

National Theatre as a Memorial to Shakespeare



LARGELY attended meeting was held in London the other day at the Lyceum theatre in support of the movement to establish a national theatre as a memorial to Shakespeare. Lord Lytton presided, and among those present on the platform were Lady Lytton, Mr. Pinero, Mr. Bernard Shaw, Mr. A. Lytton, K.C., M.P., and the Hon. Mrs. Lytton, Sir Squire Bancroft, Mr. H. Beerbohm Tree, Mr. Jerome K. Jerome, Mr. Comyns Carr, Sir John and Lady Hare, Mr. Rider Haggard, Mr. Bouchier, Miss Violet Vanbrugh, Mr. E. S. Willard, Mr. Robert Barr, Mr. H. O. Arnold-Forster, M.P., Mr. T. P. O'Connor, M.P., Mr. Philip Carr, and many other representatives of politics, society, and the drama.

The chairman, in opening the proceedings, announced that among other communications which had been received was a telegram from Sir Oliver Lodge in the following words:—"The British theatre is too important an educational agency to be left to the uncertainties of private enterprise alone. It should receive national recognition, and be raised into a higher and securer atmosphere." (Cheers.) M. Lugne-Poe, the French actor, telegraphed, "Voeux pour la réussite du theatre national." (Cheers.) The chairman said that for nearly two years a movement had been on foot to commemorate the 300th anniversary of the death of Shakespeare. In all the proceedings taken hitherto it had been assumed that we could best show our admiration for the genius and the fame of Shakespeare by some sculptured or architectural work of art. That meeting had been called by those who disagreed with the proposal for a statue in Portland Place, and who desired that the monument should take the form of a national theatre—a permanent home of the British drama. It had been called, however, not to divide, but to unite all who desired to join in honoring the memory of Shakespeare. (Cheers.) It was with the greatest pleasure that those responsible for promoting that meeting received a few days ago an invitation from the other Shakespeare Memorial committee with a view to a possible combination of their forces. He thanked those gentlemen for the conciliatory attitude they showed. Referring to the opinion of a few persons who objected to the theatre as an institution at all, he said he did not feel called on to answer that objection, as he did not think the theatre needed any defence from himself or any one else. (Cheers.) The fact, again, that difficulties existed was no reason for not going on with so desirable a project. The last objection and the most important was that the theatre scheme was objectionable and the monument scheme desirable on the ground that the former served some useful purpose and that the latter did not. He reminded them that former attempts at erecting a Shakespeare memorial theatre had been failures because it was desired to erect a sculptured monument which the vast majority of those appealed to felt must be a failure. He had every hope that the result of that meeting might be a conference which would unite the forces of those desiring to do honor to Shakespeare, and send them forward upon common ground, and he was strengthened in this hope by a letter which he had just received from Lord Plymouth, the chairman of the organization to which he had already referred. It was Lord Plymouth who invited them to meet him and his friends at the House of Lords, and as a result of that meeting Lord Plymouth promised he would send to him a message. The letter was as follows:—

54 Mount Street, W., May 19, 1908.
My Dear Lord Lytton,—In accordance with our arrangement at the conference held last Wednesday between the executive of the Shakespeare Memorial committee and yourself and other leading supporters of the national theatre movement, who were good enough to accept our invitation, I have the pleasure of sending you this letter to be read at the Lyceum theatre demonstration, as promised by you.

We had a meeting of our general committee at the Mansion house yesterday, at which the following resolution was passed:—"That the executive of the Shakespeare Memorial committee be authorized to arrange for a conference between representatives appointed by them and an equal number, appointed by the National Theatre committee, with a view to attempting to arrive at an agreement as to the form which the Shakespeare memorial should take, and to report to the general committee."

A desire was expressed by all present that we should endeavor to arrive at some solution of the question that will be satisfactory to all parties, and the wording of the resolution was so framed as to leave the representatives nominated free to consider the matter in all its possibilities.

It has seemed to the Shakespeare Memorial committee, for various practical considerations, that an architectural monument, as the permanent symbol of the world-wide homage to Shakespeare, should be put forward without delay, lest time be lost, and the work be not completed by 1916.

