

Do Improper Plays Curse Those Who Produce Them?



Sadie Martinot, Once "The Toast of Three Cities," Now Mentally Unbalanced and Destitute, a Charge of the Actors' Fund.

By William A. Brady
The Distinguished Manager and Play Producer.

IT is my conviction that a bad play—vicious or immoral—is a boomerang which sooner or later strikes one or all of the participants in it. This punishment is well deserved by those who exploit improper plays. The bad play is well named, because it is bad for the actor, the author, the manager and the audience.

I hold that the public who make up the audiences are most to blame. Going to a theatre where you know an improper play is being produced is like going to grocer's or butcher's where you know tainted provisions are sold. If you patronize such vendors you deserve the merchandise you get for your money. The public is most to blame because the public is the patron and buys what it wants.

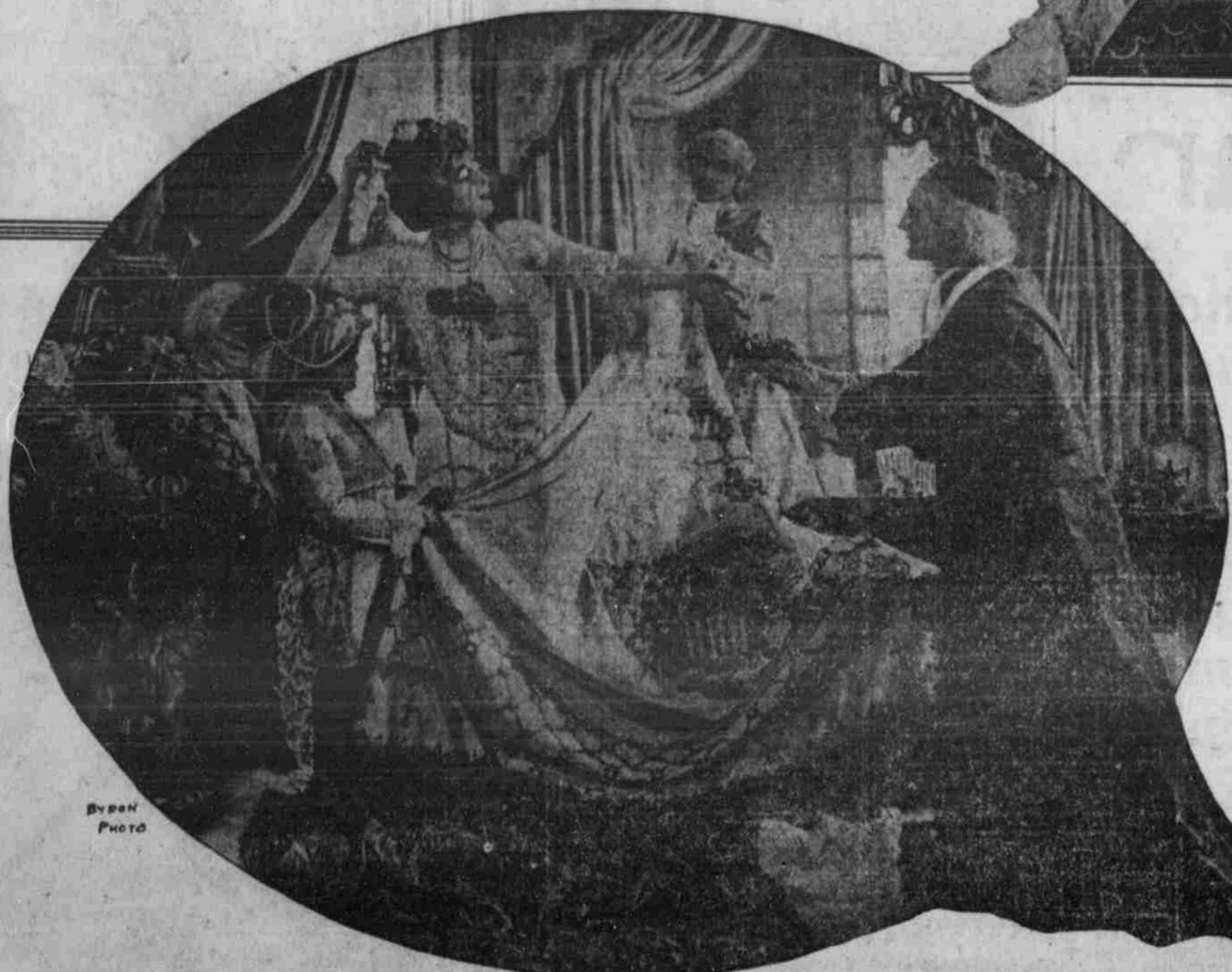
Next in the roll of responsibility is the one who conceived the play. The author is morally responsible for the idea which he develops into play form. If that idea is corrupt, the product will be corruption. The man who conceives, produces and sends such wares is guilty at least as a moral lawbreaker.

