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THE PLAY-PEDDLERS' TRUSTS

Why Canada Gets Most of the Best Productions of the Commercial Stage

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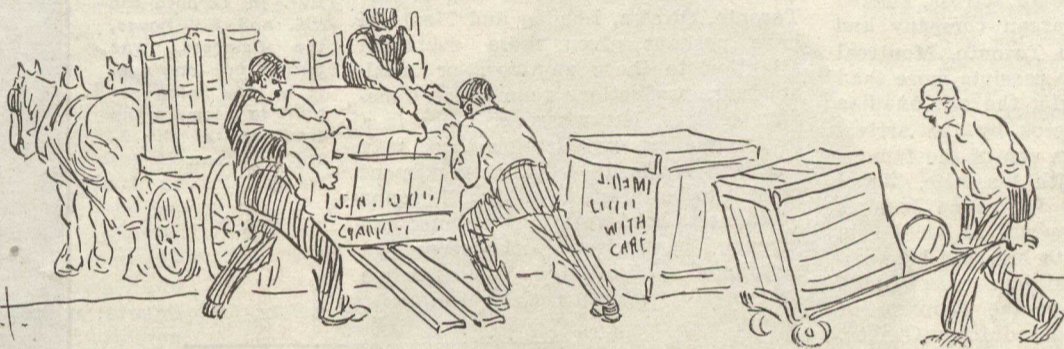
DECORATION BY C. W. JEFFERYS

among stage mechanics. It stands to reason, producers did not always come off best in encounters over freight rates or wages of employees. Actors and actresses suffered under this system by the risk of financial collapse on the part of the producer. Theatre owners in the smaller cities were also at a loss since they could never be certain of being able to secure regular attractions at their houses.

About twenty years ago Messrs. Klaw and Erlanger, chiefly known as producers of elaborate musical comedy, organized the theatrical trust. The basis of their control of the situation was a series of

contracts with theatre-owners all over the continent. They made agreements with these owners to supply them with, say, forty weeks of attractions in a year, with such-and-such a division of the net receipts. They now proceeded to get together attractions to fill these contracts. They made, as it were, a programme of musical comedies, tragedy, serio-comedy with "stars" of varying magnitudes in each company. They sent these companies out on tour, keeping them all spinning like balls tossed in the air by an agile juggler. For a number of years they had practically no opposition, but about eight years after the founding of the trust the criticisms that had been brought up against it, found satisfaction, for the time being at least, in the advent of the Shubert. Cities in which the K. and E. trust had only one theatre were now able to support two and the Shuberts obtained control of the new one. Or theatre-owners seeking better terms or novelty, joined the Shuberts when their K. and E. contracts were up. Competition began to be a thing of real importance in the theatrical profession. Better plays and better players followed. To-day the two "trusts" run, as it were, neck-and-neck. The Shubert group includes such famous producers as Morosco, Shubert, Tyler, Brady and Winthrop Ames. The Klaw and Erlanger group includes Cohan and Harris, Belasco, the Frohman successors, and others. Between them they control not only all the first-class American theatres, but all the first-class Canadian theatres as well.

THE significance of Canada's lack of an evenly-distributed population between coast and coast is nowhere better demonstrated than in the arrangement of the theatrical circuits of the trusts. They prove, as perhaps nothing else shows so clearly, the north-and-south connections of our widely separated Canadian centres. The chief theatrical circuit entering Canada comes through New York State to Toronto, and possibly other Canadian cities, passing then west through Ohio to Chicago. Sometimes Montreal and Ottawa are let into this circuit, but more usually these two cities are supplied from New York via New England cities. Winnipeg and the prairies are connected with a circuit running out from Chicago via Milwaukee, St. Paul and Duluth. Vancouver and Victoria are on a circuit starting at San Francisco and including Seattle, Portland and Tacoma. Our far eastern cities are not very fortunate in the supply of productions. Their natural



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so easy. For the United States provides an audience over ten times as big as Canada, and therefore ten times as able to patronize a production.