I would point out, however, that the furtherance of serious drama has all along been one of the objects which the committee have kept in view; indeed, in accordance with the report of the special committee, we hoped to have obtained a site for the monument on which a memorial theatre might also be erected for the furtherance of dramatic art and literature. A sub-committee has been appointed consisting

of the following nine members—namely, Lord Esher, Lord Plymouth, Mr. Butcher, Mr. Chisholm, Mr. Colvin, Mr. W. L. Courtney, Mr. Beerbohm Tree, Dr. Gollan, Mr. Sidney Low—to meet in conference a committee of like number appointed by the supporters of the national theatre movement, as suggested by you on Wednesday last. Thursday, May 28, is suggested as a date for the conference. I mention these matters at once in case it may serve the convenience of your committee.

I feel confident that I am giving expression to the fervent hope of many members both of the Shakespeare Memorial committee and those who are supporting the national theatre movement, as well as the deep-seated feeling of Englishmen generally, that nothing in the nature of strife may mar our efforts to signalize the world's unanimity in paying homage to the memory of Shakespeare.

I am, yours sincerely,
PLYMOUTH (Chairman of the Executive Committee, Shakespeare Memorial Committee).

Mr. Lytton moved the first resolution:—"That this demonstration is in favor of the establishment of a national theatre as a memorial to Shakespeare." He said that the first and almost the last appearance that he had made upon a stage was in a play of Racine's in which he had to impersonate the crowd. (Laughter.) He was taught to come up to the footlights and say, with great embarrassment: "Moi, je suis l'assemblée." (Laughter.) He was in that part that day, a member of and representing the crowd, and he could assure them that he was not in the least ashamed of his client, that the instincts of the multitude were perfectly sane and right on the question, not necessarily of an official, but of a national theatre, and he was confirmed in his belief when he thought that there were, so far as he could conceive, not two sides to the question at all. He wholly disagreed with Mrs. Stephen Mortimore in Mr. Pinero's brilliant play. He said there was only one side to that question. If there were another, of course Mr. Bernard Shaw would be upon it. (Laughter.) Now they had the happiness and strength of his support, and he presumed Mr. Shaw was suffering the anguish of for once being in agreement with several human beings. (Laughter and cheers.) The principle that it was unwise to leave any art wholly to the mercy of the commercial motive was already conceded in this country—without going to the many and great examples in foreign countries—in the National Gallery, the British Museum, the great public buildings. Let them think of the Royal College of Music. Let them think even of the parks, which were at this moment the peculiar glory of the summer. They were all admissions on the part of the state that it did not do well to leave these things purely to commerce and to private enterprise. Let them think only, if he might mention the art with which he had some little conversance, of the good that the Royal College of Music has done since it was started—how teachable the Eng-

lish people had shown themselves. (Cheers.) Let them think of the efforts of men like Sir Charles Halle in Manchester and Dr. Richter in London. (Cheers.) He thought they would agree with him that it had become a part of the almost ordinary equipment of any London musician to have a true appreciation at any rate of Beethoven's symphonies, and to have achieved that in the last 20 years was to have added in the true sense of the word to the wealth of the nation. (Cheers.) Was it not amazing, when they thought of all that had been done in the direction of the other arts, that the drama had been left out—the drama, the most universal, the most human, the most beneficent, and the most popular of all the arts? (Cheers.) Surely they might say of the theatre that it called out fundamental emotions—courage, pity, scorn, pathos. Mr. Gladstone once said of an orator that he was dependent entirely upon his audience, that he gave out in vapor and took back in flood. So surely with the theatre. Poetry—not in its most subtle form, but still real poetry—was living in the voices and the eyes of those who took part in it. Then there was laughter, the antidote against cant and the charm against madness—that abounded surely in the theatre. Think how Mrs. Siddons and Miss O'Neill, those great ladies, moved some of the most austere and virtuous to almost a passion of admiration. Human nature was exalted by the actions and looks of beautiful persons who attuned themselves to glorious fiction. (Cheers.) Yet we exposed this beautiful and splendid art to the ruinous risks of competition and extended no hand to it, isolating it among all the others of the arts in this respect. (Hear, hear.) It was his good fortune years ago to be an almost constant attendant at the Theatre Francaise in the great days of Got, of Delaunay, of Febvre, of Worms, of Sarah Bernhardt, of Bartet, and many other great artists. (Cheers.) He learned there that a national theatre like that, aided by the Conservatoire, taught clearness and precision of language—and, after all, what was the use of Shakespeare unless we could make him intelligible even to those who sat some way off? (Laughter and cheers.) If taught him, also, how agreeable it was to see a variety, instead of successes with long runs. (Cheers.) Thirdly, it taught him to delight in art's glorious ensemble—he meant the voluntary co-operation of the great and eminent men of the profession to the young who had exhibited talent and whom they delighted to educate and yet to serve. Lastly, he saw in the Theatre Francaise that dignified and leisured retreat for those who had done great service to their art—dignified and leisured, but not in the least lost to the nation—which enabled men who were in the profession of the actor, as well as others who ministered to it, to give the best of their time and the best of their youth to the highest and noblest interests of the art. (Cheers.)

