The Best Plays of 1899-1909

BURNS MANTLE

THE BEST PLAYS OF 1899-1909

AND THE
YEAR BOOK OF THE DRAMA
IN AMERICA

EDITED BY
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AND
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With Illustrations

Published by THE BLAKISTON COMPANY, Philadelphia

Distributed by
DODD, MEAD AND COMPANY
NEW YORK - - - 1944

Second printing, July, 1944

INTRODUCTION

As MAY be discovered by reference to the introduction published in the volume of "Best Plays" covering the decade extending from 1909 to 1919, the inspiration for these two added volumes to the American Theatre record stems from a desire to make our theatre history complete.

The annual Year Books of the Drama in America were begun the season of 1919-20. Ten years back, Garrison P. Sherwood, an avid collector of theatre data, suggested that, working together, he furnishing the statistics and I the digests of ten plays that would fairly represent the seasons included, we could bridge a gap then existing between the older and newer records.

Previous histories, starting with the William Dunlap record in 1732, have come down as far as Prof. George C. D. Odell has advanced with his invaluable "Annals of the New York Stage." The thirteenth volume of this series chronicles in detail both theatre and other amusement activities up to and including the year 1888.

There have been a good many recent theatre histories published, including Prof. Arthur Hobson Quinn's "A History of the American Drama," which covers the period between the Civil War and the middle 1930s; Prof. Glenn Hughes' "The Story of the Theatre," which goes back to the beginning and comes down to 1928; George Freedley's and John A. Reeves' "History of the Theatre," also going back to the beginning and coming down to 1941, and Margaret G. Mayorga's "A Short History of the American Drama," which is a "commentary on plays prior to 1920."

None of these, however, is a detailed and statistical record of the theatre seasons covered. They are, for the most part, editorial and critical discussions of plays and playwrights, selected primarily for the importance of the plays and the interest they inspired in the theatre.

We have followed the form and duplicated as far as possible the detail of the twenty-four previous volumes of "Best Plays" already issued. As a result we now have between covers a complete and, we believe, a correct report of the American theatre's activities for the first forty-two years of the twentieth century.

By adding this report to the previously published theatre records

of other historians, any hardy researcher can push his way happily back through an acreage of words, both flowery and weedy, to the earliest transplantings of the drama in this New World.

In selecting the plays chosen to represent the first ten theatre seasons of the twentieth century, not the slightest claim is made to an infallibility of judgment. These ten plays are probably not, certainly not in every instance, the best plays written during this period. Some of them are quite frankly chosen because they represented a pleasantly reminiscent period of playgoing. But they are all, I believe, characteristic of their time and they were all extremely popular with the playgoers who were supporting the theatre at the time of their production. Each of them represents its author, if not at his best, at least at no worse than his second best.

William Clyde Fitch had arrived at his showiest years in the theatre at the beginning of the twentieth century, which accounts reasonably enough for my taking two of his plays, "Barbara Frietchie" to represent the season of 1899-1900 and "The Climbers" the season of 1900-01. The records indicate that during the season of 1900-01 Fitch had no fewer than ten plays running either in New York or on tour simultaneously. Elsie De Wolfe played "The Way of the World," Sadie Martinot "The Marriage Game," Annie Russell "The Girl and the Judge," and Amelia Bingham "The Climbers" at one time or another during the winter on Broadway. S. Miller Kent was touring in "The Cowboy and the Lady," written for Nat Goodwin and Maxine Elliott; Howard Kyle was touring in "Nathan Hale"; there were three "Lover's Lane" companies on the road and Julia Marlowe was continuing with the previous season's "Barbara Frietchie."

Many other plays were to flow from the pen of this successful dramatist—including "The Stubbornness of Geraldine," "The Girl with the Green Eyes," "The Truth," and "The Woman in the Case." He started writing "The City," perhaps his grimmest and, as it turned out, his last play, in 1908 and completed it in 1909. It was produced posthumously, but did not long survive.

"Barbara Frietchie" was the popular success of its day, and also one of the two Fitch war plays, "Major André" being the other. It offers an interesting contrast with the war dramas that have followed it as representative of the first and second World Wars.

"The Climbers," at the time of its production, was counted the best of the Fitch output up to that time, and is fairly representative of the author's style and of such skill in drama construction as he had developed.

