

**THEATRICAL
NOTES.
[LONDON-1893]**

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Theatrical Notes. [London-1893] by Joseph Knight

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JOSEPH KNIGHT

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BY

JOSEPH KNIGHT



LONDON

LAWRENCE & BULLEN

16 HENRIETTA STREET, COVENT GARDEN

1893

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ADVERTISEMENT.

THE substance of the following work has appeared in the *Athenæum*, from the pages of which periodical it is with permission reprinted. It does not aim at supplying a full chronicle of the London stage during the period which it covers, notices of very many pieces of ephemeral nature or interest having been excised. Should this contribution to stage history prove acceptable, materials are in hand for a second volume, which will bring the matter up to date and link the drama of Byron, Wills and Albery with that of Mr. Pinero, Mr. Henry Arthur Jones and Mr. Grundy. Notices of French performances in London occupy a portion of the work larger than may perhaps appear desirable. It must be remembered, however, that the renascence of acting and of interest in the stage which the present generation has witnessed is to some extent due to the education afforded the public by the visits of foreign companies of world-wide renown, and the consequent demand for acting, which, though common now, a generation ago was not to be obtained.

INTRODUCTION.

THE average of a generation is held to be somewhat over thirty years. During that period the writer of these notes has watched with close interest the progress and development of the stage in England. Thirty years constitute a long time as regards human observation and artistic progress. The first thirty years of the acted drama carry us from Ferrex and Porrex or Gammer Gurton's "Needle" to Marlowe's "Edward II."; another "generation" gives us the first folio Shakspeare. As civilisation proceeds, alteration is less evident. None the less, the last thirty years of the English stage have witnessed more than one change, amounting practically to revolution. Public interest in things theatrical, at the outset slumbering and apparently extinct, has flamed out afresh. The dramatist, once the most underpaid of literary craftsmen, has now the ball at his feet, and new theatres in the parts of London suited to their growth rise like exhalations.

Such menace as the prophets of evil see in the present unprecedentedly prosperous state of affairs comes from within rather than from without, from the exacting vanity which the exercise of the most dangerous of callings is apt to breed, and from the intolerance of censure and discipline fostered by continuous success. If any external peril seems to

be dreaded it is that the public, in its emancipation from restraint and its enjoyment of privilege, should grow disposed to seek amusement at any cost, and to balance the attractions of a well-managed music-hall against those of some ill-managed theatres. Of this before-mentioned "generation" the second decade is, roughly speaking, that undertaken in the present survey. It is, so far as regards the stage, a period of new birth. The breach with the traditions of an unambitious and irreverent past began with the opening by Mr. and Mrs. Bancroft in 1865 of the Prince of Wales's Theatre in Tottenham Street, and the production of the early comedies of T. W. Robertson. Fortune smiled from the first upon well-directed effort, and a venture involving some elements of extreme risk had a success beyond the dreams of those by whom it was made.

From the moment it succeeded, a return to, or a continuance of, what had before been seen became impossible. Ruin speedily drove from the London stage the manager who could not benefit by experience. Into the merits and defects of the Robertsonian comedy, accepted from the outset by the public, disputed step by step by critics of a certain order, called by damaging nicknames not yet wholly forgotten, there is no need to enter. Nothing prettier or more healthful has replaced it, and the most conspicuous of subsequent popular successes have not seldom emanated from men who have had the feeling or the courage to go back to the Robertsonian style.

Still better days were in store. The Franco-

German War, disastrous in its influence on France, led to the visit to England of the Comédie Française, a visit unremunerative at first but after a while successful and potent in influence. Familiar enough with foreign art was a section of playgoers. Memories of Rachel, of Bouffé, of Lafont, of Ravel, and of Ristori still linger. These and other great artists had, however, appeared as "stars" and had not seldom been supported by scratch companies of the most unsatisfactory description. When it first came to London the Comédie Française, which had naturally fallen on evil days, and was driven to a policy of retrenchment as well as to banishment, brought with it a limited number of its best actors. Men of highest position and of world-wide reputation were compelled accordingly to accept the smallest rôles, sometimes, indeed, those of mere supernumeraries. M. Got himself, shortly afterwards *doyen* of the company, took a part in which he had not half-a-dozen lines to speak. From the moment that the value of *ensemble* such as was then exhibited was recognised the disgraceful exhibitions previously tolerated could no longer exist. In a representation of an aristocratic hall guests who could scarcely be taken for the friends of the domestics could not be tolerated, and the mimic spectators of a thrilling action could not be permitted to yawn into the gallery or to launch *willades* at the stalls. Again and again the Comédie Française visited London. It was succeeded by the companies of the Gymnase-Dramatique, the Vaudeville, the Palais Royal, and half-a-dozen more Parisian theatres, by the Saxe-

Meiningen Company and the Rotterdam Dramatic Company, though "last not least" in this splendid list.

By this time the question of *ensemble* was settled and even the sleepest of "personally directed" companies was compelled to make some pretence to adequacy of mounting and cast. So far as regards *mise en scène*, meanwhile, the lesson had been learned almost too well, and the only thing to be feared was that decorations too artistic and luxurious should detract from the *vraisemblance* of the scene as when in the house of a country gentleman is presented a collection of treasures only to be expected in a palace. That this difficulty has not had to be faced seems due in part to the fact that the stage and those enjoying it reflect on each other, and that the fashionable world has made haste to overtake and realise the pictures set before it.

One result that was hoped from the lessons obtained has not been realised. The star system has not been killed, it has not even been scotched. Some consolation, nevertheless, is to be obtained. It no longer pays in London and it has to bury its head in the country. There, even, some modification has been undergone. It is not the star who is ordinarily acceptable in a country town, it is a piece with the *cachet* of a London success.

The question whether we have better actors than we had a generation ago is not easily answered. The very oldest existing document consists of the recorded conviction of a sage that youth in his time had fallen off from its former high estate. This