

Puritan Attacks on the Stage and Its Clothes: Plays Which Offended ...

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Puritan Attacks on the Stage and Its Clothes

Plays Which Offended Fundamental Morality Are Not Successful Nowadays, Despite What Reformers Say of Lingerie Displays and Scanty Skirts

By JOHN CORBIN.

THE amazing feature of the attacks lately made upon the contemporary stage has not been their verbal violence. In that respect they have often been excelled. Nor have the assailants brought any charge against the themes broached in the contemporary drama. As early as 1579 Stephen Gosson arraigned the theatres for corrupting the religion and the moral conceptions of the Elizabethan public, and with such fervor that the players were moved to defend their ethical standards. A century later, Jeremy Collier published "A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage," which moved John Dryden to a confession of sin and wrought a definite reformation in the moral tone of the drama. Both of these old moralists knew the theatre well, and they launched their shock battalions against its mighty citadel. The puritan critics of today make their stand not for the purity of the mind, but for the purity of the eye. Their complaint is that the returning soldier is invited to the inspection of lingerie; that the American drama is being written by the salesman of hosiery.

Beyond any question, there has been of late decades a startling relaxation in the standards of ocular decorum. A hundred years ago the female sex (as it called itself) was supposed to be without limbs and (even in the case of stage dancers) incapable of outward flourishes. Then, in 1827, Mme. Françoise Hutin attempted to introduce French ballet dancing at the Bowery Theatre.

"When she sprang upon the stage in her abbreviated skirts a storm of hisses greeted her, and the curtain was rung

down upon the trembling, affrighted Frenchwoman."

The "occupants of the seventy-five-cent boxes"—the diamond horseshoe of that day—arose in their offended modesty, and trooped out of the theatre. The occupants of the pit, who paid 37½ cents for their seats, hesitated between subservience to the high example of the boxes and the instincts of Peeping Tom; but in the end they, too, stood, and in fact exited, in the cause of ocular seemliness. Not so the twenty-five-cent occupants of the gallery. Deaf to the mandates of high society, they sat tight in a curiosity unashamed. But they were not rewarded. Mme. Françoise Hutin was never allowed to appear again. Yet the ballet costume of wicked Paris eventually became familiar even to the most sensitive eye.

The elder puritan of the eye met his Waterloo in "The Black Crook"; and the story of that famous victory, or infamous defeat, is recommended to the modern descendant. Thanks to the machinations of the press agent, or whatever he was called in those days, the clergy attended in numbers and returned to their pulpits to denounce the exhibition of limbs and flourishes—with the result that "The Black Crook" achieved nationwide fame and earned for its producers several fortunes. The reformer of today denounces the press because it does not denounce the show which roused his ire. By sad experience the press has learned its business. If it so much as whispered the name the box office would rejoice in what in theatrical parlance is known as a riot.

The assertion that such plays are written by sellers of hosiery is equally bland and engaging, and it suggests that as yet

the reformer's experience of the undress revue is limited. Hosiery is the least of all its requisites. As Haywood Brown once expressed it, the chorus has made its stand for the freedom of the knees. And there are at least thirteen other points which it has incorporated in its covenant with the public. What these are I know, but may not tell. For it is a curious feature of the phenomenon to which the reformer has called attention that, though most of us look upon the thing itself without a qualm, the name of it still sticks in our throats. The fact seems to be that no generation can be quite without decency. An Elizabethan would have blurted out all these words amid roars of laughter; but he so cherished the modesty of his eye that he would permit no woman on the stage, even in the most voluminous of all crinolines. And so, in deference to modern proprieties, I can only say that the seller of hosiery and lingerie, though from a motive quite different from that of the reformer, would look upon the modern girl and music show with an equal abhorrence.

That the exploitation of nudity has at times been a serious evil is obvious to every right-minded playgoer. But the remedy is not so obvious. The critical preacher of today is himself against invoking the censorship of the police. He is also against "Burlesonizing" the stage. Only one remedy has proved at all efficacious. Certain managers have gone so far in catering to the roving eye as to shock the man in the street, not to mention his wife and his daughter. The result has been financially disastrous. What were once haunts of all unseemliness have of late become almost reactionary. With this as with other evils, the only available remedy lies in the instinctive decency and good sense of the people.

The broadening of current standards of taste is, in fact, the work not of the theatres but of the public. There was a time when the waltz was denounced from the pulpit—and when Lord Byron found in it a new and prepotent intoxication. Standards have been easing off ever since. The zoological dances, which are being deplored in some quarters, were popular in all grades of society before they were exploited on the stage; and at one time our débutantes reached extremes which a chorus girl would blush to emulate. In a recent play a young actress engaged in a game of "strip poker" in which she "lost" large quantities of her hosiery and lingerie. Certain case-hardened first nighters were shocked; but, as it happened, she went from the theatre to a costume ball in the identical disarray, and there created not a ripple of protest. The fault, in so far as there is a fault, lies with the standards of the great public; and for those the managers must be held far less responsible than the clergy.

