

STAGELAND

The past month has been rather dull in the Toronto dramatic world. The play-houses—I like the quaint old term—have given us nothing above the average, and consequently the audiences have been small. But the little bird that flutters about the footlights whispers that the best is yet in store, and that theater lovers may look for a succession of really excellent presentations in the weeks that intervene before Lent.

At the Grand, Mme. Rhéa gave us "Nell Gwynn," with all the sumptuary of beautiful gowns. The play woven about the historic orange maid and court favorite is, as Madame renders it, graceful, poetic, but not strong. Yet the title rôle suits Rhéa better than any she has essayed in recent years. She gave a charming conception of gay *Nell Gwynn*.

It is not an unusual thing for the public to arraign the stage. It was worth while to hear the stage arraign the public, through the lips of pretty Rhéa.

We were together in her dressing-room, she in her rich robe of white satin a-shimmer with gold embroidery, the short brown *Nell Gwynn* curls tossing a little over her forehead, the brown eyes looking out from a face weary with the day's work of rehearsal, matinee, and evening performance.

"So tired," she said, "so tired. However shall I go through these last acts?"

Presently we were speaking of plays, and that most uncertain thing—the public taste.

"Morality," she cried, catching up the word as it fell, and springing to her feet. "Oh, do not talk to me of a moral public. It is the stage that is moral; it is the public that is immoral. What right have preachers and press to prate of stage immorality, when it is the public to which we cater that demands the thing that is *risque*, that is impure.

"Let us put a pure, poetic play upon the stage, let us shut out from it all that is evilly suggestive, let us make it uplifting,—and the public, where are they? We play to empty



houses. Bah! we of the stage despise the public; we know it is it that is immoral. It wants plays that appeal to the senses; it demands heroines of evil pasts, and sensuous presents; it will pack our theaters to see "Second Mrs. Tanquerays," and gloat over Nethersole kisses. It pays four thousand

dollars per week to hear Yvette Guilbert sing indecent songs.

"What use is it for preachers to talk of elevating the stage? Let them elevate the public first. We who act are above those who come to see us, and we know it. We despise the public."

Her eyes flashed, the color came into the tired face, the arms were thrown up in emphasis, and the beautiful voice rang out, so that it might have been heard above the entr'acte music.

The dressing maid looked up interestedly from the depths of a huge trunk.

"Sit down, madame," I begged; "you will be so weary."

"Oh, ma'amselle," she continued, in



quieter tone, the sweet voice dropping, "we actresses who do love the right are ashamed of your public. It is immoral, not we. It does not care for pretty, pure *Juliets*, or gentle *Desdemonas* any more. It wants us to play with mud—with mud—for its amusement, when we would rather look up and reach toward, even if we cannot touch, the sky.

"I wonder," she spoke in half-low musing now, "I wonder how many pure-souled actresses the public has dragged down to its level."

The pretty foreign Rhéa accent, the tense tone, swift gesture and swaying womanly figure in its lustrous gown; the stillness of the warm little dressing-room, the gleaming mirror, the velvets and silks, picture hats and jeweled crown; the full, sweet voice, with its accompaniment of orchestral music drifting in through the wings and across the corridors;—it was a tableaux impromptu, a dramatic effect, that would have charged *Nell Gwynn's* audience with electric applause, could they but have witnessed it.

And her listener felt all too keenly the justice of the arraignment to make reply.

"For Fair Virginia," which was presented at the same theater during the first days of the month, is a pretty American play, dealing with the Civil War. The manager of the Grand does not often undertake to vouch in the press for a play, so that when he does, as in this instance, we look for something especially good, and always elevating. We are apt to greet such plays with scant houses, through ignorance of their merit; nor realize what we have missed until they have gone. That charming idyllic drama, "Shore Acres," when presented here, was an instance of this.

"For Fair Virginia" was a simple domestic drama, woven in grievous threads through the struggle between the "blue" and the "grey." Possibly it held a stronger interest for us, inasmuch as it was presented while yet the stir of possible strife filled the air with forebodings.

Our pulses respond with quick thrill to the rattle of musket, the beat of drum, and the bivouac songs, when war breathes its hot threatenings in our faces.

God grant that, whatever else may come, Canada may never suffer a civil war.

The Toronto Opera House does one of the best theatrical businesses in the city in melodrama; and it is always a clean and wholesome melodrama.

The public seem to have found this out, for it the play be worth anything,—and the stage has presented some really excellent ones this season,—the house is crowded from floor to top gallery.

"The American Girl," one of the plays of the past month, proved distinctly above the average, and deserved the packed houses which greeted it. It was bright, swift in action, and, while not in the least original in plot or rôle, moved from start to finish without one dull moment. The company was an exceptionally good one, and the several rôles well taken.

Miss Helen Robertson, who played the title rôle, is a young actress new to the stage. This is only her second season, and her first appearance in Toronto. She is a beautiful, dark-eyed girl of the Marie Burroughs type, and essays the same class of rôles—the domestic-emotional. In her portrayal of the bereft wife and mother of the two clever little children, she showed to great advantage; her acting being marked by a charming sympathy, combined with artistic restraint and reserve.

In a little after-chat with her I found her full of the enthusiasm of her profession, and eager to make advance. She keeps up her studies, and looks forward to even greater favor than that which the public has already deservedly accorded her.

And then, there were those bright little folks, *Prince Roy* and the *Little Lady*, whom

