

AMERICANS AS ACTORS.

IN dealing with this question, it must be understood that we treat only of North America, and of one section of it only, the United States. The other sections—Canada and Mexico—are not directly concerned in the inquiry.

Every nation has its own aptitudes for certain forms of endeavour. This is partly, if not mainly, due to race, partly to climatic conditions, partly to the other conditions on which national as well as individual life is based—those of labour, amusement, loyalty, hopes and fears, ambitions, and the circumstances which make for more or less strenuous endeavour. With regard to the racial qualities, it is hardly necessary to understand their origins or even to seek them; it is sufficient if we accept existing facts. Were we examining the history of a nation or a race such might—would be—an imperative duty, primarily undertaken for the acceptance of the very base of true understanding. Sufficient for the present purpose it is to examine how things stand to-day. If we wish to understand the idiosyncrasies of American character and life sufficiently to make some kind of forecast of possibilities of the future, we must primarily have a truthful estimate of the present.

The United States of America, as it exists to-day, is a nation of specialists. This does not imply that each individual deliberately sets himself or herself to a chosen task at the beginning of life, and follows it on to the logical end. Rather does it refer to the conclusions of work and life; a sort of survival of the fittest for special endeavour, each adapting himself to special needs and following the path on which he has begun, with ever-growing ardour as new possibilities develop themselves. Herein advance depends a good deal on another racial quality which in the West has become highly developed, that of adaptability. It is not sufficient for a worker to be strenuous by nature and efficient by practical effort; developing opportunities due in part to the ordinary chances of life, all make for new powers and new applications of initial forces. To speak in metaphor: progress does not run on rails, but follows the ordinary roads created or organised as the resultant of many varying needs. The United States has been for more than a century in a condition of development which has had no equal in any other part of the world, or at any other age. A vast region, containing some three million square miles of surface, came at once into habitable

possibility. It is true that on the outer edges of the North American Continent the European races had found foothold and that the centre was occupied by Indians—the descendants of Asiatic races, chiefly Chinese, who lived a nomadic life, sparsely scattered over the vast and then inhospitable area, roughly grouped in tribes of varying worth and powers, but all largely if not wholly savage. The Anglo-Saxons had settled on the Eastern seaboard and had penetrated inwards, civilising as they went. The Spaniards had settled to the east and west of the South. The French occupied the centre of the South. In the North Great Britain and France contended for supremacy. At the beginning of the era of great progress the prime need was population, and the overcrowded nationalities of Europe found outlet for their surplus population. But pioneering must begin with individuals; it was only when the Famine came to Ireland in 1846–7 that the great rush of immigrants began. But when once the current had been formed its progress became continuous. Until recently the American States became the dumping ground of all the over-peopled countries. Italy, Germany, Poland, Hungary, Russia, have continuously sent enormous numbers of emigrants, purely and primarily for purposes of finding settlement. Other nations have added to the population, but from a different cause: that of seeking work; some ending in settlement and consequent fusion, others coming as workers but not remaining permanently. For illustration the Swedes, lumberers by hereditary practice, came to the forest regions; and having once done their work as foresters made permanent settlement. On the other hand, the Chinese when coming made contracts with the shipping companies to bring back to China in due course their bodies “alive or dead.” The penalising conditions of recent legislation have largely stopped the incursion of this race. We need take no special note in this connection of either of the coloured races, Indians or Negroes. The former were the indigenous inhabitants when the Caucasians made entry and are rapidly becoming extinct. The latter are the descendants of the slaves imported chiefly in the later years of the eighteenth century, and as they do not fuse with the white races do not enter on our consideration. The negro breeds fast, and the very existence of millions who flourish in what has come to be known as the “Black Belt” is a terror to the statesmen of the Federated States. Mexico is largely Spanish. The population of Canada is largely the result of emigration from Scotland, though, of course, other nations have sent contingents also; notably Japan in later years. Contingents of all races are now to be found within the United States.