Sir John Hare, in seconding the resolution, said that they had three distinct causes of congratulation, the first being that they were met together to discuss the great question of

a national theatre seriously; the second, that it should take place in the theatre and on the stage to be forever famous in theatrical annals by its association with the great actor who for 20 years controlled its destinies, and whose sympathies were so entirely with the objects they were there to advocate; and the third that their meeting should take place under the presidency of Lord Lytton, for the name of Lytton must always be revered by lovers of the drama. (Cheers.) He had felt it his duty, however, as an actor, to consent to say a few words in reference to the all-important subject they were met to discuss. Speaking as one who had always advocated—he might say strenuously advocated to the best of his ability—the necessity of establishing a national theatre if the art of the theatre was to be elevated and raised to the dignity it attained in other countries, he rejoiced at the response from many of the most thoughtful and educated men of our time, and at the large and representative gathering assembled there today to further the good cause. (Hear, hear.) The idea of a national theatre in this country, at first ridiculed and spoken slightly of by some, discouraged and sneered at in certain quarters, was assuredly taking firm root and commanding itself to the minds of that large minority who were jealous of our artistic reputation; who recognized the immense power that the stage could exercise as a refining and educational influence on the great public who support it. Nearly 40 years ago Matthew Arnold wrote the following plea for a national theatre:—"We have in England everything to make us dissatisfied with the chaotic and ineffective condition into which our theatre has fallen. We have the remembrance of better things in the past, and the elements for better things in the future. We have a splendid national drama of the Elizabethan age, and a later drama, which has no lack of pieces conspicuous by their stage qualities, their vivacity, and their talent, and interesting by their pictures of manners. We have had great actors. We have good actors, not a few, at the present moment. But we have been unlucky, as we so often are in the work of organization. It seems to me that every one of us is concerned to find a remedy for this melancholy state of things, and that the pleasure we have had in the visit of the French company (the Comedie Francaise) is barren, unless it leave us with the impulse to do so and with a lesson how alone it can be rationally done. 'Forget'—can we not hear these fine artists saying in an undertone to us, amidst their graceful compliments of adieu?—'Forget your clap-trap, and believe that the state, the nation, in its collective and corporate character, does well to concern itself about an influence so important to national life and manners as the theatre. . . . The people will have the theatre; then make it a good one. . . . The theatre is irresistible; organize the theatre.' (Cheers.) Sir John Hare also quoted from the speech of the Bishop of Ripon, in replying for the guests at the Royal Academy banquet in 1905:—"I

and the marvel was that the House was able to do it all. (Cheers.)

Professor Masterman sketched the development of representative government and the change in the relations between the crown and parliament, and said that the execution of Charles I. was the inevitable outcome of the system which placed the king as the head of one of the parties in the state and made the other party the opposition to the crown, and it made it inevitable that the next step should be the establishment of ministerial responsibility. The year 1649 was the only time in English history when there had been an opportunity for an absolutely fresh start, and yet within a few years everything was welcomed back which had been cheerfully destroyed. That was a most instructive thing, as it showed that they were not a people who could make revolutions, but a people that understood the secret of freedom "broadening down from precedent to precedent." The real control of affairs passed out of the hands of the sovereign into those of the parliament, and by a natural transition they came to the struggle of the people to secure that parliament should be the representative of their interests and wishes.

