

Stage Spectacle that Cost a Fortune to Produce



UNPACKING THE COSTUMES ON ARRIVAL FROM LONDON.



SECTION OF THE BUTTERFLY BALLET REHEARSING.

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TWO YEARS consumed in preparation—three short hours required for its presentation. Two thousand artisans to lay its foundations—300 people to make it sparkle and glitter, and \$200,000 expended before the first performance.

Such, in brief, is the history of an English spectacle recently transplanted to America.

Months before its New York managers figured on bringing it across the sea, artists were working it out in the dingy old offices of a London playhouse, in the fog-hung studios of the British metropolis, and in the stuffy workshops of the managing director of the historic home of pantomime and the ballet master spent weeks in studying color plates, sorting, grouping, throwing this one out and ordering that one drawn on different lines.

When the plans were pronounced good, 1,400 men and women found employment on the 1,200 costumes, costing over \$10,000, and as much as the scenery. Half that number helped to build and paint ten distinct sets of scenery and to manufacture the properties. And during the months in which expert hands wrought, the players and dancers were not idle. English rehearsals move slowly and with strict attention to detail. The English dancer is not so quick to grasp instructions as her American sister, but once having mastered them, she is not to be shaken or confused.

When all this has been accomplished and Boxing night with its throng of holiday revellers is a thing of the past, the American manager appears on the scene, surveying the production with a critical eye and figuring on its possibilities in his own country. Accompanying him are his librettist, his master mechanic, his electrician and his costumer. Gradually the little party scatters, the master mechanic and the electrician to be swallowed up in that mysterious realm "behind the scenes," not to emerge until they have passed upon the novelties in stage mechanism and have studied the details of their construction. The costumer is lost in the maze of textures and colors known as the wardrobe room, and the manager and his librettist shut themselves up in their hotel to study the book and the lyrics.

Then, when the American rights are secured, it is back to New York, and silence on this particular topic for months. But under cover of silence work is progressing steadily. The book is first written to please American theater-goers, for jokes which tickled the London spectators were originally borrowed from American plays and cannot be retained. The dialogue, too, must be cut, for English humor is too slow a coming to suit Americans. The lyrics have already been heard in America. So, by the time the librettist and lyric writer finish their work, only the skeleton of the book remains, on which to hang the gorgeous costumes and the glittering scenery which comes over from England.

It is in their scenic effects and their costumes that the English stage directors eclipse all rivals. They spend not only lavishly, but well, and, in return for an expenditure of £200,000, they have an equipment so solid and of such excellence of material and workmanship that it will live to dazzle two continents.

In the meantime, the new scenes demanded by the American book are being built, the drawings for the 300 costumes needed for typically American specialties are being made in New York. This work is pretty well disposed of when the first English shipment arrives, under bond, November 1. The second installment arrives a month later, and both are divided into three lots.

The costumes are taken to a big loft in a Broadway theater where 200 men and women, the force of a good sized garment factory, are waiting to receive them and

begin the work of alteration. The scenery is divided between the theater where the production is to be made and the studio where the managers have their American productions built. The properties go to still another establishment, where they undergo a process which can be described only as Americanization. "Trick props" are regarded as certain fun-makers by American producers of spectacles.

The work in the costume department is comparatively simple, because it moves on steadily and without interruption from the arrival of the importations until the dress rehearsal. The property man and the master mechanic have more difficult tasks, for the theater in which the production is to be made is occupied by other attractions until a few days before the opening. This means two shifts of workmen, who snatch every opportunity, night or day, to install the new scenery so far as it will not interfere with the staging of the attraction already in possession of the house.

The costumes have been sent over from England in perfect condition, so the work in the American costume rooms consists principally in fitting the wardrobe to the new company. The garments are shipped in huge hampers, lined with heavy muslin, and are accompanied by a schedule which duplicates the one used by the stage and ballet master. The costumer and the stage directors confer, and chorus and ballet girls are grouped so as to require as little alteration as possible in the costumes. The girls are then given a first fitting, the alterations are made, and a week or so before the dress rehearsal a final fitting is given. For days, and nights, too, for that matter, in the small ante rooms attached to the costume department can be seen a continual procession of shapely young women and anxious-eyed dressers or wardrobe women. As fast as the costumes are fitted they are packed back into the hampers, ready for transportation to the theater, and are not opened again until the dress rehearsal.