"If I Were King" is one of the colorfully reminiscent plays of its period. It was written by Justin Huntly McCarthy, the English

dramatist, and played successfully by E. H. Sothern in his most persuasive romantic manner. Originally, Mr. McCarthy's wife, the popular Cissie Loftus, had the role of the heroine.

"The Darling of the Gods" is another drama that, as dramatic literature, might easily have been bypassed. But it also represented the florid and popular type of production with which David Belasco built his fame as an outstanding producer of that decade. It was the play that brought John Luther Long into the theatre, following his earlier success with the "Madame Butterfly" sketch from which both the drama and the opera were adapted. It also serves as an interesting comparison of our attitude toward the picturesque people of old Japan and our present contempt for the treacherous enemies who are the lineal descendants of the one-time romantically heroic Samurai.

George Ade was a definite figure among the playwrights who were popular through the 1899-1909 decade. With "The County Chairman," produced in 1903, following the first Ade hit with "The Sultan of Sulu," the genial Indiana humorist took American politics and the Hoosier politicos apart and made good-natured fun of them. Mr. Ade once told an interviewer that it was his ambition to write native comedies that would truthfully and amusingly reveal his fellow countrymen without slandering them or holding them up to ridicule. He consistently held to this standard throughout his comparatively short playwrighting career and probably extracted great satisfaction from the returns he gained by doing so. "The County Chairman" is far from a great play, but it does honestly represent the American theatre scene through the season of 1903-04.

C. M. S. McLellan (who signed himself "Hugh Morton" when he wrote "The Belle of New York") confesses his great disappointment in a preface to the printed version of "Leah Kleschna" that his producers insisted upon his providing a fifth act and a happy ending to the drama. It would, it was his contention, have been a much stronger play if it had ended indeterminately but reasonably at the close of the fourth act. "Leah Kleschna" did much to establish the high standing of the Manhattan Theatre Company which was the favorite enterprise of Harrison Grey and Mrs. Fiske at that time.

"The Squaw Man" was Edwin Milton Royle's fourth play and his greatest success. It was, as more fully appears in later pages, one of those fascinating romantic adventures in playwriting that dot the record. It was dashed off because Mr. Royle was in need of a curtain-raiser to piece out an evening devoted to a new comedy, but a good deal of serious labor was afterward given the rewriting of the script. Mr. Royle's daughter, Josephine, recalls that her father spent the better part of the summer following the first production

of the one-act version, perfecting, among other features, the phonetics of the Ute tongue so that the actors could read them convincingly. George C. Tyler, the producer, also gave great care to the selection of the cast. Happily, the success that followed was ample reward for the labors of all concerned.

Arthur Hobson Quinn, in his excellent "History of the American Drama," credits William Vaughn Moody and his drama of the Southwest, produced originally by Margaret Anglin in Chicago as "A Sabine Woman" and later the same year, 1906, in New York as "The Great Divide," with having been, both author and play, significant influences in establishing the trend of "the drama of revolt in America" at the beginning of the twentieth century. Certainly it was the most literary and most literate of the dramas of its period and fittingly represents the season of 1906-07.

Augustus Thomas was one of the definitely upstanding as well as outstanding American dramatists of this period. He contributed generously and most successfully to the theatre, from the production in 1884 of his first play, "Editha's Burglar" (adapted with Edgar Smith from a novel by Mrs. Frances Hodgson Burnett), through the next three decades. "The Witching Hour" seems to me to have combined as many of the virtues of his skill as dramatist, and of the quality of his dramatist's mind, as any play he wrote during his middle period. It was also the popular success of the season of 1907-08.

Finally, we have Booth Tarkington's and Harry Leon Wilson's "The Man from Home," which, though it might never have been selected as one of the great plays of its day, was still a tremendously successful play the season of 1908-09 and quite honestly reflected the taste of the playgoers at that time. As it happens the choice of a play to represent this particular season was a little confusing. In the first place, Eugene Walter's "The Easiest Way" was unquestionably the outstanding drama produced in 1909. But I had already included that in the 1909-19 volume as the representative success and most significant drama of the 1909-10 season, which was the season following its Broadway heralding, but also the season of its greatest country-sweeping popularity.