Third in the order of responsibility and blameworthiness is the manager. He knows what he is doing. He buys the play knowing what he is doing. With the same clear vision he engages the cast. Perfectly aware of the prurience of the output, he rehearses the play, advertises it, and on the first night of its production offers it to the public in the guise of entertainment. He can never dodge his share of the blame on the plea that he didn't understand what it was all about.

On the other hand the actor can truthfully set up that plea. He needs an engagement, he accepts the first offer he gets, and often signs a contract without full knowledge of what he will be expected to do and say. Having signed the contract he is to a great extent in the hands of his manager, who directs his fortunes. Very earnestly do I assert that the player is least of all to blame for the vicious play in which he acts a part. He is not a free will agent. His necessity makes him a puppet. His sense of responsibility often makes him determine to go through with a thing which his conscience does not approve, because he believes he should be true to the man who has given him his job and his chance.

Yet the punishment often falls most heavily on the person least responsible, the actor or actress who has originated or even followed some one else in a vicious role. Instances come readily to the mind of actresses who, because of success in such roles have gone to the muck heap of fate for the playing of those parts. In other words, the public that patronized the play and made the actress temporarily popular, neglects, chills and starves her, or would do so, were it not for the saving grace of the Actors' Fund. The public is a fickle master. It is curious, but it is not constant.

The public's punishment of the player who has sinned against its good taste and its standard of morality is a boomerang. It is not like the sudden kick of a gun, but like the slow, sure rounding of a cannon, guided by a determined, relentless runner. That punishment is as sure as the revolutions of the earth.



Mrs. Leslie Carter as the infamous Du Barry. Mrs. Carter Has Been Bankrupt and Sued by Many Creditors Since She Appeared in the Play.

Notoriously Bad Plays and Misfortunes of Players in Them

- "THE TURTLE" and "THE MARRIAGE GAME" were two disreputable plays in which Sadie Martinot took the leading part. Miss Martinot has declared that she has had nothing but misfortune since. She is now penniless, her mind gone and an inmate of the Actors' Fund Charity Home.
- "DU BARRY," a play in which Mrs. Leslie Carter impersonated the most notorious woman of the court of Louis XV., who for her extravagance was beheaded during the French revolution. Mrs. Carter recently became a bankrupt.
- "THE DEGENERATES," a drama which portrays the most deplorable tendencies of modern society, was prominent in the repertory of Lily Langtry. Since she appeared in that play Mrs. Langtry's vogue with theatrical managers and the public has steadily declined.
- "SAPHO," a play so indecent that Olga Nethersole was arrested and tried before a New York judge and jury for producing it. Since that affair Miss Nethersole has lost much of her former favor with American audiences.
- "THE CLEMENCEAU CASE" was even worse in its affront to social conventions than was "Sapho." Pearl Eytling appeared in "The Clemenceau Case" as a star. Not long afterward she became a victim of drugs and died miserably.
- "ORANGE BLOSSOMS," the very boldest and most impudent of attempts to corrupt theatre audiences presented Pilar Morin as its leading actress. That great artist never regained her former status. She is now giving dramatic art lessons in a Harlem, New York, flat.
- OFFENSIVE REALISM in playing such characters as Juliet, Charlotte Corday and the heroine of "The Queen's Necklace," is held responsible for the gradual decline of Mrs. James Brown Potter's popularity.
- "THE CONQUERORS" and "The Girl from Rector's" were plays containing scenes offensive to public taste. Paul M. Potter, their author, has lost much of the reputation and fortune gained by his dramatization of Du Maurier's "Tilby."
- OFFENSIVE BURLESQUES—Michael Leavitt, the most celebrated producer of this sort of entertainment, recently was driven to accept a benefit to relieve his pressing necessities.

younger. I produced several plays that were far from creditable to me. One was the "Clemenceau Case." Another was "Thou Shalt Not," a play by Albert Ross. Yet when the city authorities interfered with the performances of "Thou Shalt Not," I asked them to read their Cymbeline. The motive and action were similar. The plays differed in power of treatment and in locale.

