Stage Management in the Irish National Theatre

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The Irish National Theatre began as humbly as the Theatre Libre in Paris, and the circumstances of both are similar. It is curious that Antoine was an employé in a gas company, and Mr. Fay happens to be in some like employment. Antoine has become one of the most successful actors in Paris, more even than a successful actor he has become an actor of genius; and Mr. Fay, though we do not pretend to think that he is in any way comparable to Antoine, is an actor not without talent. He has shown himself possessed of a real sense of humour and a power of infecting his audience with his enjoyment of the drolleries of life. But Antoine, a great actor, is a unique stage manager, and has done more for stage management in Paris than anyone else. It is quite true to say that the Theatre Francais does little more than watch and imitate his stage management and his methods of acting. Antoine has produced plays in verse and in prose, and he knows how to treat one as well as the other. It is not our intention to be beguiled into a discussion concerning the kind of stage management suitable to verse plays. The treatment they need is of a different kind from that of prose, but their arrangement cannot be left to chance. A Hungarian rhapsody is not played in the same manner as a classic composition. There must be order in disorder, in fact, the disorder must be only a seeming, for if we subtract order from Art we get life. Our discussion is strictly limited to Mr. Fay's method or want of method in presenting the play on the stage. The actors and actresses in a National Theatre play scramble about practically anyhow, and they remind one very often of three little boys and a little girl reciting a story on a barn door. In "The Shadowy Waters" the actors stood in different corners of the stage, and fired off their lines, reminding one of a game of "Aunt Sally"; a line was drawn out and sent whirling across the stage. Mr. Fay seems to delight in what is known in rehearsals as "dropping the scene." The object of every other stage manager is to avoid intervals between the speeches, and to weld every part together till the play is but one thing; but Mr. Fay's intention, if he has any definite intention, seems to be to disintegrate. The simplest stage tactics are unknown to him, such for instance as the knowledge of the effect gained by sending one — shall we say of a group of four? — up the stage. Four men are discussing whether they will start at the end of the month on a shooting excursion. They urge their different opinions, and the greater part of the discussion is occupied by A. B. and C. It is therefore the duty of the stage manager to send D. up the stage to examine guns which are on the rack. He examines these, and, when his cue comes, he walks down the stage and tells them that if they want him to join the excursion it must take place on the 29th. This is the A, B. C. and D. of stage management but our contention is that Mr. Fay does not know his A. B. and C. of stage management, and we are anxious that he should set about learning it.

Words are dependent on the position of the actor on the stage and the gesture that accompanies them. Sometimes it is well that the actor should speak the lines sitting still, and it

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is well sometimes that he should speak them on a rise. We will give an example of how the author's meaning may be spoiled by a change of position. In Ibsen's play, "Ghosts," in the third act, Oswald is telling his mother that he feels that the illness of which the doctor has warned him is coming back, He fears an abasement of his reason, and he asks his mother to give him some morphia pills that will kill him. She begs him not to lay such a task upon her, saying that she will always be by to look after him. He answers: "But you may not always be there, I shall fall into the hands of strangers"; and then she says, "What a thing you ask of me, I who gave you life." Oswald's answer is: "A nice kind of life it was that you gave me." The actor spoke these lines on a rise; getting up from his chair, he went up the stage speaking them at the top of his voice, "A nice kind of life it was that you gave me." Ibsen's point is that Oswald knows, almost from the beginning of the play, his pre-destined end. To speak these lines rising destroys the author's meaning. The lines should be spoken pensively, looking across the room, almost as one speaking in a dream: "A nice kind of life it was that you gave me."

A piece well-staged — staged with imagination, amounts almost to a re-writing. Here is an instance: A strike leader has betrayed his comrades — we need not enter into what the betrayal was — suffice it to say that he relied on his personal influence to convince them that he had not betrayed them. He has failed to do so, and returns to the house. The mob is about the house, and he foresees his death, and resolves to anticipate the design of the mob by taking poison. The author's stage direction is the ordinary stage direction — "He drinks the poison" — and the stage manager has to settle how the hero's death will be presented. Is he to drink the poison and roll about the ground in agony? Or is he to wait and show terror of the poison? Both situations are possible. But Antoine, intervening, says, "No, we won't do either. Take the glass, Dick, you are standing at the other side of the table — place one hand on the table, and as you lift the glass to your lips the curtain falls." But then Antoine's stage management is miraculous,

Mr. Fay has been praised a great deal. He has been to London, and Mr. William Archer and Mr. Walkley have spoken of his plays as "folk plays," and his talent as '*folk talent," and all manner of "folk smoke" has been raised to signal him. We hope that Mr. Fay will not be beguiled, deluded, destroyed by the praise of these journalists, who would have praised any little bushman who came over to London with a boomerang. The same little bushman would be praised in Paris. It is the custom of journalists to praise strangers. For who knows but the boomerang may make a hit? In France one nods the head, hearing the Kaffir tongue spoken, "How nice, how pretty, how harmonious." But Mr. Fay is more important than a bushman with a club to flourish. He is the founder of the "Irish National Theatre." We do not speak derisively, Mr. Fay has managed very well; he manages to struggle on, and one should not ask more of any man. We were about to say he has received very little support, but that after all cannot be truly said of a man who has found an admirer to buy him a theatre.

This article is not written in any carping spirit, it is written by one who has always taken an interest in the stage, who has thought about it, and who foresees that Mr. Fay must apply himself to learn a very complicated and difficult art. Very few authors can put a piece on the stage effectively. Actors are generally good stage managers. Mr. Fay is the exception; he must take pains, work at it, develop whatever talent for the art there is in him; and if he feels that

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there is no germ that can be developed it will be well for him to employ a stage manager. A theatre can dispense with everything else, with scenery, costumes, wigs and paint; the author and the stage manager are the two essentials, and we do not know which is the most indispensable.

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