A LETTER FROM MAY IRWIN.

The Well Known Actress Gives Her Views

Upon Things Theatrical and Explains Her Ambition to Make People Laugh.

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New York, Jan. 28.—The theater is a place of great interest, one, you might say, of national interest. For centuries it has played a significant part in the arts and the advancement artistically of the nations, and we find it today an institution of really vast importance, involving not only the attention of the amusement seeking public generally, but the investment of millions of dollars and the employment of thousands of people. The theater being of such vast public import, it is well to turn the attention to that which makes it a success. The drama is responsible for its popularity, success and its existence. The question has arisen and has been loudly discussed of late, "What class or style of drama do the people want; do they want Shakespeare?" I suppose Shakespeare has been selected as an example because of the fact that he is the greatest dramatist the world has known and for what the name Shakespeare stands for in a general sense in the world of the drama. As I understand it, the question directly involving the general public interest is not "Do we want Shakespeare as an individual dramatist?" but "Do we want that class of drama of more or less serious trend of which Shakespeare is recognized as the head?" Is the theater a place for instruction and learning, or is it one for amusement only?

I am inclined to believe in that sense that the people do not want Shakespeare and that the theater is purely a place of amusement. In these modern times of trouble and care, which indiscriminately leave their marks on all, relief and recreation are a blessing. I think the public go to the theater to be amused. They look upon it in a different light from that in which it was regarded years ago. The theater is a pleasant diversion from the cares and worries everyday life involves. Most of us go to the theater to forget and to be amused, for in the amusing there is the forgetting. If one sits down after a hard day's work and says to oneself "What shall I do tonight, where shall I go where I can spend a couple of hours pleasantly?" the conclusion is usually arrived at to attend some theater. Of the millions of people who the habit the civilized portion of the globe it is only natural that there should be a common movement toward enjoyment and pleasure. Pleasure means joy and harmony, and we all are attracted by harmony, the same as we are not attracted by discord. Of these millions of people who seek enjoyment and amusement the greater portion select the theater as the means unto the end. The average man, after a day's work and serious thought, does not care to court further serious thought or tears, but wants something to distract the mind, to divert the currents of the brain into more pleasant and enticing channels. He wants to be amused. He wants to laugh, to be jolly and to see the bright side of things. He has had enough of the problems of life which face us all in their different phases in his battle with their influence during that day. He wants to throw them off for a short respite and forget. The theater is the most successful in this effort. It is most effective and most diverting. The man does not want Shakespeare. He has had Shakespeare all day. He has met him after breakfast, sat next to him in the street car on the way to business, received him in his office several times during the day, talked with him, argued with him, plead with him, wrestled with him, fought with him, conquered him and has been conquered by him. Does he care, then, to be brought face to face with him again in the evening in a place of amusement? No, sir; he has had all the Shakespeare he wants and is thankful for the means of forgetting him. That means, it strikes me, is comedy. Of all the drama I think the comedy does the most good.

Time brings about many changes, and I am sure that it has not disregarded the theater in this respect. Years and years ago it was that this was a place for serious thought, for study and for teaching. Scientists, professors and students attended the play and there gave careful study to its teachings and the art. They were the most liberal patrons. They were the ones upon whom its existence and successful maintenance depended. But as evolution goes hand in hand with time its marks were also left upon the theater and on the play. The demand for a certain class of drama and art became less because of the fact that the lessons once learned from Thespis were being gained through other means, and with its decline came the clamor and rush for art of a lighter vein. The amusement, the enjoyment, the pleasure, which before had been gained elsewhere and through other means, gradually began to make itself manifest over the footlights. It proved a means which took with the popular mind and which has grown in force and importance to this day and will continue doing so until time and evolution on their rounds again draw near and again leave their marks upon the play and the playhouse. The amusement of the populace may be then obtained through the means the conditions demand, but at the present writing the demand is for amusement. "I want to laugh," says the toiler, the banker, the bootmaker, the laborer, the statesman and all. "I must laugh."

