

Troublous Times for the Theatre Business

All Sorts of Suggestions for Remedying War Slump Are Being Considered by the Managers—The Question of Prices and Ticket Speculators



Billie Burke.

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AMONG THOSE WHO HAVE APPEARED AS STARS IN NEW YORK THEATRES THIS SEASON.

IN the Hudson hinterland referred to by the theatrical profession as "the provinces" a new play called "The Golden Goose" is being groomed for the metropolitan stage. When it reaches Manhattan, as it probably will in the course of a few weeks, the irony of the situation will undoubtedly be pointed out by the reviewers, for it is an open secret that the golden goose of the theatres is dead—killed by the managers who plucked her too closely. At least she is dead for the time being, and nobody knows how long it will take to resurrect her.

Last week four of Broadway's principal playhouses were dark, and this week several more will close for want of patronage. All will reopen, of course, for the holiday season, when Santa Claus is kind to managers as well as to children, but when the festivities are over, some are apt to suspend operations again. Certainly they will have to, unless conditions improve vastly — unless that portion of the playgoing public that suddenly swore Broadway returns to be amused.

When the United States entered the war last Spring there were many and varied predictions as to what effect our participation would have on the theatre. One of the most prosperous seasons in the history of the native stage was at the home stretch. Glowing with its success, a majority of the official forecasters predicted continued prosperity, basing their prophecies on the wartime popularity of stage presentations in London and Paris, a popularity unprecedented in the annals of these capitals.

For the first eight weeks of the season of 1917-18 it looked as if the optimists were right. They pointed with pride to auditoriums well filled, regardless of the quality of the offerings; to box offices where one could get only information, and little of that as to where all the tickets were. A few intrepid managers became so elated at what appeared to be the American public's adoption of the slogan, "Amusement as usual," that they adopted a \$3 scale of prices. And then the débâcle! Suddenly and without warning the seats that had been filled all Fall

were found vacant; there was not only one but many vacant chairs. The managers were uneasy, but they chose to consider the depression temporary. Nevertheless, it continued, and the end is not yet. In fact, the last week has been about the worst week in the history of the American theatre.

How complete has been the rout that began in the last days of October only the close observers know. In the intervening weeks the reversal of form has been complete. In August theatres were at a premium; now they can be had for a song, or at least a couple of them. In August almost any wise man would have told you that certain stars were valuable assets; that, no matter how unsuccessful their plays, their personal followings would keep them afloat for six or eight weeks. Consider the stars of first magnitude extinguished by the deluge. Some of them lingered a month or two; the engagements of others were numbered

and went the same week. A brace of stars with a standing record of full seasons runs lasted two months.

The cut-rate ticket has found its way into playhouses it has never before violated. There have been nights a-plenty in the last few weeks when seats for all but three or four theatres could be bought at substantial reductions at "Joe's." Not all of them have come direct from the box offices, for a few attractions are popular enough not to be forced to traffic with Joe, but they could be bought nevertheless for half of what the other agencies paid for them. There have been nights, too, when even Joe could not dispose of his pasteboards, and on such nights any manager without a smattering of Greek would tell you that hoi polloi were not on Broadway.

What is the cause of the sudden upheaval which has already cost the theatres hundreds of thousands of dollars? Pro Bono Publico writes to his

tax was only the Boston tea-party incident of the situation, the proverbial straw that broke the dromedary's back.

Late in October a number of events conspired to awake the average American to a realization of the fact that we were principals in a terrible war. The Italian reverses, the latest Russian collapse, the Liberty Loan, the levying of the war tax tripped on the heels of one another. Added to these was the sugar shortage, the first alimentary indication that the war was real for us; undoubtedly this was a contributory cause to the public's awakening, since a man's intelligence, as surely as his heart, is reached through his stomach.

