

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Never take the Theatre seriously. If you do, you will miss all the fun. The Theatre is primarily for enjoyment. Everything in it that is worth while will disappear the moment you begin to say to yourself: "Why, this is real, this is something bigger than I expected. Let me think- " Then you begin to get into trouble, and worse still, the actors begin to get into trouble. The Theatre is the world of make-believe, and if I, as a dramatist, can make you believe any nonsense that I choose to write, then it is one up to me. But if you will go and think about it you will probably find me out, and then I shall be in trouble too.

So you see it is not only me, it's you too. If between us however, we can persuade the actor that he is a great man, for the time being then we have got a performance. It would be a simple thing if the Theatre consisted of ourselves and the actor, because then we could all agree to be light-hearted about it and really enjoy things. In the old days it was like that. There was the actor-manager, apt perhaps to take himself seriously, though generally he knew that it was really all bunkum, especially if he was a good showman; then there was me, and of course I've never pretended anything, I'm far too wise to do that; and then there was you. Look back on it and you'll find that in those days you were more light-hearted. You enjoyed things more easily. Now why? Was it just because you were younger and less critical, or was it because life was easier, that the realities didn't keep cropping up? Unless I look out I shall become serious, and that we decided was the one thing not to do. You see, we've been living through the greatest transition the world has yet known, the difference between ancient and modern, old and new (I nearly said good and bad, and as we are living it most of us are oblivious to it, that goes without saying. We are making history. There now, it's out, and don't let 't turn your head. A few people have realised this and it has turned theirs.

Now where should this transition be most apparent? In the Theatre, for if the Theatre is not a mirror of today and tomorrow it cannot exist. Nothing is more old-fashioned than a ten-year-old play, and above all we of the Theatre pride ourselves being modish. Some of us think quite wrongly that we are persona, making history, instead of it being the world as a whole that is doing so. Then their heads swell, I say "their" advisedly, and some of these heads - you can notice them from the way they hold them - do belong to the world of the Theatre, and is there nothing serious in the Theatre, except perhaps the price of the seats, it is pity their heads are affected, for it is so rarely in the right direction. To come down to brass tacks, to-day the Theatre takes itself ponderously, and this is a misfortune, for to today, least of all, does it know in what direction it is heading, whether towards Romance, Realism or Symbolism, or is it just aiming at being Theatre? For if it will think itself important it will only become self-adulatory and "groovishness" is one of the deadly sins.

The profession, as it is termed by its ardent devotees, is not the most ancient in the world. I understand there is at least one more ancient. However it is getting on in

years, and one must forgive it if sometimes it gets a little tired, a little jaded. When there is great acting, there also is great writing. The last generation brought us sound acting and sound writing, not sufficient to make it great but there is hope in the new generation, with Jean Forbes Robertson a great artist following a great tradition, Valerie Taylor, Kathleen O'Regan, Charles Laughton, Frank Lawton, Raymond Massey and Noel Coward, whose temperamental acting is on a par with the greatest in any generation. In a few years time these will be names to conjure with, and doubtless they will produce great plays out of their own or other people's pockets.

These are only a few out of the hundreds striving to do something worthwhile. How easy when you are a success, how difficult when a failure. It is very sad, and my advice to you is never go on the stage for therein lies Disillusion. Never put up money for the stage for therein lies Disaster, and above all never write for the Theatre for therein lies Disappointment, Heartache, and Depression; and yet –, and there is the whole thing in a nutshell. “And yet.” These plays that follow might well be called that. For can one keep away from it once one has dabbled? In spite of Disillusion, Disaster, Disappointment, isn't there something worth while? Isn't success just ahead of one, if only one keeps on? Incurably optimistic? At least that is more hopeful than the “What is wrong with the Theatre” attitude. I'm sick of that. Of course, there is a great deal wrong with the Theatre and always will be, and “What is right with the Theatre?” is a question not usually to be found in paragraphs about the stage in the Press, since it is so much easier to decry than to praise. Yet there is much that is right with the Theatre, in fact more so than ever previously. To-day the drama holds up the mirror to life – it is no longer the playground of old conventions. It is going through a period of reformation and therefore is at war with itself. Even the whole technique of acting is changing. In other words, the Theatre is being modernised, and consequently is the butt of all who dislike progress. It was very pleasant in the old days to know that Irving was at the Lyceum, and that Ellen Terry was his leading lady; that Alexander was at the St. James's playing drawing-room drama with immaculately creased trousers; that Tree was, to his own mind, glorifying Shakespeare at his beautiful theatre and that his epigrams were seasoning the brilliant supper parties in the dome of His Majesty's; that comedy was at its highest over the way at the Haymarket; and that the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, was keeping the flag of melodrama and pantomime flying with a policy that has never since been rivalled.