This very discouraged the Edwin Booths and the Charlotte Cushmans who were struggling for a rise on fame's steep ladder. They have fallen back disheartened. The encouragement their few followers has been drowned by the great cry, "I want to laugh." "Laugh, and the world laughs with you. Weep, and you weep alone." This quotation decided my career on the stage. I will admit that when I was quite a small girl and had just commenced my theatrical career with my sister I cherished a secret hope that some day I might become a great actress, a tragedienne. But when I grew a little older and saw life as it really is my ambition changed. It wasn't to become a great actress. I couldn't bring sunshine into my actor's life by making them cry. I might, though, if I made them laugh, and so I began. It was hard work, but I've found that nothing can be accomplished in this life without hard work, so I plodded along. In time I got nearer to the cry, "I want to laugh and be merry," and then nearer still, until now I hear it from all sides. I know the closer I came upon that cry the nearer I came to success, and so here I am working hard to make people laugh. And it's hard work too. If you don't believe it, just try it yourself and see. If you have never been on the stage, just get in front of a lot of people some time and say something which you think is exceptionally funny and see how it is taken. There is no more awful sensation in the world than to say something expecting your auditer or auditors to laugh and have them look at you with an expression of face seemingly to indicate that they question your earnestness or even your sanity. As even the business of manufacturing sunshine, so to speak, has its drawbacks. But I'm digressing, I'm afraid. If I personally were to go to the theater, I should select some light and amusing entertainment. I should not take Shakespeare. I am not decrying Shakespeare because in a business sense I might be in opposition to him, but I am only expressing my views and opinions from observation of the public, which, in the end, tells the whole story. If they wanted Shakespeare, they would have him. Where there is an effect there is always a cause, and the reason that Shakespeare does not thrive is because of the fact that those who want Shakespeare are the few, while those who want something of a lighter nature are the many.

Shakespeare is slipping away because the demands grow less, and the time may come when there will be no demand at all, and Shakespeare may be absolutely dead unless some sudden revolution of public taste should arise. I personally have been fortunate in striking a particular vein which seems to satisfy that cry. I have traveled all over this country, and this summer I am going to England. Whether I shall make them laugh in British accents is to be seen. I am inclining to believe, however, that my style of humor and songs will prove a novelty. I should like to be successful in London because I am an American. I don't think any great prejudice exists there against American artists. I think that in a big city like London it is just the we are here in New York. If the artist is to our liking, we accept him or her, and success is theirs. If they do not appeal to us, as often the artists from the other side do, they simply fall and go back to where they are understood. So in going to London I feel that I shall be treated just as nicely as though I were home. It will rest with me to find the English sensibilities and arouse them. If I do that, I shall feel sure that my mission in making another portion of the world laugh has been accomplished.

May Irwin

LITTLE MISS MUSTARD.

Miss Muriel Mustard, a child of 8 years, gave her first pianoforte recital at the St. James hall, London, recently and proved herself to be a marvel of precocity.

Bruno Steindel, the boy who has lately been attracting the attention of London, is no doubt equally a marvel of precocity, but he at all events has also this peculiar distinction—that he plays certain compositions with the full sentiment of a complete artist.

Miss Mustard, so far as she gave an exhibition of her powers, did not ever attain to such a result. Nevertheless she is most certainly an extremely clever girl, who knows how to follow out her teaching with singular completeness. She played a quick little waltz by Godard, for example, with some real brilliance. In all her accomplishment, however, she did not show any particular originality. Many people will follow her career with much interest, for she certainly shows singular promise. It would be asking too much, however, to expect that the world should excite itself about a talent which has not yet reached its full development in any respect.

The famous baritone Mr. Ferguson is meeting with great success in England. He returns to America next February.

A NEW COMPOSER.

Strauss as the name of a musical composer means much. A new star of this same stripe and has been shining in London. The new applicant for honors is Richard Strauss, not related to the dynasty of the Vienna waltz kings. His father was a famous horn player, and the son developed a strong bent toward musical composition at an early age.