The ultimate fusion of these many races must create what will be practically a new type. But such is as yet far off; so we need only glance at it as a possibility, and confine ourselves to things as they are. How each of the various races named will supplement each other is an ethnological problem. In race-fusion the lower as well as the higher races have beneficent part, adding physical strength, endurance, fecundity, though they may lack moral and intellectual strength. But, after all, progress does not proceed on a grade of continuous or eternal proportions. There are set-backs as well as sudden propulsions forward; the utmost that can be expected is a *tendency* of advance.

Where American race-problems are involved it is to the United States that we must look. Canada and Mexico are fairly constant in their racial developments—Scotch blood in the one case and Spanish in the other being the paramount foreign elements; but “foreigners,” being merged in the mass of population, must be accepted to-day as part of the indigenous stock. And, therefore, in following the subject before us, we must almost of necessity confine ourselves to the United States.

Now, as the various nationalities carry with them not only their national as well as their racial characteristics, but the customs and habits of the places which they have left, and which may fairly be accepted as logical developments of their predominating characteristics, we have to realise that the immigration, through a reasonable space of years, is no negligible quantity in determining the possibilities of advance in any given direction of the nation as it exists.

Take the characteristics of these nationalities in their own habitats and we can get a suggestion of their influence in an expanding nation. Such influence must, of necessity, be at first of the minimum, for the proportion of foreigners is small; but the newcomers, as expansive offshoots, must have their share of dispositions, customs and habits. The German is philosophic, reasonable, industrious, calm. The Italian—type of the Latin in our present connection—is passionate, effusive, quick, eager, reckless, impulsive, largely swayed by emotion. These two races, German and Latin, typify broadly the essential qualities required within the range of the present discussion. The Irish element we need hardly consider separately when we come to the union or cleavage between aptitude and habit, since it resembles the Latin rather than the German temperament. We have further, in examining into artistic possibilities, to consider what special as well as what general elements we have to deal with.

The Latin, being demonstrative, is in the habit of displaying

emotion—and in lesser degree thought and intention—by gesture. The German, on the other hand, has a phlegm which negatives such momentary trivialities. Any traveller knows how much easier it is to understand—when he does not know the language—what is going on between other persons in Southern than in Northern Europe. Take, for instance, a shop or public vehicle—any place where prices have to be asked and payments made. In the one case gesticulation at every moment supplements, duplicates, or interprets speech. The quick action of hand and finger is simply arithmetic in action : the facial expression is as illuminative as carefully chosen words ; and so on through the whole scheme of the expression of thought. But in the places where calmness, if not self-restraint, is usual, there is no such help. The customary meaning of words is of paramount force ; and one who does not understand the language is simply helpless. Thus the racial habit of gesticulation, or of duplicate means of expressing thought, becomes a prime quality of power or facility in the art of the stage. Of course, the practical difficulty in estimating the comparative values of racial additions to the population is that of education. Emigrants are, as a rule, not well educated. As a matter of fact they come mainly from quite the lower and poorer classes. The exception is in the case of a great number of German emigrants. In Germany every one is educated up to a certain degree, to the result that when any of them emigrate they are not immediately inferior to their surroundings, as is too often the case. Thus, broadly speaking, the German brings to the racial fusion a philosophic calm, the Latin and the Celt emotional temperament. In the last Census, 1900, the foreign born population was as follows, counting in thousands only :—

English	...	...	...	...	843,000
Scotch	...	...	...	...	234,000
Irish	...	...	...	...	1,619,000
French	...	...	...	...	104,000
Italian	...	...	...	...	484,000
Polish	...	...	...	...	170,000
Hungarian	...	...	...	...	145,000
Russian	...	...	...	...	424,000
German	...	...	...	...	2,669,000

This does not take into account the census of descendants of “foreigners” settled in the United States. So that, as at present existing, what we may call the “impulsive races”—French, Italian, Irish, Hungarian, Polish, number about two and a half millions ; whilst the more phlegmatic races, English, Scotch, German and Russian, number four millions. As the population of the States and territories at the last census numbered

