Brander Matthews

A Book About the Theater

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ABOUT THE THEATER

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THE EARLY SEVENTEENTH
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A BOOK
ABOUT THE THEATER

BY
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TO AUGUSTUS THOMAS

My Dear Augustus:

Let me begin by confessing my regret that I cannot overhear your first remark when you receive this sheaf of essays, many of which are devoted to the subordinate subdivisions of the art of the stage. As it is, I can only imagine your surprise at discovering that this book, which contains papers dealing with certain aspects of the theater rarely considered to be worthy of criticism, is signed by the occupant of the earliest chair to be established in any American university specifically for the study of dramatic literature. I fancy I can hear the expression of your wonder that a sexagenarian professor should turn aside from his austere analysis of the genius of Sophocles and of Shakspere, of Molière and of Ibsen, to discuss the minor arts of the dancer and the acrobat, to chatter about the conjurer and the negro minstrel, to consider the principles of pantomime and the development of scene-painting. But I am emboldened to hope that your surprise will be only momentary, and that you will be moved to acknowledge that perhaps there may be some advantage to be derived from these deviations into the by-paths of stage history.

You are rather multifarious yourself; "like Cerberus, you are three gentlemen at once"; you have been a reporter, you have published a novel, you have painted pictures, you have delivered addresses—and you write plays, too. I think that you, at least, will readily understand how a student of the stage may like to stray now and again from the main road and to ramble away from the lofty temple of dramatic art to loiter for a little while in one or another of its lesser chapels. And you, again, will appreciate my conviction that these loiterings and these strollings may be as profitable as that casual browsing about in a library which is likely to enrich our memories with not a little interesting information that we might never have captured had we adhered to a rigorous and rigid course of study. You will see what I mean when I declare my belief that I have come back from these wanderings with an increased understanding of the theory of the theater, and with an enlarged acquaintance with its manifold manifestations.

Perhaps I ought to explain, furthermore, that these excursions into the purlieus of the playhouse began long, long ago. I gave a Punch and Judy show before I was sixteen; I performed experiments in magic, I blacked up as Tambo, I whitened myself as Clown, I played the low-comedy part in a farce, and I attempted the flying trapeze before I was twenty; and I was not encouraged by the result of these early experiences to repeat any of the experiments after I came of age. I think it was as a spinner of hats and as the underman of a "brothers' act" that I came nearest to success; at least I infer this from the fact—may I mention it without seeming to boast?—that with my partners in this brothers' act, I was asked if I would care to accept an engagement with a circus for the summer. As to the merits of the other efforts I need say nothing now; the rest is silence. When the cynic declared that the critics were those who had failed in literature and art, he overstated his case, as is the custom of cynics. But it is an indisputable advantage for any critic to have adventured himself in the practise of the art to the discussion of which he is to devote himself; he may have failed, or at least he may not have succeeded as he could wish; but he ought to have gained a firmer grasp on the principles of the art than he would have had if he had never risked himself in the vain effort.

With this brief word of personal explanation I step down from the platform of the preface to let these various essays speak for themselves. If they have any message of any value, I feel assured in advance that your friendly ear will be the first to interpret it. And I remain,

Ever yours,

Brander Matthews

Columbia University,

in the City of New York.

I
THE SHOW BUSINESS

THE SHOW BUSINESS

I

At an interesting moment in Disraeli's picturesque career in British politics he indulged in one of his strikingly spectacular effects, in accord with his characteristic method of boldly startling the somewhat sluggish imagination of his insular countrymen; and in the next week's issue of *Punch* there was a cartoon by Tenniel reflecting the general opinion in regard to his theatrical audacity. He was represented as Artemus Ward, frankly confessing that "I have no principles; I'm in the show business."

The cartoon was good-humored enough, as *Punch's* cartoons usually are; but it was not exactly complimentary. It was intended to voice the vague distrust felt by the British people toward a leader who did not scrupulously avoid every possible opportunity to be dramatic. And yet every statesman who was himself possessed of constructive imagination, and who was therefore anxious to stir the imaginations of those he was leading, has laid himself open to the same charge. Burke, for one, was accused of being frankly theatrical; and Napoleon, the child of that French Revolution which Burke combated with undying vigor, never hesitated to employ kindred devices. When Napoleon took the Imperial Crown from the hands of the Pope to place it on his own head, and when Burke cast the daggers on the floor of the House of Commons, they were both proving that they were in the show business. So was Julius Cæsar when he thrice thrust aside the kingly crown; and so was Frederick on more than one occasion. Even Luther did not shrink from the spectacular if that could serve his purpose, as when he nailed his theses to the door of the church.

