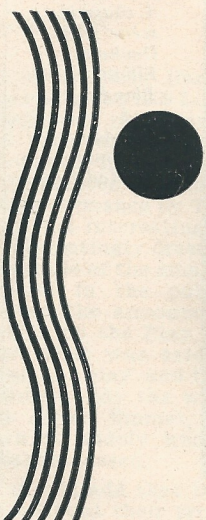


The Playgoer
Dec 1948

With the Amateurs



THE PROBLEM OF CHOOSING PLAYS

By HAROLD DOWNS :: Editor "Theatre & Stage"

AFTER visiting the Welsh Valleys, I thought I would take a look at amateur work in London suburbia. On the whole, I saw little that impressed me as striking improvements on pre-war productions. But in fairness—and with pleasure—it must be admitted, with qualifications, that enthusiasm is keen, although some of the enthusiasts are much too self-centred; that there is a desire to keep "Live" Theatre not only alive but also in vigorous action and in competition with rather than as complementary to what is seen on the screen; and that before one season ends constructive thought is exercised on "What next?",

The time-lag (inescapable in existing abnormal conditions) between any date on which I can attend a performance and the earliest date of publication of anything that I am impelled to write about it is too long for it to retain topicality. Therefore, perhaps the most satisfactory method of treatment, notwithstanding its illogicality, is to proceed from the particular to the general, and to focus attention on points that make a national instead of a local appeal.

The selection of a play for production has to be made by all active amateur societies that organise both public performances and (I hope) adequate support. What is the most effective method of choosing a play?

I know one society that permits its producer to be the sole selector and that accepts his choice, even when it may appear to some members and supporters that it is arbitrary and unwise alike. A second society organises play readings and invites its members to attend to pass judgment on the readings, the Selection Committee already having worked through suggestions for plays for production received in response to invitation. The society's performances are public performances and are, therefore, attended by non-members. (Is a play reading likely to weaken interest in and support of a subsequent performance of the play?) A third society acts upon the majority vote of the executive committee, each member of which is assumed to bear in mind all relevant factors when using his or her vote.

NO doubt officers of amateur societies will be interested in details of how The Questors, Ealing, tackle what is often admitted to be a problem. Incidentally, I made it my business to see The Questors in Shaw's *The Apple Cart*. The performance of it was their main contribution to the festivities of the Borough of Ealing's Arts and Civic Week. During the run—nine performances—they had as their guests the Mayor, members of the Council, and representatives of local organisations.



A charming scene with Denholm Elliott as Blandinet and Constance Cummings as Madeleine.



Another of those intimate scenes of which Sacha Guitry is such a master. Madeleine starts to give a few home-truths. Daniel is too quick. He smothers her oratory as he turns to his audience. This time it's "Don't Listen Men!"

I saw Cedric Hardwicke as King Magnus in the 1929 London production, I had seen performances by touring and repertory companies, and been interested in amateur readings and performances. I went not only to see the performance by The Questors—the play was interestingly produced, not so interestingly dressed; effective use was made of the small stage—but also because in the publicity matter I noticed the announcement of a Discussion on the Play, and I wished to hear what was said about the producer, the play, and the players by the members. By the way, the producer was Alfred Emmet, whose excellent work is widely known, assisted by Abraham Asseo.

I should add that the settings were not without their provocative points, and that the cast maintained good quality entertainment, with a player now and again scaling artistic heights and occasionally failing to give full significance to lines, thus weakening interpretation.

With the programme, members of the audience were supplied with a

voting paper. It had two sections: (a) My preference among the plays presented in the current season's programme is as indicated below:—

Sheridan	...	The Discovery.
Bridie	...	Mr. Bolfray.
Pirandello	...	Six Characters in Search of an Author.
Euripides	...	The Trojan Women.
Shaw	...	The Apple Cart.

I give this enumeration to convey an idea of policy and range. Section (b) was: I would like to suggest the following play(s) for consideration by the club.

AT the Discussion Meeting, which I enjoyed, although I thought there was too much inconsequential, detailed talk about the mechanics of the stage and too little about the play and its interpretation, details of how the voters—286 of them—voted were given.

We all know that figures can be—and are—manipulated to serve various, even conflicting, purposes. These

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Alfred Emmet in action in producing "The Apple Cart" (see "Producers' Gallery").

particular votes could be collated in different ways on which I will not comment now. Here, however, are the first and second results arrived

at in one way, and dealing with the season's work :—

The Discovery ...	20	votes, then	50
Mr. Bolfray ...	27	"	82
Six Characters ...	38	"	31
The Trojan Women	39	"	42
The Apple Cart...	162	"	73

Looking ahead, members suggested about 250 plays, with Shaw (17 of his plays mentioned) heading the list, followed by Shakespeare (15). Priestley (7), Ibsen (5), and Barrie (5) were in demand. (Is a revival of interest in Barrie on the way?) Other playwrights upon whom the members "had their eyes" were (the enumeration is incomplete): Emllyn Williams, Granville-Barker, O'Neill, Strindberg, Vosper, Marlowe, Sophocles, O'Casey, Pinero, Coward, T. S. Eliot, Sheridan, Bridie, Vanburgh. The suggestions, on the whole, furnished evidence that the members wish the players, with their producers, to work on representative modern drama with an occasional dip into the past.

