

## A FRENCH INDEPENDENT THEATRE.

## MAETERLINCK.

It was daring of the Independent Theatre to bring over to London a French company that can hardly be called famous, and cause it to present pieces of a by no means fashionable character. Yet many will be glad of their daring, for the result has been three very interesting and instructive evenings. "Pelléas et Mélisande," the only real novelty, demands attention first. It proved to be one of those affairs that puzzle a critic and make him uncertain for some time what is his opinion; but it triumphed in the end, and even one or two of the writers to whom the names of Maeterlinck and Ibsen are as red rags, who go to an Independent Theatre performance as if to an execution in which they are to play the chief part, could not wholly resist the drama.

It must not be assumed that M. Maeterlinck has written a prodigious masterpiece or created a new form of drama that is likely to live. Yet his piece is of curious and rare charm, and, as an experiment, may be called a complete success. Probably it would have fallen flat had it not been mounted and handled with great judgment. The curious, nebulous tragedy, if played in full glare of the footlights, might have seemed puerile and empty in so many scenes that the really beautiful parts would not have been a counterpoise. In the use of a gauze curtain between the players and audience, and disuse of footlights, in the employment of an ever-darkened stage, and the curious manœuvring of lights to cover the entrance and exits, seemed a savour of trickery. The reduction of the scenery to two cloths, one representing a weird forest and the other a sketchy, mysterious crowd, on a Raphael-cartoon scale, appeared a confession of poverty. Yet, under these strange circumstances, the simple, poignant drama, told in the fantastic, half-poetic, half-prose style of Maeterlinck, and chanted rather than spoken by a company that reduced gesture and movement to a minimum, became fascinating.

To me the effect of "Pelléas et Mélisande" was almost that of a dream drama. What was comic in costume, incongruous in scenery, and ludicrous in stage accident seemed, if not natural, at least undisturbing, just as are the wildest absurdities in our dreams. Some of the scenes left imperishable memories. The strange episode of Mélisande's hair, when, as she leans out of her tower, it falls over her head and reaches down to her lover, who ties it round his neck, had an exquisite charm, while the last meeting of the two and their passionate embrace when expecting the avenging sword of the husband was thrilling, or *si émotif*, to use the French phrase for "thrilling" in "The Master Builder." Of course, the acting had a great share in the success. It required the admirable elocution and beautiful voice of Mdlle. Marthe Mellot as Pelléas, the curious wailing tones and simplicity of method of Mdlle. Suzanne Despres, the angular hardness of M. Ligné Poë, and the grave, effective acting of M. Ripert as Arkel, the old king, to give full effect to the play.

As regards "L'Intruse," I can only say that I was disappointed. It was ably acted, though the handling of the three sisters was ridiculous; but, willing as I was, it did not make me shiver. Possibly the lateness of the hour and the length of the piece weakened its effect. I know that some people were thrilled, and I envy them. The two Ibsen performances were of very different merit. The "Rosmersholm" was admirable, "The Master Builder" disappointing. As individual performances, those of Mr. Lewis Waller, Mr. F. R. Benson, Mr. Bernard Gould, and Miss Elizabeth Robins, were, perhaps, finer than those of the French players; but no such perfect all-round presentation has been given in London, and one seemed to learn much about the curious play. Very rarely have I seen acting so utterly unselfish, so thoughtful and conscientious. It must not be imagined that the individual work was poor. Indeed, Mdlle. Mellot as Rebecca really played with great force and much subtlety, while M. Poë as Rosmer brought out some aspects of the part better than his English predecessors, and M. Ripert, despite a ridiculous make-up, proved to be a capital Kroll.

Of "The Master Builder" performance I speak with diffidence. Possibly the French translation, which is commoner in tone than the version of Messrs. Archer and Gosse, and the French presentation, which is less poetic than that given by Miss Robins, are the truer. I cannot tell for lack of Norwegian. Certainly they are less attractive. A Solness as a red-faced builder with an impossible waistcoat; a Mrs. Solness quite cheerful, almost jolly, except when she thinks of her troubles; and a Hilda like a mad, merry girl from a little shop on the Surrey side of the Seine—a *gigolette*, in fact—I had not expected, and, ably as these startling concepts were carried out, I felt a little distressed. However, the Kara of Mdlle. Mellot was admirable. Moreover, the stage-management, which in "Rosmersholm" had been abler and more intelligent than in the English performances, was so poor in "Solness le Constructeur" that the thrilling last act fell flat. I am glad to have seen such a curious new reading, but prefer the old.