If the statesmen have now and again acted as tho they were in the show business, we need not be surprised to discover that the dramatists have done it even more often, in accord with their more intimate relation to the theater. No one would deny that Sardou and Boucicault were showmen, with a perfect mastery of every trick of the showman's trade. But this is almost equally true of the supreme leaders of dramatic art, Sophocles, Shakspere, and Molière. The great Greek, the great Englishman, and the great Frenchman, however much they might differ in their aims and in their accomplishments, were alike in the avidity with which they availed themselves of every spectacular device possible to their respective theaters. The opening passage of 'Œdipus the King,' when the chorus appeals to the sovran to remove the curse that hangs over the city, is as potent on the eye as on the ear. The witches and the ghost in 'Macbeth,' the single combats and the bloody battles that embellish many of Shakspere's plays are utilizations of the spectacular possibilities existing in that Elizabethan playhouse, which has seemed to some historians of the drama to be necessarily bare of all appeal to the senses. And in his 'Amphitryon' Molière has a succession of purely mechanical effects (a god riding upon an eagle, for example, and descending from the sky) which are anticipations of the more elaborate and complicated transformation scenes of the 'Black Crook' and the 'White Fawn.'

At the end of the nineteenth century the two masters of the stage were Ibsen and Wagner, and both of them were in the show business—Wagner more openly and more frequently than Ibsen. Yet the stern Scandinavian did not disdain to employ an avalanche in 'When We Dead Awaken,' and to introduce a highly pictorial shawl dance for the heroine of his 'Doll's House.' As for Wagner, he was incessant in his search for the spectacular, insisting that the music-drama was the "art-work of the future," since the librettist-composer could call to his aid all the other arts, and could make these arts contribute to the total effect of the opera. He conformed his practise to his principles, and as a result there is scarcely any one of his music-dramas which is not enriched by a most elaborate scenic accompaniment. The forging of the sword, the ride of the Valkyries, the swimming of the singing Rhinemaidens, are only a few of the novel and startling effects which he introduced into his operas; and in his last work, 'Parsival,' the purely spectacular element is at least as ample and as varied as any that can be found in a Parisian fairy-play or in a London Christmas pantomime. And what is the 'Blue Bird' of M. Maeterlinck, the philosopher-poet, who is also a playwright, but a fairy-play on the model of those long popular in Paris, the 'Pied de Mouton,' and the 'Biche au Bois'? It has a meaning and a purpose lacking in its emptier predecessors; but its method is the same as that of the uninspired manufacturers of these spectacular pieces.

II

It is not without significance that our newspapers, which have a keen understanding of the public taste, are in the habit of commenting upon entertainments of the most diverse nature under the general heading of "Amusements." It matters not whether this entertainment is proffered by Barnum and Bailey, or by Weber and Fields, by Sophocles or by Ibsen, by Shakspere or by Molière, by Wagner or by Gilbert and Sullivan, it is grouped with the rest of the amusements. And this is not so illogical as it may seem, since the primary purpose of all the arts is to entertain, even if every art has also to achieve its own secondary aim. Some of these entertainments make their appeal to the intellect, some to the emotions, and some only to the nerves, to our relish for sheer excitement and for brute sensation; but each of them in its own way seeks, first of all, to entertain. They are, every one of them, to be included in the show business.

This is a point of view which is rarely taken by those who are accustomed to consider the drama only in its literary aspects, and who like to think of the dramatic poet as a remote and secluded artist, scornful of all adventitious assistance, seeking to express his own vision of the universe, and intent chiefly, if not solely, on portraying the human soul. And yet this point of view needs to be taken by every one who wishes to understand the drama as an art, for the drama is inextricably bound up with the show business, and to separate the two is simply impossible. The theater is almost infinitely various, and the different kinds of entertainment possible in it cannot be sharply distinguished, since they shade into each other by almost imperceptible gradations. Only now and again can we seize a specimen that completely conforms to any one of the several types into which we theoretically classify the multiple manifestations of the drama.

