HOW TO PRODUCE AMATEUR PLAYS

A PRACTICAL MANUAL

BY

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TO

THOMAS R. EDWARDS

TO WHOM ALL OF US
WHO REALLY CARE ABOUT PLAYS —
PRODUCERS, DRAMATISTS, PLAYERS, AND CRITICS —
ARE UNDER MANY OBLIGATIONS,
THIS LITTLE BOOK
IS GRATEFULLY DEDICATED
BY THE WRITER

A WORD BEFORE THE CURTAIN

HOW to Produce Amateur Plays is a primer. It is my intention to set forth as succinctly as possible the most important factors that can be learned by amateurs in the process of selecting, rehearsing, and producing plays.

It need hardly be repeated that no art can be taught by text-books, and I therefore make no claim to having written a treatise capable of transforming ordinary human beings into great actors and inspired producers. My little manual, if properly studied, will, I believe, enable the amateur producer and actor to approach their work with intelligence and a certain amount of humility, and prevent needless waste of time and energy. This is not a book for professionals, nor will the advanced student of the art of the theater find in it anything very original or revolutionary.

I have set down, as clearly as I could, a description of the successive steps necessary for the performance of a play by amateurs, and for this purpose adopted what I have found to be the most effective method of assisting beginners in any art or craft, which is to give them, with as little theory as possible, specific examples of the actual problems to be

solved, and show how these problems can best be approached and worked out.

I would remind the amateur that his function in the community is to give pleasure to himself and his fellow-beings, and that the truest kind of amateur is he who does a thing for the love of it. For him the theater should be an adventure in enjoyment, and if this little manual contributes ever so little toward the realization of that adventure it will have fulfilled its mission and satisfied

THE AUTHOR

PREFACE

THIS little book, which first appeared more than eight years ago, has made several demands upon my attention. It seems to have found its place early in its career, and has insisted upon periodical revisions every so often. In 1922 it became necessary for me to bring the play lists up to date, and two years later the book was entirely rewritten for publication in England and distribution throughout the British Empire.

When, this Spring, it was found that the latest printing would shortly be exhausted, I saw that it was no longer possible to patch new pieces on the old, and I determined to dress the book in a complete new outfit. I have therefore taken the English edition and using that as a basis, written a new book, incorporating into it such additional material as I thought was needed. First, a new chapter has been added, "Dramatics in the School"; next, I have expanded the list of plays to about five times its original size; and finally I have incorporated new data into all the chapters.

Since "How to Produce Amateur Plays" was first published, I have examined over a score of books concerned with every aspect of the question of amateur dramatics. Some

of these works have long since gone out of print, but three or four have succeeded in establishing themselves as standard texts. Yet I am presuming to launch my little primer once again into a field which might seem already overcrowded. I am encouraged to do this chiefly because the demand for it has increased steadily from year to year; it has been used throughout this country and abroad and, so far as I am able to see, it is fulfilling the function for which it was written.

Let me state briefly just what the book is intended to do. It is not a treatise for Little Theaters; it is not a history of the art of stage scenery; it is not a guide for the teaching of expression, acting, or gesture. For those who wish to study such matters in detail I have incorporated a list of the best books at the end of this volume. "How to Produce Amateur Plays" is simply a guide intended to show the amateur producer and school-teacher the first principles of selecting and staging plays. I have attempted merely to point the way in a practical fashion, not to explain the process whereby experienced producers may learn new secrets of lighting, staging, or acting.

It may be urged that voice, gesture, pronunciation, painting, lighting, and the rest are all necessary elements in the production of a play. This is true, but I emphatically affirm that the most important thing is to select and "put on" a good play. I plead for the play rather than for the details of its production. If it is possible to set it artistically and act it well, so much the better. Such accessories are as clothing to a person: necessary, but not of great

moment when compared with the character or the soul. Respect the play; without respect, the rest is nothing.

For this reason I have confined my little treatise to what I regard as the essentials.

I wish to acknowledge my indebtedness for the Chapter on Make-up to Miss Grace Griswold, who has in many ways placed amateurs in her debt; and to the many publishers, whose books and advice have materially helped me in compiling my lists: in particular Messrs. Little Brown, Appleton, Samuel French, Macmillan, Walter H. Baker, Brentano's, Small, Maynard, and Henry Holt.

To Mrs. Edith M. Isaacs, Editor of *Theatre Arts Monthly*, I am especially grateful for the use of the majority of the illustrations in this volume.

