

## SIR HENRY IRVING (1838-1905)

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*Sir Henry Irving, noted English actor, delivered the following speech at the annual dinner of the Playgoer's Club, in London, on February, 14, 1898.*

### THE DRAMA

Mr. Chairman and Gentlemen: It is five years since I had the pleasure of sitting at your hospitable board and listening to that delightfully soothing an digestive eloquence with which we medicine one another after dinner. (Laughter.) In the course of those five years I daresay we have had many differences of opinion. The playgoer does not always agree with the player, still less with that unfortunate object, the poor actor-manager. But whatever you may have said of me in this interval, and in terms less dulcet, perhaps, than those which your chairman has so generously employed, it is a great satisfaction to me to feel that I still retain your esteem and good will. In a certain sense you are the manager's constituents. You cannot eject him from the office, perhaps, with that directness which distinguishes the Parliamentary operations. But you can stay away from the theatre, and so eject his play. (Laughter.) On the whole that is a more disconcerting process than the fiercest criticism. One can always argue with the critics, though on the actor's part I know that is gross presumption. (Laughter.) But you cannot argue with the playgoer who stays away.

I am not making any specific accusations—only remarking that it is staying power which impresses the importance of the Playgoer's Club upon the managerial mind. Moreover, to meet you like this, has the effect of a useful tonic. I can strongly recommend it to some gentlemen who write to the newspapers. (Laughter.) In one journal there was a long correspondence—the sort of thing we generally get at one season of the year—about the condition of the stage, and a well-known writer who, I believe, combines the function of a dramatic critic with the responsibility of a watchdog to the Navy, informed his readers that the sad decadence of the British drama was due to the evils of party government. That is certainly an original idea; but I fancy that if the author were to unfold it to this company, he would be told that he had mistaken the Playgoer's Club for the War Office or the Admiralty. Still we ought to be grateful to the man who reveals a perfectly fresh reason for the eternal decline of the drama, though we may

not, perhaps, anticipate any revolution in theatrical amusements even from the most thoroughgoing reform of the British Constitution.

In the public correspondence to which I have referred, a good deal was said about the need for a dramatic conservatoire. If such an institution could be rooted in this country, I have no doubt that it might yield many advantages. Years ago I ventured to suggest that the municipal system might be applied to the theatre, as it is on the Continent, though I do not observe that this is yet a burning question in the county council politics, or that any reforming administrator has discovered that the drama ought to be laid on, like gas or water. (Laughter.) With all our genius for local government we have not yet found, like some Continental people, that the municipal theatre is as much a part of the healthy life of the community as the municipal library or museum. (Hear! hear!) Whether that development is in store for us I do not know, but I can imagine certain social benefits that would accrue from the municipal incorporation of a dramatic conservatoire. It might check the rush of incompetent persons into the theatrical profession. Some persons who were intended by Nature to adorn an inviolable privacy are thrust upon us by paragraphers and interviewers, whose existence is a dubious blessing until it is assumed by censors of the stage that this business is part and parcel of theatrical advertisement.

Columns of this rubbish are printed every week, and many an actor is pestered to death for titbits about his ox and his ass and everything that is his. (Laughter.) Occasionally you may read solemn articles about the insatiable vanity of the actor, which must be gratified at any cost, as if vanity were peculiar to any section of humanity. But what this organised gossip really advertises is the industry of the gentlemen who collect it, and the smartness of the papers in which it is circulated. "We learn this," "We have reason to believe"—such forms of intolerable assurance give currency too often to scandalous and lying rumours which I am sure responsible journalism would wish to discourage. But this, I fear, is difficult, for contradiction makes another desirable paragraph, and it is all looked upon as desirable copy. (Laughter.)

Of course, gentlemen, the drama is declining—it always has been declining since the time of Roscius and beyond the palmy days when the famous Elephant Raja was "starred" over the head of W.C. Macready, and the real water tank in the Cataract of the Ganges helped to increase the attractions of John Kemble and Mrs. Siddons. But we ourselves are evidently in a parlous state at the present day, when actors vainly endeavour to struggle through twenty lines of blank verse—when we are told mechanical efforts and vast armies of supers make up the production of historical plays—when pathological details, we are told, are always well received—when the "psychonological (whatever that may be) — (laughter) is invariably

successful—and when Pinero and Grundy's plays do not appeal to men of advanced thought, as I read the other day.

In all the lament about the decline of the drama there is one recurring note: the disastrous influence of long runs. If the manager were not a grossly material person, incapable of ideals, he would take off a successful piece at the height of its popularity and start a fresh experiment. (Laughter.) But he is sunk in the base commercialism of the age, and, sad to relate, he has the sympathies of the dramatic author, who wants to see his piece run say a hundred nights, instead of twenty. I don't know how this spirit of greed is to be subdued, though with the multiplication of playhouses, long runs may tend to become rare. A municipal subsidy or an obliging millionaire might enable a manager to vary his bill with comparative frequency, when he has persuaded the dramatic author that the run of a play till the crack of doom is incompatible with the interest of art. (Laughter.) I cannot help suspecting that the chief difficulty of a manager, under even the most artistic and least commercial conditions, will always be, not to check the inordinate proportions of success, but to secure plays which may succeed at all.

I hope you will not accuse me of taking a too despondent view of the drama, for believe me, I do not. To be sure, we sometimes hear that Shakespeare is to be annihilated, and that the poet's intellect has been over-rated. And lately a reverend gentleman at Hampstead announced his intention of putting down the stage altogether. (Laughter.) The atmosphere of Hampstead seems to be intellectually intoxicating; at any rate it has a rather stimulating effect on a certain kind of dogmatic mind. This intolerance has been very eloquently rebuked by a distinguished man who is an ornament of the Church of England. It is Dean Farrar who says that these pharisaical attacks on the stage are inspired only by "concentrated malice". Well, the periodical misunderstanding to which the stage is exposed need cause but little disquiet. I have no doubt it will survive its many adventures, and that it will owe not a little of its tenacious vitality of your unflagging sympathy and hearty and generous encouragement. (Cheers.)