Buffalo Bill's Wild West and Barnum and Bailey's Greatest Show on Earth might seem, at first sight, to stand absolutely outside the

theater. But it is impossible not to perceive the close kinship between the program of the Barnum and Bailey show and the program of the New York Hippodrome, since they have the circus in common. At the Hippodrome, however, we have at least a rudimentary play with actual dialog and with abundant songs and dances executed by a charging squadron of chorus-girls; and in this aspect its spectacle is curiously similar to the nondescript medley which is popularly designated as a "summer song-show." Now, the summer song-show is first cousin to the so-called American "comic opera"—so different from the French *opéra comique*. Even if it has now fallen upon evil days, this American comic opera is a younger sister of the sparkling ballad-opera of Gilbert and Sullivan, and of the exhilarating *opéra bouffe* of Offenbach, with its libretto by Meilhac and Halévy.

We cannot fail to perceive that the librettos of Gilbert and of Meilhac and Halévy are admirable in themselves, that they would please even without the music of Sullivan and Offenbach, and that they are truly comedies of a kind. That is to say, the books of 'Patience' and 'Pinafore' do not differ widely in method or in purpose from Gilbert's non-musical play 'Engaged'; and the books of the 'Vie Parisienne' and the 'Diva' do not differ widely from Meilhac and Halévy's non-musical play, 'Tricoche et Cacolet.' 'Engaged' and 'Tricoche et Cacolet' are farces or light comedies, and we find that it is not easy to draw a strict line of demarcation between light comedies of this sort and comedies of a more elevated type. Gilbert was also the author of 'Sweethearts,' and of 'Charity,' and Meilhac and Halévy were also the authors of 'Froufrou.' Still more difficult would it be to separate sharply plays like 'Charity' and 'Froufrou' from the social dramas of Pinero and Ibsen, the 'Benefit of the Doubt,' for instance, and the 'Doll's House.' Sometimes these social dramas stiffen into actual tragedy, the 'Second Mrs. Tanqueray,' for example, and 'Ghosts.' And more than one critic has dwelt upon the structural likeness of the somber and austere 'Ghosts' of Ibsen to the elevated and noble 'Œdipus the King' of Sophocles, even if the Greek play is full of a serener poetry and charged with a deeper message.

It is a far cry from Buffalo Bill's Wild West to the 'Œdipus' of Sophocles; but they are only opposite ends of a long chain which binds together the heterogeneous medley of so-called "amusements." In the eyes of every observer with insight into actual conditions, the show business bears an obvious resemblance to the United States, in that it is a vast territory divided into contiguous States, often difficult to bound with precision; and, like the United States, the show business is, in the words of Webster, "one and indivisible, now and forever." There is indisputable profit for every student of the art of the stage in a frank recognition of the fact that dramatic literature is inextricably associated with the show business, and the wider and deeper his acquaintance with the ramifications of the show business, the better fitted he is to understand certain characteristics of the masterpieces of dramatic literature. Any consideration of dramatic literature, apart from the actual conditions of performance, apart from the special theater for which any given play was composed, and to the conditions of which it had, perforce, to conform, is bound to be one-sided, not to say sterile. The masterpieces of dramatic literature were all of them written to be performed by actors, in a theater, and before an audience. And these masterpieces of dramatic literature which we now analyze with reverence, were all of them immediately successful when represented by the performers for whom they were written, and in the playhouses to the conditions of which they had been adjusted.

It is painfully difficult for the purely literary critic to recognize the inexorable fact that there are no truly great plays which failed to please the contemporary spectators for whose delight they were devised. Many of the plays which win success from time to time, indeed, most of them, achieve only a fleeting vogue; they lack the element of permanence; they have only theatrical effectiveness; and they are devoid of abiding dramatic value. But the truly great dramas established themselves first on the stage; and afterward they also revealed the solid qualities which we demand in the study. They withstood, first of all, the ordeal by fire before the footlights of the theater, and they were able thereafter also to resist the touchstone of time in the library.

