

# ANNIE RUSSELL AS PUCK

## A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM.



Photos by Halls & Helleners

### SHAKESPEARE THEN AND NOW

#### HAS THE TWENTIETH CENTURY IMPROVED ON THE SEVENTEENTH IN DRAMATIC PRESENTATIONS

Have we moderns, producing and acting in the twentieth century plays written by a bard of the seventeenth century, constructed for the exigencies of that period, made an advancement in art, or should the plays of Shakespeare be presented with such an investiture as the author was accustomed to? The drama of every age is conditioned by various influences brought to bear on the playwright; the physical conditions of the theater itself, the methods of the actors and the audience.

Thus there have been three distinct steps in evolution of the English drama. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries it was essentially a drama of rhetoric, "full of stately speeches and high sounding terms;" throughout the eighteenth century it was mainly a drama of conversation, and during the nineteenth century it has become a drama of illusion.

Acting in Elizabethan days was a representative rather than a representative art. Instead of losing himself in the part, the actor of that period lost the part in himself. The thespian of that time—usually a round, pert-wigged fellow who saved the air with his hands and wore a passion of tatters—wishes all eyes to be directed upon himself and never desired to be merely considered a component part of a stage picture. Stage

Imagine Annie Russell playing in "A Midsummer Night's Dream" amid such a rude environment as that!

Upon the assurance from some functionary that all was in readiness, the first person seen by the audience would be that of an urchin who would appear, bearing a board upon which had been roughly painted "Act I, Scene I, Athens, the Palace of Theseus," thus easily and effectively transforming at least for the audience the rough planking and general sordidness into the royal hall of the proud and mighty duke.

The fact that the stage was surrounded on three sides by standing spectators forced the actor to emulate the platform orator. Set speeches were introduced bodily into the text of a play, the most notable example being in the second act of "A Midsummer Night's Dream," where the progress of the action of the piece was impeded by these interlarded bits, which, although a portion of the original version, have been expurgated as unnecessary in a revision of the manuscript for later presentations. Soliloquies were common and formal dialogues prevailed. By convention, all characters, regardless of their education or station in life were considered capable of talking, not only in verse, but in poetry. Thus, in the play just referred to, we see Quince, a carpenter; Snug, a joiner; Puck, a fellow maker; Bottom, a tinker, and Bottom, a weaver, conversing in the most high flown and scholarly way at intervals concerning the old story of Pyramus and Thisby.

Nowadays, elaborateness of stage illusion has made spoiled children of us all. We must have been pampered with mechanical toys until we have lost the art of playing without them. Where have our imaginations gone that we must have real rain upon the stage? Shall we labor for real snow before long, that must be

kept in cold storage against the spring and summer seasons? A longing for concreteness has been fostered by our fantasy. We then-treasures have come to manhood and have put away childish things. No longer do we dream ourselves in a garden of springtime blossom; we only look upon canvas trees and painted flowers. No longer are we charmed away to that imagined spot where journeys end in lover's meetings; we can only look upon love in a parlor and notice that the furniture is natural.

Modern stage craft in the theatre has made possible many worthy things that were not dreamed of in the philosophy of Shakespeare. But the financial outlay to accomplish this end is fairly staggering. We have outgrown our primitive simplicity, but perhaps we have not yet arrived at the age of wisdom.

When playgoers have progressed to another century or two they may see fit to discard some of the trappings of the present day drama, becoming again like little children, content with simple toys and in that happy day the production of "A Midsummer Night's Dream" will not approximate an outlay which seems all but foolhardy, such for example as the Wagnerian & Kemmer production, which Annie Russell is offering this year, which required an outlay close upon \$50,000.

#### CRUCIAL MOMENT IN A PLAY.

Something About the "Great Scene" of This Season.

