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SIR MAX BEER-BOHM, the famous English writer, caricaturist, and former dramatic critic, who is now 73, gave a talk a few days ago in the BBC Pacific Service on looking back over "A Life of Play-going." In it he had something to say about the difference between the theatre and the screen, and something about himself—not a great deal, but, like the little drawing on the right, a self-portrait of a kind. We have taken down his talk—apart from a few words we couldn't catch—and reprint it here.



THE title I have chosen for this soliloquy has rather an old-world flavour, but I myself am one of the relics of an older and easier and more pleasant, and yet a more formal world than this one, for my lips were loath to frame the modern equivalent "Doing a show." I might have said "Going to the play," which was a familiar phrase in the Victorian and Edwardian years.

In fact, for better or worse, things were very different. Let me look back over some of the differences. Actors and actresses were certainly regarded with far greater interest than they are nowadays. The outstanding ones had inspired something deeper than interest. It was with excitement, with wonder, and with reverence, with something akin even to hysteria, that they were gazed upon.

SOME of the younger of you listeners would no doubt interrupt me if you could at this point by asking: "But surely you don't mean, do you, that our parents and our grandparents were affected by them as we are by cinema stars?" I would assure you that those idols of ours were even more ardently worshipped than yours are. Yours, after all, are but images of idols, mere shadows of glory. Those others were their own selves, creatures of flesh and blood there before our eyes. Even we, in our humility, acted as stimulants to them; the magnetism diffused by them across the footlights was in some degree our own doing. You, on the other hand, have nothing to do with the performances of which you witness the result.

THUS the theatre has certain advantages over the cinema, and in virtue of them will continue to survive. But the thrill of it is not quite what it was in my young days. People had come not so much to see a mere play as to see a play with their idol in it. They hoped the play would be a success for his sake. If it seemed to them a failure, a pit and gallery booed the author for having thus betrayed their idol. Actor-managers were kings in their fashion—in the English, the constitutional fashion, not autocrats in danger of their lives. In the daytime they drove about unguarded in hansom

PLAYS AND PEOPLE

Max Beerbohm Looks Back

cabs, or even walked, taking the pavement with just as easy a grace as that with which they took the boards. They are gone. They have been replaced by theatrical syndicates. Are you thrilled when you see a syndicate sauntering down Piccadilly? Or driving round in a charabanc? Is your pulse quickened by the thought of the awful financial risks taken by these brave fellows? Do you pray that their box offices will be for ever besieged? I fear you are coldly concerned with the mere question, whether the play they are running is a good one worthy of your respect—for you "the play's the thing."

IT is on the whole a better thing than it used to be. In my very young days it was mostly something adapted from the French, and had suffered greatly in the Channel crossing. Henry Arthur Jones and Arthur Wing Pinero were almost alone in having both a sense of the theatre and a sense of the realities of life. And the Americans gave us no help. Her sole export was not at all a good one. America was very grateful for the imports she got from us. Meanwhile in Norway a great grim dramatist was every morning at his desk, un-resting but unhurrying, to give to his compatriots one play every two years. And in England there was a Scotsman who knew the Norwegian tongue and translated the bi-annual achievement. Towards the end of the eighties he even managed to get the latest of these achievements produced precariously in some small theatre in London.

THE dramatic critics of that time were a less sophisticated race than the present one. They were a race of cheerful hacks. They did not see eye to eye with their Scottish colleague, William Archer, on the merits of *A Doll's House*. Even A. B. Walkley, though he of course recognised the magnitude of Ibsen, found him rather rebarbative, and Bernard Shaw, though promptly an Ibsenite, had not yet become a dramatic critic. The Ibsen movement became more and more mobile later on when a dynamic and fervent little Dutchman, who was not at all content with being something in the city and being also Consul for Bolivia, rushed in, founded the Independent Theatre, and produced the play entitled *Ghosts*. And though there was a terrific outcry against Ibsen, there was also an earnest outcry for him, raised by people who had hitherto rather disdained the theatre.

THERE was so much to be said for the Ibsen method—for the stage as just a three-walled room with some people in it talking in a perfectly natural manner, and illustrating some idea, and presenting some problem or other, and with no prospect of that happy ending to which the public was accustomed. And presently, under the Ibsen influence, Mr. Pinero wrote *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray*. I'm told that it seems very artificial nowadays, but it seemed dreadfully, delightfully, true to nature

then. And later in the day the performances of earlier and later plays by Ibsen, and of plays by other more or less grim foreigners and of a play or two already by Bernard Shaw. And very superior young men who had never thought of writing for the theatre began to do so, not without some measure of devious success. In the course of time it befell that Shaw became actually popular. Harley Granville Barker had brilliantly established himself in the Court Theatre, and it was there that *Man and Superman* was produced. Someone told King Edward that it was a play he ought to see. One night he came and saw it. Then came all of rank and fashion to see it. And the bourgeoisie came to see them. And both the seers and the seeing discovered that Shaw was really a most delightful person.

AT that time I was a dramatic critic, and very angry that not all the theatres in London were given over to intellectual drama. I was still in that



MAX BEERBOHM
"I am very mellow"

mood when, 35 years ago, I retired from dramatic criticism and left London. I ceased to go to theatres. In my late years I became mellowed—I became tolerant of whatever might be going on behind my back. For retired critics there is the overweening bliss of knowing that you needn't write one line about what is going on. You needn't feverishly be on the lookout for some point of view from which you could compose an article which readers would think clever and would enjoy.

Oh yes, I assure you I am very mellow. If the bad old times, and with them the bad old tricks, the soliloquy, the aside, and so on, came in again, I think I should rather welcome them for old sake's sake, and if intellectual ideas were to be banished from the boards, I am not sure that my heart would break.

I have a notion that the drama is, after all, essentially a vehicle for action, and that it is essentially, or at least mainly, a thing to cause the excitement, of pity, and awe, or of terror, or of

(continued on next page)