When an academic investigator into the arid annals of dogmatic disquisition about the drama was rash enough to assert that, "from the standpoint of the history of culture, the theater is only one, and a very insignificant one, of all the influences that have gone to make up dramatic literature," Mr. William Archer promptly pointed out that this was "just about as reasonable as to declare that the sea is only one, and a very insignificant one, among the influences that have gone to the making of ships." It is true, Mr. Archer admitted, that there are "model ships and ships built for training purposes on dry land; but they all more or less closely imitate sea-going vessels, and if they did not, we should not call them ships at all.... The ship-builder, in planning his craft, must know what depths of water—be it river, lake, or ocean—she will have to ply in, what conditions of wind and weather she may reckon upon encountering, and what speed will be demanded of her if she is to fulfil the purpose for which she is destined.... The theater—the actual building, with its dimensions, structure, and scenic appliances—is the dramatist's sea. And the audience provides the weather."

III

Since the drama is irrevocably related to the theater, all the varied ramifications of the show business have their interest and their significance for students of the stage. It is not too much to say that there is no form of entertainment, however humble and however remote from literature, which may not supply a useful hint or two, now and again, to the historian of the drama. For example, few things would seem farther apart than the lamentable tragedy of Punch and Judy and the soul-stirring plays of the Athenian dramatic poets; and yet there is more than one point of contact between these two performances. An alert observer of a Punch-and-Judy show in the streets of London can get help from it for the elucidation of a problem or two which may have puzzled him in his effort to understand the peculiarities of Attic tragedy. Mr. Punch's wooden head, for example, has the same unchanging expression which characterized the towering masks worn by the Athenian performers. In like manner a nondescript hodgepodge of funny episodes, interspersed with songs and dances, such as Weber and Fields used to present in New York, may be utilized to shed light on the lyrical-burlesques of Aristophanes as these were performed in Athens more than two thousand years ago.

Perhaps even a third instance of this possibility of explaining the glorious past by the humble present may not be out of place. A few years ago Edward Harrigan put together a variety-show sketch, called the 'Mulligan Guards,' and its success encouraged him to develop it into a little comic drama called the 'Mulligan Guards' Picnic,' which was the earliest of a succession of farcical studies of

tenement-house life in New York, culminating at last in a three-act comedy, entitled 'Squatter Sovereignty.' In this series of humorous pieces Harrigan set before us a wide variety of types of character, Irishmen of all sorts, Germans and Italians, negroes and Chinamen, as these are commingled in the melting-pot of the cosmopolitan metropolis. These humorous pieces were the result of a spontaneous evolution, and their author was wholly innocent of any acquaintance with the Latin drama. And yet, as it happened, Harrigan was doing for the tenement-house population of New York very much what Plautus had done for the tenement-house population of Rome. A familiarity with the plays of the Latin playwright could not but increase our appreciation of the amusing pieces of the Irish-American sketch-writer; and a familiarity with the comic dramas of Harrigan could not fail to be of immediate assistance to us in our desire to understand the remote life which Plautus was dealing with.

The plays of the Roman dramatist were deliberately adapted from the Greek, and they therefore had an avowedly literary source, whereas the immediate origin of the plays performed in New York was only an unpretending sketch for a variety-show; but both of these groups had the same flavor of veracity in their reproduction of the teeming life of the tenements. Humble as is the beginning of the 'Mulligan Guard' series, at least as humble is the beginning of the improvised pieces of the Italians, the comedy of masks, which Molière lifted into literature in his 'Etourdi,' and in his 'Fourberies de Scapin.' In the hands of the Italians the comedy of masks was absolutely unliterary, since it was not even written, and its performers were not only comedians, but acrobats also. And here the drama is seen to be impinging on the special sphere of the circus—just as it does again in the plays prepared for the New York Hippodrome. It is more than probable that this improvised comedy of the Italians is the long development of a primitive semi-gymnastic, semi-dramatic entertainment, given by a little group of strollers, performing in the open market-place to please the casual crowd that might collect.

Equally unpretending was the origin of the French melodrama, which Victor Hugo lifted into literature in his 'Hernani' and 'Ruy Blas.' It began in the temporary theaters erected for a brief season in one or the other of the fairs held annually in different parts of Paris. The performances in these playhouses were almost exactly equivalent to those in our variety-shows; they were medleys of song and dance, of acrobatic feats and of exhibitions of trained animals. As in our own variety-shows, again, there were also little plays performed from time to time, at first scarcely more than a framework on which to hang songs and dances, but at last taking on a solider substance, until finally they stiffened themselves into pathetic pieces in three or more acts, capable of providing pleasure for a whole evening. The humor was direct, and the characters were painted in the primary colors; the passions were violent, and the plots were arbitrary; but the playwrights had discovered how to hold the interest of their simple-minded spectators, and how to draw tears and laughter at will.

