

FRANCIS WILSON DEFENDS THE CHILDREN OF THE STAGE



Ellen Terry.

Answers Critics Who Denounce Their Use in Dramatic Productions--Ellen Terry's Experience.

By FRANCIS WILSON.

THE Christian Advocate recently printed an editorial article headed "Children of the Stage," to much of which, I think, one may take exception both in argument and statement of fact.

Its statements ought not to go unnumbered lest they be accepted by the public as irrefutable and, thereby, a bias against the theatre and all those who are connected with it be created. He is a cowardly soldier who will not fight for his flag, and a poor player who will sit quiescent under false imputations against his profession, at the head of which shine the greatest names in art and literature.

In the first place, I do not believe it quite fair of The Christian Advocate to impugn bitterly the motives of those who are opposed to its views concerning the child on the stage. Those who disagree with us on any subject are not "shameless" creatures nor, necessarily, actuated by love of gain or guided by wickedly indefensible reasons.

The source of The Advocate's information is all too evident; the publication of the Massachusetts Child Labor Committee, in which are to be found many misleading and unsubstantiated statements.

In its reply to the first argument, that dramatic art needs the child actor for certain plays, it quotes President Eliot as saying, in opposition, that "a profession which boasts of women of sixteen-year-old Juliet," should be able to fill the part of a child under fourteen with a young person over that age. But the profession of which President Eliot spoke does not "boast" of such a thing, knows nothing about it, in fact, and so far as I am able to ascertain, the statement has no verification in all dramatic history.

Age cannot represent extreme youth, but youth may better simulate age on the stage.

Nothing is so patent in its destruction of illusion, which is the soul of drama, as the effort of age to impart the semblance of youth, and this Miss Mjoeska discovered and acknowledged when she, at 42, played this same rôle of Juliet in the world's greatest love story.

However, desiring to know who President Eliot had in mind when he made the assertion about Juliet, I wrote him and received the following:

Dear Sir: No good report was made of my remarks before the legislative committee to which was referred the question of making an exception to the Massachusetts laws on child labor in favor of children employed on the stage. I think I said something to the following effect: "Many of us have seen a woman of sixty playing Juliet." I had in mind Miss Terry.

Very truly yours,

CHARLES W. ELIOT.

It is little less than astounding to find so careful a scholar as Dr. Eliot so wide of the mark.

Five steps to a five-foot reference shelf would have set him right. And it was his influence, perhaps more than any other, which shut the door of opportunity in the face of child genius in Massachusetts.

"Our plays," Ellen Terry says in her book, "The Story of My Life," "from 1878 to 1887 were 'Hamlet,' 'Romeo and Juliet,' &c.' Permitting 'Romeo and Juliet' to have been played in 1887, Miss Terry was still in the thirties when she played Juliet, and, as she did not afterward appear in the rôle, Dr. Eliot is only about thirty-odd years astray in his assertion.

On page 219 of the same book there is a paragraph bearing directly on this matter. After reciting her regret, when "Romeo and Juliet" was about to be produced at the Lyceum, that she had not gone to Verona and just "imagined" instead of staying at home cudgeling her brains over the various opinions of philosophers and critics with respect to Juliet, she adds:

"Now I understand Juliet better. Now I know how she should be played. But time is inexorable. At sixty, know what one may, one cannot play Juliet." Replying, then, to the other part of President Eliot's argument, I beg leave to say that not to be able to accomplish impossibilities belittles the skill of no art or its followers.

But President Eliot when he sees the injustice of his statement will only be too glad to make amends, of course.

Expressing himself as in favor of dramatic training for the development of the imagination in children, Dr. Eliot, will

come to understand their vital necessity to the drama.

The drama needs the child, for the preservation of many of its ancient and modern dramatic classics, its "Tempests,"



Alma Sedley in "Alias Jimmy Valentine."

Master John Tansey of The New Theatre Company.

FRANCIS WILSON AND BABY DAVIS IN "THE BLUE BIRD."



Children in "The Blue Bird."

"Mid-Summer Night's Dreams," "Winter's Tales," "Rip Van Winkles," and "Uncle Tom's Cabins," its "Peter Pan," its "The Blue Bird," &c.

But that is not all: The dramatic child genius needs the stage, needs it at the moldable, formative period for the proper development of its genius, a development it can gain, through no other source.

It is urged that a child that has genius at seven will not lose it at fourteen. Possibly, but what it cannot fail to lose is the development of that genius at a crucial period of its artistic life.

Ellen Terry, (page 71 of her autobiography) says of Henry Irving: "Many of his defects sprang from his not having been on the stage as a child. He was stiff with self-consciousness, and his amazing power was imprisoned, and only after long and weary years did he succeed in setting it free."

