

TRYING OUT PLAYS IN TORONTO

Summer Stock Company finds out from sane Canadian appreciation what plays are fit to star in next season

By DONALD B. SINCLAIR

FOR the past eight weeks the Percy Haswell Players stock company have been doing a series of delightful hot-weather plays in Toronto. All the plays thus far have been of a much higher character than the average summer stock company's productions; ranging from Shakespeare's "As You Like It" to "The Marriage of Kitty," a light comedy by Cosmo Gordon Lennox, with the heavy-drama play, "The Fighter," sandwiched between.

There is more than one reason for the performance of so great a variety of really good plays at low prices in a first-class Canadian theatre. One reason is to give Toronto playgoers the worth of their money. But a bigger reason is the value of Canadian appreciation in the trying out of new plays for next season.

Miss Percy Haswell, leading lady of the company, began to tell me about the play which she is to star in next season, "The Light Above," written expressly for her by Edwin Milton Royle, author of "Squawman."

"We're going to try that out here in Toronto just as we tried out my husband's new play, 'The Fighter,' last week when two of Mr. Shubert's experts came to Toronto to report. Do you know that New York managers depend a good deal on

Toronto's judgment of a play? You've got the critical instinct here."

Trying out new plays in Canada—that was interesting.

"Will Toronto, in your opinion, ever become a producing centre—say for Canada?"

"Undoubtedly, the managers have certain plans for Toronto. It may be some time before they are evolved—but this trying out of new plays here looks like a beginning now, doesn't it?"



Allen Fawcett,
Playwright and Stage Manager.

When Miss Percy Haswell came in off the road last spring from a tour in the Booth Tarkington and Harry Leon Wilson vehicle, "Foreign Exchange," Messrs. Sam and Lee Shubert remarked: "How would you like to take a stock company up to Canada this summer, Miss Haswell? Go to Canada and win!"

Miss Haswell comes from Texas. She saw a struggle ahead of her at Toronto. Within the past three years several stock companies have played Toronto. They had all gone broke. There were some ex-stars among them too. They lacked the something essential which makes theatrical ventures a success. Someone speaking of the obituary of one of the derelict companies observed that its lack was a leading woman of distinction, and hinted that at one performance the leading man came on in a drawing-room scene with his shoes unlaced. When a Texan like Miss Haswell scents a fight, she is in the saddle, lariat coiled for the throw. So Miss Haswell said "Yes" to Messrs. Shubert, got her company together, picked her scenic artists and electricians, and arrived at the Royal Alexandra Theatre, fully equipped to serve up two-dollar drama at bargain prices to Toronto audiences.

That was two months ago. Since then Toronto has seen Miss Percy Haswell as Naomi, the class "cut-up," giggle delightfully through Tom Robertson's fine old English comedy, "School"; has watched her portrayal of the sombre Leah Kleschna, and the dashing "Kitty" in "The Marriage of Kitty"; the people pack the house on the most torrid nights of summer. Why? Partly as a recognition of Miss Haswell's talent. Certainly she is an actress of rare charm—one of Augustin Daly's protégées. A splendid stage reputation preceded her to Toronto. Theatregoers still recall her work with W. H. Crane in "The Virginia Courtship," with Otis Skinner in "The Honour of the Family," and as a star under Belasco's management in "The Darling of the

Gods" and "The Royal Family." Not until you have met Miss Haswell, the woman, do you fully understand those big summer audiences. Her clientele believe in her as an actress and a woman—there you have it! Miss Haswell throws something more over the footlights than the mere part she is playing; you feel that there is something more than that part. A big-hearted woman's sympathy and generosity would give you above what you have really paid for.

When I went over to the theatre to interview her the other day, Miss Haswell was just opening her morning mail.

"A big mail, Miss Haswell."

"An average delivery," she said.

"You'd almost require a secretary," I suggested, watching her busily thumb through the high white drift of letters on the desk.

"Would you apply? I wouldn't take you." She laughed. "Because I like to read every one of these myself—they're so encouraging when one has worked so hard. Ah, here is one. I think I like it best of all."

She handed it to me to read.

