

Public Taste and Immodesty at the Theaters

THE question of what should or should not be shown at the theater is to be decided by law at Des Moines, if the present agitation continues in the passage of the ordinance pending before the council of that city. In debating the matter, Mr. Anderson, dramatic editor of the Des Moines Capital, writes thus:

No such hysteria and so little common sense is manifested in the wholesale arraignment of the stage by moral reformers that to advocate calmer and saner consideration of the subject seems futile. Heedless of the fact that the subject has been thoroughly discussed in these columns in the past, that so far as my own views are concerned there is little to add. But I have too much pride in the city's progress to stand by without protest at an attempt to set the town back, theatrically, into the days of the Puritans.

The original theater ordinance introduced in the city council this week is the height of ridicule of the entire country. The motive which inspired the drafting of the ordinance may have been sincere. I shall not question that. But in the over-zealous attempt to curb indecent and pernicious exhibitions, a literal interpretation and enforcement of the ordinance, if passed, would prohibit the presentation of any play which treated of crime or suicide. This would mean the banishment from the local stage of the dramatic necessities of a moral lesson involve in some form or other the tragic incidents of humanity. We should have to go to Omaha to see "Hamlet," which is filled with murder and suicide; to Kansas City, or some other city equally infamous in dramatic liberty, to see "The Thief," for theft is a crime, and Chicago and New York might be expected to revive "Uncle Tom's Cabin" for the amusement of provincial visitors who would be denied its exhilarating details at home.

Of course, it is quite improbable that the ordinance will be passed in its original form. I only cite its introduction as an instance of how blindly and violently the reformers seek to deal in matters pertaining to the stage.

The stage has its viciousness, just as there are occasional defects in the moral standard in every art, in every great institution of human endeavor. The theater is a great institution, and its influence is wide and appealing more widely to the masses than any of the other arts. The drama should be nurtured with the most intellectual care. It is needless to say that all those who have the welfare of the public at heart will insist that the theater should be free from the stage and further the progress of dramatic art. But the work to be effected must be done by those who have thoroughly investigated the conditions, who are qualified to point out the evils that demand attention and to suggest a remedy that will not work a hardship upon the legitimate part of the industry.

In the interest of simple justice it is to be deplored that the reformers who most loudly condemn the stage know the least about it. It is fair to condemn any institution without making first a careful study of the conditions and having specific knowledge upon which to base complaint.

I admit that there is indecency and vulgarity on the stage. There are some plays in the lower order of theatricals, but indecency and vulgarity in the theater are not to be found in the more select playhouses. But in curing these evils never will be accomplished by frantic exercises embracing the theaters and all that there is in them. The question must be faced calmly; the reformers must know whereof they speak, and must be able to distinguish between that which is bad and that which is good.

It is a difficult matter to define just what indecent or immoral in the theater means. It comes to question of nudity, there might be a greater display of it in the boxes at the opera than on the stage. The more seen plays heralded as the most indecent exhibitions, which are nothing more than repulsive vulgar. Again there are plays which, in their presentation and language, would be passed without question by the self-appointed censor in their own persons are more immoral than the "indecent" which cause the purists to shrink with horror.

In my opinion the only way to have a moral stage is to cultivate a healthy taste for amusement and exercise it.

In his closing paragraph Mr. Anderson has summed up the whole of the remedy. Very lately some comment has been made in these columns on the topic, the conclusion then being that the public must divide responsibility with the managers for the conditions complained of. The cultivation of a healthy moral sentiment must not be placed entirely on one or the other of the parties to the controversy, either each must contribute in some way, each doing his share to bring about the result so generally desired. The managers can assist in this by refusing to produce a play of any kind whose chief attraction will depend on its suggestiveness, its immorality or its close approach to the immodest or indecent. Such things are not essential to the theater, and the manager does not strengthen his case when he refers to "Hamlet" as containing the elements of violence frequently one hears some unthinking person denouncing the Bible because within its sacred pages are to be found stories of violence and immorality. These are but the sordid depths of sin against which the theater is to be raised. The manager's duty is to provide for the uplift of mankind and for the spread of morality and the encouragement of right living. The effect of a properly digested and correctly presented play is the same. No objection may be lodged against the theater on this score. Nor is it puritanical to ask that this be not lost sight of.