DETAILS of how societies have chosen their "first play of the season" and the "follow up" would, perhaps, be useful material for a supplementary article, especially as I wish to draw attention to the activities of the Charlemont Playgoers' Society (Charlemont Evening Institute, West Bromwich). Its chairman and founder, Mr. George Legg (headmaster of the institute) has not only sent me "proof" (recall "Real or Phoney?" "The Playgoer," July-August issue), but also a copy of the



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society's questionnaire—see the panel. Incidentally, my correspondent—Miss Mimi Birley, an exceptionally keen enthusiast and an actress of distinction—whose interesting first letter caused me to deal with the subject, has written again. I will also draw upon her letter for additional illustrative material.

YOUR REPLIES ARE INVITED

PLACE the following types of entertainment in order of your preference: Farce, Comedy, Drama, Tragedy, Musical, Ballet, Variety:—

Do you consider yourself (a) high-brow, (b) middlebrow, (c) low-brow?

Do you prefer modern or costume plays?

Do you prefer stalls or circle?

As a general rule what price (inclusive) do you regard as sufficient for (a) an ordinary visit to the theatre; (b) a special occasion—5s., 7s. 6d., 10s., 12s. 6d., 15s.

Please place the week-nights in order of your preference for play-going, Monday to Saturday. State "any" if you have no particular preference.

Do you prefer to attend only professional, only amateur, or do you wish to attend either. (N.B.—The Society is pledged to support both.)

Are you likely to be interested in a panto. party if one is formed later in the year?

Would you be prepared to support a programme of talks or discussions about Drama if such were arranged?

If your answer to the above is "Yes," would you prefer a programme of, say, six talks on a definite night each week or an occasional talk on dates to be arranged?

Irrespective of the preceding two, would you like the committee to arrange a talk or discussion on either of the Shakespeare plays before Stratford is visited?

The Cads have been approached with a view to their giving the first performance of their future productions for members and friends

of the Society. Would you support this venture by taking, say, four tickets to sell to people who would not otherwise attend an amateur performance?

SAID OR WRITTEN

WE are back in a period of fine playing and of increasingly deft and sensitive production. Every journey to the theatre continues to be an excitement: one day our new dramatists must take their call. Meanwhile we can hope with reason for experiment without eccentricity, for less fluff-and-flutter around the sofa, for more plays that have both a point to make and the means to make it, and for poetic drama that finds again the singing and the gold, and the great light on Troy.—J. C. Trewin in *The English Theatre*.

The immediate function of criticism is to inform or instruct the public. But, in the long run, its more valuable function is to assure the artiste that he is not working in a vacuum in-

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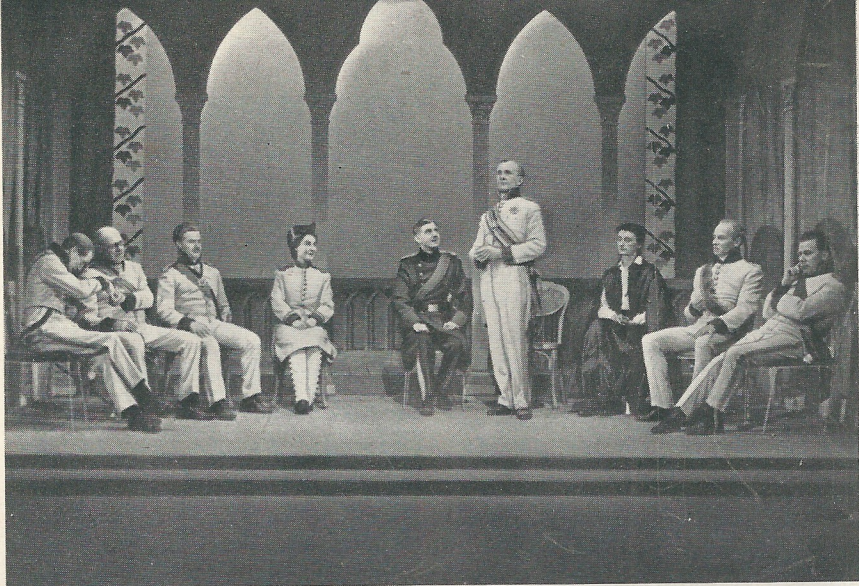
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A scene from Act II of "The Apple Cart," by Bernard Shaw, produced at the Questors' Theatre. Left to right—Nicobar (Cyril Box), Crascus (Frank Smith), Boanerges (Frank White), Amanda (Pamela Richards), Magnus (Eric Batson), Proteus (Wilfred Sharp), Lysistrat (Betty Ogden), Pliny (John Howard), Balbus (Allan Fuller).

habited by the deaf and the blind. Apathy is his worst enemy and, if apathy is accepted without protest, standards begin to break down.—Eric Newton in *The Sunday Times*.

QUESTIONS ANSWERED

No. 35.—I believe an interesting book on the Theatre has been published in a series. Can you tell me?—You probably have in mind *The English Theatre*, by J. C. Trewin (No. 1 in "Life and Leisure" Series, 6s. net, Paul Elek).

No. 46.—Is there a magazine dealing with Drama, Theatre, &c., which is published in the provinces?—Yes; *Theatre*. Apply to the Bradford Civic Playhouse, Chapel Street, Leeds Road, Bradford.

PRODUCERS' GALLERY—3

ALFRED EMMET, producer for The Questors, Ealing, is also lecturer, adjudicator, author.

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