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The Opera of Undress

New York's First Taste of a Style that Pleases Paris.

NEW YORK, Dec. 14.—Undress always comes to the American theater from France. Before "Orange Blossoms" and its successors shocked local taste into calling for the police similar pieces had been acted at the Folies Bergere and other homes of more or less polite indelicacy in Paris.

Decollete opera has long been delayed in reaching New York, but it has finally come here just as directly from the City of Light. It made its way from Paris to Italy and Russia several years ago, but New York is only now witnessing this product of the Opera Comique.

In a way this kind of opera has a native origin. Jules Massenet, who has done more to make it possible than any other French composer, first wrote operas of undress to display the beauty of Sybil Sanderson, who had made her great success in his opera, "Manon." Camille Saint-Saens was not alone dedicating his talents to the same purpose and composed "Phryne," in which the beautiful American soprano appeared at the Opera Comique.

"Thais," which was sung at the opera in 1884, was the last opera especially composed for the American soprano, who had also appeared in "Le Mage" and had, in fact, made her first appearance in "Escarmonde," composed especially for her by Jules Massenet.

The opera of undress as an art form pleased the Paris public too much to be dependent on the charms of one singer. There were other beautiful Americans to ravish the eyes of the Paris public. To appear in scant draperies to the accompaniment of pleasing music became in a measure the specialty of the American singer at the Opera Comique.

Mary Garden has been the most recent favorite there and for her Camille Erlanger composed "Aphrodite," which in theme as well as in costume was declared the most decollete opera that had yet been sung in Paris. Oscar Hammerstein, with all his generosity toward the modern French repertoire, has not had the courage to announce "Aphrodite," nor has the work been sung as yet outside of the Opera Comique.

"Thais" has never been compelled to stand on its merits as an opera, but has always had the pictorial assistance of some noted stage beauty. After Miss Sanderson came Miss Garden, who has not yet sung the opera in Paris, as it is not in the repertoire of the Opera Comique, but first donned the draperies of the Egyptian courtesan in Brussels. In has already been settled that she is to make her first appearance as a member of the company at the Opera in Paris next season in this opera.

It was natural that no noted stage beauty as Lina Cavallieri should have thought of the role as a good medium for her talents and more than two years ago she made her first essay as the Massenet heroine. This was in St. Petersburg, where she sang with the famous Battistini.

Later the two appeared in the same opera in Rome and Milan. Such triumphs did not satisfy Mrs. Cavallieri, who knew that no audience in the world would become so enthusiastic over Massenet's works as the Parisians, and above all over "Thais."

Mrs. Cavallieri had never before attained the heights of the Opera, all her appearances in Paris previously having been made at the Italian performances in the Theater Sarah Bernhardt. With "Thais" she was able to win success at the National Academy of Music, as the Paris opera house is officially called.

Faithful to beauty and Massenet, the audience crowded the theater at every performance, and their desire to witness this traditional combination had not been satisfied when the August deadness fell on Paris. So Mrs. Cavallieri had to return to

exhibit again the beauties of Italian outlines revealed to the accompaniment of such characteristically Gallic music as Massenet's.

None of the women who have succeeded best as Thais has been French. Sybil Sanderson had long been in Paris and, unlike her successor, Mary Garden, spoke and sang French as if it were her native tongue. She was even more of an American, however, than Miss Garden, as she



LINA CAVALIERI AS THAIS

was born in San Francisco. Lina Cavallieri, who is a Roman, sang in Paris in French for the first time when she appeared as Thais at the Opera.

"Phryne," which Camille Saint-Saens wrote for Miss Sanderson to sing at the Opera Comique, was more frankly revelatory than "Thais," but it never gained the same popularity, and ladies of the opera who feel that they could show themselves and their talents to advantage in works of the decollete French school have always chosen "Thais." Anybody who has seen Miss Sanderson's photograph in the role of the heroine will appreciate that she went quite as far as any of her successors in the art of delicately disrobing for the operatic stage.

It was in "Phryne" that Jane Harding, who had been well known in Paris before she decided to sing in opera, was pelted with vegetables, fish and similar missiles by the furious wives of some of her former admirers who had on her first appearance in public the opportunity to give expression to their feelings. She naturally retired under such a fusillade and "Phryne" disappeared along with her.

