

STUART WALKER

MORE PORTMANTEAU
PLAYS

Stuart Walker

More Portmanteau Plays

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INTRODUCTION

During the period which has elapsed between the publication of *Portmanteau Plays*, and that of the present volume our country entered upon the greatest war in history, and emerged victorious. It is far too early to estimate what effect that war has had or may have upon all art in general, and upon the dramatic and theatric arts in particular, but there is every indication that the curtain is about to rise on the great romantic revival which we have watched and waited for, and of which Stuart Walker has been one of the major prophets.

During the actual period of the war many of the creative and interpretative artists of the theater were engaged either directly in army work or in one of its auxiliary branches. It is amusing to recall that the present writer met Schuyler Ladd serving as Mess Sergeant for a Base Hospital in France, Alexander Wollcott, late dramatic critic of the New York *Times*, attached to the *Stars and Stripes* in Paris, and Douglas Stuart, the London producer, in an English hospital at Etretat, the while he himself was serving as an enlisted man on the staff of the same hospital. These are minor instances, but when they have been multiplied several hundred times one begins to see how closely the actor, the critic, and the producer were involved in the struggle. Again the problem of providing proper entertainment for the troops was, and still is, a serious one. In the great number of cases it seems highly probable that the entertainment along such lines done by the men themselves was far more effective than that provided by outside organizations. More than once, however, it appeared to the writer that here was a field especially suited to the *Portmanteau Theater* and to its repertory. The question of transportation, always a crucial point with such a venture, was no more difficult than that presented by many companies already in the field, and doing immensely inferior work. My return to America put me in possession of the facts of the matter, and without desiring in any way to cast blame, much less to indict, or to emphasize unduly a relatively unimportant point, it seems only fitting that there should be included in this record the reasons for what has seemed to many of us a lost opportunity. They are at least much more brief than the apologia which precedes them.

The *Portmanteau Theater*, its repertory of forty-eight plays, and its trained company, was offered for war purposes under the following conditions: no royalty was to be paid for any of the plays, no salary was to be paid Mr. Walker; the company was to go wherever sent, whether in or out of shell fire, in France or in England; the only stipulation being that the members of the company should be remunerated at the same rate paid an enlisted man in the United States army, and that the principal members should receive the pay of subalterns. On the whole an arrangement so generous that it is almost absurd. To this offer the Y. M. C. A. turned a deaf ear. Their attention was concentrated on vaudeville at the moment, and with one hand they covered their eyes while with the other they clutched their purse strings. The War Camp Community Service could see no way in which the Theater could function for the men either at home or abroad. The *Portmanteau* was, in a word, too "high-brow" a venture for them. The reader is referred to the Appendix of this volume showing the repertory in use at that time. Another official contented himself with the statement that the problem of transportation involved rendered the project impracticable. The matter is too lengthy to discuss here, but the writer, who was able to observe the situation at first hand, knows this to be an error. The navy then asked for plans and estimates so that a number of *Portmanteau Theaters* might be constructed aboard the ships. Mr. Walker offered to put all his patents at the complete disposal of the Navy Department, and himself was ready to draw plans and make suggestions. The navy approved the idea, and with sublime assurance requested Mr. Walker to proceed with the work of construction—at his own expense. It

was impossible; the money could not be afforded, and the venture was abandoned. It is therefore very evident that there was an opportunity, and that that opportunity was lost; but it was not the *Portmanteau* which lost it. At any rate we are left free to take up the history of Mr. Walker's theater and his plays at the point where we left off in the first book of the series.

The close of the highly successful season at the *Princess Theater* in New York, the winter of 1915-1916, was followed by twelve weeks on the road, three of which were spent in Chicago, and then by thirteen weeks in Indianapolis. It was in this last city that the production of the adaptation of Booth Tarkington's book, "Seventeen," changed all plans by its instant popularity. On the way East, a stop was made in Chicago, and before that city had time to do much more than voice its enthusiasm, the company left for New York. During the fall of 1917 *Seventeen* was played regularly, with the addition of some special performances of the repertory. *Seventeen* was played in New York for two hundred and fifty-eight performances (Chicago had already had one hundred), and the special performances of *The Book of Job* were renewed in the spring. It was during the next fall, that of 1918, that a second *Seventeen* company was sent out on the road. That company is still out, the total playing time for the work since its production being (April, 1919) just one hundred and four weeks. The next summer, 1918, included a repertory season of thirteen weeks, again at Indianapolis, and four in Cincinnati, while the following winter, just past, chimed ten weeks of repertory at the *Punch and Judy Theater* in New York. To sum up in brief then—Mr. Walker has, beginning in the spring of 1916 and ending in the spring of 1919, played seventy-six weeks of repertory, in which he has produced forty-eight plays. This does not include the *Seventeen* run which, as I have said, totals one hundred and four weeks to date. It is safe to claim that this represents as successful repertory work as has been done in the United States so far. We shall, however, return to that presently.

In the fall of 1917, so important to the Portmanteau company, a change of management was instituted, by which the following staff came into control: Stage Director—Gregory Kelly: Stage Manager—Morgan Farley: Musical Director—Michel Bernstein: Manager—Harold Holstein: Press Representative—Alta May Coleman: Treasurer—Walter Herzbrun. The changes were excellent, and were thoroughly justified in their results. An arrangement was made with the Shuberts, whereby booking was greatly facilitated, and with its structure thus reinforced, the Theater was in an excellent position to "carry on."