In fact, the more minutely the history of the stage is studied, the more clearly do we perceive that the beginnings of every form of the drama are strangely unpretentious, and that literary merit is attained only in the final stages of its development. Dramatic literature is but the ultimate evolution of that which in the beginning was only an insignificant and unimportant experiment in the show business; and it must always remain intimately related to the show business, even when it climbs to the lonely peaks of the poetic drama. Whatever its value, and however weighty its message, it is still to be commented upon under the head of "amusements," for if it does not succeed in amusing, it ceases to exist except in the library, and even there only for special students. It lives by its immediate theatrical effectiveness alone, even if it can survive solely by its literary quality.

IV

Those who are in the habit of gaging the drama by this literary quality only are prone to deplore the bad taste of the public which flocks to purely spectacular pieces. But this again is no new thing, and it does not disclose any decline in the ability to appreciate the best. A century ago in London, when Sarah Siddons and John Philip Kemble were in the full plenitude of their powers, and when they were performing the noblest plays of Shakspere, they were thrust aside for a season or two while the theater was given up to empty melodramatic spectacles like 'Castle Specter' and the 'Cataract of the Ganges.' It was horrifying to the lovers of the drama that these great actors in those great plays should have to give way to the attraction exerted on the public by a trained elephant, or by an imitation waterfall; but it is equally horrifying to be informed that the theater in London for which Shakspere wrote his masterpieces, and in which he himself appeared as an actor, was also used for fencing-matches, and for bull-baitings and bear-baitings, and that the theater in Athens for which Sophocles wrote his masterpieces, and in which he may have appeared as an actor, was also used for the annual cock-fight.

So strong is the popular appreciation of spectacle that the drama, the true theater as distinguished from the mere show business, has always to fight for its right to exist, and to hold its place in competition with less intellectual and more sensational entertainments. The playhouses of any American city are likely to have a lean week whenever the circus comes to town, and perhaps the chief reason why the most of them now close in summer is to be sought not so much in the frequent hot spells, as in the irresistible attraction exerted by the base-ball games. The drama in Spain, which flourished superbly in the days of Lope de Vega and Calderon, sank into a sad decline when it had to compete with the fiercer delights of the bullfight; and the drama in Rome was actually killed out by the overpowering rivalry of the sports of the arena, the combats of gladiators, and the matching of men with wild beasts. What is known to the economists as Gresham's Law, according to which an inferior currency always tends to drive out a superior, seems to have an analog in the show business.

(1912.)

II
THE LIMITATIONS OF THE STAGE

THE LIMITATIONS OF THE STAGE
I

Few competent critics would dispute the assertion that the drama, if not actually the noblest of the arts, is at all events the most comprehensive, since it can invoke the aid of all the others without impairing its own individuality or surrendering its right to be considered the senior partner in any alliance it may make. Poetry, oratory, and music, painting, sculpture, and architecture, these the drama can take into its service, with no danger to its own control. Yet even if the drama may have the widest range of any of the arts, none the less are its boundaries clearly defined. What it can do, it does with a sharpness of effect and with a cogency of appeal no other art can rival. But there are many things it cannot do; and there are not a few things that it can attempt only at its peril. Some of these impossibilities and inexpediencies are psychologic subtleties of character and of sentiment too delicate and too minute for the magnifying lens of the theater itself; and some of them are physical, too large in themselves to be compressed into the rigid area of the stage. In advance of actual experiment, it is not always possible for even the most experienced of theatrical experts to decide the question with certainty.

Moreover, there is always the audience to be reckoned with, and even old stagers like Henry Irving and Victorien Sardou cannot foresee the way in which the many-headed monster will take what is set before it. When Percy Fitzgerald and W. G. Wills were preparing an adaptation of the 'Flying Dutchman' for Henry Irving, the actor made a suggestion which the authors immediately adopted. The romantic legend has for its hero a sea-captain condemned to eternal life until he can find a maiden willing to share his lot; and when at last he meets the heroine she has another lover, who is naturally jealous of the new aspirant to her hand. The young rival challenges Vanderdecken to a duel, and what Irving proposed was that the survivor of the fight should agree to throw the body of his rival into the sea, and that the waves should cast up the condemned Vanderdecken on the shore, since the ill-fated sailor could not avoid his doom by death at the hand of man. This was an appropriate development of the tale; it was really imaginative; and it would have been strangely moving if it had introduced into it a ballad on the old theme. But in a play performed before us in a theater its effect was not altogether what its proposer had hoped for, altho he presented it with all his marvelous command of theatrical artifice.