(exclusive of "Indians not taxed") some seventy-six millions, the proportion of "foreign born" element is in no case an alarming one regarding ultimate disposition of races. It is the American custom to count as (United States) Americans all born in their own land; an exact enough custom for practical purposes, as the fusion of races becomes permanent and incoming foreigners become absolutely merged in the existing race. It is thus the existing population to which we must look for development in the emotional arts. Any variation which may come from the "foreign" element must, as shown by the above figures, be rather on the phlegmatic than the emotional side. Let us therefore consider the question as one dependent almost entirely on existing population and local conditions.

If the number of theatres is any indication of the wishes of a people in that direction, the United States stands very well for histrionic effort. Mr. Julius Cahn gives in his compendious *Theatrical Guide* the names of more than two thousand six hundred theatres of varying importance in the United States, which would allow of one theatre for every 24,000 inhabitants. This compares favourably with our British average, for by the lists given in the *Era Almanack* the British theatres and music-halls total about 800, which would give an average of just about twice as many persons to each theatre.

Were our examination as to the popularity of the theatre the incidence would be altogether on the American side; but as it is relating to the native capacity for acting, it rather tends the opposite way. For even with such an evident demand for actors the indigenous supply is insufficient; there is a ready market in the United States for the services of competent players—provided, of course, that they can speak the language.

The conclusions of the statistics given are borne out by experience, which is, after all, the only convincing way of arriving at conclusions in such a matter as this, dependent largely on ever-varying factors of fallible humanity. Between the years 1883 and 1904 I spent altogether with Henry Irving in America more than four years occupied with eight theatrical tours, during which we visited every great town in the United States, North, South, East and West; so that there was plenty of opportunity of studying the trend of theatrical affairs in that great nation. Of course, as Irving travelled with his own company there was not much opportunity of comparison from within between native and imported histrionic talent. But now and again our forces, both histrionic and executive, were reinforced by local aid; and through this means, as well as by seeing the other plays given in cities and towns where we played, one came in time to have a properly-

founded estimate of American suitability for the exercise of the actor's craft. Let me say here that to my mind the American workman has, as a workman, no superior. By "workman" I mean men or women working at any craft requiring intelligence as well as labour. The statement applies to all crafts, whether or not included in the category of fine arts. We have had at times the assistance of workmen of all nationalities, but I am bound to say that the Americans were the readiest, the most capable, the steadiest, the hardest working, the most intelligent. Put an American workman opposite a new situation or a state of things with which he has had no previous experience, and he will proceed to a quicker and better result than will any other of equal experience. If he is independent to a measure not usual in older communities, what of that? A good workman should know that he is a good workman; it is part of the measure of his self-respect; and self-respect is one of the most important factors of human advance. So much for the executive workmen of the theatre; as to the actors, we only employed those of minor importance—chorus, supers, and an occasional "young man" or "extra lady." On one occasion we took a whole chorus from New York and travelled them with us for the tour; and we generally supplemented the local orchestra not only with members of our own orchestra, who formed a section of the touring party, but with local extraneous performers. On one occasion we had, by the way, as one of our limelight operators, an Indian actor, who, being anxious to have experience in an intimate way of a higher stage work than his own, took that opportunity of study. In Boston we nearly always had supers who were students of Harvard, and on several occasions, in various places, an enterprising reporter undertook, *incognito*, that humble service for the purpose of more intimate observation.

But it is from the auditorium, not the stage, that the true merit of actors must in the long run be judged. Their art is an art of result, and if they do not achieve that satisfactorily they are not successful in their aims, and consequently of no account. How they achieve result is not known to the audience and not cared for by them. Such is a part of the education and practice of their craft or "mystery." And although it may be of academic importance to thoughtful students of work in general, it cannot be of much importance to the public, who only care for completed work which will please, amuse, or interest them.