Times change and with them our taste. Suppose we were able to see Irving in “The Bells,” Arthur Roberts at the Pavilion, George Alexander in “His House in Order,” Charles Wyndham at the Criterion, Marie Studholme at Daly's, and Lewis Waller in “Monsieur Beaucaire,” should we be satisfied?

I fear it would all seem unsophisticated and childish; we have changed unconsciously. The Theatre is if anything ahead of its time, or should be. Nothing dates so quickly as fashion and humour, and therefore, conservative though we may be as a People, the Theatre must move on if it is to live, and personally I believe the

Theatre will live, in spite of other attractions. Its appeal is so intimate as opposed to the mechanical diversions proffered by its rivals.

To-day the Theatre must be run commercially, otherwise it does not justify itself, and ends in the Bankruptcy Court. Hence the commercial manager, a gentleman of great airs but few graces; yet I question whether he is not a blessing in disguise, for being a business man he will recognise that the best is good enough for the public, and that though a bad play sometimes succeeds, a good play rarely fails, a mediocre one invariably does.

Everyone interested in the Theatre holds his own theory with regard to it. Should my theory agree with yours you will consider me an agreeable and intelligent man; should it disagree, then you will angrily insist that I am a fool unworthy of attention. But theories or no theories, I have noticed one or two things. More plays are failing, and failing quickly. There must be some reason for this. People may say, "Ah! Daylight saving, the high cost of dinner and one's seat, dancing, broadcasting, dirt track racing, cheap motor-cars, what do you expect?" I expect, and maintain quite reasonably, that the Theatre should hold its own against all these rival attractions, if the plays are good. Good plays are scarce, and the commercial manager, who at present apparently prefers to produce a play which he knows to be bad rather than put on no play at all, is learning his lesson. The play calmly and quietly read and adjudged good, stands a better chance than the play hastily read and decided upon, because someone has a few thousand pounds to lose. A good play, as I said before, a play of reason and clash of thought, well constructed and well played, rarely fails completely. The public, on the whole, do not miss a good thing. Occasionally a good play may go wrong, but if so the failure can generally be attributed to some specific cause, such as faulty finance. It is all nonsense to suppose that an ordinary straight play can be produced for less than five thousand pounds. If you have less than that amount, and the first night is not well received, and your notices are bad, the whole of your capital will be swallowed up immediately. But if you have five thousand pounds you can nurse your play until the notices are forgotten and the public for the play found, in which case it can run for ten or twelve weeks at least, and your money made back in either London or the provinces, with little loss and perhaps even profit. Plays should be put on for the hundredth night and the two hundredth night and every succeeding hundredth night, not for the first night. A first-night audience is a specialised one and is incapable of judging what the Great Public is going to like. Some of the greatest successes of recent years are examples of this. The Public, and by that I mean the vast beef-eating, home-loving unsophisticated middle classes, have got to be lured into the Theatre. They do not want to go very much, an outing is a tiring business anyway, and there are other and better things to do. No first nights with their excitement and hysteria for them. They want full value for their money, so they wait cannily until the play has run for a hundred nights or so, for if it has not run for that period it cannot be much good, or they wait until a friend, more adventurous than themselves, says "You simply must go. I've not enjoyed myself so much for years; never stopped laughing, or-still better-crying." How many of them