Sir William Collins, M.P., proposed a vote of thanks to the speaker.

Mr. George Dew, L.C.C. (Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners), seconded the resolution; and the speaker, replying, said that the House of Commons was so grateful to the city of London for its protection of the five members whom Charles I. tried, to arrest that to this day the representatives of the city enjoyed and exercised the right to sit on the Treasury bench on the first day of the sittings.

A certain young man from Glasgow came to Canada last year and hired himself to a farmer. On the first morning the farmer said to him: "Now, William, you might go down to your corn field and see if there are any crows in it." When William returned the farmer said to him: "Well, William, were there any crows in the field?" "Oh, yes, many a score." "Well, did you frighten them away?" "Oh, no, I only shut the gate. I thought they were all yours."

console myself by remembering that we are one in the emotions which fill our hearts at this moment, the emotions of gratitude and of shame. We one and all feel honored to take our place at this table, of the great and worthy fraternity of those who are united in their devotion to art. But a feeling of shame strikes across our gratitude, for we represent the great and varied callings of the world outside your Academy; and we are keenly alive to the fact that we represent that majority of a nation which, though possessed of vast wealth and wide dominions, does so little for literature, for the drama, or for art. It seems to me a bad day when the patronage of the state is governed by that narrow, utilitarian spirit which turns an almost exclusive attention to things of productive value. We are not free from the clamor of those who frankly declare that the state has no concern with those non-marketable forces, like cultivated imagination, wholesome sentiment, high reverence, which tend to build up the character of our citizens by ennobling their thoughts and inspiring their motives. Where these men would have the state do less I would have it do more." (Cheers.) Such was the opinion of two large-hearted, intellectual, and unprejudiced men. Now, it seemed to him that the words of Matthew Arnold were as true today as when he wrote them. The state of our theatre was still chaotic and ineffective. Month by month, year by year, the work of the theatre was becoming more a trade and less an art, and commercial interests paralysed the aspirations and ambitions of the most artistic and conscientious of our managers. The same strictures might with equal force be applied to France, but France was saved from that same reproach by one thing only—its national theatre. The Theatre Francaise through centuries had maintained its superiority, and preserved the traditions of all that was best in past and contemporary dramatic literature; it was removed by all sordid financial considerations from pandering to the vulgar taste, and it placed its actors on an academic footing, which dignified and exalted their calling. (Cheers.)

Mr. Edmund Gosse supported the resolution, which was carried with one dissentient.

Mr. Pinero moved:—"That the honorary committee for this demonstration is hereby appointed as a committee, with power to add to its number, and is instructed to draft a scheme for a national theatre." In the course of his speech he said that about the middle of her late Majesty's reign a new English drama came into being, initiated by the late Thomas William Robertson, and by Mr. (now) Sir W. S. Gilbert. (Cheers.) That movement had constantly increased in strength. Since the accession of his present Majesty much new blood had been infused into our dramatic literature. He hailed the appearance of a new school of vigorous young authors, and he believed there was every reason to hope that the growth of a drama such as we had not seen in England for 300 years might be regarded in history as one of the most memorable features of the reign of King Edward VII. (Cheers.)

Mr. T. P. O'Connor, M.P., seconded the resolution, and in doing so said that all the many controversies which arose from time to time with regard to the personality of Shakespeare left him cold and uninterested. It was the language and works of Shakespeare that appealed to him. He contended that if Shakespeare could rise from the dead and give his opinion, the monument he would most desire would be the performance of his works and the preservation of his language. (Cheers.)

The resolution was carried.

Mr. Comyns Carr proposed the third resolution:—"That the committee hereby appointed invite the co-operation of the provincial cities, and organize meetings for the formation of a National Theatre Society and the collection of subscriptions." He thought that when the scheme was organized, it would be possible for that organization to present to the great provincial cities a presentation of our theatre, classical and modern, which would be as perfect as the presentation which would be made in London. He was sanguine that they would receive a great and loyal response from those cities. When they remembered what had been done for the plastic art by a number of our great cities, why should they doubt that they would be moved by an equal spirit of generosity for the scheme they were advocating that day? (Cheers.) They addressed a great and generous democracy in support of a cause they believed to be worthy. (Cheers.)