He is only two or three years on the wrong side of 30 now, and his first symphony was composed as far back as 1883. Hans von Bulow was among the first to recognize his talent, and in England Dr. Richter and Mr. Manns were assiduous in introducing his more recent compositions.

At the present moment there is probably no German composer whose works are more keenly discussed, for it is a characteristic of his eccentric muse that she either inspires enthusiasm or aversion. Owing to the ill health of Herr Levi, Herr Strauss has recently been appointed to fill his room as conductor of the opera house at Munich.

A critic says: "One may have an imperfect sympathy with the tendencies of Herr Richard Strauss' music and yet cordially acknowledge the unquestioned talent which it displays. 'Till Eulenspiegel' is certainly prodigiously clever and entertaining, and possibly, though we feel some doubt on this point, the extraordinary symphonic poem entitled 'Tod und Verklarung,' which was heard for the first time in England under the composer's direction on Tuesday night, may, on a further and fuller acquaintance, be found to contain unexpected beauties. Both works were finely played, and the composer, whose youthful appearance and simple bearing are much in favor, was enthusiastically applauded by a full audience. Mozart's 'Eine Kleine Nachtmusik' was excellently played, but Herr Strauss shines more as a conductor of his own music than that of others. He is conscientious and intelligent, but his readings are lacking in breadth and masculine force."

Doesn't Want to Be Kicked Out.

"If my audiences," says Joseph Jefferson, "do not bid me farewell until I bid them farewell, I confidently expect to be with them for a year or two more at least. I do not know whether I shall make a public retirement or quietly 'sneak out,' probably the latter. Shakspeare says, 'Superfluous lags the veteran on the stage.' I hope to detect my waning powers before you do and go quietly down and out instead of waiting, like the dog whose day is past, to be kicked down stairs and out."

Stories of The Stage.

Box office stories are interesting when the right man tells them in the right place, and one such one resulted in Herman Klotz, treasurer of the Germania theater in New York. Late one afternoon a gentleman bought two seats in the third row and asked me to reserve for him for about an hour the two adjoining ones, which were on the center aisle.

This I did; not in the usual way, by laying them aside in an envelope, but by simply turning down the corners, or dogearing them and letting them stand in their places in the rack.

Perhaps an hour later I stalked an individual who, from his get up, I sized up at once as a "solid and wealthy westerner." He wore a large, black, wide brimmed, soft hat, long fur trimmed overcoat, a pair of fierce mustaches, the kind that the late John A. Logan affected. Looking at the diagram for a moment and asking whether Mr. Philipp would sing that night, he pointed to the third row, saying:

"Have you those two seats?"

The identical ones I had turned down!

"No, sir, but I have those two," pointing out two in the fourth row directly behind them.

"Don't want them."

By this time he had shifted a little to one side of the window, looking not at me, but straight before him, a peculiar light in his gray eyes, his appearance anything but reassuring. Suddenly his arm shot through the opening of the window, his hand reached the rack and the two same seats, and he pulled them out and with a grin said, "How much?"

By means of a small mirror which hung on the wall opposite my rack and the plate glass front of the box office he had seen what he thought were the seats he wanted and had got them.

My hair did not exactly stand on end, but I felt anything but comfortable. The action was so audacious and had happened so suddenly that I was completely dumfounded, tried to laugh and mumbled out something like "Two dollars."

He pulled out a wad, extracted the money, turned to go, but came back and said:

"Excuse me, young man, for my suddenness just now. My folks were Germans. It's just about once every two years that I get a chance to see a German show, and when I do I like to get just the seats I want. In fact, when I want something and it is to be got, I generally get it."

"I don't doubt it for a minute," said I.

He handed me his card; also a cigar, which was better than the average, and pleasantly bade me good day.

He writes colonel before his name, and, as I afterward learned, is one of the most prominent citizens of Nebraska's largest city.