WHEN an old-time brother in a musty monastery wrote a morality play on a greasy parchment he probably took the thing in great trepidation, to the Abbot and with blushes asked the holy gentleman to read it over with a view to putting it on, on the "green" of the village that snuggled for spiritual warmth, let us say, against the outer walls of the monastery. So the Abbot looked it over and tapped his foot, humming the while, and clearing his throat. It has ever been the privilege of stupid people to censor works they could never produce themselves, but let us assume that the Abbot, besides being stupid, was afraid some other Abbot might get the parchment and steal whatever glory the play might yield, if he, the first Abbot, turned it down. So he abused the Monk and said the technique was rotten, but he'd see about putting it on—himself in the leading role. But nowadays when you have written a play and inflicted it on your friends you go finally to New York to some producer to whom you have a letter of introduction. The letter may be worth something or it may not. Then, the play may be or may not be worthy. Perhaps, if you haven't a letter of introduction you break your heart and your purse trying to get appointments with producers, or better still, you go to some play-reader of established reputation who reads your effort and—let us say—recommends it to a producer. Enter now the Trusts.

Many years ago plays were produced by various individuals with money and nerve. They got together scenery and actors to fit the manuscript. They played as long as they could in their home city, New York or Boston or Philadelphia, and if the play was popular they led it out later into the wilderness of small cities and towns. They took more or less chances about getting halls or "opera houses" or real theatres to play in. They sent advance agents and they moved heavily and expensively from place to place. If other producers had already pre-empted the right to use certain favourable theatres, its rival production might be held up for many weeks before it could arrange its schedule. Sometimes these plays did well, but at other times they failed miserably for want of good business management. Each company dealt as an individual with railroads and with the growing "menace" of unionism

It takes the average child some time to learn that the stars don't just run around loose in the sky at night; and it takes many a grown-up years of theatre-going to comprehend the marvellous system on which the luminaries of the histrionic universe—the theatrical stars as they are called—come and go in their orbits. Just as an unseen stage-manager gives Saturn his cue to enter or leave a certain part of the firmament, so the Play Peddlers' Trusts—there are two of them—say when Montreal shall see John Drew in a new morning coat, or when Winnipeg is to hear Mr. Augustus Thomas's latest masterpiece—Augustus Thomas writes nothing but masterpieces—or when Toronto is to be shocked by such-and-such a tipsy musical comedy. The stage management of our nightly firmament may be a degree more mysterious than that of our theatres, but only a degree. Messrs. Klaw and Erlanger, and Messrs. Shubert, the two trusts that dominate the American-Canadian stage, are to most people, even to some of its own employees, mere names, but eminently powerful ones. If the stage is as great an educational factor as the old time priests used to think it was—and no one has ever been able to deny it—then one of the most important educational influences in Canada is controlled by these two theatrical trusts in New York. As a matter of fact, there is no "if" about it. Englishmen wonder at the close resemblance between the American and Canadian sense of humour. They find the slang of New York echoed in Victoria—except, of course, among the Englishmen of Victoria. They note how closely the Canadian view of what is a "good show" approximates the American view. Though as a matter of fact these resemblances are only superficial and there are countless points—increasing in number—in which Americans and Canadians differ, the fact is that our theatres, supplied chiefly with American productions, reflect American habits and manners into the minds of Canadians. Even Canadian writers appear to approximate their work to the American public because Americans control the commercial theatre on this continent. Thus Harvey O'Higgins' "Mr. Lazarus" is in an American setting and seeks success in New York before ever it comes to play-houses in O'Higgins' native land. When next you observe a group of profane hotel porters heaving titanic trunks with American labels into the baggage-lift of that hostelry where good theatricals stay when in your city—or when you see a crew of lorry-drivers inveigling a colossal piece of American-made scenery down the back lane which leads to a stage entrance—consider then that you have just had the privilege of glimpsing one of the functions of the American trusts. You may resent the American labels and American scene carpentry. But the next time you hear that a Canadian girl—like Margaret Anglin—has been elevated to a pinnacle of glory with bill-posters about her, or that a Canadian has written a successful play and made a fortune out of it—an example of this is, for the moment, missing—remember that without the American trusts these things would not have been