A second choice was Edward Sheldon's "Salvation Nell," but Mr. Sheldon was reluctant to see that drama in print again, even in the reduced form in which the plays are here presented. Naturally, I deferred to his wishes in the matter. The Tarkington-Wilson comedy was the next selection and does, I think, strike the proper nostalgic note of reminiscence we considered important to this compilation even in a 1934 revision favored by the authors.

The choice of ten plays to represent ten years covered by this

volume does not, to my mind, represent the most important contribution the book makes to American theatre history. That will be found in the records of dates and casts so painstakingly compiled by my collaborator, Mr. Sherwood. These records not only serve as spurs to memories of a happy playgoing decade, but they are studded with names and dates of both interest and value to researchers in the theatrical field. We are again indebted to our colaborers, Clara Sears Taylor and Elliott T. Martinson, for their valued and sympathetic assistance.

Wartime working conditions force us to send "The Best Plays of 1899-1909" to press with all its imperfections (minor, we trust) on its head. Whether or not it proves all that we hope for it as the last link in the chain of recorded theatre facts stretching from 1700 to 1943, it is still, we feel, a work that should have been done.

B. M.

Forest Hills, 1944.

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BARBARA FRIETCHIE

A Play in Four Acts

By Clyde Fitch

BARBARA FRIETCHIE (83 perf.)—Play in four acts by Clyde Fitch. Produced by Charles Frohman at the Criterion Theatre, New York, October 23, 1899. Cast:

Barbara Frietchie.....Julia Marlowe
Sue Royce.....Norah Lamison
Mrs. Hunter.....Annie Clark
Capt. Trumbull.....J. H. Gilmour
Arthur Frietchie.....Lionel Adams
Jack Negly.....Arnold Daly
Tim Greene.....Becton Radford
Dr. Hal Boyd.....Algernon Tassin
Corporal Perkins.....Ralph Lewis
Sally Negly.....Katherine Wilson
Laura Royce.....Mary Blyth
Mammy Lu.....Alice Leigh
Mr. Frietchie.....George Woodward
Col. Negly.....W. J. LeMoyne
Fred Gelwix.....Dodson Mitchell
Edgar Strong.....Donald MacLaren
Sergt. James.....Frank Colfax
Orderly.....H. Phillips
A Boy.....Byron Ongley

Staged by William Seymour.

This play was revived at the Academy of Music, New York, January 28, 1901, for 40 performances. Cast:

Barbara Frietchie.....Effie Ellsler
Sue Royce.....Mary Blyth
Mrs. Hunter.....Fanny L. Burt
Capt. Trumbull.....Frank Weston
Arthur Frietchie.....Algernon Tassin
Jack Negly.....George S. Christie
Tim Greene.....Fred Hardy
Dr. Hal Boyd.....Byron Ongley
Corporal Perkins.....Richard Warner
Sally Negly.....Carol Arden
Laura Royce.....Olive Murray
Mammy Lu.....Alice Leigh
Mr. Frietchie.....Charles Stedman
Col. Negly.....Charles Chappelle
Fred Gelwex.....George W. Mitchell

Edgar Strong	**Charles Gibson**
Sergt. James	**William Colfax**
Orderly	**H. Phillips**
A Boy	**Charles Ongley**

IN 1899 the American theatre was approaching the turn of the century gaily and with confidence. Having come through a decade of prosperity, and been benefited (in a business way) rather than harmed by the Spanish-American War, the theatre was riding high on the crest of what might be called a star wave. It was the stars of the stage rather than their plays that dominated the playhouses. Many atrociously bad dramas were saved by the attractiveness of their casts, and more particularly by the popularity of their leading players. It was the stars, in fact, who had as much to say in dictating the character of the plays in which they appeared as had their managers.

