

FRANK BENSON: Missionary of Shakespeare

He Helped "To Reawaken the Sleeping Soul of England"

"It is your privilege and mine, in this building, to help to reawaken the sleeping soul of England. It is our proud privilege to open the ears of our fellow-countrymen to words and sweet sounds that give delight and hurt not, and to open their eyes that they may see the heaven-disclosed visions of beauty and truth."

THESE words were spoken to a cheering audience in the old Shakespeare Memorial Theatre after the 1908 festival at Stratford-on-Avon, by Frank Benson, the director of the festival, and they give the key to the life-work of this famous interpreter of Shakespeare, who died last week.

Beginning in 1886, Frank Benson (afterwards Sir Frank) managed twenty-six of the annual festivals on Stratford-on-Avon, and did more than anyone else to make these one of the great events in England's theatrical year. In the intervals he played Shakespeare in the provinces year after year, and gave more Shakespearean actors and actresses to the stage than any actor-manager of his time.

Famous Players From Abroad

Not only did his own company play many of Shakespeare's plays at Stratford, but famous players came down from London and even from abroad. Sarah Bernhardt and Rejane, the two greatest French actresses of the day, appeared on festival programmes.

Frank Benson, contrary to general belief, was not a member of the famous family of Archbishop Benson. He was educated at Winchester and New College, Oxford, and part of his service to the English stage was that he brought the public school and university spirit into the profession.

A Great Athlete

Benson was a great athlete, and in the inter-university sports in 1881 he captained the Oxford team and won the three-mile race, which gave victory to Oxford by five events to four. All through his life Benson laid great



SIR F. R. BENSON (athlete, actor and scholar). From a portrait by Hugh Rivière in the Shakespeare Memorial Picture Gallery at Stratford-upon-Avon

stress upon athletics and games. He made his company keep fit by playing games, and to this he owed much of his success both on and off the stage.

Benson served under Henry Irving, and later in the provinces under a man well known at one time in New Zealand, Walter Bentley. The company got into difficulties, however, and Bentley deserted it one week-end in Scotland. Benson, although quite young and with not much experience, took the company over, and started on his long and very successful career. He devoted himself to the provinces and only appeared in London occasionally. He had enormous en-

thusiasm and equally enormous energy, and was a scholar as well as an actor.

Short Runs, No Stars

His principles were short runs, no stars, all-round competency, unostentatious settings. He quickened the pace of Shakespeare and helped to free production from the heaviness of the older school of acting. He played every Shakespearean play except two. Among his most noteworthy achievements in Shakespeare were the playing of all three parts of "Henry Sixth," the staging of the historical plays from "King John" to "Henry VI." consecutively in one season, and the production of "Hamlet" without cuts of any kind. This production of "Hamlet" lasted five or six hours; one half was given in the afternoon and the other half at night. He also played other classical drama such as Sheridan, and in the festivals at Stratford-on-Avon he included plays by some of the leading contemporary dramatists of England and Europe.

The "Bensonian" School

Frank Benson was famous as a trainer of Shakespearean actors. Bensonians, as they are called, include or included: Oscar Asche and Lilly Brayton; Henry Ainley; George Weir, one of the greatest Australian comedians of all time; Baliol Holloway; Stephen Phillips, the dramatist; Frank Rodney; Nigel Playfair; H. R. Hignett; Matheson Lang; Lillian Braithwaite; Grahame Browne; A. E. W. Mason, the novelist; Dennis Neilson-Terry. And we must not forget his wife, Lady Benson, whom Frank married when she was an actress in his company, and who played with him through his career, often in the lead. Quite a number of players trained by Benson have appeared in our New Zealand theatres.

A Band of Brothers

In the Library and Picture Gallery at Stratford there is the portrait of Frank Benson that we reproduce, the athlete as well as the actor and the scholar. The picture gallery has been described as a Bensonian shrine, for a large number of Bensonians are commemorated in panels, and under the portraits is the Shakespearean line:

"We few, we happy few, we band of brothers:" That was the dominant note in Benson's relations with his company—they were a band of brothers. Benson was the first actor to be made a freeman of Stratford-on-Avon since Garrick. But Benson's greatest memorial is that he taught the people; he interpreted Shakespeare to them, enlarged their horizons, and in his own words, "helped to re-awaken the sleeping soul of England."

(2YA broadcast a tribute to the late Sir Frank Benson on Sunday, January 7)



As Richard II.



As Richard III.



As Petruchio in "The Taming of the Shrew."



As Romeo in "Romeo and Juliet"