

After the Play

NOT the most interesting play produced in New York last week, but the most interesting event—that is about my notion of “Overtones,” by Alice Gerstenberg, given at the Bandbox by the Washington Square Players.

Miss Gerstenberg, who is young, lives in Chicago, and has dramatized “Alice in Wonderland,” has not told the public, so far as I know, how her play first suggested itself. One guesses that she may have hit upon it in the form of a question—why not embody, incarnate, anthropomorphize the subconscious?

Wherever she began, she ended by choosing to incarnate the self which we are fully conscious of and as consciously wish to hide, and whose promptings are strictly relevant to what we are saying and hearing.

Not many years ago, when Harriet was a young woman, she fell in love with a portrait painter who loved her. Because he was poor she threw him over, and married a rich man she did not love. The painter married Margaret, and they are happy in desperate poverty. Margaret comes to see Harriet by appointment. What Harriet hopes to gain by this interview is an opportunity of seeing the painter often and winning his love again. She wants also to emphasize the fact that she is rich and to hide the fact that she is unhappy. Margaret's object is to save her husband and herself from starvation by getting an order. She wants also to emphasize her happiness and to hide her poverty.

Miss Gerstenberg has brought these two women together, and two more—the suppressed self of each. Harriet can hear and see her own suppressed self, and Margaret hers. We, the public, can see and hear both of them as each prompts the woman it is suppressed by. We hear the insistent “Tell her we have an automobile” repeated to Harriet. We hear, as plainly as Margaret hears, the hungry raving cry, “We are starving.” In the end the invisible is seen, the inaudible is heard, and the suppressed selves fly at each other like dogs.

“Overtones” is amusing, now and then exciting, interesting all the time. It is also odd, and not quite odd enough, not quite inventive enough. When once you have grasped Miss Gerstenberg's formula you cease to be surprised. A certain deductive unimaginative literalness prevents your surprise from being renewed and kept going.

But the formula itself, I believe, is new. It is obviously of importance to the stage. It points the way to other new things. Miss Gerstenberg's success will incite other dramatists to try their hands at plays in which the suppressed self is also at moments the irrelevant, and we shall be the richer by droll scenes of contrast between what a man says and the superficially unrelated things he is thinking about. Perhaps some dramatist, master of a more learned and curious art, and working with a producer who knows the use and value of the half-light, will even persuade the subconscious to appear above the threshold.

And suppose you had written a play with scenes in which the things your characters thought were more significant than the things they said. Suppose you were earnestly desirous of having your audience attend with unaccustomed divination to these unspoken thoughts. What better prelude could you wish, what apter preparation, than a curtain-raiser made after Miss Gerstenberg's recipe?

Now you know what I mean when I stop November 8th, 1915, as it goes by, and tell it not to forget it was the birthday of “Overtones” at the Bandbox.

Of course we could easily get too many plays about the self-consciously suppressed or about the subconscious. It is

equally true that we are never likely to get enough one-acters as good as two of the other three plays given by the Washington Square Players. “Literature” is the one short play most likely to please people who like Schnitzler and people who usually don't. “The Honorable Lover” is Bracco at his best, isn't it? Mr. Ralph Roeder's translation of “The Caprice” reveals a fine sympathy with Musset's use of words. And the sets? They make you wonder how long the people who prefer realism in all stage settings will stay a majority.

“The Great Lover,” given at the Longacre and written “by Leo Ditrichstein and Frederic and Fanny Hatton,” is a play sure to please everybody and a few other people. It begins behind the scenes of an opera house, in the manager's office, where there is a most amusing babel of egos, all shameless and clamorous. Into this turmoil comes Mr. Ditrichstein as Jean Paurel, composed, correct, very urbane, monocled, grayhaired, awfully well turned out. Petulant he is a moment later, when the manager crosses him, but cool in his petulance and witty. When he makes love to order he does it with a proper spirit, with none of that weary acquiescence in routine which gave feature to the hero of “The Concert.” He treats the younger generation, when it knocks at his door, to a demonstration of candor in jealousy, and the demonstration has a real beauty of candor. Here, and at many other points, the play rises out of its class, giving the character of Jean Paurel a human likable variety which must be a result of fineness in observation. He is winning in his vanity, and he is many other things. Mr. Ditrichstein plays the part flexibly, with color and fineness, and lightly where lightness is needed. So, you think, it might have been played by a Richard Mansfield who had cured himself of the trick of being sinister. Mr. Ditrichstein is extremely good even when the play turns to pathos of a dismally familiar brand. Near the end it is sticky with renunciation. But at the very end there is a wholesome touch of tart cynicism. The play is well worth seeing for its sheer amusingness, for the much-above-the-average delicacy with which Jean Paurel's character is modeled, and for Mr. Ditrichstein's acting. Its pathos can be borne best by those whose memories are shortest.