read the criticisms? Long ago have they learned to distrust that weary man who has to go to the theatre every night of his life because it is his job, and who having lost all glamour and love for the foot lights, has become blasé and bored. How can he be expected to know what the great public like? He only knows what he doesn't like himself. He has seen it all before, is not of it, merely a paid spectator, and the zest has gone. He knows what will happen, and what the characters will say next. It is all technique and convention to him. He knows only too well that Miss Whats-Her-Name will play the lead, and that she will be bright and fluffy, because that's the kind of part she always plays, and that everybody in the play will be odious to her for two hours and twenty-five minutes, and that in the last five minutes she will retaliate, for indeed it is a long worm that has no turning, and also it will be time for her to have supper with her husband, who happens to be the manager of the theatre. They know it all backwards, and small blame to them whose business is other men's pleasure if their criticisms are arrived at before they enter the theatre. From Shaw they expect this, from Maugham that, from Coward certainly the other. A story of true life may be dismissed as improbable because it has not come within their experience or learning. A fluency in writing that has taken ten years to attain may be called too easy; and they write, not as a guide to what the public like, but of their own dislike and satiety. In England to-day there are four first-class critics, and a fifth – unfortunately the fifth is a man with violent prejudices. These four are men of wide knowledge who love the Theatre and have its interests at heart, and who have also a zest for life. The rest are indifferent journalists. There is one man whose criticisms have only to be read to know that the exact opposite of what he says is true. Another, until recently the critic of one of our leading daily papers, was also their cricket reporter. Admirable duality, had it not rendered him noisily somnolent throughout his Theatrical duties. His criticism contained surprising elements of fantasy – alas! only truly appreciated by his erstwhile theatre neighbours. Critics forget that they should be of the Theatre just as much as author, the producer, the actor, and the stage hand, and it is their duty to help the Theatre as a whole by their help and co-operation. If the Theatre is wrong let them suggest remedies, let them help to improve it; let it be their pride that they do help and not hinder. Unfortunately they have neither the time – for their criticisms must be in by midnight – nor the inclination, and even if they had they are not given the space, for in England the Theatre is unimportant. We wonder why America is far ahead of us theatrically. There the entertainment business is the second largest in the country, and is treated with commensurate respect and the necessary amount of space given to praise or blame in the daily press. Here a quarter of a column must suffice, or possibly only a few lines, even if the play treated happens to be a work of genius. But to-day there are not many works of genius. Perhaps authors have got discouraged, for the thinking play, that is the play of inaction but with thought and dialogue, can only be expected to run for fourteen or fifteen weeks at the most, there is no audience for more than this. Here the critic definitely could help. Encourage the young writers, and there must be dozens of them, – do not annihilate them on their first attempts. No man's first attempts can be prodigies. More people writing more

successfully will woo the public back to the Theatre. On fourteen weeks' run there can be little profit for the risk taken. Why not cut down production expenses, adapt old scenery, so that three plays can be put on for the price of one, and so make it worthwhile to do this kind of play. I am told that the day of the drama of inaction is over. I do not believe it: as long as there is clash of thought in the play you can hold an audience. The public is tiring of crudely written plays of action. How many of the crook plays during the last boom have paid their expenses? No, the true drama of life, heightened here and there, it is true, to make it more theatrically presentable, will come into its own again. Life as it is lived is scarcely dramatic, but life untouched would not be art. Art must idealise its subject to emphasise the full values. Food that is seasoned tastes better than food that is unseasoned, and equally the dramatist must colour the characters to give them light and shade so that he can bring out the truths that he wishes to convey. Give the writers a chance, let them write instead of scrawl, and there will be successes in London once more. There will not be so much talk of what's wrong with the Theatre. Here am I doing exactly what I have told you not to do. But of course no one will ever take me seriously.

I have the honour for the second time to present for your approval three plays. "Ostriches" was my first serious attempt at writing, a play. True, I had written ten glorious, and to my mind, splendid, dramas and comedies, but luckily for myself on second thought they found their rightful home. "Ostriches," however, I sent to Mr. J.E. Fedrenne, who was kind enough to take an interest in it. After various vicissitudes the Censor stepped in and banned it on the grounds that it concerned incest. This was a surprise to me as it did not seem to be about that subject at all. However, no amount of coaxing from Mr. Fedrenne would persuade him, and so the play has remained unproduced in England. Eventually however, the play was done by an indifferent cast, and under indifferent direction in America, and failed ignominiously in New York. I was not able to see it myself and so learned nothing from the production, but I certainly learnt how personal criticism could be. "Fear" was written a year ago, and was produced last November by the Play Actors' Society on a Sunday night, with Mr. Dennis Neilson Terry in the part of Tony. Again I was unable to be present. But I understand that Mr. Terry's performance was magnificent, and since then he has bought the play, and so I shall still hope to see his interpretation. "Fear" was an interesting play to write, and still more to re-write, which I have done completely since its first production. The third play, "Twenty Houses in a Row," has been performed on a Sunday night by the Venturers Society. It differs completely in style and environment from my other plays, and is in the nature of an experiment for me. I am reminded of Mr. Disraeli's comment on his son's first novel, "What does Ben know about Dukes?" I have also been reminded of this by the critics, but in rather cruder language. Again my thanks are due to Mr. Martin Secker for his persistent faith in me.

Your humble and obedient servant,

Lathom