Nov. 1, then, witnessed a public conscious of a fierce and probably long conflict ahead, a conflict which would require a conservation of resources and energy. The natural reaction was economy with a vengeance, and immediately off came the head of the theatre, which had become overdeveloped through the acquisitiveness of managers, the greatest of all luxuries. That the attitude of the public was one of economy and not a reversion of feeling against this form of relaxation in wartime is evidenced by the fact that the movie and variety theatres are thriving. One of the Broadway palaces dedicated to the movies took in \$19,000 the other week, while the losses of a theatre with a \$3 scale of

prices must have been at least half that. Several schemes have been advanced as a solution to the problem by which the theatre may be saved from disaster until peace or the necessity of relaxation has brought the masses back to the theatre. The proximity of Paris and London to the battle front and the constant presence of thousands of troops relieved the theatre in those cities of any such crisis. One manager recently addressed an appeal to the public, pointing out the importance of the stage as a medium for mental and nervous relaxation and asking for more loyal support. The answer was echoed in dozens of letters showered upon the newspapers by persons who for years had had their pleas for box-office

consideration at the hands of the managers unanswered. Another put into effect a co-operative scheme by which producer, players, and theatre should share receipts pro rata, but it failed to bring relief for the very good reason that it did nothing to increase the receipts. For the same reason a general reduction of actors' salaries suggested in some quarters will not solve the problem of the vacant orchestra chair. Suggestions are plentiful; the remedy still undiscovered. One manager admits that the trouble is at the managerial end of the string. He says playgoers seceded because the price of their recreation had gradually soared beyond their means. Accordingly he has introduced a scale of reduced

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William Faversham.

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by days or weeks. Never have these idols been treated so cruelly. One whose minimum drawing power was \$9,000 a week dwindled to a third of that; another who recently played to \$10,000 weekly blinked out this season when the receipts dropped to \$150 a night; a pair of stars who singly in other years could pack the house attracted about \$600 a night, and part of that came from the cut-rate man.

Even musical comedy has not been immune—that fabled form of relaxation beloved of the Tired Business Man. Any old musical comedy, however decrepit the libretto, in normal times would last six or eight weeks and make money; recently one equipped with the music of the world's most famous light-opera composer and sung by one of the most popular American light-opera baritones came

favorite paper that it is because the plays presented nowadays are so inferior that intelligent people won't tolerate them, and then spoils his argument by adding that they must perforce attend the movies. Also the general average of plays this season is admitted to be as good as in recent years, and, furthermore, the defection is nation-wide, which means that the rest of the country stopped going to see last year's plays synchronously with Manhattan's desertion of this year's crop.

Others assert that the imposition of the war tax on tickets wrought the havoc. The prevailing tendency of the public to palm the tax and not produce it until asked to, a fact substantiated by any ticket seller, lends color to this assertion, but the real cause lies deeper. The

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an agent and becomes a principal. The agent does that when he buys out large blocks of seats far in advance and markets them at arbitrary prices. Until the panic came, it was not unusual for the brokers to buy in advance \$40,000 worth of seats for an attraction that promised to be popular, while in one case they purchased \$200,000 worth before the première. Naturally, to protect themselves and show a profit they must charge enough for the seats which they sell to cover the losses on those they do not, and an unsold seat, unlike most commodities, has no value after curtain time. Like Clementine of the undergrud song, it is "lost and gone forever" after 8 o'clock. The theatre patron who pays \$8 for a seat to the most popular play is paying the agent's losses on the unused seats for

those less popular. Rarely does the manager get any appreciable part of the premium. If this unhealthy condition can be cured, if the ticket broker will be willing to accept a reasonable commission for his services, it is argued by the manager in question, the public's present expenditure will buy seats for all the theatres instead of four or six. Thus the public will be enabled to see more plays for the same money, more stages will show a profit, and the agents themselves will not have their earnings diminished. Strangely enough, the ticket brokers have indicated their preference to return to this basis. They say they would make more money with less risk than under the present system of enforced purchases in large quantities.

This manager asserts that he is not against the agent as such, that he objects to him only when he ceases to be