Mr. Justice Madden, vice-chancellor of Dublin university, seconded the resolution. He looked on the movement as a protest against an attempt to localize Shakespeare. He asked them to authorize him to go back to Ireland with the expression of a hope that they would help in the movement. He hoped he could assure them that that great movement would secure practical support and sympathy throughout the whole of Ireland. (Cheers.)

The resolution was carried.

Mr. W. C. Steadman, M.P., moved:—"That the committee appoint a deputation to wait on the prime minister and the London county council with a view to seeking their support for the proposal of a national theatre."

Mr. Bernard Shaw seconded the resolution, but though called upon very earnestly by the audience to make a speech, declined to do so, owing to the lateness of the hour. He said that if the subject was not exhausted, those who constituted the meeting were. (Laughter.)

The resolution was carried, and the meeting ended with a vote of thanks to the chairman.

The Speaker on the House of Commons

PROFESSOR J. H. B. Masterman delivered, the other day, in the Royal Gallery of the Palace of Westminster, the third of a series of four lectures on "The House of Commons: Its place in National History." The Speaker presided, and said he noticed that one of his predecessors on that platform had been Sir William Anson, the author of a very grave and almost classical work on the British constitution; and he remembered that some years ago, when Sir William was walking up the floor of the House of Commons to take his seat, a very witty Radical member, who, though no longer a member, was still in the land of the living, mentioned the book, and said, "He will find the House of Commons a very different place from what he thought it was." Whether that prophecy had been realized or not he did not know, but it showed that there was a difference between theory and practice. The lecturer would deal with the theory, and he, as speaker, had to deal very largely with the practice. As an old member, now, he was sorry to say, getting a very old member of the house, for he had heard the maiden speech of every member of the present government, he would like to say a word or two with regard to certain aspects of it. It was often said that those who lived on a mountain were not so well able to judge of its proportions as those who lived at a distance, and the same might be said of those who were in daily touch with the House of Commons. Their view was apt, perhaps, to get a little distorted by being brought into contact with the daily life of that body, and those somewhat removed from it were able to arrive at a sounder judgment on its surroundings, its might, and relations to its surroundings. The House always appeared to him to be in certain respects a very singular assembly. First of all they must never forget that it was the electoral chamber of the nation. Other countries such as America and France had a chamber specially constituted for the purpose of choosing their president, the man who was to rule them for a fixed or an indeterminate number of years, and when they had selected their president their function was over, like that of certain ephemeral insects whose whole object in life was to lay an egg, and then die.

The House of Commons was not only the parent of the government, but also the critic of the government, and might, indeed, become its accuser, its judge, and its executioner; and in that respect it differed widely from the other electoral chambers he had mentioned. The House of Commons was, above all things, an educating medium, the place where grievances might be discussed and a remedy found, or pushed on one side as not deserving a remedy or, as was usually the case, a compromise arrived at. It was also the executive and legislative body of the nation, and in that capacity its work might seem to many of them to be very slowly accomplished; but it must be remembered that in the House of Commons the nation had a body which, when it had once taken a step, found it very hard to reverse that step and to go in another direction. It was, therefore, most necessary for the House to deliberate very carefully before it committed itself to a particular step. He was constantly struck with the extraordinary continuity of the body over which he had the honor to preside. The king's consent to acts of parliament was given in old Norman French, which sounded rather astounding considering that it was an English king addressing English peers and commoners, and all formal communications between the House of Commons and the House of Lords were still carried on to this day in old Norman French, maintaining the forms that were in use hundreds of years ago. He would very much regret if the old forms were changed, they conveyed everything they wanted to convey and preserved the continuity of the ancient assent. It was often said that it was a wonder the House of Commons did its work as well as it did considering the character of the assembly, its want of homogeneity, 670 members drawn from all parts of the country, representing all classes, differing in wealth and education and in the lives they had led, and the views that they held upon politics, and chosen generally at a time of great electoral excitement. Then let them think of the stupendous task they had to carry out in governing this country, the dependencies abroad, and the colonies, the clash of interests and of classes, and the differences of creed in the millions over whom the House of Commons ruled,

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