One of the difficulties the earnest workers in the world of the theater encounter is that the vulgar mind readily seeks out vulgarity and will exchange its coin for the opportunity to witness a display of immodesty that has only its vulgarity to commend it to notice. To the healthy mind no danger resides in such a condition. It is only when evil befalls itself in garments of wit and sparkles under the fair cloak of intellectual respectability that it assumes the attitude of genuine danger. Men and women have lost but little in this matter because some things that were considered immodest a few years ago are no longer looked upon as such. Custom has changed. Many things are permitted nowadays that a generation ago would not have been tolerated. For example, in the seventies Lydia Thompson's "British Blondes" were considered the very acme of daring, and the debate that followed them in their tour across the country was loud and fierce. Today the statuesque Lydia and her fair companion would be looked upon as rather mild, when compared to some of the displays made in connection with musical comedies and burlesque shows. Whether the world is better or worse for this change is not in point; the change has come over the habits of thought, and people are no longer shocked at the appearance of a woman in tights on the stage. It is only when the appearance is accompanied by suggestive or allusion that it becomes offensive to good manners.

This shifting view of public morals has other aspects. In no way has it abandoned the basic principle of honesty in individual responsibility. Certain things have been wrong since the beginning of man's career as a responsible being. Aside from these fundamentals, which are too obvious to require specification, "morality" has long been a matter of geography. Conduct considered improper in one locality is considered correct in another, and it is unwise to lay down hard and fast rules on all points that might be mentioned in order to bring the whole question into ridicule. And the pervasiveness of man's nature is that he prefers to do those things he ought not to do. One case will serve to illustrate. When Arnold Daly first understood the basic principle of honesty in individual responsibility, he was in New York. He was such to be occasioned by the project. Press and pulpit rallied and thundered against the drama as immoral and unfit for public presentation, and the authorities were bestirred to action. Only

Regulation by Ordinance Not Likely to Bring About Reformation Sought -- Cultivation of Healthy Amusement Appetite the One Remedy

one way to tell exactly appeared, and that was to see the performance. So Mr. Daly was permitted to go ahead with a single performance. On that night the jam at the theater exceeded anything New York had ever witnessed. Men and women struggled madly to get inside, and as high as \$5 was paid for a seat. The police reported against the drama, and the actors were put under arrest for giving an immoral performance. The case dragged along some months, and finally the judge handed down his opinion, to the effect that Mrs. Warren's "Profession" is not an immoral play. An effort was made to revive it, and no one cared to see it. It had lost the attractive quality of evil. This argument proceeds in a circle always, and comes back to the point taken by Mr. Anderson: "Cultivate a healthy

At the Omaha Theaters

"The Traveling Salesman" and "The Prince of Tonight," Both New, Coming to the Boyd—"The Lion and the Mouse" to Have a Week at the Krug—Orpheum Offers Vaudeville and Gayety Extravaganza—Harry Lauder, Julian Eltinge and Others at the Auditorium.

THE "Traveling Salesman," James Forbes' latest comedy success, which will be seen under the management of Henry B. Harris at the Boyd theater for four nights, beginning tonight, is a comedy of character and is distinguished by an abundance of wholesome humor, energetic action, breezy dialogue and sympathetic touches of human emotion, that mark the author's previous offering, "The Chorus Lady." Mark Smith will be seen in the role of Bob Blake, the jovial "knight of the road," who finds the romance of his life in the Grand Crossing railroad station, where he has been marooned on a cheerless Christmas day. Miss Miriam Nesbitt will appear in the part of the sympathetic station operator and ticket agent, who shares her meager Christmas lunch with the persuasive stranger and presently finds her heart enmeshed in the tendrils of his love. The story of "The Traveling Salesman" is simple and to the point. Beth Elliott is about to lose an apparently worthless piece of land through a tax sale. A professional lover, Franklin Royce, enters into a plan with a millionaire to buy it for her. He knows that the railroad wants it and will pay any price to acquire it. During a poker game in the second act, which incidentally is the most laughable creation that ever emanated from the brain of a playwright, Royce becomes intoxicated and babbles about the scheme to Blake, who is already head over heels in love with the girl. Blake anticipates the intended flank movement of the enemy and plans to block it. This impetuous action on his part involves him in all sort of predicaments and imperils his position with his firm. His action is misconstrued by the girl and, for a while, his affair of the heart is in danger, although before the final curtain falls everything is straightened out and the pair are happily married. Throughout the entire action of the play mirth runs riot and the audience is never for a moment without a hearty laugh. Others in the company which helped to make the piece such an emphatic success during its metropolitan runs are James O'Neil, Jr.; Clifford Stark, Lawrence Edwards, Theodore Kehrwald, Daniel Jarrett, Guy B. Hoffman, Emmett Shackleford, Robert Hamilton, Miss Diana Huneker, Miss Marion Stephenson and Miss Virginia Hamilton.