The stage-setting Irving bestowed upon this episode was perfectly in keeping with its tone. The spectators saw the sandy beach of a little cove shut in by cliffs, with the placid ocean bathed in the sunset glow. The two men crossed swords on the strand; Vanderdecken let himself be killed, and the victorious lover carried his rival's body up the rocks and hurled it into the ocean. Then he departed, and for a moment all was silence. A shuddering sigh soon swept over the face of the waters, and a ripple lapped the sand. Then a little wave broke on the beach, and withdrew, rasping over the stones. At last a huge roller crashed forward and the sea gave up its dead. Vanderdecken lay high and dry on the shore, and in a moment he staggered to his feet, none the worse for his wounds. But unfortunately the several devices for accomplishing this result, admirable as they were, drew attention each of them to itself. The audience could not help wondering how the trick of the waves was being worked, and when the Flying Dutchman was washed up by the water, it was not the mighty deep rejecting Vanderdecken, again cursed with life, that the spectators perceived, but rather the dignified Henry Irving himself, unworthily tumbled about on the dust of his own stage. In the effort to make visible this imaginative embellishment of the strange story, its magic potency vanished. The poetry of the striking improvement on the old tale had been betrayed by its translation into the material realities of the theater, since the concrete presentation necessarily contradicted the abstract beauty of the idea.

Here we find ourselves face to face with one of the most obvious limitations of the stage—that its power of suggestion is often greater than its power of actual presentation. There are many things, poetic and imaginative, which the theater can accomplish, after a fashion, but which it ventures upon only at imminent peril of failure. Many things which are startlingly effective in the telling are ineffective in the actual seeing. The mere mechanism needed to represent them will often be contradictory, and sometimes even destructive. Perhaps it may be advisable to cite another example, not quite so cogent as Irving's 'Vanderdecken,' and yet carrying the same moral. This other example will be found in a piece by Sardou, a man who knew all the possibilities of the theater as intimately as Irving himself, and who was wont to utilize them with indefatigable skill. Indeed, so frequently did the French playwright avail himself of stage devices, and so often was he willing to rely upon them, that not a few critics of our latter-day drama have been inclined to dismiss him as merely a supremely adroit theatrical trickster.

In his sincerest play, 'Patrie,' the piece which he dedicated to Motley, and which he seems himself to have been proudest of, Sardou invented a most picturesque episode. The Spaniards are in possession of Brussels; the citizens are ready to rise, and William of Orange is coming to their assistance. The chiefs of the revolt leave the city secretly and meet William at night in the frozen moat of an outlying fort. A Spanish patrol interrupts their consultation, and forces them to conceal themselves. A little later a second patrol is heard approaching, just when the return of the first patrol is impending. For the moment it looks as tho the patriots would be caught between the two Spanish companies. But William of Orange rises to the occasion. He calls on his "sea-wolves"; and when the second patrol appears, marching in single file, there suddenly spring out of the darkness upon every Spanish soldier two fur-clad creatures, who throttle him, bind him, and throw him into a hole in the ice of the moat. Then they swiftly fill in this gaping cavity with blocks of snow, and trample the path level above it. And almost immediately after the sea-wolves have done their deadly work and withdrawn again into hiding, the first patrol returns, and passes all unsuspecting over the bodies of their comrades—a very practical example of dramatic irony.

As it happened, I had read 'Patrie' some years before I had an opportunity to see it on the stage, and this picturesque scene had lingered in my memory so that in the theater I eagerly awaited its coming. When it arrived at last I was sadly disappointed. The sea-wolves belied their appetizing name; they irresistibly suggested a group of trained acrobats, and I found myself carelessly noting the artifices by the aid of which the imitation snowballs were made to fill the trapdoor of the stage which represented the yawning hole in the ice of the frozen moat. The thing told was picturesque, but the thing seen was curiously unmoving; and I have noted

without surprise that in the latest revival of 'Patrie' the attempt to make this episode effective was finally abandoned, the sea-wolves being cut out of the play.

