

An Interesting Controversy

Mr. H. Plimmer Replies to Mr. Allan Wilkie

SHOULD actors be heard or seen off the stage? writes Mr. H. Plimmer. During a quarter of a century's experience as a journalist and dramatic critic, I am inclined to think that it is the wise actor who sticks to his stage, just as it is commendable in a cobbler to adhere to his last. Remember, only a few months ago, the hot water Clara Butt plunged into when she became her own autobiographer. The reference is to the talk on Shakespeare given by Mr. Allan Wilkie over the air from 2YA on a recent occasion. Perhaps it was unfortunate for Mr. Wilkie that he could not stick to Shakespeare. In seeking to indicate certain alleged fallacies respecting the public attitude to the works of Shakespeare, he went out of his way to endeavour to convince listeners, in that I, as critic of "The Dominion" for over twenty-one years, had only a superficial knowledge of Shakespeare, and therefore fell into those fallacies current as to the respective merits of the various plays of Shakespeare. What seemed to have provoked the actor in the first instance was a perfectly innocuous (and I maintain truthful) generalisation as to the merits of the Bard's plays. Said Mr. Wilkie:—

"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 pro-

duced once in a generation or 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."

To understand my reference the better, I should say that the remark quoted was included in my notice of "All's Well That Ends Well." What Mr. Wilkie terms an "erroneous belief" may not be so in cold fact, but merely in Mr. Wilkie's own imagining. I assert once more that the "rough classification" of mine will stand up to the test of wiser judgments than that of Mr. Wilkie. In other words, I was inferring that "Hamlet," "Macbeth," "Othello," "Romeo and Juliet" (of the tragedies), and "The Merchant," "As You Like It," "Twelfth Night," "A Mid-

summer Night's Dream," "The Shrew," and "The Merry Wives of Windsor" (of the comedies), are better "theatrical entertainments" than the plays that are performed less frequently, such as "Much Ado About Nothing," "A Comedy of Errors," "Coriolanus," "Measure for Measure," "Troilus and Cressida," etc., etc. Mr. Wilkie would have been on safer ground had he merely stated that opinion varied as to the merits of the plays, and tastes differed with the passage of years; but he went the whole way when he singled out my very guarded statement as one of "the fallacies" of his aerial discourse.

The actor went on to stress his point by again referring to my notice of "Coriolanus," as a case in point—that whilst I, forsooth, dared to say that I found the play tedious in parts (which I most certainly did), some other critic on some paper in an Australian town (name of town and critic both omitted) had said it was one of the finest plays in his repertoire. Now, Allan, is not that too obviously weak a means of cavilling at me for finding parts of "Coriolanus" tedious? I leave it to those who witnessed the play, and who are honestly unprejudiced, to say who was nearer the truth. I will not have the character of Coriolanus as a "noble" Roman. From the outset this proud, arrogant soldier shows what he is in his treatment of the downtrodden, starving poor of Rome. He spurns them in great contempt on every possible occasion, and deserved all he got at their hands. Then when defeated in his run for office and pronounced a

traitor to the State (through having been a traitor to the people), he goes over to the enemy, fights against his own country, his own kith and kin, for a time, and then on the eve of subduing Rome, once more turns traitor. Coriolanus was no more "noble" than Jessica could be said to be a dutiful daughter to Shylock, yet sympathy for both these characters is ever sought on entirely wrong premises.

But the very crown of folly was encompassed by Mr. Wilkie when he said:

"While on the subject of critics, let me point out another fallacy from which they suffer. No doubt, with the very best intentions, and the desire to be helpful, they constantly stress in their criticisms of the performances, the philosophy, wisdom, and intellectual qualities of Shakespeare."

Could any statement be more stupid? Is it possible to over-stress the incomparable intellectual virtues of Shakespeare; but beyond and before all is not the time to do it apt during a season of the Bard at the local theatre? This egregious error of Mr. Wilkie's is emphasised in a most extraordinary way by the actor himself, who would have it given out that Shakespeare is more entertaining than "Chu Chin Chow," "Charley's Aunt," and "East Lynne." He is not! He is more intellectually refreshing, more mentally stimulating, more lofty in his ideals, more poetical in beauty of thought and language, but not, Mr. Wilkie, more entertaining. Otherwise seats in the theatre would be in greater demand. If by stressing the virtues of Shakespeare as a genius is doing the theatre a disservice (as Mr. Wilkie said), then is the outlook for Shakespeare a gloomy one; but to withhold praise to England's greatest genius when occasion serves would certainly be doing the hard a disservice. As I suggested at the outset, actors should neither be seen nor heard off the stage. Their world is such a small one.

Mr. Dennis Barry

Well-known Before the Microphone

THOSE who were listening in the Sunday night Mr. Wilkie presented the special programme from 2YA, and those who were privileged to see the plays presented in Wellington, will remember the very fine songs sung by Mr. Dennis Barry. Mr. Barry is by no means new to the microphone, for it is now about three years since he first broadcast from Savoy Hill, the studio of Station 2LO, London.

When he was in New Zealand about this time last year, he broadcast from Christchurch. This was his first appearance on the air in New Zealand. Mr. Barry affirms that he would rather sing to an audience than to a microphone. With the latter, imagination, and versatile imagination, was necessary to picture the audience, and the result is not so pleasing, nor so convincing.

His last song on Sunday night was one of his own setting, and as it has not yet been published, it is impossible for Mr. Barry to supply the listeners who have written him for a copy. As soon as possible, Mr. Barry will have

this published, and is keeping the names and addresses of those who wrote him, in order that he may fulfil their request.

He has been with the Shakespearean Company since 1926. He has no favourite part, but says he just likes the part which he is playing, and if anyone has seen him as Puck in "A Midsummer's Night's Dream," they will quite agree. His representation and his stage appearance is very fine, while his excellent musical voice is an asset to whatever role he may play.

A Peep into Wales

A SPECIAL programme has been arranged for the Children's Session on Friday, St. David's Day. The chief feature will be an imaginary journey in an imaginary aeroplane, from New Zealand to Wales, then a flight over that historic little country. There will be songs and choruses, and recitations describing the country—"The Ashgrove," "Bells of Aberdovey," etc.

THE Konigswusterhausen, Berlin, station has recently inaugurated a series of picture transmissions. These are still pictures. The wavelength is long, but its length is not announced.



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