

THE NEW THEATRE

Whose Motto is "Art for Art's Sake" and not for the good of the box-office

By SYDNEY DALTON

IN the past nearly every art has had its share of patronage by the millionaire — painting, sculpture, music; but the drama has been confined to the tender mercies of commercial managers.

This has hurt the dramatic art in certain vital respects, even if it has benefited it in others, and certainly it has stifled some of the best literature of the stage. The actor himself has been more fortunate under this system than the drama.

But the opening of the New Theatre in New York has created a new hope for the American drama, and if it stands consistently by its original scheme it will doubtless prove to be an institution which will foster a higher aim in dramatic literature, and give incentive to playwrights to produce a higher type of play.

The New Theatre was founded by thirty representative citizens of New York — men who, with unlimited wealth, were willing to devote millions to the

cause of the hitherto neglected art of the theatre. The list includes such men as John Jacob Astor, August Belmont, Henry Clay Frick, George J. Gould, and J. Pierpont Morgan. The building itself is a magnificent affair, the finest thing of its kind in the English-speaking world. It takes the place of the government-fostered theatres of Europe, such as the Comedie Francaise of Paris, and the Hof-burg of Vienna. Any description of the building and the interior arrangements and decorations must necessarily be of a most cursory and inadequate nature. The splendid layout of the main auditorium; the enormous stage, sumptuous hangings and seats; the elaborate decorations, and the prevailing colour scheme of grey and gold; the comforts and conveniences for the playgoer — all these things must be seen to be appreciated. The extensive foyers and promenades, designed by artists having a free hand to spare no expense; the gorgeous ceiling of the main foyer, given by Mr. Wm. K. Vanderbilt; the graceful winding marble stairways; the tea room, library, and smoking rooms — all would occupy too much space to describe with any approximation of exactness.

The actors themselves have had as much consideration for their comfort bestowed upon their quarters as the audience. They will have the advantage of a splendid library, in the first place, which will include the standard works and everything bearing upon the subject of the drama and its related arts. Dressing-rooms of much greater comfort than are afforded in other theatres; shower baths, elevators and a sumptuous green room are at the disposal of the players.

The building fronts on Central Park West, and extends from 62nd to 63rd Streets. It is the intention of the directors to utilise a plot at the back of the edifice for a school of dramatic art some time in the future. It is hoped, by this means, to train promising talent for the theatre itself.

But the point that is of chief importance is a consideration of the aims and objects of the institution—what it hopes to do for the drama, the actor and the public.

In the first place the institution has

not been launched with a view to antagonising, or even rivalling any of the theatrical managers. The New Theatre has its place and the other managers theirs, and the New Theatre is not in any way attempting to encroach upon the privileges of the others, because for one thing it would not fill any particular real want by so doing. It is obviously the duty of the institution to provide something that is not supplied by the other managers. For instance, it should be the home of classic drama; and it should produce the best type of drama of the present—plays of great merit which can not get a hearing elsewhere. Not that it should be a dumping-ground for cast-off plays whose merit is chiefly literary, at the expense of action and the essentials of success. But there are many splendid plays refused by the managers for the simple reason that, while possessing great merit, they lack the elements of popularity which are necessary for a financial success, and have no chance of enduring for a "long run." It stands to reason that managers are not going to expend from \$15,000 to \$40,000 upon a production unless they think it will prove good for an extended period of popularity—and the fact remains that many of the best plays, like many of the best books, are not the ones that make great financial successes, else would Shakespeare be the only popular playwright. But an institution like the New Theatre can afford to produce plays which will not necessarily pack the house for an entire season. It can present a play several times a week for a month or two, and after one season the play can be put into stock and given an occasional presentation, eventually paying for itself. Of course this is quite impossible in the ordinary theatre, where a manager expects a play to make him a profit of possibly \$20,000 or more a season. There is no individual on the New Theatre staff or board of management who will make or lose a cent by any great success or failure.

The theatre was opened with a production of Shakespeare's "Antony and Cleopatra," the cast including Mr. E. H. Sothorn and Miss Julia Marlowe. The repertoire, of course, will be extended from time to time. This first season opened with the Shakespeare play above mentioned; "The Nigger,"

by Edward Sheldon; "Strife," by John Galsworthy; Sheridan's "School for Scandal"; "The Cottage in the Air," by Edward Knoblauch, and two additions have since been announced, Maeterlinck's "Bluebird," recently produced in London with pronounced success; and "Don," by Rudolf Bresier.