In all probability the assailant of our stage exaggerates the fault. The decencies of the eye are much more a matter of custom than of intrinsic morality. In Paris they used to tell a story of an Arab who expressed delight at the fact that the women of Western Europe could mingle in general society. He found that it improved the women and improved society. A Frenchman inquired whether Arabian women might not profit by such liberty. But at this suggestion the Arab wildly shied. The passions of his countrymen were so inflammable, he said, that if an Arabian woman were to disclose so much as her nose or her forehead she would not be safe from violence. To us his prudery and his illogic are merely laughable; but must we not seem equally absurd to the Japanese? When the Portsmouth Peace Conference was in session a Bostonian Summer resident of

York Harbor entertained a Japanese delegate and his women folk. It was a broad-minded Bostonian, and he especially admired the Japanese as the Yankees of the East. But at bedtime the delegate, accompanied by a bevy of his women folk, trotted down to the dock and plunged into York River, quite as they would do in their own country. Overnight the broad-minded Bostonian, admirer of the Yankees of the East, was transformed into a rigid exclusionist. He even ceased calling Aguinaldo the George Washington of the Philippines.

The really amazing thing about the contemporary outburst against the stage



A Stage Style of 1868. Lydia Thompson, Famous in Her Day as "The English Blonde."

is that, with all the solicitude for the purity of our eyes, the critics do not seem to be concerned for the purity of our minds and hearts. Yet the broadening of standard here has been even more remarkable. Is "Camille" an immoral play? When, in 1849, Dumas fils wrote "La Dame aux Camélias," he read it to Emile Augier, the foremost dramatist of his time; to Jules Janin, the foremost dramatic critic, and to Léon Gozlan, a prominent novelist. All three signed for him a brevet of morality. But the Minister of Education, Léon Faucher, forbade him to produce his play. Dumas then got his illustrious father to go with him to plead his cause before the Minister. Faucher refused to admit father or son, and turned them over to a subordinate, who said that nothing could be done. At the end of a year de Mornay succeeded Faucher as Minister and licensed "La Dame aux Camélias," which had a successful Spring run. But by Autumn there was a third Minister, Persigny, who forbade the resumption of the run until overborne by his predecessor, de Mornay. So at last the piece won the freedom of the stage. But at the end of fifteen years, when Dumas fils recorded these adventures, the play was still under the ban in England. It lived to become a leading feature in the repertory of Bernhardt, Duse, and all actresses who aspired to the first rank; and it is today a favorite of the sob sisterhood wherever there is a local stock company. What was its offense in the eyes of two Ministers of Education? Simply that it attempted to show a courtesan as a human being with a heart and a capacity for self-sacrifice.

We are not here concerned with the truthfulness of the play, or with its ef-



From F. J. Willstach Collection. The Worrell Sisters in "The Field of the Cloth of Gold," 1868.

fect upon the morals of the public. Let us grant that Marguerite Gauthier is sentimentalized, and that the generations of women who have admired her character and bewept her woes have received a demoralizing impression as to the life of her kind. The point is that, once again, as in the time of Molière, the drama won its freedom to speak the truth as it conceived it about human life and character. Ibsen met, and overcame, a similar opposition when he undertook to show how a woman might have a higher duty than that to her husband and children. When Shaw exhibited Mrs. Warren and her profession, Magistrate McAadoo closed the theatre—and was judicially reproved for his overweening arrogance. Today Ibsen and Shaw seem to many folk conservative moralists. One recent play showed a young girl having her "fling" of immorality, and took the position that she had the same right to do it as any young man. Another exhibited young people who, being financially unable to marry, lived together in freedom unreprieved. If the pulpit disapproves of one or all of these teachings, as I presume it does, here is its true point of attack; for they strike at the

roots of established morality and religion. But the reformers who are now assailing the stage do not mention these things and are apparently ignorant of their existence.

Here again, however, if we take the broader view of the stage by decades and generations, the policy of non-interference has been justified. With the exception of "Camille," none of the plays instanced has attracted the general public, which shuns offenses against the mind and the heart as instinctively as it fights shy of improprieties addressed to the senses. The tendency of the commercial managers whom the puritan critics abominate has been steadily reactionary.

Yet the drama as a human institution has undoubtedly profited by its freedom. Thanks to the pioneering of Dumas fils and Ibsen, a whole range of moral and social problems, of problems in character and in conduct, have been made familiar to the great public. Side by side with the "classy, girly, jazzy show," against which pulpit orators fulminated, were Maeterlinck's "Betrothal" and Barrie's "Dear Brutus"—plays that probe ideas of character and fate with a broad-



Isco, in London Sketch. The Victory Girl—A Picture Typifying One Class of Modern Stage Costumes.

ly human sympathy and a philosophic insight which are beyond all praise. Just where the masterpieces of our modern stage will stand in the world perspective of drama, it is perhaps too early to conjecture. This much, however, is already manifest, that seldom or never through all the centuries has the general level of intelligence and of moral standards in the theatre been so high. Surely that is a fact as worthy of attention as the before-mentioned details as to stockings and lingerie—or the absence of them.

It is a fact often commented on from the pulpit itself that, in the decades which have seen the rise of the modern drama, the Church has been gradually letting slip its hold on the people. Many

reasons have been given for this; but the most cogent of them, I take it, would somehow relate themselves to the narrow-minded violence of pulpit attacks on the stage. For a generation and more the world has been moving out and away from its old moorings—at a pace that has always been rapid and often disconcerting. But it is still the same old world—beguiled at times, no doubt, by the pride of the flesh and the lust of the eye, but, in its depths, moved only by those great forces that work through the heart and the mind. It is not without cause if a generation shuns certain free churches and finds delight of the spirit elsewhere, at the expense of \$2, plus the agent's fee, plus the war tax.



Brown Brothers.

An Old Poster Which Caused Much Clamor. "The Black Crook" Was the Proprietor of Our Modern Ballet Shows.