

**THREE LANCASHIRE
PLAYS: THE GAME, THE
NORTHERNERS ZACK**

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Three Lancashire Plays: The Game, the Northerners Zack by Harold Brighthouse

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To
MISS A. E. F. HORNIMAN

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PREFACE

IN another age than ours play-books were a favourite, if not the only, form of light reading, and the novel, now almost universally preferred, is the development of the last century. But a writer of plays should be the last person in the world to resent the novelist's victory, for plays are written to be acted, and reach a full completeness only by means of the collaboration of author with producer, scene-painter, actors and, finally and essentially, audience. The author's script bears to the completed play a relationship similar to that of an architect's plan to a completed building.

Architect's plans, however, are not unintelligible to the layman, especially to the layman who is not devoid of imagination, the layman who is ready to spend a trifling mental effort and to become, be it ever so little, expert. And so with printed plays, those ground-plans of the drama. There must have been in the eighteenth century, a larger percentage of the reading public than obtains to-day that was expert in reading plays; plays were thought—you can find ample proof of it in the *Diarists*—easier reading than the novels of Fielding, Richardson and Smollett. Perhaps the comparative brevity of a play was, even in those unhurried days, a point in its favour; certainly the play-reading habit was

strong and one likes to think that it is not lost. To read dully the script of a spectacular play is desolating weariness, but the same script read with sympathetic imagination becomes the key to fairyland, and from an armchair one sees more marvels than ever stagecraft could present. There are abominable limitations on the stage; producers are tedious pedants; but the reader mentally producing a play from the book in his hand looks through a magic casement at what he gloriously will instead of through a proscenium arch at the handiwork of a merely human producer. Play-reading, in fact, obeys the law that as a man sows so shall he reap; a little trouble, rapidly eased by practice, leads one to a great deal of pleasure.

It depends, of course, upon the play as well as upon the reader, and though one has rather romantically instanced spectacular plays, their scripts do, as a rule, belong to the class of play which is not worth reading. They are, or are apt to become, the libretto to some specific scenery or stage effect and the imaginative reader, failing to hit upon the particular staging intended, is lost in puzzlement. Nor do plays of action make the best reading. There are no plays but plays of action, but action is of many kinds, and the play whose first concern is situation and rapid physical movement is so specifically a stage-play, so sketchy in its ground-plan until the collaborators work in unison upon it, as to make reading more of a torment than a pleasure. While you must have wordless pantomime at the basis of every play, it is those plays which exhibit in high degree the use of action in the form of dialogue that are the more comfortable reading; and, always postulating that a play is a play—not necessarily a playwright's play, the admiration of his brother craftsmen, but a thing practicable,

actable and effective on the stage—the more physical action is subordinated to character, to the exploration of the springs of human motive, the better it is for reading purposes and the better for all purposes.

Ibsen led the modern play, where the modern novel followed it, to the investigation of character rather than to the unfolding of a story, and one suggests that readers who find satisfaction in the modern psychological novel should find the reading of modern plays to their taste for the reason that the dramatists, though they haven't in a play the same opportunities for analysis as the novelists find in their more spacious pages, are essentially "out for" the same thing.

The type of play one is here writing about is one which has not, in the past, flourished extensively in the popular theatres; it is the type known, rather obscurely, as the "Repertory" play. It was called by that name, probably in derision, and the Repertory play was held to be synonymous with the un-commercial play. Then queer things happened. "Hindle Wakes" broke out of the Repertory pallsade, made dramatic history and, what from the amazed commercial manager's standpoint was even more startling, a fortune; "The Younger Generation" followed into the commercial camp; and in the rent profiteer's year of 1919, when managers seemed forced by ruthless circumstance more even than by inclination to play the safest game and to offer the Big Public nothing but repetitions of the tried and true, two plays from the Repertories came to town. "The Lost Leader" filled the Court Theatre in a very heat wave, and "Abraham Lincoln" took the King to Hammersmith—with many thousands of his subjects. So that it will not do to speak of plays as commercial on the one hand and Repertory on the other. Repertory has golden possibilities,

if you don't expect too much of it. It would be fallacious to expect the same pay-dust from "Abraham Lincoln" as from "Chu Chin Chow." Nor would one expect Joseph Conrad to sell like Nat Gould.

Sincerity is a virtue possessed, as a rule, by the Repertory play, but it will by no means do to claim for this sort of play a monopoly of sincerity. The most popular type of drama (and the most English), melodrama, is rigidly sincere—to the confounding of the Intellectual. There is plenty of dishonest thinking and unscrupulous play-making, but not in popular melodrama. In melodrama which pretends to be something other than what it is, there is immediate and obvious insincerity, but there is no writing with the tongue in the cheek in downright, unabashed melodramas of the old Adelphi, and the present Lyceum type. It will not do to call the "highbrow" plays sincere, with the implication that all other plays are insincere, any more than they can themselves be sweepingly characterized as uncommercial. Sincerity, anyhow, may be beside the point, and the term Repertory play, though unsatisfactory, stands for something perfectly well understood. No definition would be apt to the whole body of Repertory plays, but one would like, diffidently, to suggest that Repertory plays are written by men and women of intellectual honesty who postulate that their audience will be composed of educated people—and that attempt at a definition fails. It has a snobbish ring.

And now, after generalizing about Repertory plays and reading plays, to come down to the particular instance of the Lancashire plays here printed. They are three of seven plays which their author has written about the people of his native county, and reasons for publishing them now

are that nobody wanted to publish plays during the war, and that the author is an optimist about the future of Repertory. Which last is only a sort of reason for publishing some of Repertory's step-children—that, at any rate, the new men may know, if they care to know, these workaday examples deriving from the only Repertory Theatre in Great Britain which created a local drama. Though none of these three plays was, in fact, produced by Miss Horniman's Company, they nevertheless belong to the "Manchester School," which was a by-product of her Company.

The "Manchester School" was never conscious of itself, as the Irish School was. The Irishmen had a country, a patriotic sentiment, a national mythology; they had, so soon after the beginning that it seemed they had it from the first, the already classical tradition of Synge; they had in the Deidre legend a subject made to their hands, a subject which it appeared every Irishman must tackle in order to pass with honours as an Irish dramatist; and there was explicit endeavour to create an Irish Drama. In Manchester, so far were we from any explicit ambition to create a Lancashire Drama that we denied the fact of its creation. What reputation it had was not home-made in Manchester and exported, but made in London and America. At Miss Horniman's theatre in Manchester, there were so many bigger things being done than the earlier, technically weak plays of the local authors. And it is worth pointing out that the authors went (it was admirable, it was almost original in them) for their material to what was immediately under their noses; they took as models the Lancashire people of their daily life, and in their plays they did not always flatter their models. The models saw themselves in the theatre rather as they were than as they liked to think