

Popular Fallacies regarding Shakespeare

Mr. Allan Wilkie Broadcasts from 2YA.



DURING my tour of the Dominion in 1927 I had the privilege of broadcasting two little addresses dealing with different phases of Shakespeare. In one I remember endeavouring to disabuse the minds of my listeners that Shakespeare was an academic entertainment; and the other showing how the phrases and writings of Shakespeare had become incorporated in our daily speech, even though in the majority of cases we might be ignorant of our indebtedness to him for sayings which had become household proverbs. To-night I propose to touch upon some popular fallacies regarding Shakespeare. They are many and varied, and it will only be possible for me to refer to a few, and those very briefly.

A conversation overheard during the lunch hour on Wednesday in a well-known cafe in Wellington exemplifies a mistaken belief regarding Shakespeare which I should like to think is very exceptional, but unfortunately I hear of so many instances of a similar nature that I am reluctantly compelled to realise that notwithstanding our much-vaunted system of modern education such colossal ignorance is far from rare.

The conversation was between a lady and gentleman seated at a table in the cafe, who were discussing the current entertainments in the city, and the lady inquired "What was on" at the Grand Opera House?

"Oh, they are playing Shakespeare there," replied her friend.

"Oh, yes, Shakespeare," repeated the lady vaguely. "Are they playing it in English?"

She evidently had a confused notion that Shakespeare was something akin to Italian grand opera, which, although occasionally rendered in English, was more usually heard in the language of Mussolini's compatriots.

WHEN I was playing "The Merchant of Venice" recently in a certain town in New South Wales, the custodian or caretaker of the theatre, apparently a well-known and popular identity of the town, stood on the front steps and greeted the members of the audience, with most of whom he seemed to be on familiar terms, as they entered. One little group, however, stopped and debated with him the advisability or otherwise of going in to see the play.

One of them, obviously referring to the character of Shylock, remarked to him, "You know it requires a very fine actor to play this part."

"Oh," replied my friend the caretaker, "This man's good, he's the original, he wrote it."

At one stroke he thus disposed of the Baconian theory for all time, and also paid me the greatest compliment of my whole career.

These two little stories, both of which I can personally vouch for, expose the popular fallacy that Shakespeare, however much we may cherish him as our national poet, is appreciated by, or even known to, a large section of the community. Such callous indifference and abysmal ignorance makes one wonder whether we deserve

NOW, let us examine another erroneous belief regarding Shakespeare, which I find reflected in the "Dominion" critique of a play I produced last week. In his comments on the play the critic states, "The very fact that the lesser known plays are only produced once in a generation or

in the first place, the theory advanced by the writer, presupposes that the mass of the people are the finest judges of the merits of a theatrical entertainment, on which line of argument the merits of "Chu Chin Chow," "Charley's Aunt" and "East Lynne" are pre-eminent. Also it postulates the theory that the taste in Shakespearean plays is unchanged and unchangeable, whereas taste and preference will be found to vary, not only in every generation, but in practically every decade, and with every country, and even, to some extent, with every town.

The plays that have been most successful in Wellington, may fail to attract in Dunedin and vice versa. Samuel Pepys, in his famous diary, describes "A Midsummer Night's Dream" as "The silliest play that ever I did see," yet to-day it vies with "The Merchant of Venice" as the most popular of all Shakespeare's plays.

No one will seek to deny that "Othello," probably the finest constructed play of Shakespeare, is an excellent dramatic entertainment. Twenty years ago, and even less, it was one of the biggest draws in Shakespeare—to-day it is one of the least attractive. "Much Ado About Nothing" has all the qualities that make for popularity.

Two fine, and well-known, leading characters in Benedick and Beatrice, and an equally well-known low comedy part in Dogberry, witty lines, intensely humorous and dramatic situations, a charming song, dances, and all the ingredients of a popular play.

SUNDAY last listeners to 2YA were privileged to hear Mr. Wilkie deliver his interesting address on Shakespeare. That so great an interpreter of the master dramatist as Mr. Wilkie would take an unusual angle, was almost to be expected. A new light was thrown upon the works of Shakespeare, revealing the very broad outlook of one who has for a lifetime been associated with drama.

The address, repeated below, by the courtesy of Mr. Wilkie, came over splendidly, reflecting great credit on the man before the microphone, and also the man behind it.

the many great men which the English race has produced.

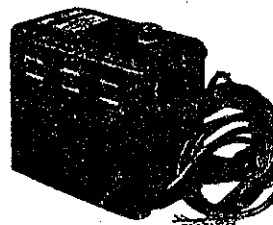
One cannot conceive a Scotchman in any part of the world, no matter how humble his origin and circumstances, who has not at least a working knowledge of Robbie Burns, or, say, a German to whom Goethe or Schiller would convey nothing more than a name.

SPEAKING of the Germans, there occurs to me another popular fallacy regarding Shakespeare. It is continually reiterated through the medium of the British Press, and by the Germans themselves that Shakespeare is infinitely more popular in Germany than he is with his fellow countrymen, both in England and throughout the British Empire.

Now, in the last issue of the German Shakespeare Yearbook, the number of stage performances of Shakespeare throughout Germany for the previous year amounted to 1683, while here in Australia and New Zealand, with my company, I give an average of over 300 performances annually, which, in ratio to the population of Australia and New Zealand combined, and that of Germany, indicates that you are getting at least 50 per cent. more Shakespearean representations than the Germans. And it is also to be noted that every one of those 1683 performances of Shakespeare in Germany was subsidised by either the Government or the municipal authorities.

In that one respect I do admit that Germany and indeed every other civilised country is far ahead of us, inasmuch as they realise the importance of the drama in their national life, and by the help of substantial subsidies, foster and encourage the production of classical and literary drama.

so, may be conceded to a rough classification of their merits as a theatrical entertainment." How far this generalisation might apply to the play referred to in this particular case, this is not the time nor the place to discuss, but the statement as a whole is based on a superficial knowledge of the determining factors in Shakespearean production, and will be found on examination to be entirely fallacious, although his opinion is undoubtedly shared by a large number of people.



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