On the whole, I feel deeply indebted to the Independent Theatre for bringing over the Théâtre de l'Œuvre—the company sneered at as "amateurs," though the chief members are successful Conservatoire students. It is very rare to pass three evenings so pleasantly and profitably as in seeing the two Ibsen and the two Maeterlinck dramas. Perhaps nothing has been proved except the vigour of the prejudice of some of our critics, who have, even in dealing with the performances, acted on the maxim that any stone is good enough to throw at a dog. Yet, to have had a new if almost impossible form of art presented in such style as to be fascinating as a novelty, and to have seen two new readings of remarkable plays, is sufficient to render memorable the last week of March, 1895.

MONOCLE.

Maurice Maeterlinck, once dubbed by an indiscreet critic "the Belgian Shakspeare," strikes even a chance acquaintance as possessing a singularly frank and sincere personality. Although familiar with English literature, and speaking the language better than most foreigners, he seems more at ease when conversing in the deliberate Academic French which has remained so excellent a tradition among the Belgian, or perhaps, I should say Flemish, upper classes.

I found M. Maeterlinck (writes a representative of *The Sketch*) in one of those typical Soho hostleries in which the visitor, once he has passed through the swing-door, seems transported by sight, sound, and, it must be added, smell, into some old-fashioned *Tournebride* on the south side of the Seine; and everything, from the musty *loge* of the Concierge to the cordial smile of the neat *bonne*, serves to heighten the illusion.

"I have certainly been pleased by the cordial reception accorded in London to my work," my host replied, in answer to a question; "but I myself take little or no interest in the practical side of dramatic life. I always enjoy reading a play far more than I do seeing it acted, for on the stage the delicate symbolic essence of what every thoughtful writer wishes to convey cannot but escape."

"And yet, Monsieur, you yourself have preferred to present your theories cast in the dramatic rather than in any other literary form?"

"I have done this," he answered with some hesitation, "because I consider the drama as a convenient and natural poetic medium lending itself in a special manner to the expression of ideas. I myself can remember enjoying the stage presentation of only five plays. These were 'A Winter's Tale' and 'Julius Cæsar,' admirably produced by the Saxe-Meiningen troupe; Tolstoi's 'Powers of Darkness,' Schiller's 'Jungfrau von Orleans,' and Ibsen's 'Ghosts,' which last seems to be the most complete and admirable of the master's work, and resembles, in its finality and fatality, the finest examples of the Greek drama. Still," he continued, after a short pause, "I cannot but think that Ibsen loses by being dramatised, while Shakspeare gains by being acted."

"Your characters move in the Fourth Dimension, and have their being in No Man's Land. Have you never felt inspired by the past?"

"No; I cannot re-create events that have occurred, and thus the historical drama has never appealed to me. Surely he who wishes to produce work that will live should detach himself from his surroundings, and take little or no account of the petty actualities of our present civilisation. As it is, no writer can wholly escape the influences of his epoch. The poet should draw not the body, but the soul of humanity."

"It is the material side of stagecraft you feel an antipathy to?"

"Yes, and also the personal elements there brought into play. I regard originality as being the last quality to be applauded in an actor or actress. The interpreters of a drama should be average, and even mediocre, men and women, only intelligent enough to realise those characters they are attempting to make live. Perhaps I should add that I do not expect any of the kind of dramatic work which we are now discussing to ever appeal to the great play-going public. The man who drops into a theatre in order to digest his dinner wishes to be amused rather than interested. Still, new movements and new ideas make their way slowly but surely."

"With what group of French *littérateurs* do you claim kinship?"

"All my sympathies are with the *Mouvement Idéaliste*, which is, as you probably know, a natural reaction against low realism. I am constantly in Paris, and at one time I saw a great deal of Villiers de L'Isle-Adam, to whom I owe much—as, indeed, I do to many of my French contemporaries, in whose work, much as it differs from my own, I take a vivid interest."

"One word more. Are you about to give the world another 'Princesse Maleine' or 'L'Intruse'?"

He shook his head, smiling. "No; I have, for the present, given up the dramatic form, and I am engaged on a translation of Novalis, the German philosopher and metaphysician made familiar to English readers by Carlyle—a writer, by the way, who looms large in my literary Wallhalla. I am also just about to publish a volume of psychological essays, to be entitled 'Le Trésor des Humbles.'"



[ Photo by Sacre-Smits, Gand.

M. Maeterlinck.