Clyde Fitch, among other star makers and star worshipers, had enjoyed ten years of varied success. As a young man, recently graduated from Amherst College, he had written "Beau Brummell," practically in collaboration with Richard Mansfield, who played it, and with the help of an earlier Brummell play, Blanchard Jerrold's "Life of George Brummell." He had followed this with "His Grace de Grammont," which helped an ambitious young actor-manager, Otis Skinner, to a firmer footing as an independent in the theatre. He had written "Mistress Betty" for Madame Modjeska, "The Moth and the Flame" for Herbert Kelcey and Effie Shannon and "The Masked Ball" for John Drew and Maude Adams. His "Nathan Hale" did not do much for Nat Goodwin, but was later played extensively through the West by Howard Kyle. Mr. Goodwin and his beautiful wife, Maxine Elliott, also toyed for a season with "The Cowboy and the Lady." Mr. Fitch's position among his contemporaries was a commanding one, and it was quite natural that his "Barbara Frietchie" should be selected as the 1899-1900 "vehicle" for the beauteous and popular Julia Marlowe.

There was plenty of star competition those days. During this particular season playgoers saw John Drew in C. Haddon Chambers' "The Tyranny of Tears," E. H. Sothern and Virginia Harned (that was before Miss Marlowe had come into Mr. Sothern's life) in "The King's Musketeers," and Mrs. Fiske in Langdon Mitchell's "Becky Sharp."

It was in November, 1899, that William Gillette produced "Sherlock Holmes." Henry Irving and Ellen Terry were over from London with "Robespierre." The dramatization of Lew Wallace's "Ben Hur" was a stage sensation. That season Viola Allen began the

years of her great triumph in Hall Caine's "The Christian," and Maude Adams bounded into stardom with "The Little Minister."

It was also the year that the English actress, Olga Nethersole, was arrested for playing a scene in a dramatization of Daudet's "Sapho" (also by Clyde Fitch), in which her lover (Hamilton Revelle) boldly carried her up a spiral stairway to her apartment. To attract the police today such a scene would at least have to reveal the heroine in a disrobing exhibition en route.

We have selected "Barbara Frietchie" to represent this particular season because it creditably and interestingly reflects the playwriting art of Clyde Fitch in his pre-social comedy days, and because it gives us a taste of the frankly prettified war drama of the period. We have come pretty far in this division since standards were set by "Secret Service" and "Held by the Enemy." We have known "What Price Glory" and "The Eve of St. Mark." But in the older theatre the romance rather than the realism of war was attractive to audiences. It is their theatre-going tastes and reactions we are striving to recapture.

"Fitch was vigorously criticized for falsification of history," writes Arthur Hobson Quinn in his "History of the American Drama," "and rather feebly defended himself on the grounds that Barbara Frietchie was ninety-six years old and bedridden when Stonewall Jackson went through Fredericksburg. But Whittier's heroine, rightly or wrongly, had become established as the real Barbara and it was a dangerous experiment, since it distracted the attention of critics from the play itself. For, while false to fact and legend, it is true of the spirit of the time, from the social if not from the military point of view. It has not the vigor of 'Secret Service' or the profound depth of 'Griffith Davenport,' but it has a charm of its own, which helped largely in the success of its adaptation into the musical comedy, 'My Maryland' (1927)."

It is a pleasant summer evening in 1863 when we first meet Barbara Frietchie and her friends. The rising curtain reveals the façades of three houses in Frederick, Maryland. Two of them are red brick, with front porches. The third is a frame cottage set back in its yard with a geranium garden in front of it.

On the porch of the Frietchie house, which is in the center, two young girls are sitting gossiping, and on the porch of Col. Negly's house next door a young woman and a young man are talking earnestly. It is early evening. There are a few lamps lighted inside the Frietchie and Negly houses, and through the open windows of the Frietchie house come the strains of "Kathleen Mavourneen." That would be Barbara Frietchie singing and accompanying herself on the piano.

The girls on the Frietchie porch are Laura and Sue Royce. "They are pretty, rather thoughtless young creatures, but sweet-tempered and warm-hearted. They wear soft, light dresses, open at the neck, and are bare-armed." The Royce girls are both interested and curious about the couple on the Negly porch. The girl over there is Sally Negly. They can't see the young man's face but they suspect he is a beau. They are sure of it when Sally politely declines their invitation to come sit with them. A moment later they have recognized Sally's young man. He is Edgar Strong, a young stalwart of the South. Presently Edgar gets up, bows gracefully to Miss Negly and walks a little stiffly down the street, paying no attention to the "Ahems!" of the Royces.