It may be remembered by those who read the first book of the *Portmanteau Series* that in my introduction I placed the greater portion of my emphasis on the theatrical side; that is, the *Portmanteau* as a portable theater rather than as a repertory company. It is my intention here to reverse the process, and this for two reasons. First: Mr. Walker has in the last two years by no means confined himself to the *Portmanteau* stage. The recent run at the *Punch and Judy Theater* in New York was upon a full size stage, and this was not at all an exception. The *Portmanteau* was, and is, an idea, but that idea has no very definite connection with repertory as such. There is no longer the need, in this particular instance, that there once was, for the invariable use of the *Portmanteau*, except as convenience requires. At the very beginning, when the company often played for private persons, the portable stage was indispensable. But so thoroughly did the *Portmanteau* idea justify itself that from being a crutch it grew into a handy staff, always valuable, but no longer essential. All that has been said of it, and of its possibilities, is quite as true today as ever it was, but now having proved his original thesis, if so it may be called, Mr. Walker may well be content to work out the future gradually and in his own way. Second: the repertory idea is certainly of infinitely more importance than any theatrical device or contrivance, however interesting and valuable such a departure may be in itself. As to any difference in the acting necessitated by the change from a small to a large stage that amounts to little. It is entirely a difference in quality, an ability to temper the interpretation to the surroundings, and as such would apply as readily to the staging and setting of a play as to the acting itself. On a large stage one might take three steps to convey an impression where on a small stage one step would produce the same effect. An arch or pylon would obviously have to be of greater proportions on a large stage

than on a small one. Yet in both these instances the ultimate effect is precisely the same. Let us turn then to a consideration of the Portmanteau, not as a theater, but as a repertory company.

There is certainly no space here, and just as certainly no necessity, for dwelling long upon the prime importance of repertory. Several excellent books have been written on that absorbing subject, and we may surely take for granted that which we know beyond all doubt to be the truth, namely, that repertory as opposed to the "long run" and to the "star" system is the ultimate solution of a most vexatious and perplexing problem—how to change the modern theater from an industry to an art. The disadvantages of the present mode of procedure are too evident to call for recapitulation; witness the results obtained. On the other hand there can be no question that there is a practicable and simple panacea in repertory; see what has been done by the Abbey company in Dublin, by Miss Horniman's players in Manchester, by the *Scottish Repertory Theater*, on a smaller scale, in Glasgow, by John Drinkwater's repertory theater in Birmingham, concerning which I have, unfortunately, no exact data, but which I understand is doing remarkable work with distinct success, and by the Portmanteau company in the United States. It would be well also to include Charles Frohman's season at the *Duke of York's Repertory Theater* in London; in fact the inclusion of this seventeen weeks' season would be inevitable. Where the experiment has failed it has failed for reasons which did not, in any way, shape or manner, invalidate the principle at stake. Thus, to cite the great example on our own side of the water, the *New Theater* was doomed to failure from the very start in the fact that it was born crippled. It may be restated to advantage, just here, that from the spring of 1916 to the spring of 1919, a period of three years, Mr. Walker has produced forty-eight plays, has given seventy-six weeks of repertory, and has had a nearly unbroken run of one hundred and four weeks with one play which has been commercially successful beyond the others. Of the forty-eight plays produced during this time eighteen had never been seen before on any stage; four were entirely new to America (except for a possible itinerant amateur performance); and twenty-six were revivals, modern, semi-modern, and classical. It is my belief that this record will take a creditable position in the history of American repertory. Abroad, however, its place is less secure, but even here the *Portmanteau* is by no means snowed under.

In the other great English speaking country there are four outstanding examples of repertory work, as has already been stated. On the Continent the situation is entirely different; there is no "problem" there, for the repertory theater has long been an established fact. France, in the *Comédié-Française*, and Germany, in several of her theaters before the war, merely provide us with a criterion. In Great Britain, however, and in America, we are in the process of building and adjusting, so that the examples of one will reasonably affect the other. At the risk of being misunderstood we shall pause long enough to call attention to the *Irving Place Theatre*,¹ of New York, a German house supporting German plays, and attended very largely by a German clientele, but notwithstanding all this a repertory theater of standing, and of some distinction, from which we might learn several useful lessons. However, it is with the Anglo-American stage that we have to do at the moment.

Doubtless, first in importance comes the Abbey Theater Company of Dublin. From December, 1905, to December, 1912, there were produced at the *Abbey Theater* (I am unfortunately unable to include the several important tours made) seventy-four plays, of which seven were translations. Of the rest but few were revivals, as the history of the Irish literary movement will show. They were plays written especially for the theater, for particular audiences, and to achieve definite purpose as propaganda. Moreover, when the *Abbey* was tottering on the brink of failure, Miss Horniman came to the rescue with a substantial subsidy which enabled the theater not only to proceed, but finally to establish itself on a sound running basis. Mr. Walker's company has had to fight its own way from the very start.

¹ Since America's entrance in the War given over to the "movies."