There is a decidedly French flavor to "The Prosser Caper," now a much beprinted stage attraction. The story is that an old man who does things respectable old men ought to be ashamed to be caught doing. The desire of an elderly father of a family to enjoy himself in a reckless manner is at the foundation of nearly all the fun.

The old gentleman's daughter is sought in marriage by a young French artist. The artist is acceptable to everybody concerned, but the girl's mother is afraid that the intending son-in-law may have some intrigues on hand, as the Frenchman has read about in books always have, so she insists that her husband shall talk to the artist and urge him to get rid of all undesirable attachments before he marries their daughter.

Here is the old gentleman's chance. He goes to the young artist and tells him he must give up all his models. The artist astonishes him by saying that he has no models and has nothing to do with girls.

The old chap knows better, though, and finally, prompted by friends whom he seeks for advice, the artist acknowledges that he has a girl of whom he is very fond, and he will give her up at once. The father insists that he shall be permitted to break off the alliance and goes to see the girl. She is a young lady, stagestruck, who is prevailed upon by the artist's friends to play the role.

She refuses to give up her supposed lover, but plays her role so skillfully that the old man gets all tangled up in the web of her wiles, and there you have opportunities for all kinds of complications, out of which all the right people come in the right shape.

Here is a specimen advance man's story—the kind of stuff theatrical managers and ambitious actors pay good money to have written in New York and send out, with the idea that newspapers can be fooled into giving away valuable advertising space:

Just before one of the great boat races between representatives of several well known female colleges last summer the girl who pulled the stroke oar of one of the crews was suddenly taken sick and was unable to pull an oar. Every one inside that boathouse showed keen disappointment, and tears were in several eyes, when a bright, dashing, curly headed little miss, a graduate from the very school not long before, came tripping in to wish their luck and announce that she was on hand to "row and yell for her alma mater." In an instant she took in the situation, and, with an encouraging "Cheer up, girls! Trust with it yet," she quickly changed her pretty summer dress for an extra rowing suit and took her place in the vacant seat.

After winning by a scant half length they paddled back triumphantly to their quarters, where the girls laughed, cried and hugged the little heroine. When they emerged from their boathouse an hour later, where many of their female admirers were waiting to receive them, the sick girl, having recovered, received congratulations with the rest, no one suspecting that she had not helped win the race, while there is where the name of the actress who rows for the girl is inserted, who rowed in her place, slipped out unnoticed and explained to her anxious friends later that she was so excited she got on the wrong boat and didn't see much of the race. Isn't it easy?

Arthur B. Warde is fond of telling about an actor he once had in his company whose self assurance and presence of mind were nothing short of colossal. He was the low comedian of the organization, which was traveling at the time in Illinois.

"The play was a frost," says Mr. Warde, "and we were dismal, impecunious wretches, every one of us, and ready to abandon the town on our uppers. A sure offer was made to me in a neighboring town, but we didn't have the money to take us there.

"This fellow—his name was Ripstar—was full of expedients. We were in a bad fix and did not know what to do, when Ripstar came to the hotel where I was staying. He was accompanied by a boy who had rents in his trousers and blood on his garments. It seems that Ripstar had found him on the street just after he had been attacked by a spotted dog. In a moment he had found the name of the owner of the dog and in two moments and a half he had made a confidential trade with the boy. At the request of Ripstar the owner of the dog, a very prominent and wealthy citizen, called.

"Do you see that unfortunate and suffering child; how he has been mutilated by your dog?" said Ripstar.

"My dog?"

"Yes. A spotted dog, with a brass collar, on which is engraved your name. With premeditation and malice aforethought this carnivorous animal has young made violent efforts an hour so close by the postoffice, to make a heavy lunch off this boy of mine."

"But—

"No buts, sir. I have already sent for a lawyer and am about to enter suit against you for $5,000 damages. But as I have only this morning arranged to leave for New York on an extended trip I will, if agreeable to you, settle the matter for a smaller amount cash down."