Having been a child actress herself, Miss Terry knew about such things, knew the value of early training in her art, knew the injustice that would be done to any dramatic genius brought first to the practice of his art at fourteen or sixteen--at that awful period when self-consciousness sets in. She knew, as in Irving's case, that once the awkward age of adolescence had arrived, the acquisition of dramatic technique must be always almost insuperably hampered.

2. "The Child Labor Committee's investigations show that very few prominent actors began their stage work in childhood."

My contention is that these investigations are inaccurate, misleading and unjust. By long odds a majority of those actors who have reached prominence upon the stage began as children. In The New York Tribune, June 19, 1910, in THE NEW

York Times, July 3, 1910, I gave a very incomplete list of about 200 actors and musicians who, beginning as children, attained the highest rank on the stage. It included almost all the great people of dramatic history in the periods named, some of whom were Macklin, Master Bertie, Woffington, Cooke, Mrs. Siddons, John and Charles Kemble, Abington, Grimaldi, Dora Jordan, Miss O'Neill, Keane, John Howard Payne, Helen Fawcett, J. W. Wallack, Mrs. Duff, J. B. Booth, Edwin Booth, J. S. Clark, Ristori, Salvini, Rachel, Patti, Melba, Josef Hofmann (have we forgotten Mozart, Mendelssohn, Tetracuzzi, et al?), Adelphi Phillips, Joseph Jefferson, Edwin Forrest, Mrs. Kendall, Agnes Robertson, Clara Morris, Fanny Davenport, Lotta, Sol Smith Russell, Effie Shannon, Mabel Taliaferro, Rose Coghlan, Arnold Daly, George Cohan, Dixey, Collier, Adeline Gencé, Fritz

Mr. Lord seems to be a man of "magnificent misinformation."

3. "Out of the 320 children under 15 years of age who in 1895 were licensed for employment on the stage in New York, only five are still in the profession and only one is at all prominent."

Wonderful! Some of these children, who have probably changed their names from Masters, Tommy, Johnny, Little Alice, and Petite Sara, are still with us under more appropriate titles, and should now be 18 to 28 years old. They have still time to "reach prominence." One may not be President of the United States until 40, or thereabout.

It should scarcely be quoted as evidence of the worthlessness or danger of an art or profession that its followers are not people of prominence at 18 or 28, should it?

Of the 320 children who were licensed

Scheff, Maude Adams, Julia Marlowe, Nazimova, and Mrs. Piske.

It is as I have said, a very incomplete list, and it was fairer than the list of forty-four names of those who began later, given by the Child Labor Committee, which included such a well-known child actor as Anne Russell, who, in fact, was already "a leading lady" at fourteen, and James K. Hackett, "who recited in public at 7."

All of which is on a par with the statement of Mr. Everett W. Lord, the committee's inaccurate secretary, that "Every life insurance company discriminates against actors." I have before me at least I write letters from four or five of the principal life insurance companies, denying that any such discrimination is made.

Because some of these untalented figures, their sphere of usefulness ended, should drift into other fields, and some perhaps become immoral or profligate, there is little justice and less philosophy in ascribing their downfall to the stage with which they were but momentarily associated. It is the perversity of human nature that, brought up in the highest moral environment, people will yet lie, steal, burn, and murder.

4. "Overstimulation of the imagination and feelings, coupled with the loss of the normal hours of rest at night, are strongly detrimental to the physical and mental well-being of the immature."

Children have little or no sense of responsibility, no self-consciousness. It is this which makes them so naive and which gives such piquancy to their sayings and doings.

In the case of the stage child, it makes no difference to it whether an audience is composed of kings and queens or of nobodies. There can be no undue nervousness or overstimulation in a child performing a part. On the contrary, I know from experience that the pleasure of doing well, of being praised, of receiving the reward of applause, is not less grateful to children than to adults. We all do better under the stimulus of appreciation.

There is no "loss of normal hours of rest," they are simply other hours, but quite as numerous, coupled with such additional care, for the stage child genius, aside from any other consideration, is a valuable bit of commercial property whose health and welfare are to be jealously guarded.

5. "Nor is it easy to step from it [the stage] into any other reputable occupation."

A distinct slur upon the stage, of which, at this late day, one would scarcely expect The Advocate to be capable!

It is not to give pleasure and instruction, which, as the world's greatest entertainer, is precisely the mission of the stage. And this is why, in face of organized religious opposition, happily growing feebler, the stage has reached its present powerful position. It is the people's institution, and is safely enthroned in their minds and hearts.