In Manchester, Miss Horniman's own repertory company at the *Midland Theater* and finally at the *Gaiety* has been distinctly and brilliantly successful. In a period of a little more than two years there were produced fifty-five plays; twenty-eight new, seventeen revivals of modern English plays, five modern translations, and five classics. This is a repertory as well balanced as it is wide. In 1910, however, there was inaugurated the practise of producing each play for a run of one week, so that from that time on the theater was open to the criticism of being not a repertory in the fullest sense of the term, but a short run theater. But for that matter, I do not think that there is a repertory theater either in England or in America which fulfills the ideal conditions set down by William Archer who had in mind, as he wrote, the repertory theater of the Continent.

"When we speak of a repertory, we mean a number of plays always ready for performance, with nothing more than a 'run through' rehearsal, which, therefore, can be, and are, acted in such alternation that three, four or five different plays may be given in the course of a week. New plays are from time to time added to the repertory, and those of them which succeed may be performed fifty, seventy, a hundred times, or even more, in the course of one season; but no play is ever performed more than two or three times in uninterrupted succession."²

This applies exactly to the *Comédié-Française*, which, in the year 1909, presented one hundred and fifteen plays, eighteen of which were performed for the first time, the remainder being a part of the regular body of the repertory of that theater. In the first decade of the present century there were no less than two hundred and eighty-two plays added to the repertory of the *Comédié*. It may be of service to remember, however, that the *Comédié-Française* was established by royal decree in 1680. If the *Globe Theater* of Shakespeare's day had lived and prospered up to the present we might have an example to match that of France.

It is probable that if one were to use the phrase "repertory in America" the wise ones of the theater would raise their eye-brows stiffly and remark, "There is none." That would be nearly true, but not altogether so. It is my desire here to sketch in brief the early beginnings of what has been termed the "independent theater" movement,³ from which repertory in this country unquestionably grew, up to the time of the establishment of the "little theaters" which now dot the country, and into which movement that of the "independent theater" eventually merged.

In 1887 there was inaugurated by A. M. Palmer at the *Madison Square Theater*, of which he was manager at that time, a series of "author's matinées" which appear to have been in some sense try-outs for a possible repertory season. Only three plays were produced, however, before Mr. Palmer decided against the scheme as impracticable. It is interesting to note that these three plays were all by American authors—Howells, Matthews, and Lathrop. The attempt was actually not repertory in the strict sense, but it undoubtedly marks a tendency, slight, but evident, to incline in the right direction.

Some four years later, in the fall of 1891, a Mr. McDowell, son of General McDowell of Civil War fame, started the *Theater of Arts and Letters* with the idea of bringing literature and the drama into closer relationship. Five plays were produced, and among the names of the authors (again they were all natives) one finds several which have since become famous. Commercially, the venture was a total failure, and the authors did not even collect their full royalties. A short tour was made with several of the more successful plays, one by Clyde Fitch (a one-act which was afterwards expanded

² Mr. John Palmer, in his book, "The Future of the Theater," gives the following as the programme for the then, 1913, projected National Theater. The war intervened, however, and the venture has been lost sight of for the moment. This statement is even more reasonable than that of Mr. Archer, for this is intended for practical use in England while his was merely taken from France. "... it seems desirable to state that a repertory theater should be held to mean a theater able to present at least two different plays of full length at evening performances in each completed week during the annual season, and at least three different plays at evening performances and matinées taken together ... and the number of plays presented in a year should not be less than twenty-five. A play of full length means a play occupying at least two-thirds of the whole time of any performance. But two two-act plays, or three one-act plays, composing a single programme, should, for the purposes of this statute, be reckoned as equivalent to a play of full length." As Mr. Palmer remarks "this statute is both elastic and watertight." E. H. B.

³ See Appendix for complete repertories.

into *The Moth and the Flame*), one by Richard Harding Davis, and one by Brander Matthews. All three of these were one-act. American authors were willing enough to write plays, but they apparently could not succeed, except in isolated instances, in writing good ones. There was evidently an utter dearth of suitable material. Nevertheless, when foreign plays were put on no better fortune ensued, unless they represented the old school of pseudo melodrama, and farce adapted from the French and German, such as Augustin Daly delighted in. Daly too had discovered that to encourage the American playwright was to court disaster.

In 1897 *The Criterion*, a New York review of rather eccentric merit, endeavored to establish the *Criterion Independent Theater* modeled on the *Théâtre-Libre* of Antoine. A company was recruited, headed by E. J. Henley, and performances were given at first the *Madison Square Theater*, and then the *Berkeley Lyceum*. It was frankly intended that the appeal should be to a small, select audience, and, in spite of the jeers of the press, five plays were produced—one Norwegian, one Italian, one French, one Spanish, and one American. A glance through the list shows us that the American play, by Augustus Thomas, is the only one which has not since entered into the permanent literature of the stage. Internal differences, and imperfect rehearsals combined to overthrow the venture which, after one season, was abandoned. The success of the last production, however, *El Gran Galeoto*, inspired Mr. John Blair to produce Ibsen's *Ghosts* with Miss Mary Shaw at the *Carnegie Lyceum* in 1899. From this sprang *The Independent Theater*, generously backed financially by Mr. George Peabody Eustis of Washington.