BARRETT H. CLARK

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CONTENTS

HOW TO PRODUCE AMATEUR PLAYS

CHAPTER I

CHOOSING THE PLAY

"WHAT play?" is a question requiring the most careful consideration. Of the many thousands of dramatic works available for production by amateurs there is an increasingly large number that are worth while. Unless one has already made up one's mind and selected the play — or at least the sort of play — to be performed, it will be well to refer to one of the many selected lists of good plays for amateurs to be found in books, pamphlets, or study outlines published by persons or organizations capable of judging the value of plays. Otherwise, the bewildering catalogues issued by play publishers will afford little satisfaction. One such list I have appended to the present volume, with a few indications as to the kind of play and its adaptability to the various types of amateur groups.

It is wise to have each play under consideration read not only by the producer but by members of the group that are to produce it. Amateur clubs should have some sort of library, for in selecting plays it is never altogether satisfactory to depend upon either lists or catalogues. Certain facts must be kept in mind in selecting any play, and chief among these are:

1. **Size of the Cast.** This is a simple matter: ten persons obviously cannot play Shakespeare.

2. **Experience of the Actors.** This may be a little more difficult. In rare instances advanced amateurs are able to give a fair performance of an Ibsen or Chekhov play, but the average dramatic club had better avoid works in which the portrayal of subtle emotions is demanded. As a rule, the plays of the great classic dramatists — Molière, Sheridan, Goldoni, Goldsmith, even Shakespeare — suffer less from inadequate acting than do the works of the moderns. The opinion of an expert, or of some one who has had experience in directing amateur plays, should be sought and acted upon. If, for example, "As You Like It" is under consideration, it should be remembered that the rôle of Rosalind demands delicate and subtle acting, and if no suitable woman can be found for that part, a simpler play, like "The Comedy of Errors", had better be substituted. Modern serious plays are on the whole more difficult: the portrayal of a modern character calls for maturity and skill seldom found in any amateur. The characters in Molière's "Bourgeois Gentilhomme", Shakespeare's "Comedy of Errors", Sheridan's "Rivals", are more or less well-

known types, to which conventional acting is far better suited. On the other hand, only the best-trained amateurs are able to impart the needful appearance of life and actuality to a play like George Kelly's "Show-Off" or Henry Arthur Jones's "Liars." Still, there are many modern plays — among them, Shaw's "You Never Can Tell" and Wilde's "Importance of Being Earnest" — in which no extraordinary subtlety of characterization is called for. These can be produced almost as easily by amateurs as the simpler plays of Shakespeare and Sheridan.

3. **The Kind of Play** to be offered raises certain questions which are entirely beyond the scope of purely dramatic considerations. In the English-speaking countries there is often a studied avoidance, by amateurs of all ages, of so-called "unpleasant plays." Without entering into the reasons for this aversion, it is rather fortunate that this is so, because as a rule "thesis", "sex", and "problem" plays are vastly more difficult for amateur actors to perform than other dramatic works.

While it is a splendid thing to believe no play too good for amateurs, some moderation is necessary where a play is patently beyond the mental and emotional powers of a cast: "Hamlet" ought never to be attempted, nor such subtle and otherwise difficult plays as "Three Sisters" of Chekhov. Plays of the highest merit can be found which are not so taxing as these. There is no reason why Sophocles' "Electra", Euripides' "Alcestis", or the comedies of Lope de Vega, Goldoni, Molière, Lessing, and the better-

known English classics should not be performed by amateurs.

It goes without saying that the facile, trashy, " popular " comedies of the past two or three generations are to be avoided by amateurs who take their work seriously. This does not mean that all farces and comedies should be neglected. " The Magistrate " and " The Importance of Being Earnest " are among the finest farces in the language. The point to be made is that it is better to attempt a play which may be more difficult to perform than " Charley's Aunt " than to give a creditable performance of that decidedly hackneyed piece. It is more meritorious to produce a good play poorly, if need be, than a poor play well. I have often been called to task for making this statement, particularly by those who regard production and action as of more importance than plays. But may I emphasize one point here, and let it go at that? The play comes first, always: without the play, there is nothing. To assert, as many have done, that it is better to produce a poor play well than a good play badly, is to claim that the manner should take precedence over the matter. You may just as well say that it is more important that a man should behave or dress well than think well.

If, after having consulted the list in this volume and other of the many available lists, the group are still unable to decide on a suitable modern play, the best course is to return to the classics. It is a fair assumption that the plays that have pleased audiences for centuries will please us. Aristophanes' " Clouds " and " Lysistrata ", with the

fewest possible "cuts"[1]; Plautus' "The Twins" and Terence's "Phormio"; Goldoni's "Fan"; Shakespeare's "Comedy of Errors" and half-a-dozen other comedies; Molière's "Merchant Gentleman" and "Doctor in Spite of Himself"; Sheridan's "Rivals" and Goldsmith's "She Stoops to Conquer"; Lessing's "Minna von Barnhelm" — all these are "safe." A classic can hardly be seen too often. Another argument in favor of the performance of the classics is that they are rarely produced by professionals. If an amateur society revives a classic, especially one that is not often seen, it may well be proud of its achievement.