II

In 'Patrie' as in 'Vanderdecken' the real reason for the failure of these mechanical devices is that the plays were themselves on a superior level to those stage-tricks; the themes were poetic, and any theatrical effect which drew attention to itself interrupted the current of emotional sympathy. It disclosed itself instantly as incongruous, as out of keeping with the elevation of the legend—in a word, as inartistic. A similar effect, perhaps even more frankly mechanical, would not be inartistic in a play of a lower type, and it might possibly be helpful in a frankly spectacular piece, even if this happened also to be poetic in intent. In a fairy-play, a *féerie*, as the French term it, we expect to behold all sorts of startling ingenuities of stage-mechanism, whether the theme is delightfully imaginative, as in Maeterlinck's beautiful 'Blue Bird,' or crassly prosaic, as in the 'Black Crook' and the 'White Fawn.'

In picturesque melodrama also, in the dramatization of 'Ben Hur,' for example, we should be disappointed if we were bereft of the wreck of the Roman galley, and if we were deprived of the chariot race. These episodes can be presented in the theater only by the aid of mechanisms far more elaborate than those needed for the scenes in 'Vanderdecken' and 'Patrie'; but in 'Ben Hur' these mechanisms are not incongruous and distracting as were the simpler devices of 'Vanderdecken' and 'Patrie,' because the dramatization of the romanticist historical novel is less lofty in its ambition, less imaginative, less ethereally poetic. In 'Vanderdecken' and in 'Patrie' the tricks seemed to obtrude themselves, whereas in 'Ben Hur' they were almost obligatory. In certain melodramas with more modern stories—in the amusing piece called the 'Round Up,' for example—the scenery is the main attraction. The scene-painter is the real star of the show. And there is no difficulty in understanding the wail of the performer of the principal part in a piece of this sort, when he complained that he was engaged to support forty tons of scenery. "It's only when the stage-carpenters have to rest and get their breath that I have a chance to come down to the footlights and bark for a minute or two."

A moment's consideration shows that this plaintive protest is unreasonable, however natural it may be. In melodramas like the 'Round Up' and 'Ben Hur,' as in fairy-plays like the 'Blue Bird,' the acting is properly subordinated to the spectacular splendor of the whole performance. When we enter a theater to behold a play of either of these types, we expect the acting to be adequate, no doubt, but we do not demand the highest type of histrionic excellence. What we do anticipate, however, is a spectacle pleasing to the eye and stimulating to the nerves. In plays of these two classes the appeal is sensuous rather than intellectual; and it is only when the appeal of the play is to the mind rather than to the senses that merely mechanical effects are likely to be disconcerting.

Mr. William Archer has pointed out that Ibsen in 'Little Eyolf,' has for once failed to perceive the strict limitation of the stage when he introduced a flagstaff, with the flag at first at half-mast, and a little later run up to the peak. Now, there are no natural breezes in the theater to flutter the folds of the flag, and every audience is aware of the fact. This, then, is the dilemma: either the flag hangs limp and lifeless against the pole, which is a flat spectacle, or else its folds are made to flutter by some concealed pneumatic blast or electric fan, which instantly arouses the inquiring curiosity of the audience. Here we find added evidence in support of Herbert Spencer's invaluable principle of Economy of Attention, which he himself applied only to rhetoric, but which is capable of extension to all the other arts—and to no one of them more usefully than to the drama. At any given moment a spectator in the theater has only so much attention to bestow upon the play being presented before his eyes, and if any portion of his attention is unduly distracted by some detail—like either the limpness or the fluttering of a flag—then he has just so much less to give to the play itself.

Very rarely, indeed, can we catch Ibsen at fault in a technical detail of stage-management; he was extraordinarily meticulous in his artful adjustment of the action of his social dramas to the picture-frame stage of our modern cosmopolitan theater. He was marvelously skilful in endowing each of his acts with a background harmonious for his characters; and nearly always was he careful to refrain from the employment of any scenic device which might attract attention to itself. He eschewed altogether the more violent spectacular effects, altho he did call upon the stage manager to supply an avalanche in the final act of 'When the Dead Awaken'; but even this bold convulsion of nature was less incongruous than might be expected, since it was not exhibited until the action of the play itself was complete. In fact, the avalanche might be described as only a pictorial epilog.