The list of the patrons of this theater reads like a chapter from "Who's Who." Many of the men associated with the plan gave their services free or at a nominal cost. The three persons more directly responsible for the artistic side of the work were Charles Henry Meltzer, John Blair, and Vaughan Kester, while among the patrons were W. D. Howells, Bronson Howard, E. C. Stedman, E. H. Sothorn, Charles and Daniel Frohman, and Sir Henry Irving. Six plays were given, this time none of them of American origin. The press and critics were most bitter in their denunciation of these foreign importations, as they had been on the previous occasion. There was, however, on the part of the audiences a definite tendency to let drop the scales from their eyes, and to awake to the new forces in the drama and the theater as represented by Ibsen, Hervieu, the *Théâtre-Libre*, and the *Independent Theater*. But in spite of all this, one season's work saw the conclusion of the project. A part of the repertory was given in other cities, notably Boston and Washington, but, though a very real interest was aroused, it was not sufficient to permit the company to continue. About two thousand dollars represented the deficit at the end of the season; by no means a discreditable balance, albeit on the wrong side of the ledger, when one considers the circumstances. The actual results of the work are summed up in a privately printed pamphlet written by Mr. Meltzer than whom no one was more closely in touch with the whole independent movement.

"What have the American 'Independents' achieved by their efforts?

"They have succeeded, thanks to Mr. George Peabody Eustis, the general manager of the scheme, in giving twenty-two performances of plays recognized everywhere abroad as characteristic, interesting, and literary.

"They have extended the 'Independent' movement from New York to Boston and Washington.

"They have encouraged at least one 'regular' manager to announce the production next season of an Ibsen play.

"They have revived discussion of the general tendencies of modern drama.

"They have interested, and occasionally charmed, an intelligent minority of playgoers, who have grown weary of the rank insipidity, vulgarity, and improbability of current drama.

"They have bored, angered, and distressed a less intelligent majority of playgoers and critics.

"They have discovered at least one new actress of unusual worth.

"They have prepared the way, at a by no means inconsiderable cost of time, thought, and money, for future, and perhaps, more prosperous movements aiming at the reform of the American stage."

Coming at the time it did, sponsored by the best minds in America, and worked to its conclusion by whole hearted enthusiasts, *The Independent Theater* did, beyond all doubt, have a very vitalizing effect on both the stage and the drama of this country. The next step, perhaps the climactic one of the series, was longer in coming (1909).

The *New Theater* has been our greatest attempt and our greatest failure. The details of these two seasons have been placed before the public so many times that there is no necessity for doing more here than suggesting a broad outline. If the enterprise had, from its very inception, been in the hands of capable men who knew their work, instead of being handicapped by wealthy amateurs the history of a failure might never have been written. In its first season *The New Theater* presented thirteen plays at intervals of a fortnight. Of these, four were classics, three were original works by native authors, and two by contemporary British dramatists. During the second season, at the end of which the idea was given up and the *New Theater* abandoned, eleven plays were produced; six of these were of British origin, semi-modern; one was a classic; three were Belgian, and one was American. I have counted in this season, two plays produced the season before, the only revivals. Altogether then, twenty-two plays were given, only five of which can be considered as home products. Mr. Ames, the Director, was balked at every turn by the combined forces of Fifth Avenue and Wall Street, while the outrageous and impossible construction of the theater itself proved an insurmountable handicap. In addition it was now found almost impossible to induce the American dramatist to turn from the great profits of the long run Broadway theaters to the acceptance of one hundred and fifty dollars a performance at the *New Theater*. There was something to be said on both sides. The *New Theater* was a splendid and costly attempt, and it taught us several invaluable lessons, chief among them the occasional unimportance of money.

Probably next in order comes the short repertory of Miss Grace George at the *Playhouse* in 1915 and 1917. This lasted for about one season and a half, and, while there was promise of continuation, the project was finally abandoned. It is only fair to say that Miss George worked under the peculiar disadvantage of entire lack of sympathy, and indeed, open antagonism as well, on the part of several of her most important confrères. The real trouble seemed to be one of those that affected the *New Theater*, that is, Miss George was totally unable to secure American plays for her purposes. In the period of her project she produced seven plays; five the first year, and two the next. Of these, five were modern British plays, one was a translation from the French, and one was semi-modern American. Again it will be observed that American plays were simply not forthcoming, a condition widely different from that obtaining during the nineties when the *Theater of Arts and Letters*, and the *Criterion Independent* held their short sway. Miss George's effort was distinctly worth while, but in the end there was added only another gravestone to the cemetery of buried hopes.⁴

With the advent of the "little theater" movement, from about 1905, there are many small companies and theaters which can, in a broad sense, fairly be termed repertory. To discuss any number of them would require a book in itself, and the reader is referred to "*The Insurgent Theater*" by Professor Dickenson as the work most nearly fulfilling this need. Probably the *Washington Square Players* of New York are typical, more or less, of them all, and their repertory for two years is given in the Appendix. Aside from the natural conditions resulting from the war, one reason of their failure seems to have been their pernicious desire to be "different" at any cost. In spite of their excellent work they ultimately found that cost to be prohibitive, but the discovery was made too late.⁵ The majority of the little theaters are, however, too entirely provincial in their appeal to warrant an assumption of any great influence, in spite of their vital and unquestionable importance.⁶

⁴ Announcement has just been made that Miss George will continue her repertory during the season of 1919-1920.

⁵ They only failed for \$3000, however: the rent of a Broadway theater for a week.

⁶ This statement hardly applies to *The Neighborhood Theater*, or to that successor to *The Washington Square Players*, *The Theater Guild*, the work of which at the *Garrick Theater*, New York, during the first part of 1919 has been excellent in the very highest degree.