One of the latest musical comedies, namely, "The Prince of Tonight," will begin a three nights' engagement at Boyd's, starting Thursday evening, with a matinee on Saturday. The cast is headed by Henry Woodruff, the well known leading man, and serves to introduce him for the first time in Omaha as a musical comedy star. "The Prince of Tonight" has several musical comedies of the present day have, a thoroughly defined plot, dealing with the old legend that whoever is at the blooming of a century plant his wish will be granted for twenty-four hours. Mr. Woodruff, who plays the hero, utters this wish and is transported from a poor college boy into the Prince of Lunitania, a mythical land of fairies, dreams and moonlight. He goes through the usual vicissitudes that occur to the hero of a musical comedy, but finally wins the girl of his heart and everything ends happily. Among the successful songs are "I Wonder Whose Kissing Her Now," "You're a Dear Old Man After All," "Can This Be Love," "Her Eyes Are Blue for Yale." Miss Ruth Peebles, late prima donna of Savage's forces; Viola Hopkins, Margaret McBride, Arthur Aylesworth, John C. Leach, Joseph Herbert, Jr., Law Lawson, Edward Beck and forty or more show girls and brothers assist Mr. Woodruff.

In "The Lion and the Mouse" Charles Klein, its author, has succeeded in drawing clean-cut, powerful studies of two widely contrasting types. He portrays in "Ready Money Ryder" the enormously rich man whose life is guided solely by business principles and he draws with firm, sure touch and masterful skill, the woman of tenderness and sympathy to whom the severe, cold man of business is little better than a monster. He has conceived a probable situation in which the conflict of these two types is one of force and semibrutality on one side and lightning-like keenness and brilliancy on the other. He makes the wit of "The Mouse" stronger than the might of "The Lion." The play is interesting, convincing and persuasively. The forthcoming local engagement of "The Lion and the Mouse" at the Krug on Sunday for a week's engagement is particularly interesting, from the fact that it will be offered for the first time at popular prices, thereby giving opportunity to those of moderate income to witness this alluring play. The cast is still at the \$1.50 standard, as is also the scenic surroundings. The cast contains many sterling, standard players, prominent among whom may be mentioned Oliver Doug Wilson, Clifford Leigh, Seymour Stratton, William H. Burton, Walter Allen, George Casanova, Casselberry, Edith Barker, Ida Glenn, Rose E. Tapley, Dora L. Allen, Elizabeth De Witt and Ella Craven. Matinees will be given as usual on Wednesday and Saturday.

The Lombardi Grand Opera Company has toured the United States for many years, visiting this city often in its travels, but Impresario Mario Lombardi promises that this year he will bring the most complete company that he has ever brought here. Included in the company of 147 persons is an orchestra of fifty and a chorus of sixty, both far superior to any orchestra or chorus that has ever visited Omaha with this or any other company in recent years. Thirty-seven principals will interpret the master works of the world's most famous composers. Madam Ester Adaberto, dramatic soprano of the Metropolitan Grand Opera company last season, will head the

about from manager to manager for months before a hearing was had. Mr. Short proposes to obviate this difficulty. He has organized a society, the purpose of which is to give the managers an opportunity to see what they are buying. The proper enjoyment and erected by a capable company. To the performance will be invited producing managers, actors and critics, and the work of the author will be tried out under such conditions as will show if it has merit. Several plays have already been produced, and the merit of the plan is generally commended. Mr. Short's prospectus says:

The American Dramatic Guild, an organization formed for the purpose of aiding playwrights in getting a hearing for their plays, and for giving actors and actresses an opportunity of appearing before managers, has been successfully launched in New York, under the leadership of Frank Lea Short. The plan includes the creating of chapters of the guild in cities all over the United States, so that plays may be given on tour. All plays will be carefully read and considered for production. The plan also includes the publication of a little magazine containing information regarding the guild called "The Prompt Book." Playwrights wishing to submit plays are requested to address to Secretary, 405 Astor Theater building, 1531 Broadway, New York City. Copies of the Prompt Book will be mailed free on application.

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