What is the strongest scene in any modern play? This is the text that has furnished substance for a decidedly heated discussion recently in New York, and has been taken part in by theatregoers, dramatic critics, managers and actors. The discussion has been intensely interesting and decidedly instructive. Scenes have been pointed out from every sort of a play, from the Broadway success to the Bowers thriller, and the pickers and choosers have presented all kinds of reasons why they think their choice should be first choice.

In the effort to decide on the one "great scene," no end of good has been done; attention has been directed to many almost unheard of plays, and it has been shown that many plays are greatly admired that have not succeeded with the vast army of the persons who attend the theatre. But what it has done best is to bring strongly forward the essence of what a really "great scene" must be. Told in a few words it is this: A great scene must be vital human nature, not exaggerated, but intensely dramatic. More than this, it must come just at the psychological moment of the play; it must be worked up to logically, naturally, and with every due sense of dramatic propriety.

After much deliberation, it has finally been decided that the great scene of the present decade is the so-called "Madonna Scene," in Blanche Walsh's new Clyde Fitch play, "The Straight Road." Of course this decision was not arrived at without endless argument. The strongest objection was that the scene is mainly great because of the artistic ability of Blanche Walsh, conceded to be the greatest emotional actress on the American stage today. The argument was advanced that almost any scene might be called a "great scene" in her hands. But the result arrived at in the end was that this particular portion of "The Straight Road" is far and away the greatest scene of many years; that it is a throbbing bit of intensity, concerning which there have appeared more ethical and semi-religious reviews than have been written of any offering on Broadway in many years.

The scene occurs in the third act,

where Miss Walsh, in the role of Moll O'Hara, a girl of the slums, is led to believe that her lover has discarded her. She has become a reformed woman for his sake, and now in a spasm of hopelessness and utter despair she determines to forget her former avowal to walk the straight road and to drown her troubles in a wild debauch. Like a mad woman she tears at the furniture; she grasps a flask of liquor and pulls the cork with her teeth; she tears the shade from the window, and then stands quivering with the liquor in her upraised hand. For the sweeping away of the window covering has flooded the room with light, and one stray moonbeam illumines welded a picture of the Virgin hung on the wall. The woman falls on her knees before the picture of the Mother of Sorrows in an agony of contrite weeping. The scene is almost terrible.

#### PUCK AND THE FAIRIES.

From Hazlitt's "Characters of Shakespeare's Plays."

Puck is the leader of the fairy band . . . a madcap sprite, full of wantonness and mischief, who laughs at those whom he misleads—"Lord, what fools these mortals be!" . . . Puck is borne along on his fairy errands like the light and glittering gossamer before the breeze. He is hailed a most epicurean little gentleman dealing in quaint devices and faring in dainty delights. . . . With Oberon and his fairies we are launched at once into the empire of the butterflies. How beautifully is this race

of beings contrasted with the men and women actors by a single epithet which Titania gives the latter, "the human mortals!" . . . The reading of the play is like wandering in a grove by moonlight; the descriptions breathe a sweetness like odors tarrown upon beds of flowers.

#### A MODERN POET'S VIEW.

Swineburne in the Fortnightly Review, 1876.

But in the final poem, which concludes and crowns the first epoch of Shakespeare's work, the special graces and peculiar glories of each that went before are gathered together as in one garland of every hue and every scent. The rousing genius of the master of all poets finds its consummation in the "Midsummer Night's Dream." The blank verse is as full, sweet and strong as the best of Burns or Keats; the rhymed verse as clear, pure and true as the simplest and truest melody of "Venus and Adonis" or the "Comedy of Errors." But here each kind of excellence is equal throughout; there are here no purple patches on a gown of serge, but one seamless and imperial robe of a single dye. Of the lyric and prosaic part, the counterchange of loves and laughter, of fancy fine as air and imagination high as heaven, what need can there be for any one to shame himself by the helpless attempt to say some word not utterly unworthy? Let it suffice to accept this poem as a landmark of our first stage, and pause to look back from it on what lies behind us of partial or of perfect work.