But I was not responsible, as my critics have said, for that wretched play, "The Turtle." I owned an interest in "The Turtle," and disposed of it. At the last for personal reasons I rehearsed it. Grace George was playing a small part in it, and to relieve her from the embarrassment of speaking some dreadful lines I rehearsed the play, and while rehearsing modified it. The cast included the since unfortunate Sadie Martinot. Miss George disliked the piece and the character she played. Otherwise, had she continued playing in that kind of roles her goal would have been far different from the one she has reached.

It has been said that a new generation of playgoers arises every five years. It is true that there is a new one at least every ten years. This new generation of playgoers overflows with curiosity and runs to see everything that is new. The more piquant it is the better. The bad play draws the crowd. There is no use denying this, but let me illustrate the situation by a parallel case. Take a great painter of portraits, say Sargent or Chase. They have painted superb portraits. Suppose that either of these artists should paint a suggestive figure for a vicious purpose and exhibit it in

a Fifth Avenue window. A greater crowd would rush to see that painting than would ever gather to see meritorious portraits by those eminent painters. But watch what follows.

The crowd, its curiosity sated, becomes disgusted. There is a revision of feeling. Those artists have committed a crime against good taste and morality, and slowly but surely, the crowd that patronized begins its punishment. Unfair? Yes. Unjust? Unquestionably so. But that is the way of the public whom we have offended.

I said that the bad play, by which I mean filth for filth's sake, was bad for all connected with it. It is true. The vicious play reacts upon the audience by vitiating its taste. That playgoer who has been following the worst plays he could find ceases to enjoy the good ones. It reacts upon the author by corrupting his judgment. It so falsifies his standards that he becomes uncertain of what the public will like or won't like. It weakens his confidence in his own estimate of material. It paralyzes his power to do good work.

The punishment is that he becomes unable to write a clean, fine play. His mind has become tainted. Such an author, one who is a pioneer among writers of the wrong kind of plays for the American stage, came to me only to-day with a play on an impossible theme. He wanted me to buy a comedy drama on "War Babies." He has a brilliant mind, he is a charming fellow, but his own work is a Frankenstein that is destroying him.

Yes, the manager is punished, summarily and severely punished. Public opinion is his judge. The public seems to recognize and condone youthful follies of management. Charles Frohman, long ago, produced one French farce after another, but he would produce no more. He wanted to produce only fine, clean plays. He was true to his resolution. He was the manager beyond all others whose face was turned toward the sun. I can easily imagine the look on his face when he said: "Why fear death? It is a beautiful adventure." His conscience was clear. The public forgave his early errors and taste in judgment. I believe it has forgiven mine.

The one exception to my own reformation in this regard is "The Family Cupboard." But I regard that play as big drama, and that it contained a lesson that was unforgettable and profitable to members of a family. And I have closed that. But the public makes of the manager who persists in producing filth a social Ishmael.

The actor suffers doubly who is engaged in the production of a bad play. His own standards of art fall beneath his feet. The vengeance of the public strikes hardest at him, because he is the concrete object, the symbol of the bad taste and viciousness that have been thrust upon them.

Even the manager who has engaged the player for a certain line of parts hasn't the courage to give him or her a chance in an entirely different class of characters, so that in the profession and out of it, it is possible and probable that the brand of the evil part that has been played will remain upon the originator of it.

When a man has reached fifty he acquires a true sense of values. At least the true man does. He leaves his mistakes behind him and he presses forward to the finer, better things of life. He cares more for his family, more for his standing in the community, more for words of genuine commendation from the worthy. There is more of life behind him than ahead of him. He wants to make that remainder of life upright and free from mistakes. That time has come to me. My wife aided my determination, and I frankly avow my resolution that no bad play will ever be produced by me, or that I will help in the direction of it. Nor will I permit my wife or daughter to appear in one.

We are at the dawn of a great new industry. Almost all things are possible to the motion picture art. We will see it used in the schools and colleges. It will be one of the great forces of this century, unless managers with muddy minds inject filth into it in the name of drama.



Mrs. Lily Langtry Whose Professional Decline Began Soon After She Produced "The Degenerates."

William A. Brady
Asserts the History
of the Stage
Shows That Every
Bad Play Brings a
Punishment to
Actor, Author and
Manager



Olga Nethersole in a Scene from "Sapho." Since Her Arrest for Producing the Play Her Popularity Has Waned.



Sadie Martinot in the Much-Criticised Disrobing Scene in "The Turtle."