The installation of English scenery in the ordinary New York playhouse is of itself a big task. America as yet has no theater built to accommodate the English spectacle, and the cost of making room for scenery alone is an item to stagger people who view the play from the front. For last season's reigning spectacle rock was blasted from under the theater, and a second or sub-cellar was built. This year, the entire scenic investiture is worked from the sides and the fly galleries, which necessitates the use of twenty-four sets of new lines or ropes in dropping the scenery from the lofts. An iron bridge was also erected on the right-hand side of the fly-door, in mid-air, for working the electrical effects, and the electric plant of the theater was reinforced. Forty-eight stage men worked in night and day shifts for six weeks, laying off only for matinee and evening performances. During the day rehearsals were held on the stage, but as only stage carpenters can, they dodged round the players, the music of their hammers keeping time to the strains of the over-worked pianos.

All of the fitting of scenery is done under the direction of the master mechanic. A cool head and executive ability are as essential to the success of this autocrat behind the scenes as is mechanical ability. He must have no more men under him than are absolutely necessary to the staging of the piece, as space is at a premium, and so he must train each man to act promptly and deftly. A moment's hesitation on the part of a man high up in the fly gallery will spoil a situation as surely as the failure of an actor to take up his cue. Once the scenery is installed it is rehearsed until each man works with the regularity and promptness of a piston rod in a well oiled engine.

The stage men guard not only the success of the piece, but the lives of the actors. In a spectacle, the scenery, ac-

ording to the vernacular of the profession, is practical. That is, the huge lily pods, or leaves, used in the fern scene are of sheet iron twelve times their natural size, and made to hold one of the players. The Mother Goose shoe holds twenty-four children. Both are stoutly built, but carelessness in their setting would result in dangerous falls to the players.

The property man, after checking off every article consigned to his department, and comparing these with the schedule furnished by the property man at the London theater, makes himself thoroughly familiar with the "props" in the order of the scenes in which they are to be employed. He is responsible for everything carried onto the stage from a rose for the premier in the ballet to the elephant on whose back Fatima makes her entrance.

His system consists of accurately grouping the "props" and training his men in such fashion that each employe knows which article he is to carry on and off the stage. In the newest spectacle the property men handle 3,000 articles of various sizes at each performance, and they would consider it a personal disgrace to have a chorus girl ask, "Where is my banner?" They are drilled as carefully as the men who handle the scenery, and so deftly do they manipulate the thousand and one breakable trinkets that an accident is almost unknown.

In a production of this sort, loss and breakage are serious, because many of the "props" cannot be replaced on this side of the water, and the artisans are at their wit's end when called upon to "fake" imitations of the originals. American stage mechanics are masters of trick "props," such as animals, automobiles and flying machines, but trinkets like arms, fans, banners, crowns and pottery peculiar to certain countries are more accurately reproduced by foreign manufacturers.

During the process of perfecting the mechanism of the production the actors have been selected and rehearsed. In choosing principals for a spectacle the honors must be divided between men who will make merry and women who will dress the stage. At least two well-advertised beauties are deemed essential, while the number of comedians is limited only by the roles. The masculine members of the chorus are selected solely for their vocal abilities, but the young women are divided into two classes—the workers and the show girls. The latter may have little or no ability as singers, but they must dress the front row and feast the eye by physical charms when arranged in groups. The workers are the singers and dancers, of whom less pulchritude is demanded. The show girls try the soul of the practical stage manager, and he swears by the little girl with sharp features who has to be padded to fill a costume, but who never fails to lead her line whither it should go.

Rehearsals of the 300 actors go on simultaneously in as many halls as the management can command. The ballet master has one large stage, the director of ensemble specialties another, the director who makes a specialty of ragtime numbers a third, and the principals have a smaller hall all to themselves. Each director has his assistants, varying in number from three to five, and several pianists. The work is practically unceasing—for the director, for all the groups and rows are drilled separately, the director never rests. His assistants are useful principally in keeping order and in drilling what might be termed the awkward squad.

Rehearsals begin at 10 o'clock in the morning, and, with an hour's recess at noon, last until 5:30 o'clock. Whenever a hall can be secured for the evening, they are resumed at 7 o'clock, the director making his announcement in the afternoon something after this fashion:

"The 'butterflies' meet me at 7 o'clock at

Lyric hall; the 'moths' at 7:45. All of you report at 8:15."

It is nearly midnight when the word of dismissal comes.