There is this, too, to be said about stepping from the stage to other occupations. But though there may be many who would succeed better in other spheres, once launched, few leave the stage for other callings. The interchange, for example, between the stage and the pulpit is much in favor of the stage.

The failure to make use of dramatic instinct and power in foreign home, in a concrete instead of an abstract way, the great moral lessons of humanity is, to my thinking, as criminally ignorant a waste as would be the employment of water for flowers and neglecting it for purposes of steam.

But we are not always to be so shortsighted, so puritanically obsessed. There are hopeful signs that the world will take advantage of this great force and use it universally for the world's uplift, instead of permitting it to be narrowly confined

to the uses of a single profession. Every reformatory school, every settlement working, and many public institutions, and every church, as in the days of miracle plays, will have its stage on which humorously, emotionally, religiously, and effectively, will be driven home the vital lessons of morality, the better understanding of life through its dramatic portrayals. The world as an individual and as a mass, let it be frank, hates to be preached to. But it can be played to, demonstrated to, suggested to through dramatic instinct, which is God-given, and for the belated general use of which no credit is to be accorded.

When the time comes, as it will, for the recognition and general use of this great power, as at the Hull House, in Chicago, the first and wonderfully effective players will be children. Children selected, as at the Hull House, because of gifts of magnetism and absence of self-consciousness--in fact, little geniuses--and generally little geniuses of the poor, who will not be muzzled but given an opportunity to develop the power they possess.

I hope I shall not be thought to have made an overstatement when I say that it is just possible that depriving a child of the opportunity to charm the world with powers of a Siddons, a Maude Adams, a Kemble, or a Jefferson in order to make a typewriter or an able-bodied seaman of it, may be working that child an injustice.

6. "If those who sit in front of the footlights and applaud the children whose innocence and freshness seem for the moment to redeem the reputation of the theatre could look a score of years into the future and see what becomes of these children in the fifth act, they would uphold the hands of the Child Labor Committee."

Let me tell you what becomes of them. They are human beings made up of the strength and weaknesses of humanity. Some of them go to the good and some of them go to the bad, just as do the children of ministers, lawyers, doctors, and shoemakers. It has ever been and always will be supposed otherwise, but that is ridiculous to suppose otherwise. But that a greater percentage of them than other children fall by the wayside is not justly susceptible of proof, even by the Child Labor Committee's inaccurate and unjust secretary.

It is, I believe, exceedingly likely that the percentage of moderate and unusual success, comparing numbers, is greater in the dramatic than in other professions. One has only to look about him to see what has become of many of these children "in the fifth act." They are the Julia Marlowes, Mrs. Fiske, Maude Adams, Madame Nazimova, Ellen Terry, Annie Russells, Mabel Taliaferro, Frohmans, Belascos, Salvini, Ristori, Wallacks, Booths, Forrests, Jeffersons, Collers, Dalys, Dicesy, Colmans, Woodruffs, Elengors, Busies, &c., or to-day.

Some years ago when this question of the child on the stage was much discussed, and it was declared that no good could possibly come of permitting children to play, Joseph Jefferson and Mrs. John Drew, according to John Drew, went hand-in-hand to Mr. Gerry and said:

"Mr. Gerry, we were child actors! It is the genius of such people as these that the National Child Labor Committee is ignorantly endeavoring to divert, or stultify. With all too evidently no understanding, no sympathy with the drama and its requirements; (the stage is the drama made real) they, believing they are protecting the child of the stage, are working it a great injury. Their mistaken efforts are not for the conservation but the hampering and the destruction of dramatic genius. They are deliberately delaying the development of powers, as in Henry Irving's case, as in the case to-day of some of our actors and actresses, "stiff with self-consciousness," powers which cannot be "set free," because of a late beginning, until after the struggle of "long and weary years," possibly never.

If the ideas of the Child Labor Committee prevail with respect to the stage, it will mean the disappearance of many of our ancient and modern classical plays; the drama will be robbed of the spirit of youth, and the dramatist's scope will be pitifully narrowed.

In short, a great injustice will be worked to the child genius, as to the dramatist, and to the State, whose greatest asset is the genius of its sons.

The Bank of England means infinitely less to England, to the world, in fact, than the name of its actor-dramatist Shakespeare.

England knights its actor geniuses, and when they die, buries them in its Westminster Abbey. France decorates them with the Legion of Honor, but America, in this latest movement against the conservation of dramatic genius, would deprive them of their greatest, their most vital means of increase and development.

Are we so rich in dramatic geniuses that we can afford to enter upon this process of extermination?

Are we so progressive in other respects, to fall behind the civilized world in the matter of the drama?

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