"To cut my story short," said Mr. Warde, "Ripstar actually got a compromise from the owner of the dog, who paid him $100 cash down. Out of this he gave the mutilated boy a $5 bill, and with the $95 we easily got to the next town, where we had success, and the play thereafter was a big winner."

Miss Hilda Clark, the prima donna of "The Highwayman" company, has a double. At the first performance of the opera in New York she was accosted by a young lady and a party of friends occupied a box. In the audience there was a gentleman friend of Manager McCormick who noticed her, and five minutes before the performance was to begin he went out into the lobby and rushing up to Mr. McCormick, said: "Say, Mack, don't Miss Clark sing tonight?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Well, it's nearly time for the curtain to go up, and she is down in a box with a party of friends."

Mr. McCormick sent a messenger to the young lady, asking her to come to his office. She came and said:

"What is it?"

"Aren't you going to sing tonight?" asked the manager.

"No, why should I?" she replied.

"Well, how do you suppose we are to give the opera without a prima donna?"

"I don't know," replied the young woman. "I thought Miss Clark was to sing. She's been back on the stage an hour dressing and must be ready before now. I am a sister of your prima donna."

Manager McCormick subsided, and the young lady returned to her box.

Brains seem to have served George H. Broadhurst to win fame as a football player as well as an author. A good story is told of him of the days when he was a member of the Chicago Association club. It was in a championship game, and opposed to his 155 pounds was an Englishman named Beaumont, weighing 195 pounds and a noted rusher.

It was near the close of the game before they met. The score was 40 to 4 when both men started for the ball. They reached it at the same instant and everybody expected to see Broadhurst give way or go down before his opponent's furious rush. But he didn't.

Broadhurst simply blocked the ball. The other man kicked, and he might as well have hit a stone wall. He went into the air and scarred to turn two somersaults before landing. Broadhurst simply grinned, made an easy run down the field and shot the ball through the goal just in time to score the winning point.

BEFORE THE FOOTLIGHTS.

Those who saw "The Gaiety Girl" three years ago will remember two handsome young Englishmen of the name of Hope who played juvenile parts. They are brothers and of excellent birth, having adopted the stage because they liked it. Arthur Hope, the younger, is in the "In Town" company, playing the part of the manager of the Caravanserai hotel, but so disguised by his make up as to be hardly recognized. His brother Cecil has given up the stage and is gold mining in South Africa. Both brothers expect to meet in London in February, where they are to start for the Klondike to try for a fortune.

Mr. Dacrosch has put forth an elaborate prospectus of five weeks' season of grand opera in French, German and Italian at the Metropolitan Opera House, New York, beginning the middle of January.

The period of Victorien Sardou's new play, "Pamela," is in the year 1795—the interval between the reign of terror and the directory. The action passes within one month. The period of the drama is curiously enough just the time which was supposed to pass between the first and the following acts of "Mme. Sans Gene." The play has been read to the company of the Vaudeville, and Mme. Bejane, who is traveling in Russia, has received a copy of the play there in order that the drama may be produced shortly after her return to Paris.

Maud Odell has been loaned from the Lyceum to take a part in Arthur's play, "The Salt of the Earth."

The concert tour of the famous composer and pianist Scharwenka in the western and southern states has been everywhere attended with almost phenomenal success.

"Bluebeard" will shortly be produced in London by Robert Potman and Louis Meterzeel.

Lord Tabor has replaced Allie Wagner in the Lit company, playing "In Old Kentucky."

R. M. Gulick & Co. of Pittsburg have added Jacob Litt's three theaters, in Milwaukee, Minneapolis and St. Paul, to their circuit of popular price playhouses.

Avon Saxon, the baritone, and his wife, Virginia Chavez, known as "The Natal Nightingale," have returned from a South African tour and are at present in Paris.

Julia Marlowe contemplates the male role of Nero, the Roman emperor.