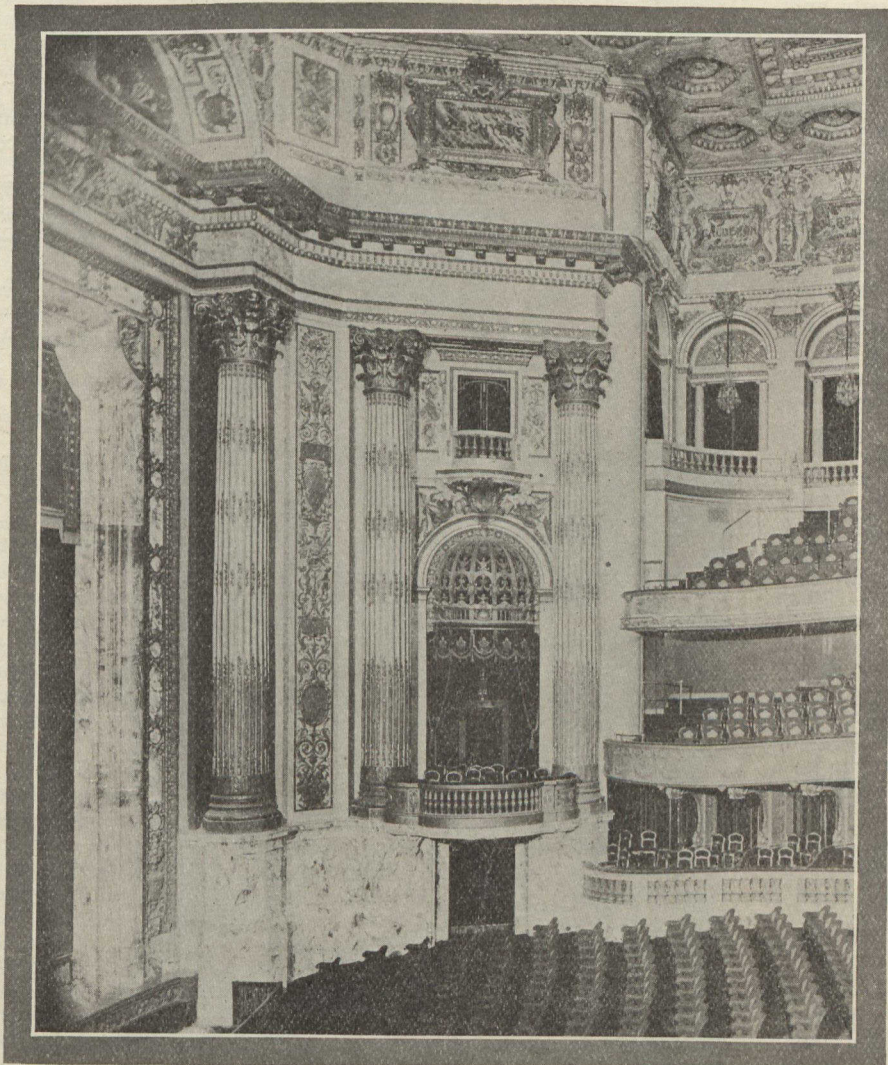
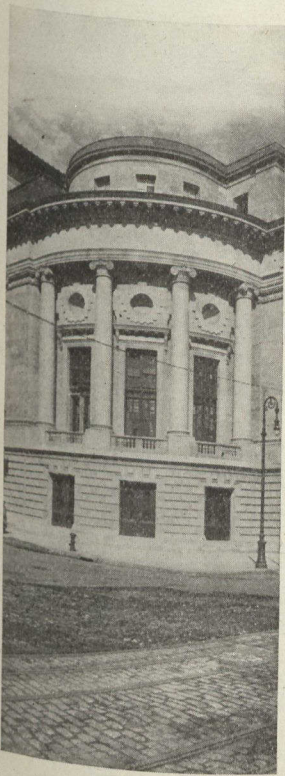
The only play of this list which I have yet seen is "The Nigger." Here, for instance, is an example of the good work which the New Theatre can do. "The Nigger" is a play which many managers would refuse, because it does not promise great popularity, yet it is a play of unusual merit, and deals with a very vital question in American life—the negro problem. Mr. Edward Sheldon—a young Harvard graduate of twenty-four who already has one success to his credit, "Salvation Nell," in which Mrs. Fiske starred—has handled the plot with great skill. He has presented many realistic pictures of the position of the negro in the South, and shows us the consequences a man must be prepared to suffer who has negro blood in his veins. Philip Morrow, a southerner of the best type, rises to the position of governor of his state, assisted by a relative, Clifton Noyes, a prosperous brewer. He wins on the Democratic ticket, defeating a prohibition candidate. After election his experience as governor convinces him that whiskey is killing the negro, and is at the root of most of the anti-negro demonstrations. He consequently determines to sign a prohibition bill which has passed the legislature. Noyes is furious, of course, and after unavailing arguments he unfolds to Governor Morrow the secret of his, Morrow's, birth, revealing the fact that Morrow's grandmother was a negress. If this secret is made public it means that Morrow will be ostracised, and will henceforth have to rank in all things with the black man. But even Noyes' threat of exposure in the event of Morrow's refusal to veto the bill does not deter him from doing his duty, and the final curtain falls as he is about to address the people from his balcony, telling them of his extraction.

It is not a pretty picture, and shows the undesirable condition of the negro in the South, and much of the prejudice, deserved and undeserved, which the white people have for their black neighbour. Mr. Sheldon has sounded a good theme in this play, and has built up a powerful drama which deserves the sumptuous setting and capable cast provided for it. It is, in truth, surprising that the negro problem has not been more extensively used as the basic idea for plays. It is a live question and should naturally attract the playwright as well as the preacher and the writer.

The development of the New Theatre will be watched with interest. There are those, in and out of the profession, who have raised their voices in protest, and have questioned the value and the motives of the institution, but the only way to silence these critics is by achievements. So far the performances, both dramatic and operatic—the latter entirely under the jurisdiction of the Metropolitan Opera Company—have been of a nature to gain the confidence of the public and the support of the backers of the undertaking.

There has been considerable talk for a long while as to what is to become of the drama, which according to a number of critics seems to be going to the bow-wows. The decline of classic drama, the rise and fall of musical comedy, the ups and downs of melodrama, the decadence of pure comedy, the present conquest of vaudeville and burlesque, the fading of the romantic play and the frequent recrudescence of Ibsenisms and French plays: all this is bewildering and topsy-turvy to the lay mind. No such turmoil will trouble the New Theatre, which is intended to be the home of real art in every serious line. It is to be presumed that both the ethical and the artistic will be considered. Or will there be a merger of the two?

There may come a day when the builders of Canadian theatres will begin to study art not only in performances, but in design.



The New Theatre, New York, is not large but is the newest and most artistic theatre in New York.

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