It will be observed that in speaking of Stuart Walker's work I have used the phrase repertory *company*, not, repertory *theater*. That is, of course, part of the secret. A theater anchored to one spot is obviously at a disadvantage. It cannot seek its audience, but must sit with what patience and capital it has at its disposal, and wait for the audience to come to it. With a touring company the odds are more even. An unsuccessful month in one city may be made up by a successful one in another. The type of play that captivates the west may not go at all in the east, and the other way about. There are plays now on the road, and which have been there literally for years, doing excellent business, which have never ventured to storm the very rocky coast bounding New York. And there are plays which have had crowded houses in the metropolis which have slumped, and deservedly so, most dismally when they were taken out where audiences were possessed of a clearer vision. Hence it is easy to see that Mr. Walker, playing in both the east and the west, in small cities and in large ones, can do what the *New Theater* and the *Playhouse* could not do. True, they could send their companies out on tour, but the *New Theater* with its huge stage and panoramic scenery could find but few theaters which could house it, and the whole idea of both that and Miss George's company was a fixed repertory theater. Indeed in both of them the faults of the "star" system were never wholly absent.

The facts that I have been able to give here seem to point to but one conclusion. That is, that Stuart Walker's repertory company stands numerically on a par with anything else of the kind ever attempted in the United States, and that it is not unworthy of comparison with the best repertory work in England. It must be borne in mind that, in some measure, all this has been done on a fairly small scale. There has not been the money at hand to do it otherwise, nor has there been the necessity. The company may be compared better with the *Gaiety* of Manchester than with the *Duke of York's Theater*. And too, as with the *Gaiety*, many of the players have been relatively unknown before their advent on the *Portmanteau* stage. It is the definite mission, or some part of it at any rate, of the repertory company to encourage new dramatists, new players, and new stage effects when such encouragement is advisable. To be merely different is by no means to be worth while.

The three plays included in this volume have all been presented successfully both in the east and in the west. The two long plays—*The Lady of the Weeping Willow Tree* and *Jonathan Makes a Wish*—both have the distinction of being popular with audiences and unpopular with critics, a condition of affairs not as unique as it might seem. As for the third, *The Very Naked Boy*, it is a thoroughly delightful trifle, unimportant as drama, yet very perfect in itself, and has been liked by nearly everyone. Combining, as it does, comedy and sentiment, it possesses all the elements that go to make for success with the average audience.

The Lady of the Weeping Willow Tree is founded on an old Japanese legend, how old no one knows. Mr. Walker became interested in Japanese folk-lore through a collection of ballads; it is amusing to observe how his fondness for ballads has followed him through all his work, and this play was the result. From the first it went well. Apparently no one could resist the pathos of the intensely human story which culminated in so tragic a form. One might think that the appeal in a play of this type, written by an author so well known as an artist in stagecraft, would be largely visual. While that appeal is unquestionably there in abundance, the real essence of the tale is the vitally human quality of its characters. One is indeed inclined to believe that we take our pleasures sadly, when he has seen an audience quite dissolved in tears at a performance of this play, and all the while enjoying themselves unutterably. It is a drama of imagination and of emotion. The cold, hard, and more often than not deceiving light of the intellect plays but a small part. It is the human heart with its passions, its fears, its regrets, and its aspirations that concerns us here; not the human mind with its essentially microcosmic point of view, and its petty, festering egoism. The play is beautiful because it is true, and equally it is true because it is beautiful. It seems to me quite the best and soundest piece of work Mr. Walker has done so far, though he himself prefers his later play, *Jonathan Makes a Wish*.

This last play is more realistic—stupid term!—than anything of a serious nature that the author has so far attempted. It is, however, the realism of Barrie rather than that of Brieux, and this at any

rate is consoling. The first act is extraordinary, splendid in thought, in technique, and in execution. Therein lies the trouble, if trouble there be. Neither of the two acts following can reach the level of the first, and with the opening of the second act the play gradually, though hardly perceptibly, declines, not in interest, but in strength. The transposition of the character of the Tramp from an easy going good nature in the first act to that of a Dickens villain in the second may require explanation. The last sensation the boy has is that of the blow on his head, and his last visualization is that of the Tramp's face bending over him. Thus, in his delirium, the two would inevitably be associated. The story of the delirium, the second act, is peculiarly well done. One feels the slight haziness of outline, the great consequence of actually inconsequential events, the morbid terror lurking always in the near background, which are a very part and parcel of that strange psychological condition which is here made to play a spiritual part. The last act suffers for want of material. In reality, all that is necessary is to wind up the play speedily and happily. It seems probable that the introduction of the deliciously charming Frenchwoman, played so delightfully by Margaret Mower, would give the needed color and substance to this portion. As it is, one feels a little something lacking—but only a little. That the play is, as one pseudo-critic remarked, an argument in favor of infant playwrights, is too absurd to discuss. If it argues at all, it is that the relationship between the child world and the adult must be democratic, not tyrannic, and that flowers grow, like weeds, only when they are encouraged, not trod upon. The play is interesting, true, and imaginative to a degree; if it is not wholly satisfactory, it but partakes of the faults of virtue. Audiences, young, old, metropolitan and urban, have responded to the work in a manner which left no doubt of their approval. In New York it was slow in taking hold, and unfortunately the company was obliged to leave to fill other engagements just at the time when a more definite success was at hand. In the west the spirit of the thing caught at once; there was no hesitation there.

