

**ABOUT THE
THEATRE: ESSAYS
AND STUDIES**

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About the Theatre: Essays and Studies by William Archer

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WILLIAM ARCHER

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ESSAYS AND STUDIES

BY

WILLIAM ARCHER

AUTHOR OF "ENGLISH DRAMATISTS OF TO-DAY," ETC.

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PREFATORY NOTE.

THE greater part of the first paper in this volume is hitherto unpublished, but some portions of it have appeared in the *Theatre* and other magazines. The second essay is reprinted from the *Westminster Review*; the third from the *Nineteenth Century*; the fourth and tenth from the *Dramatic Review*; the fifth, sixth, and eighth from *Time*; the seventh from the *National Review*; and the ninth from the *Magazine of Music*. To the editors of these periodicals I beg to express my thanks for their courteous sanction of this republication. All the papers, I may add, have been carefully revised, and some in a measure re-written.

W. A.

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ARE WE ADVANCING?

(1882-1886.)

IN seeking to estimate progress, material, moral, or artistic, we must first answer two questions which may be summed up in the words Whence? and Whither? Unless we exactly know our starting-point, and have clearly ascertained the direction, at least, in which our goal is to be sought, movement, not progress, is the most that we can prove. If we have not made up our minds whether our destination be New York, or Melbourne, or Valparaiso, our ship may do her fifteen knots an hour and yet we shall have made no progress whatever. Her speed, in fact, may merely be prolonging the voyage or hastening a catastrophe.

The destination, the goal, or, in other words, the ideal of the drama, is a subject of unceasing controversy. Shall we steer for Realism or for Idealism, for culture or merely for amusement?

Some would have us reverse the engines, put on full speed astern, and try back to the spacious times of great Elizabeth. Others are for ploughing steadily forward in the good old course laid down by Scribe. Some would put the helm a-starboard and make for rhythmic regions of Neo-Shakespeareanism; others would fain deviate in the opposite direction, eschewing poetry for photography. Browningism has its adherents; so has Zolaism; even Ibsen, in these latter days, is the god of a few fanatics. The great majority, bound to no sect or clique, is ready to dash off towards any point of the compass which promises pastime — "Zeitvertreib" — whether in the form of laughter or of excitement. Progress, then, means a score of different things to a score of different factions; at which point of view are we to take our stand in the present inquiry?

*The questions
proposed.*

I propose to adopt, for the nonce, a broad definition of progress. Is the theatre attracting, and does it deserve to attract, more and more attention from the educated and thoughtful portion of the community? If it is, it matters little in what direction the development is taking place; indeed it is almost certain to manifest itself in several

directions at once. Where there is life there is hope; and when the better minds of a nation are occupying themselves sympathetically with the drama of the day, I think we may take it as a sign of more or less healthy vitality.

The period I propose to review is short, but sufficiently eventful to be instructive. About four years ago I published a collection of essays,¹ in which I attempted a bird's-eye view of the English theatre as it then existed. "The Romany Rye," first presented on the 10th of June, 1882, was the latest production which came within my ken, and this may serve to date the volume. Over these four years, then, I wish to cast a rapid glance, noting a few of their salient features in so far as they bear upon the question above stated: *Is the theatre attracting, and does it deserve to attract, more and more attention from the educated and thoughtful portion of the community?*

We have here two separate inquiries, one simple, the other difficult; one a question of fact, the other a question of opinion. The question of fact necessarily comes first.

That the theatre is attracting more and more attention may almost be called a matter

(i) *The question of fact; increasing vogue of the stage.*

¹ "English Dramatists of To-day." London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle, and Rivington. 1882.