

**PAPERS OF
PLAYMAKING. IV. A
THEORY OF THE THEATER**

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Papers of Playmaking. IV. A Theory of the Theater by Francisque Sarcey & Brander Matthews

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FRANCISQUE SARCEY & BRANDER MATTHEWS

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PAPERS ON PLAYMAKING

IV

A Theory of the Theater

BY

FRANCISQUE SARCEY

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

BRANDER MATTHEWS

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INTRODUCTION

IN the brilliant essay on the Comédie-Française which Henry James wrote forty years ago, and which had for its text the series of critical analyses of the histrionic attainments of the chief performers at the House of Molière, then recently put forth by Francisque Sarcey, the American critic declared that the French critic was so predominant in the Parisian press that he held "in his hand the fortune of a play" and that if he "devoted an encouraging line and a half to a young actress, mademoiselle immediately had a career." This may be an overstatement, but it can hardly be called a misstatement. For the final thirty years of the nineteenth century Sarcey was the most influential of all the theatrical reviewers of France, even if he could not actually make or unmake a new play or a new player.

Henry James analyzed the reasons for Sarcey's enviable influence and for the weight of his words. Sarcey was "sternly incorruptible;" he had "a religious respect for his

theme; he had a habit of taking the theater seriously, with "unwearying attention to detail;" he had "the scenic sense, the theatrical eye;" he was "shrewd and sagacious, and almost tiresomely in earnest." And now that nearly a score of years have past since Sarcey ceased to contribute to the *Temps* his weekly review of the passing show, a later generation has ratified the praise, even if not a few latterday critics are disposed to see Sarcey's limitations with a disenchanted eye. M. Gustave Lanson, for example, in his inestimable history of French literature, holds that Sarcey's theory of the theater was somewhat too narrow and that it was sometimes too rigidly enforced.

But no one of the younger generation has denied that Sarcey had a theory of the theater, that this theory has left its impress upon the contemporary French drama, and that it had been developed by Sarcey himself as the immediate consequence of his immense experience and of his indefatigable attendance in the playhouse. Sarcey's opinions about the art of the drama were the direct result of his observations in the theater itself,—just as were the opinions of Aristotle and of Lessing.

He had no kinship with the erudite Italian theorists of the Renaissance who evolved their dramatic dogmas from their inner consciousness, being deprived of the privilege of persistent playgoing and having occasion only sporadically to see a good play well acted.

Sarcey was continually seeing good plays well acted; he was continually analyzing his own impressions at these performances, and he was continually investigating the impressions made upon his fellow-playgoers. As a result of this relentless inquiry, pursued for two score years, he discovered for himself certain of the principles of the drama,—just as Lessing had discovered them in like manner a century earlier. For Lessing, Sarcey had ever an exalted respect, as a critic of the keenest acumen and as a constant playgoer of alert intelligence. He said to me once that when he chanced to find in Lessing's 'Hamburg Dramaturgy' an opinion which he had already arrived at by his own reflexion, he felt encouraged and confirmed in his belief that his own view was sound.

When we compare Sarcey as a dramatic critic with a predecessor like Jules Janin or with a contemporary like Jules Lemaitre we

cannot help noting that however inferior he may be in wit, in felicity of phrase, in charm of style, he is superior in his possession of a compact body of doctrine about the drama, which might be a little too systematic at times, but which sustained and supported his judgments upon the plays of the moment and which gave to these judgments a validity and a significance often absent from the sparkling effusions of Janin and Lemaitre, neither of whom took the theater very seriously and both of whom now and then yielded to the temptation of accepting the play they were supposed to be criticizing either as a peg on which to hang pretty garlands of figures of speech or as a springboard from which to dive off into philosophical disquisition.

Sarcey might on occasion apply his code too rigorously; but at least he had a code to apply. He might be over-emphatic at times in declaring the rigid limits of the drama and in insisting upon the futility of well meant efforts to enlarge its scope, to broaden its mission, to bestow upon it a more significant message; but he was inexorably honest in setting forth these opinions of his, and they were founded upon an intimacy with the theater