From the beginning there has been a very definite plan in Mr. Walker's mind as to what his objective point was to be, and especially in view of what I have said of his company in connection with repertory it may be interesting to suggest the outline of that plan here. This is no less than to establish in some city a permanent repertory theater and company, and to use the *Portmanteau Theater* and company for touring purposes. It is an amusing thought; the little theater would shoot out from under the wing of its parent as a raiding party detaches itself from its company, but the consequences would be, one hopes, less destructive on both sides. The thought, however, is really much more than amusing; it is of very real consequence and importance. It will readily be seen that in this we have a combination of the advantages of both the stationary and the touring repertory company, and hence, double the chances of success. And Mr. Walker would by no means be restricted to one *Portmanteau Theater*. If conditions warranted it he could as easily construct and send out a dozen on the road, taking his work into every nook and corner of the theater-loving country. In fact the ramifications of the idea are so vast that it is useless to endeavor to do more than suggest them here. The reader will see for himself what great possibilities are involved, and what an effect this might have on all repertory work in America.

During the last two years the work of Mr. Walker's company has improved in every way. The addition of new members, such as Margaret Mower, and particularly George Gaul, whose performance in *The Book of Job* was, in my opinion, one of the finest ever seen on the American stage, has naturally served to strengthen the fabric greatly. The older members of the company, Gregory Kelly, McKay Morris, Edgar Stehli and many others, have all improved in their work, increasing in assurance and finish. The success that has attended the fortunes of the theater has made possible finer stage effects (the Dunsany productions have been immensely improved) and the repertory has been greatly enriched by some really fine plays, and has been enhanced by others of a more popular character. One thing must be said, however, in all fairness. It has seemed to the[Pg xxviii] writer that of late there has been an increasing tendency on the part of Mr. Walker's scenic artists and costume designers to fall away from the plain surfaces and unbroken lines of the new stagecraft, and to achieve

an effect which one can only characterize as "spotty." This can best be appreciated by those who know the two American productions of Dunsany's one-act play, *The Tents of the Arabs*. I am rather regretfully of the opinion that, aside from the actual playing and reading of the parts, Sam Hume's production was superior to that of Mr. Walker. An opulence of variegated colors does not always suggest as much as flat masses. The set used by Mrs. Hapgood in her production of Torrence's *Simon the Cyrenian* illustrates excellently the desired result. It is, however, Stuart Walker's privilege to adapt the new ideas, and to make such use of the old, as seems best to him. One is sometimes inclined to miss, nevertheless, the simplicity of his earlier work, especially when it is compared with the splendor, not always well used or well advised, of his later productions. His company has always read beautifully, and its reading is now better than ever. The only adverse criticism, if adverse criticism there be at all, lies against the Stage Director himself. I am especially glad to be able to say this, for the producer whose work is too good, too smooth, is surely stumbling to a fall. The very fact that there is definite room for improvement in the *Portmanteau* presentations, leads one to feel, knowing the record of the company, that these improvements will be made.

To return for a moment to an earlier phase of our discussion, it may be both interesting and profitable to note the fact that while the *Abbey*, the *Manchester*, and the *New Theaters* were all aided by material subsidies, the *Portmanteau* has stood on its own legs, albeit they wobbled a trifle on occasion, from the very start. A little, but only a little, money has been borrowed, and there has been just one gift, that of \$5000. This last was accepted for the reason that it would enable the Theater to mount sets and costume plays in a rather better fashion than heretofore. While it was not absolutely essential to the continued existence of the *Portmanteau* it made presently possible productions which otherwise would have been postponed indefinitely; in British army slang it would be called "bukshee," meaning extra, like the thirteenth cake in the dozen. The record of the *Portmanteau* is its own, and that of its many friends who have been generous in contributing that rarest of all gifts, sympathetic understanding.

Before withdrawing my intrusive finger from the *Portmanteau* pie I should like to pay a small tribute to Stuart Walker himself. I do not think I have ever known a man who gave more unsparingly of himself in all his work. That dragon of the theater, the expense account, has often necessitated someone shouldering the work of half a dozen who were not there. Always it is Mr. Walker who has taken the task upon his back, cheerfully and willingly, and despite physical ills, under which a less determined man would have succumbed. His never wavering belief in his work and his ability to do that work have brought him through many a pitfall. It is not a petty vanity, but the strong conceit of the artist; that which most of us call by the vague term ideals. The spirit of the *Portmanteau* is to be found alike in its offices and on its stage; a spirit of unselfish belief that somehow, somewhere, we all shall "live happily ever after" if only we do the work we are set to do faithfully here and now. The theater, the organization which has that behind it, in conjunction with a keenly intelligent co-operation or team-play, will take a great deal of punishment before it goes down. Mistakes have been made, of course; otherwise neither producer nor company were human; but it is in the acknowledgment and rectification of errors that men become great.

The repertory theater, the new drama, and stage craft, have an able ally in the *Portmanteau*. We may look far afield for that elixir which will transmute the base metal of the commercial theater to the bright gold of art, but unless we remember that the pot of treasure is to be found at this end of the rainbow, and not the other, our search will be in vain.

Edward Hale Bierstadt.

*New York City,
April, 1919.*

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E. H. B.

THE PROLOGUE TO THE PORTMANTEAU THEATER

THE PROLOGUE

As the lights in the theater are lowered the voice of Memory is heard as she passes through the audience to the stage.

