, which I now present without further ado.

J.T.G.

CHAPTER I.—March 13th, 1920.

Diagnosis.

WHENEVER the British theatre is discussed I cannot help thinking of the lines which Kipling wrote in the days of the Boer War—

When you've shouted Rule Britannia,

When you've sung God Save the Queen.

When you've finished killing Kruger with your mouth.

On all sides we hear that since the war the British drama has gone down. It is nowhere. For a nation of fifty millions, our production is practically sterile. One great work like Drinkwater's "Lincoln" is hailed as a redeemer. When we compare our drama with the small countries across the Channel, such as Belgium and Holland, we may feel abashed at their intellectual superiority, their width of horizon, their indescribable love of the theatre. In Amsterdam alone in one week you could see Shakespeare's "Hamlet" and "As You Like It," to say nothing of Strindberg, Hauptmann, a few new dramas and native comedies, all of no meaner calibre than the best seen at the Criterion, or even the Haymarket.

It is true, then, that at the present moment we are in the doldrums, and the reason why is not far to seek. For one thing, there is the overwhelming competition from America. Anything that has reaped American dollars is likely to attract British managers, and our public. It is not a question of quality, it is a question of marketing. The commercial manager understands the gentle art of advertising to perfection, and, with the aid of the Press Agent, there is more talk of a forthcoming American play than of any new work of a native playwright, unless he be Bernard Shaw or Sir James Barrie. When the American piece comes manned by American actors it is often a success through the punch in the acting and in the play. The American system is predatory. It has learnt a great deal from the French, and by the laxity of copyright laws, ideas, scenes, plots are often simply annexed and fathered on someone who is not their creator. Even the most correct of American managers have sometimes indulged in strangely ingenious