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## "DISCIPLE OF REALISM"

*An Appreciation of Harley Granville-Barker*

Written for "The Listener"  
by KATHRINE KEDDELL

**H**ARLEY GRANVILLE-BARKER is dead. Three short lines, no more, announced that this actor, producer, theatre-manager, writer, speaker, and man of letters was no more: and yet it is understandable that no lengthy review of his life and work was made, for even in his busiest and most successful days Harley Granville-Barker sought neither limelight nor publicity. He was content to do well those things he most loved doing because he believed in the power of ideas and ideals.

During his life he received recognition of the work he did for literature and the theatre. Many honours and degrees were conferred on him. He was a member of the academic committee of the Royal Society of Literature and for some time was Director of the British Institute of the University of Paris. In his younger days, a day of ardent causes, he was a Fabian, and throughout his long life was a staunch champion of the repertory movement.

### The Theatre of Ideas

His long life in and for the theatre began when at 14 he left a private school and joined a combined dramatic school and stock company at Margate. Later with the famous Ben Greet he played in Shakespeare and Marlowe. For years he acted and read and studied. Thus he was well fitted in 1905 to take up the congenial position of Manager of the Court Theatre.

It was a good thing for English drama and the theatre that such a man was in such a position. In the 19th Century in which he was born the theatre was in a low state. It was a time of burlesques and "stagey tricks." The innumerable melodramas presented were overcrowded with improbable incidents, the characters were the stock characters known to the young people to-day through the *Old Time Theatre* of the radio, which pokes fun so amusingly at the late-Victorian fare. A wholesome realism was needed.

A few British dramatists towards the end of the century began to write plays that were a distinct improvement on what had gone before. They began to treat seriously the serious problems of life—moral, political, social. They began to show the evils and the shams of life. For this, Ibsen, whose influence was first felt in England in the eighteen-nineties, was responsible. When he went to the Court Theatre, Granville-Barker offered plays by Ibsen and Shaw. Their ringing voices ushered in the theatre of ideas. But it must not be forgotten that without theatre managers who believed in those ideas, and in the power of the theatre to spread them, Ibsen would not have been the voice he was in England. We know what happened to him when first he expressed his ideas in Norway. Without such men as Granville-Barker, in England at least, Ibsen would

not have been the influence he was. He would have been a writer whose plays were read and discussed in the library of the intellectual.

### Calm Protests

Harley Granville-Barker was a "disciple of realism," who pioneered the new drama, while writing plays himself. He, too, dealt in ideas. Wordsworth said that poetry is emotion recollected in tranquillity. The same may be said of Granville-Barker's plays. Ashley Dukes, writer and critic, says they show "the beauty of calm that protests gently but firmly against a disordered world." Like Shaw, Granville-Barker felt that ideas are the most important things in the world. He wrote calmly and dispassionately for he was an intellectual man who saw clearly and wrote without heat. *The Marrying of Anne Lecte* was the first of his plays to be noticed. *Waste*, *The Voysey Inheritance*, *The Madras House* were others.

For some time he worked with Gordon Craig, who did the scenery and lighting, so that the settings as well as the ideas were refreshingly new, stimulating the audience and theatre folk as well. The most notable combination, however, was the Vedrenne-Barker. This was one of the most notable theatrical enterprises of the day, and the theatre is indebted greatly to these two men.

### Always a Student

The life of an actor-manager is not one of leisure. It is an exceedingly busy and frequently worrying life, yet Granville-Barker, always a student, found time to write on the history and technique of drama, on what the theatre can and should do. He was a realist and felt that the theatre should mirror life, should show man at the great crises of his life, should be as wide as life. Powerful new ideas were waiting to be born. Because they were new they required new forms and treatment. Granville-Barker helped these ideas to life and revitalised the drama which he felt was a potent weapon against ignorance, indolence in thinking, and all that is weak or evil. He helped us to understand our fellow-men with their hopes, and fears, and aspirations.

Constantly he was writing and lecturing, doing all in his power to make the theatre a vital part of life. With the famous authority on the drama, William Archer, he wrote *A National Theatre*. As a translator, Granville-Barker was most successful. A considerable number of French plays were translated while, in collaboration with his second wife, Helen Gates, of New York (herself a writer of achievement) he translated from the Spanish of G. Martinez Sierra and the Quintero Brothers. These plays have enriched the British theatre considerably. Several of them have been produced in New Zealand. Last year the Religious Drama Society of Wellington produced Sierra's *The Kingdom of God*. Other plays of Sierra's which the Barkers translated were *The Romantic Young Lady* (also produced in Well-

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