MEMORY

Once upon a time, but not so very long ago, you very grownups believed in all true things. You believed until you met the Fourteen Doubters who were so positive in their unbelief that you weakly cast aside the things that made you happy for the hapless things that they were calling life. You were afraid or ashamed to persist in your old thoughts, and strong in your folly you discouraged your little boy, and other people's little boys from the pastimes they had loved. Yet all through the early days you had been surely building magnificent cities, and all about you laying out magnificent gardens, and, with an April pool you had made infinite seas where pirates fought or mermaids played in coral caves. Then came the Doubters, laughing and jeering at you, and you let your cities, and gardens, and seas go floating in the air—unseen, unsung—wonderful cities, and gardens, and seas, peopled with the realest of people.... So now you, and he, and I are met at the portals. Pass through them with me. I have something there that you think is lost. The key is the tiny regret for the real things, the little regret that sometimes seems to weight your spirit at twilight, and compress all life into a moment's longing. Come, pass through. You cannot lose your way. Here are your cities, your gardens, and your April pools. Come through the portals of once upon a time, but not so very long ago—today—now!

She passes through the soft blue curtains, but unless you are willing to follow her, turn back now. There are only play-things here.

THE LADY OF THE WEEPING WILLOW TREE

A Play in Three Acts

Characters

O-Sode-San, an old woman

O-Katsu-San

Obaa-San

The Gaki of Kokoru, an eater of unrest

Riki, a poet

Aoyagi

WEeping WILLOW TREE

ACT I

[Before the House of Obaa-San. At the right back is a weeping willow tree, at the left the simple little house of Obaa-San.]

[O-Sode-San and O-Katsu-San enter.]

O-SODE-SAN

Oi!... Oi!... Obaa-San!

O-KATSU-SAN

Obaa-San!... Grandmother!

O-SODE-SAN

She is not there.

O-KATSU-SAN

Poor Obaa-San.

O-SODE-SAN

Why do you always pity Obaa-San? Are her clothes not whole? Has she not her full store of rice?

O-KATSU-SAN

Ay!

O-SODE-SAN

Then what more can one want—a full hand, a full belly, and a warm body!

O-KATSU-SAN

A full heart, perhaps.

O-SODE-SAN

What does Obaa-San know of a heart, silly O-Katsu? She has had no husband to die and leave her alone. She has had no child to die and leave her arms empty.

O-KATSU-SAN

Hai! Hai! She does not know.

O-SODE-SAN

She has had no lover to smile upon her and then—pass on.

O-KATSU-SAN

But Obaa-San is not happy.

O-SODE-SAN

Pss-s!

O-KATSU-SAN

She may be lonely because she has never had any one to love or to love her.

O-SODE-SAN

How could one love Obaa-San? She is too hideous for love. She would frighten the children away—and even a drunken lover would laugh in her ugly face. Obaa-San! The grandmother!

O-KATSU-SAN

O-Sode, might we not be too cruel to her?

O-SODE-SAN

If we could not laugh at Obaa-San, how then could we laugh? She has been sent from the dome of the sky for our mirth.

O-KATSU-SAN

I do not know! I do not know! Sometimes I think I hear tears in her laugh!

O-SODE-SAN

Pss-s! That is no laugh. Obaa-San cackles like an old hen.

O-KATSU-SAN

I think she is unhappy now and then—always, perhaps.

O-SODE-SAN

Has she not her weeping willow tree—the grandmother?

O-KATSU-SAN

Ay. She loves the tree.

O-SODE-SAN

The grandmother of the weeping willow tree! It's well for the misshapen, and the childless, and the loveless to have a tree to love.

O-KATSU-SAN

But, O-Sode, the weeping willow tree can not love her. Perhaps even old Obaa-San longs for love.

O-SODE-SAN

Do we not come daily to her to talk to her? And to ask her all about her weeping willow tree?

O-KATSU-SAN

Oi! Obaa-San.
[*A sigh is heard.*]

O-SODE-SAN

What was that, O-Katsu?

O-KATSU-SAN

Someone sighed—a deep, hard sigh.

O-SODE-SAN

Oi! Obaa-San! Grandmother!
[*The sigh is almost a moan.*]

O-KATSU-SAN

It seemed to come from the weeping willow tree.

O-SODE-SAN

O-Katsu! Perhaps some evil spirit haunts the tree.

O-KATSU-SAN

Some hideous Gaki! Like the Gaki of Kokoru—the evil ghost that can feed only on the unrest of humans. Their unhappiness is his food. He has to find misery in order to live, and win his way back once more to humanity. To different men he changes his shape at will, and sometimes is invisible.

O-SODE-SAN

Quick, Katsu, let us go to the shrine—and pray—and pray.

O-KATSU-SAN

Ay. There!

[They go out. The Gaki appears.]

THE GAKI

Why did you sigh?

THE VOICE OF THE TREE

O Gaki of Kokoru! My heart hangs within me like the weight of years on Obaa-San.

THE GAKI

Why did you moan?

THE TREE

The tree is growing—and it tears my heart.

THE GAKI

I live upon your unrest. Feed me! Feed me!

[The tree sighs and moans and The Gaki seems transported with joy.]

THE TREE

Please! Please! Give me my freedom.