If, however, the society insists on giving a modern play, it will have little difficulty in finding one that is worth acting. It is well not to challenge comparison with professional productions by choosing plays which have had professional runs recently; try rather to select (1) good modern plays which by reason of their subject matter, form, etc., cannot under present conditions be made commercially successful; (2) translations of contemporary foreign plays which are not well known either to English readers or producers; and, finally, (3) original plays. Here it is hard to offer sound advice. It cannot be hoped that amateur clubs will discover many masterpieces among original plays

[1] By "cuts" I mean only such omissions as are necessitated by law. I would urge amateurs to give the dramatist the benefit of the doubt, and assume that he knows what ought to be acted better than any one else. Cuts are, however, sometimes vitally necessary, but not often. If a play appears to require a great deal of cutting, or other alteration, then don't produce it. My advice here is purely practical: if I had my way I would demand that every play be acted as it was written, but in our imperfect world I realize that this is out of the question.

submitted to them, but if any MS. has a touch of originality, some good characterization, any marked technical skill — in a word, if there is something interesting or promising — then it may be worth producing. Doubtless many beginners are discouraged from writing plays for want of an opportunity of seeing their work staged; for such, the amateur society is the only resource.

Besides these particular considerations, there is the very important matter of fees or royalties required for the performance of copyright plays. A statement of the conditions relating to dramatic copyright is to be found in the first appendix to this book.

CHAPTER II

ORGANIZATION

A GREAT many more factors go into the making of a successful dramatic production than may at first be apparent. To select a suitable theater, hall, or schoolroom; to supervise furnishings and equipment; to arrange and see to it that rehearsals are conducted without waste of time or energy; to supply " props ", costumes, and furniture; to manage the stage during the performance — all this is next in importance to the acting itself.

Of late years especially it has become clear that the art of the theater, although it is a collaboration of the brains and hands of many persons, must be under the supervision of one dominating chief. One person, and one alone, must be ultimately responsible for the entire production. Except in rare instances, this chief cannot know and attend to each detail himself, but it is his business to see that the whole organization is formed and managed according to his wishes. The function of this ideal manager has been compared with that of the orchestral conductor: it is he who leads, and who must be the first to detect the slightest discord. While

the foregoing remarks are more strictly applicable to acting and staging, it will be readily seen that if the leader is not in touch with the practical side of the production there is likely to arise that working at cross purposes which has ruined many a production. While a great deal of the actual work must be done by subordinates, it should be clearly understood that the director has in every case the final word of authority.

Much in the matter of organization depends upon the number, ability, and experience of those persons who are available, but the suggestions about to be made regarding the organization of a staff are based upon the assumption that the producer is a capable person, and his assistants willing to coöperate with and learn from him.

The Director. The chief under whose guidance the entire work of rehearsing and organization should lie, is called the director. However, since this position is often held by some one who cannot be expected to attend to everything, there must be elected or appointed an officer who is directly responsible to him. This officer is:

The Stage Manager. As the director cannot always be present at all rehearsals, and as two parts of the play are often rehearsed simultaneously, it is evident that another must be ready to act in place of the chief. It is his duty to "hold" the prompt book and keep a careful record of all stage business, "cues", etc. At every rehearsal he must be ready to prompt, either lines or "business" — action, gestures, crosses, entrances, exits, and the like — and call the attention of the director to omissions or mistakes. In

the event of the director's absence, he becomes the *pro tempore* director himself.

It is advisable — though not always possible — to delegate the duties of property man, electrician, and scene shifter to various persons; but, even when this is done, it is advisable for the stage manager to keep a record of all "property plots", "light plots", "furniture plots", etc., and to hold his co-workers responsible to him.

It is also the stage manager's business to arrange the time and place of rehearsals, and see that the players are present.

At the dress rehearsal and the actual performance, it is the stage manager, and not the director, who supervises the production, allowing the director to watch the stage from the "house." His position is that of commander-in-chief. He either holds the book himself, or is at any rate close by the person who actually follows the lines; sees that each actor is ready for his entrance; that the curtain rises and falls when it should; that his assistants are each in their appointed places; and that the entire performance "goes" as it is intended to go.

The Business Manager. He attends to such matters as renting the theater — or arranging some place for the performance — printing and distributing tickets and programs; in short, everything connected with the receipt and expenditure of money. It is not of course imperative that he should have much to do with the director; although it is always well to have every one connected with the production in touch with the directing chief. The business