

## MY LIFE AS A DRAMATIC CRITIC

I had always wanted to be a dramatic critic. A taste for sitting back and watching other people work, so essential to the make-up of this sub-species of humanity, has always been one of the leading traits in my character.

I have seldom missed a first night. No sooner has one periodical got rid of me than another has had the misfortune to engage me, with the result that I am now the foremost critic of the day, read assiduously by millions, fawned upon by managers, courted by stagehands. My lightest word can make or mar a new production. If I say a piece is bad, it dies. It may not die instantly. Generally it takes forty weeks in New York and a couple of seasons on the road to do it, but it cannot escape its fate. Sooner or later it perishes. That is the sort of man I am.

Whatever else may be charged against me, I have never deviated from the standard which I set myself at the beginning of my career. If I am called upon to review a play produced by a manager who is considering one of my own works, I do not hesitate. I praise that play.

If an actor has given me a lunch, I refuse to bite the hand that has fed me. I praise that actor's performance. I can only recall one

instance of my departing from my principles. That was when the champagne was corked, and the man refused to buy me another bottle.

As is only natural, I have met many interesting people since I embarked on my career. I remember once lunching with rare Ben Jonson at the Mermaid Tavern--this would be back in Queen Elizabeth's time, when I was beginning to be known in the theatrical world--and seeing a young man with a nobby forehead and about three inches of beard doing himself well at a neighboring table at the expense of Burbage the manager.

"Ben," I asked my companion, "who is that youth?" He told me that the fellow was one Bacon, a new dramatist who had learned his technique by holding horses' heads in the Strand, and who, for some reason or other, wrote under the name of Shakespeare. "You must see his Hamlet," said Ben enthusiastically. "He read me the script last night. They start rehearsals at the Globe next week. It's a pippin. In the last act every blamed character in the cast who isn't already dead jumps on everyone else's neck and slays him. It's a skit, you know, on these foolish tragedies which every manager is putting on just now. Personally, I think it's the best thing since The Prune-Hater's Daughter."

I was skeptical at the moment, but time proved the correctness of my old friend's judgment; and, having been present after the opening performance at a little supper given by Burbage at which sack ran like

water, and anybody who wanted another malvoisie and seltzer simply had to beckon to the waiter, I was able to conscientiously praise it in the highest terms.

I still treasure the faded newspaper clipping which contains the advertisement of the play, with the legend, "Shakespeare has put one over. A scream from start to finish."--Wodehouse, in *The Weekly Bear-Baiter* (with which is incorporated *The Scurvy Knaves' Gazette*).

The lot of a dramatic critic is, in many respects, an enviable one. Lately, there has been the growing practice among critics of roasting a play on the morning after production, and then having another go at it in the Sunday edition under the title of "Second Swats" or "The Past Week in the Theatre," which has made it pretty rocky going for dramatists who thus get it twice in the same place, and experience the complex emotions of the commuter who, coming home in the dark, trips over the baby's cart and bumps his head against the hat stand.

There is also no purer pleasure than that of getting into a theatre on what the poet Milton used to call "the nod." I remember Brigham Young saying to me once with not unnatural chagrin, "You're a lucky man, Wodehouse. It doesn't cost you a nickel to go to a theatre. When I want to take in a show with the wife, I have to buy up the whole of the orchestra floor. And even then it's a tight fit."

My fellow critics and I escape this financial trouble, and it gives us a good deal of pleasure, when the male star is counting the house over the heroine's head (during their big love scene) to see him frown as he catches sight of us and hastily revise his original estimate.