THE GAKI

Where then should I feed? Unless I feed on your unhappiness I should cease to live—and I must live.

THE TREE

Someone else, perchance, may suffer in my stead.

THE GAKI

I care not where or how I feed. I am in the sixth hell, and if I die in this shape I must remain in this hell through all the eternities. One like me must feed his misery by making others miserable. I can not rise through the other five hells to human life unless I have human misery for my food.

THE TREE

Oh, can't you feed on joy—on happiness, on faith?

THE GAKI

Faith? Yes, perhaps—but only on perfect faith. If I found perfect faith—ah, then—I dare not dream.—There is no faith.

THE TREE

Do not make me suffer more. Let me enjoy the loveliness of things.

THE GAKI

Would you have someone else suffer in your stead?

THE TREE

Someone else—someone else—

THE GAKI

Ay—old Obaa-San—she whom they call the grandmother.
[*The Tree moans.*]

THE GAKI

She will suffer in your stead.

THE TREE

No! No! She loves me! She of all the world loves me! No—not she!

THE GAKI

It shall be she!

THE TREE

I shall not leave!

THE GAKI

You give me better food than I have ever known. You wait! You wait!

THE TREE

Here comes Obaa-San! Do not let her suffer for me!

THE GAKI

You shall be free—as free as anyone can be—when I have made the misery of Obaa-San complete.

THE TREE

She has never fully known her misery. Her heart is like an iron-bound chest long-locked, with the key lost.

THE GAKI

We shall find the key! We shall find the key!

THE TREE

I shall warn her.

THE GAKI

Try!

THE TREE

Alas! I can not make her hear! I can not tell her anything.

THE GAKI

She can not understand you! She can not see me unless I wish! Earth people never see or hear!

THE TREE

Hai! Hai! Hai!

[Obaa-San enters. She is old, very, very old, and withered and misshapen. There is only laughter in your heart when you look at Obaa-San unless you see her eyes. Then—

OBAA-SAN

My tree! My little tree! Why do you sigh?

THE TREE

Hai! Hai! Hai!

OBAA-SAN

Sometimes I think I pity you. Yes, dear tree!

THE TREE

Hai! Hai! Hai!

THE GAKI

Now I am a traveller. She sees me pleasantly.—Grandmother!

OBAA-SAN

Ay, sir!

THE GAKI

Which way to Kyushu?

OBAA-SAN

You have lost your way. Far, far back beyond the ferry landing at Ishiyama to your right. That is the way to Kyushu.

THE GAKI

Ah, me!

OBAA-SAN

You are tired. Will you not sit and rest?—Will you not have some rice?

THE GAKI

Oh, no.—Where is your brood, grandmother?

OBAA-SAN

I have no brood. I am no grandmother. I am no mother.

THE GAKI

What! Are there tears in your voice?

OBAA-SAN

Tears! Why should I weep?

THE GAKI

I do not know, grandmother!

OBAA-SAN

I am no grandmother!—Who sent you here to laugh at me?—O-Sode-San? 'Tis she who laughs at me, because—

THE GAKI

No one, old woman—

OBAA-SAN

Yes, yes, old woman. That is it. Old woman!—Who are you? I am not wont to cry my griefs to any one.

THE GAKI

Griefs? You have griefs?

OBAA-SAN

Ay! Even *I*—she whom they call Obaa-San—have griefs.—Even I! But they are locked deep within me. No one knows!

THE GAKI

Someone must know.

OBAA-SAN

I shall tell no one.

THE GAKI

Someone must know!

OBAA-SAN

You speak like some spirit—and I feel that I must obey.

THE GAKI

Someone must know!

OBAA-SAN

I shall not speak. Who cares?—What is it I shall do? Tell my story—unlock my heart—so that O-Sode-San may laugh and laugh and laugh. Is it not enough that some evil spirit feeds upon my deep unrest?

THE GAKI

How can one feed upon your unrest when you lock it in your heart? (*The voices of O-Sode-San and O-Katsu-San are heard calling to Obaa-San*) Here come some friends of yours. Tell them your tale.

[He goes out.]

OBAA-SAN

Strange. I feel that I must speak out my heart.

[O-Sode-San and O-Katsu-San come in.]

O-SODE-SAN

Good morning, grandmother!

OBAA-SAN (*with a strange wistfulness in her tone*)

Good morning, O-Sode-San. Good morning, O-Katsu-San. May the bright day bring you a bright heart.

O-KATSU-SAN

And you, Obaa-San.

O-SODE-SAN

How is the weeping willow tree, grandmother?

OBAA-SAN

It is there—close to me.

O-SODE-SAN

And does it speak to you, grandmother—

OBAA-SAN

I am no grandmother! I am no grandmother! I am no mother! O-Sode, can you not understand? I am no mother.—I am no wife.—There is no one.—I am only an old woman.—In the spring I see the world turn green and I hear the song of happy birds and feel the perfumed balmy air upon my cheek—and every spring that cheek is older and more wrinkled and I have always been alone. I see the stars on a summer night and listen for the dawn—and there never has been a strong hand to touch me nor tiny fingers to reach out for me. I have heard the crisp autumn winds fight the falling leaves and I have known that long winter days and nights were coming—and I have always been alone—alone. I have pretended to you—what else could I do? Grandmother! Grandmother! Every time you speak the name, the emptiness of my life stands before me like a royal Kakemono all covered with unliving people.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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