Indoors Barbara continues her singing. She has gone from "Kathleen Mavourneen" to "Maryland, My Maryland," and then to "Listen to the Mocking Bird." Barbara is quite sentimental this evening, Laura Royce observes. And it isn't because of Jack Negly. It's because of a certain Captain Trumbull. And he's a Yankee.

Now Sally Negly has come to join the girls. She brings a message which she calls in the Frietchie window. "Barbara, Jack's coming over." There is a crash of chords on the piano. "Not at home!" answers Barbara, with emphatic emphasis, and begins to sing "Her Bright Smile Haunts Me Still."

"That's just how she treats Jack now!" snaps Sally.

"And everybody's talking about Barbara and that ornry Yankee," adds Laura.

"I don't think he's ornry? I think he's nice." This from Sue.

"He's your enemy and you ought to hate him!" declares Sally. "I shan't have anything more to do with Bab if she doesn't stop seeing Capt. Trumbull."

"He has a lovely mustache."

"It isn't the mustache that makes the man!"

Jack Negly, "a handsome young fellow of twenty," comes from the Negly house and, stopping in front of the Frietchies' windows, calls to Barbara. The only answer he gets is a moment's silence, followed by Barbara's resumption of her singing. Jack is persistent Finally he gets his answer—

"I'm not home—to *cowards!*" calls Barbara.

Jack is stunned for a moment, then he walks deliberately into the house. Barbara's singing ends abruptly. "Would it be wrong to listen?" Sally wants to know. "Decidedly!" answers Sue, getting as close to the window as she can. "And, anyway, I can't hear a word!"

Two Union soldiers are coming down the street. As the girls swish their dresses up out of the way of contamination, one of the

soldiers tosses a rose into Laura's lap. She throws it after him with an expression of disgust. The soldiers disappear laughing.

Sally wishes Barbara would make up her mind to be her brother Jack's sweetheart for good and all. Jack is so moody they can't do anything with him at home. And, anyway, Barbara has no right to be mad with Jack because he won't fight with the South, especially when she is flirting with a Yankee herself.

"The whole town is angry about Barbara," reports Laura. "All the vestrymen of our church were at the house this afternoon, begging Mr. Frietchie to forbid Barbara's seeing Capt. Trumbull any more."

"Bab adores her father. I wonder what would happen if she were called on to choose between the two."

There is a sudden crashing discord on the piano, followed by Barbara's indignant "How dare you!" The Royce girls and Sally huddle together and try to hear. Presently Jack's voice, raised in anger, can be heard shouting—

"Very well; I'll go to the war. Do you hear me, Bab? I'll go and fight if you want it! *I'll go!* But not to fight for my country; understand that? To fight him! To kill this damned Northerner who has taken you from me! *You!* Barbara Frietchie, whom I love better than the South, better than my life!"

A moment later Jack has come bursting through the door. He is ready to damn all women, and does, as he passes the girls. He is rushing down the street when Barbara appears in the doorway.

"Call us what you like," she cries excitedly, yet with girlish dignity; "but remember that we women *love* the man we honor and give our lips to the man we love!"

Barbara "is a ravishing young creature who has more or less willingly upset most of the youth of the town. . . . Her eyes are large and beautiful and she does what she likes with them. . . . She is dressed in a billowy mass of blue gauziness, bare neck, save for a blue cameo, and bare arms, save for two lovely dimples. Another cameo, the color of her lips, is caught at her waist."

Barbara is angry. She has never given Jack Negly the right to speak to her that way. Nor is she impressed by Sally's wish that she would forgive Jack, and love him.

"You can't make yourself love, Sally," insists Barbara. "Love is a willful, adorable child that teases you till you give him his own way."

"Love is a saint that stands always by you and *blesses* you when you find and know him."

"Love is a magician that can make hearts change places in a sec-

ond," declares Sally. "Love isn't Cupid, really. He's Jupiter and rules all the world."

"Love is— Girls, I think *love* is a *man!*" decides Barbara.

"A Yankee man?" taunts Sally.

"I *like* Capt. Trumbull," confesses Barbara, defensively.

It is getting darker. Col. Negly comes from his house looking for Barbara's father and retires to his own porch to smoke his pipe and wait. Hal Boyd and Edgar Strong come down the street and stop before the girls. Hal asks to speak to Laura. He is a little agitated. He would have Laura persuade Sue to go indoors and play the piano. Tell her they all want to dance. He'll take her (Laura); Edgar will take Sally and they will go for a walk. That will leave Barbara alone, and that is what Hal wants. It's serious.