The amount of energy expended in one of these preliminary rehearsals is marvelous to behold. The director in his shirtsleeves, or, if the weather is cold, in a sweater takes the center of the stage and holds it with unflagging limbs and an ironclad voice all through the day and evening. One hears much of the exhausted, heavy-eyed young women who are undergoing the drilling process, but anyone who penetrates the darkened theater during a rehearsal will stumble over young women in short skirts, knickerbockers, shirt waists, dressing jackets and every form of negligence imaginable practicing as if life depended upon it. These young women have been dismissed temporarily by the director for rest, but so long as they are within reach of the music they are in motion. Instead of sighs and complaints, one hears exclamations which betray their indomitable determination to win out. There is no hint now of glittering footlights and flashing spangles, no impetus of applause, but they work with unflagging zeal.

A rehearsal is a most businesslike proceeding. There is no system of fines. Few regulations exist. Every actor knows that lack of attention, tardiness or frequent absence means a curt dismissal. There is no court of inquiry, and no apologies are accepted. If a girl wants to hold her place she shows this in actions, which mean more to the manager than recommendations or press notices.

The children are rehearsed with the rest of the ballet. For them a matron is provided, who watches over them when they are waiting for rehearsals, and accompanies them from their own hall to the large theater for the ensemble rehearsals.

Ensemble rehearsals are not held until each section of the chorus has been thoroughly drilled by its director. For instance, the chorus of a certain ragtime specialty was rehearsed separately for six weeks before the principals joined in the work. When at last each section is ready for a full rehearsal they fit together like clockwork and each group or chorus is so perfectly trained that it is not confused by those who come before or after.

The dress rehearsal is the occasion which tries the soul of every participant, from managers to humblest stage hand. The preceding rehearsals may have been almost perfect, but small defects will crop out at the dress rehearsal until every man, woman and child is fairly on edge with nervousness. This rehearsal frequently lasts until the early morning hours, when the company is dismissed to sleep during the day, reporting in time to dress for the opening performance at night.

As for the managers, the stage directors and the ballet master, there is neither rest nor sleep for them until the verdict of the public is heard. An investment of \$200,000 is practically at the mercy of the few hundred who gather to see the curtain roll up the first time on the imported spectacle.

Early Day Freight

(Continued from Fourth Page.)

unwieldy or resign their positions. There is one man in Nebraska who acted for an Omaha company for several years who carried a revolver on every trip and never had occasion to draw it from its holster.

The principal camping place for trains getting ready to leave Omaha was a point near the corner of Twenty-fourth and Cuming streets, where a creek ran toward the river, and there was grass in abundance. From the camp the wagons would come to town for their loads, and then start on the long journey across the plains. The first camping place on the road was at Elkhorn creek, about twelve miles out of Omaha, and by stages such as these the

trip was made through the eastern part of the state. Fort Kearney and Fort Sidney were the principal stopping places en route but the wise trainmaster never stopped near the station. A journey across the plains was much like a voyage at sea to the men engaged, and when they came across humankind they were, in their rejoicings, likely to go to excess. Many a day has been lost to the company after one of these orgies, and to avoid them was one of the chief duties of the trainmaster.

The worst part of the journey was after the train reached the "sand hills." These hills stood as bare bald knobs encircled with ever-shifting sands when the wagon trains moved along the valleys between them. In these valleys the sand was so deep that the wagons settled to the hubs of the wheels, and at times it would become necessary to attach half of the oxen in the train to one wagon to pull it out of the sand. Here moving was slow and difficult. One man endeavored to reduce the time between Omaha and Denver by using mules instead of oxen. When he reached the sand hills his wagons stuck; his mules sank to their knees and refused longer to pull, so that he was compelled to wait until a following train arrived to pull him out of the sand. This ended the attempt to use mules on the overland trail.

With the building of the Union Pacific the old trail was broken up, but a few years later the hauling of freight from the Missouri river to the Black Hills started. On this route mules were used to advantage, as the sand was not so deep. The "Conestoga" wagon had gone from the land, but in all other respects the work was much the same. The construction of the Elkhorn road to Valentine threw the freighters further west, but it was not until after 1885 that the railroad finally drove the last vestige of the old Overland trail and freighters from the state of Nebraska.

Carpenter's Letter

(Continued from Sixth Page.)

any of the ports of the west, but so far the western ports are getting the trade.

You can go by boat from Rotterdam to the Rhine and by canal to Paris. You can also go to Vienna by way of the Rhine, the Main and the canals into the Danube and thence on to the Black sea, or you can connect by canals with other rivers which will take you to almost any part of northern Europe. Among the canals projected are some connecting the Elbe with the Danube and also the Oder and the Vistula with that river, so that in the future it will be possible to send our goods to almost any part of Europe by water.

FRANK G. CARPENTER.



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