Miss Grace George is not only a comedian skilled to disguise her nicest calculations as engagingly fresh impulses, nor only a good producer and good manager. She is a sound judge of revivable plays for the Playhouse. “The New York idea” is an American classic. Time has done less harm to “The Liars” than to anything else by Henry Arthur Jones. Its moral outlook is upon a world in which you say to the husband, “If your wife is beginning to love another man take her to a restaurant and let the dinner be good”; to the wife, “If you run away with another man nice people will cut you and you'll have to live on the Continent in second-class boarding houses”; and to the other man, “Give her up, your country needs you.” But this moral outlook seems no older now than in 1898, when “The Liars” was first given here. The 1840 moral code for married persons was as quaint in 1898 as it is in 1915. All that seems older in the play is a slight elaborateness in some of the speeches, and the presence of a *raisonneur*, Sir Christopher Deering. The art of story-telling on the stage is always new, and how many living writers understand this better than Mr. Jones? Within two minutes after the play begins it has already lost the air of beginning. How easy it all sounds and is not!

Q. K.

A COMMUNICATION

A Pacifist's Apology

SIR: I do not know Mr. Robert Herrick; but I know the author of "The Common Lot," and "The Master of the Inn," and what he says greatly concerns me. I have listened therefore with sympathetic attention to the "Recantation of a Pacifist," and I am wondering how much of it I ought to believe. I am a pacifist myself; at the beginning of this war my pacifism was mild and moderate, but with every month it has grown more radical and more irreconcilable; the one lesson I have learned is the insanity of militarism. It does not seem to me now that I shall ever be able to unlearn that lesson, but one must never shut the door on conviction; if I had been living in France for the past six months should I have been ready to recant my pacifism?

I can easily see that much must have happened in France since the war began which would lead one's mind in that direction. I have just been reading "The Market Place," in Romain Rolland's "Jean Christophe," and the merciless realism of that study of Parisian life and character convinces me that something had to happen in France. When such a Frenchman as Romain Rolland gives us a picture like that of his own country, one feels that the day of judgment must be near. The witnesses agree that the war has brought to France a great awakening. I am ready to believe what Mr. Herrick tells us: "Even to-day, in the crisis of struggle, there is not a Frenchman who will not tell you of the immense good that has already come to his people, that will come increasingly from the bloody sacrifice. It has united all classes, swept aside the trivial and the base, revealed the nation to itself. The French have discovered within themselves and shown to the world qualities unsuspected or forgotten of chivalry, steadiness, seriousness, and they have renewed their favorite virtues of bravery and good humor." Surely these are great gains; let us not minimize them. Out of the horrible wrongs, perfidies, hates, agonies, desolations of this war, France has gleaned all the good. It is reassuring to know that the Providence who overrules all our perversities is able, after this fashion, to make the wrath of man praise him.

Mr. Herrick makes one luminous comment: "I have cited France rather than any other of the warring countries, because I have seen the French in their trials, and because outside of Belgium I believe that France has the clearest record of all in this war. Hence has come to her the greatest reward. For in order to reap blessings of war a nation must have an irreproachable cause." Indubitably! No such renewal and ennoblement could have come to the life of France if there had not been a clear national consciousness that her quarrel was just, that she was fighting not only for her own existence, but to lift the world to larger and freer life.

What, then, must be true of those who are fighting to cripple and destroy her? What must be the effect upon their lives? It seems tolerably clear that in such a deadly conflict as this, one side or the other must be in the wrong. And if praise and honor are due to those who give their lives for justice and liberty, what shall we say of those who

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take the lives thus nobly given? If the cause of one nation is irreproachable, the cause of the other nation must be execrable. And if the one nation is exalted by the struggle, the other just as inevitably is degraded and corrupted. And this is true, no matter what may be the issue of the conflict. "'Tis not what man does that exalts him, but what man would do." And so of nations. We must never celebrate the gains of the nations which have been fighting on the side of the angels, without taking full account of the losses of those which have been fighting on the other side. In making up our estimate of any war, both results must be reckoned.

I am not unaware that some incidental benefits may come to the nation which is fighting on the wrong side. The people in the ranks may be confused and misled; they may be made to believe that wars of aggression are wars for the preservation of their national life, and patriotism may unite and inspire them to heroic deeds and sacrifices; but the eternal verities cannot be forever concealed, and the reaction upon the national life of predatory policies can hardly be averted. Whatsoever a nation soweth that shall it also reap. The three nations that strangled Poland have suffered in their life and character ever since, and the retribution is not yet fully paid. The mills of the gods are still grinding.

This is why I am a pacifist. I am unable to see that war is or can be anything other than a curse. I can see that gains sometimes accrue to one side, but the losses to the