Miss Garden's draperies as Thais are of pale pink, brocaded in gold. The boundaries of satin are conveniently indicated on the back by a large bun of brilliant. There is a voluminous cloak that occasionally covers this single flesh colored drapery.

When she has begun to repent, as the heroines of Massenet usually do after their unsparing revelations of beauty in the



MARY GARDEN AS APHRODITE

THEODORE CHALIAPINE AS MEPHISTOPHELES

opening acts, Miss Garden is draped in many folds of pale blue filmy weaves, diaphanous but so numerous that no suggestion of outline is visible beyond the contour of an elbow, which, like, Katisha's, was worth going miles to see.

Mme. Cavallieri, who also wears pink, makes her costume much more ornate with jewels, which render the costume heavier but serve to outline more sharply some of the curves that might otherwise be indistinct by reason of the filmy drapery. Miss Garden wears a long satin train, whereas Mrs. Cavallieri wears draperies that barely touch the ankles.

In disrobing made the scene startling enough to give new life to Boito's "Mephistopheles," which has had no sustained popularity at any time.

In the course of time M. Chaliapine came to New York and his half naked devil has been on view this season at the Metropolitan. Perhaps New York has not been shaken so deeply as other cities have by the exhibition, and it is certain that the audiences witnessing this exposed devil have not given any demonstrative evidence of great enjoyment.

The exposed chest of the demon is not shown when he appears on the scene. He is wrapped in a voluminous whirl about him in the completest abandonment of the dance, while Mephistopheles writes in deepest thought. Suddenly he rises and throws back the cloak, revealing his bared flesh to the gaze of the polite public that gathers at the Metropolitan.

In spite of the animated dancing and the effectiveness of the tableaux when the enormous Russian rises to his feet—he is well over six feet—the audiences remain rather composed. There is the usual frigid handclapping that follows the fall of the curtain.

According to operatic tradition the enthusiasm awakened by this scene should be frenetic. Victor Maurel, who is an authority in every device of operatic mise en scene, gave his opinion as to the rather cold manner in which the act is received here.

"The dancers, as the audience perfectly well knows," he said, "are dressed, while Mephistopheles appears partly nude. The contrast is sufficient to destroy the interest of the audience."

It is more probable, however, that New Yorkers have not acquired as yet any great sympathy for low cut opera in whatever form it may be manifested.

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LURKING DANGERS OF THE DECK

How Friends Become Estranged on Five Aces in a Poker Game.

We note with an acute degree of pain that in a somewhat unfriendly controversy between "Sam" Clark and "Bill" Stoffel, of the thriving young city of Big Creek, Ark., the former was penetrated by a 44-caliber bullet discharged from a "gun" in the hands of Mr. Stoffel and now hovers precariously near to the edge of this mortal shore.

The two gentlemen had married sisters, and though not consanguineously related should, we hold, have adjusted their disagreement through methods more diplomatic than those used.

It appears that Messrs. Clark and Stoffel had for a day and a night been engaged in a friendly controversy at poker, with the intent and purpose that one or the other should arise from the combat sole possessor of their united funds. But to both fortune had been alike. First "Sam" and then "Bill" would lead. There seemed no end to it all, but they stuck doggedly to business, dealt and said little.

The fatal last hand was preceded by a joyous putting up of all the funds both men had. When each had stripped himself of his ultimate coin, Samuel cheerfully laid down a hand containing four aces, while William, with equal confidence displayed four kings and an ace.

The deeply intiate probably will remember that five is an unlawful number of aces for a single deck to hold.

Mr. Clark was, with reason, it must be admitted, much pained. He drew a long knife from his scabbard and was about to express his views with great force when Mr. Stoffel's gun went off, and the incident was closed. The sheriff now holds the states and Mr. Stoffel in escrow.—St. Louis Times.

For the last five years Russia, Italy and then Monte Carlo have been admiring the performance of a Russian basso who was as wonderful as an actor as a singer. Above all, he was praised for a performance of Mephistopheles, in which he left the upper part of his body bare and covered it with a shiny powder that gleamed in the footlights.

On the strength of this single role the fame of this Russian traveled from St. Petersburg all over Europe. This nuance

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