The conspiracy is working. The four are dancing. "Stay here on the steps, no matter what we do," Hal whispers to a confused Barbara. She is still mystified when they all four steal away, leaving Sue still playing. "Don't be afraid to say when you're tired," calls Sue, with friendly satire.

Now a hooded figure appears from the Royces' cottage and makes its way carefully to the side of the Frietchie porch. With a "Pst!" the figure attracts Barbara's attention and, later, makes its way out of the Royces' gate and to Barbara's side. Now Barbara has recognized her brother Arthur, a "high-spirited young Southern soldier."

"I was wounded yesterday in a skirmish on the Gettysburg pike," explains Arthur, haltingly, "The Yankees have taken Hagerstown, but I managed not to get caught, crawled here and have been all day at the Royces'. You must hide me in our cellar till I can get well—or die—"

Arthur has sunk down on the lower step. Barbara is quickly by his side trying to get him into the house before they are seen. She is forced to hide him in back of her as Col. Negly appears on his porch, still looking for Mr. Frietchie. Col. Negly goes back, but now Sue is tired of playing. With a cry of protest she comes to the window to tell the dancers what she thinks of them and finds them gone. She goes back into the room and comes through the front door just as Barbara is helping Arthur into the house. As Sue throws open the door a flood of light reveals Barbara and Arthur.

At this moment Capt. Trumbull comes slowly along the Royces' fence, smoking his pipe. In front of the Frietchie porch he stops to see who is on the top step. As the light falls on Barbara and her brother he hears Sue cry out: "Arthur!" And Barbara cautions: "Hush! Don't speak his name!"

Capt. Trumbull, taking his pipe from his mouth, whistles softly

to himself and turns away. "He is a tall, slender, handsome Northerner, dressed in the uniform of a Union captain. He is one of those fine-hearted, open-souled men who is loved as baby, boy and man by everyone, but so unconsciously, so far as he himself is concerned, as never to be spoiled."

After a moment's hesitation Capt. Trumbull starts to walk slowly up the street as Barbara, Arthur and Sue disappear in the Frietchie house and close the door. At the corner of the Royces' fence the Captain turns and retraces his steps. He puts away his pipe now, walks up the steps and raps sharply with the iron knocker.

As he stands waiting, a search gang of eight Union soldiers comes down the street and turns in at the Royces' gate. Col. Negly, hearing the knocking, comes to the side of his porch to see if Mr. Frietchie has arrived. "Is that you, Frietchie?" he calls. "No, sir, it's Capt. Trumbull."

An angry grunt from Negly. "Oh, I know you, sir! You're a damned Yankee, sir."

"I'm a Union soldier, sir," answers Trumbull. The search gang has gone into the Royce house.

"So was I a soldier, sir, in a just cause. I was a colonel in the Mexican War, sir!"

"I am glad you are not fighting this time, Colonel."

"I'm not, sir, but I'll take up the sword again, sir, if they need me. I'm not too old yet, sir! I may join the blessed South in a fortnight, sir."

"I might keep you a prisoner here and prevent your leaving the town," threatens Capt. Trumbull, with a smile.

"The town won't be yours, sir, in a fortnight! There won't be a damned Yankee left in the place, sir, in a fortnight! (TRUMBULL *knocks again, this time more loudly.*) And, thank God, sir, while you Northerners have our dear town not one of 'em dares to call on *my daughter,* sir. Frietchie's got to stop it too, sir! We're coming to have a word with him. (TRUMBULL *knocks louder.*) Not that I have anything against you personally, sir. I'm bound to believe if it weren't for the war you might be a gentleman, sir."

The Frietchie door is opened just a little by Barbara. She wants to know who is there. Being told, she puts a bare arm through the door to shake hands with the Captain. He would come in, but she quickly slides through the door and faces him. It is, she thinks, much cooler and pleasanter outside. She would close the door after her, but he stops her. He would have her leave the door open. He can see her face much better in the light; besides, he has a good reason.

Next door, Mammy Lu, a large and angry colored lady, is show-