The note was written in a big, round, boyish hand. The author signed his name and gave his age—nine years. Here is the letter:

"Dear Miss Haswell,—You wouldn't catch me going to 'School' during vacation if it wasn't to see you."

"Yes," said Miss Haswell, "we have had such a great success in Toronto. I just love you Canadians. You're so awfully English over here—and my grandfather was English. You like the good plays. That fine old piece, 'School,' has been one of my greatest successes. You like the good things—you know them. You get time to think. So different in the States. We lunch; in Toronto you even get time to dine at noon."

"A splendid educative influence for the masses, this presenting of standard plays by your company in such a splendid theatre at such low rates as twenty-five and fifty cents."

"Yes, we have caught the people who can't afford to pay two dollars in the winter. I hope we've done good. I believe the stage is one of the great educational institutions of the world."

"Not yet fully exploited for the masses," I said. "Oh, it is so easy to talk about a theatre for the people! It will be a long time before you will see the best road shows under two dollars."

"How are your players able to cater to the people in such regal style?"

"Quite a different proposition. It's summer. The regular season is over. It is easy to get players even at summer salaries; ambitious young people in the profession are anxious for a season of summer stock. It gives them versatility which they never get on the road."

"Why do so many stock engagements fall flat?"

"No attention to detail. Bad management. I am going to give you the recipe for the success of the Percy Haswell Players. First, I selected all the players myself. They are all friends of mine. They are one big family. They know each other's



MISS
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characteristics. That is why we were able to have the team work which, for instance, in our production of 'As You Like It' led the critics to compare it to the 'Sothorn and Marlowe' one here two weeks before. Each member of the company has high professional standing. Now, my leading man, Mr. Richard Gordon, goes on tour with Francis Wilson in the fall; Miss Ogden has signed with Gertrude Elliot; Mr. Crimans will go out with 'The Wolf.' I superintend every detail of the productions myself and above all I study my patrons. I know Toronto. I have got a house here—and the dearest maid! She's just like a mother to me. I have tried to make my company part of Toronto; I think that's the key to its success."

Our talk began to drift into a discussion of the ethics of the stage.

"What are your views as to the stage as a profession for girls?"

"For all girls, you mean? Nonsense! Why not discuss painting as a calling for all girls? Excellent if it could be so—but most girls can sweep better. The stage is the realm of art. If a girl has histrionic ability and ambition, by all means the stage. It is a grand life! Where is a girl on a more equal footing with you men? Dozens of my girl friends are drawing bigger salaries than the men in their companies; they are doing better work."

"But, Miss Haswell, the trepidation of a girl's friends if she wants to go—"

"That's just it. The profession needs weeding out. We are crowded with mediocre talent who would be better looking after their big brothers at home. Champagne suppers and all the rot you read about actresses—a real actress has no time for such things!"

"All work and no play," said young Mr. Allen Fawcett, Miss Haswell's stage manager, dropping in at the moment to summon Miss Haswell to rehearsal.

The three of us went back to the stage. Behind the scenes was a hive of industry on this morning. Electricians were tinkering with lights. Carpenters were loud with hammers.

"People have admired our scenery," said Miss Haswell. "For every production a new set is built—and right here in Toronto by an Englishman, too."

If you take the veneer off a piece of scenery you'll find often that it has a past. What was a ladies' boudoir one week may be a miner's cabin the next. Mr. Fawcett pointed out to me a piece which had been a Venetian gondola; now a stout chap was busily converting it into a lifeboat for an ocean liner.

"It's detail that counts in this business," remarked Miss Haswell. She told me of how for her production of "As You Like It" real trees were used in the Forest of Arden. Boys had been sent out into the suburbs for the trees.

"The other day," said Mr. Fawcett, "we sent out the youngsters for some more. Since 'As You Like It,' the property where they had got them had changed hands; the new proprietor saw the boys cutting down his trees and was going to have the whole bunch pinched. We used the imitation kind that week."

Ten till one—an hour for lunch; then at it again till four, the rehearsal lasted. A stock company actor works fourteen hours every day.



Alexandra Theatre, Toronto, where the Percy Haswell Stock Company are trying out first-class plays at low prices.