It is here that we arrive at the supreme quality of American endeavour; and in an art which depends for great success on individual qualities or gifts, it is of added value. The American actor knows how to make the most of his powers and

opportunities. To this end he studies and practises endlessly. In a word, he looks to his equipment for his work and strives to be well-educated in it; and here he falls into line with the other strivers of his nation. It is this which makes America a nation of experts. One and all, its people strive for complete mastery over some subject. There is nothing too small to undertake in all seriousness; to which to bring the whole of one's thought and energy and skill. Look at the result. In a thousand small industries America is easily ahead in the race for wealth, and in special articles supplies the world. The catch of a door, a towel rail, a sponge bag, the case of an eye-glass, a penholder, a lemon squeezer, "squeezer" playing cards—all these and myriad others attest American inventiveness and application. The geniuses who made wooden nutmegs by the ton and turned out whole shiploads of manufactured oats were, though fraudulent and immoral to the last degree, in a sense national benefactors, for they showed in a practical way that *nothing* in the commercial world is beneath consideration. I have known a great fortune made by manufacturing ordinary luggage labels. But then the tag was the best of its kind and sold at a price which forbade competition. Again, I have known a simple paper bag as the machinery for the accretion of great wealth. Look at the success of the Yale lock, the Dennison tag, the tram line, the concentrated cattle whose exploitation adorns our dead walls, and a hundred similar possibilities.

The same racial spirit which looks at possibilities with either the telescope or the microscope guides the stage. The grouping of theatrical management shows the telescopic aspect; the vigorous and careful way in which the daring aspirant to the third row of the chorus equips herself for other fields of conquest makes the microscopic aspect. Indeed, one who wished to put the question into an apothegm might to-day parallel Thackeray's witty saying; "The staple products of Ireland are whiskey and manslaughter," and declare that as seen largely by European eyes, "the staple products of America are toilet paper and countesses."

For my own part, I have now for some years held that the great impulse towards theatrical life will come from Americans when acting is accepted in that country as an available industry. It is right to say that at present there is no bar to its acceptance. There is not the same violent opposition in that country to those who make the choice of stage life that holds more or less in all the European nations. Of course, the situation is always looked in the face by parents and guardians, and the pros and cons summed up and weighed. No doubt the present difficulties are at times

paramount and the ultimate outlook is dreaded ; but the difficulty thus regarded is tentative rather than perpetual. The more and the quicker that young people, not as yet belonging to stage life, join the ranks of the actors, the easier it will be for those who follow them, and the lesser the strain of anxiety on the part of relatives. For with growing numbers of a class whose education has tended to conventionality rather than to unconventionality there is greater social security. In fact, to use an analogy, a new atmosphere is created. The world of the stage is like all other worlds in the incidence of cosmic laws ; and as size is a necessary condition for the creation of an atmosphere in astronomical creation, so in the lesser world the law holds. Thus we must look before long for a great American accretion—somewhat in proportion to the vastness of the population—to the ranks of stage workers.

At present, so far as I have seen through the experience of more than a quarter of a century in the working of a great theatre, the American recruits are admirable workers. We had experience of a fair number of them in the Lyceum, and they all seemed to do well and “get on” quickly. This was largely due to their own exertions. They always studied, not only the subject of their immediate work, but the things at which they are aiming. The stage, as a whole, is a world of perpetual advance, but as the mechanism is entirely individual its general powers are limited by the capacity of the players. I use the word “capacity” not in its common meaning of power of assimilation, intellectual or physical ; but as conveying an idea of existing power whether natural or acquired. And therefore, as the players enlarge their ideas, so the stage advances. It takes a long training to make an actor. There are few accepted laws which can guide or rule ; it is only by acquired experience that the actor can get that almost unconscious familiarity with his work which will supply or take the place of principles of art. One might as well expect to be an expert stenographer by knowing by heart a manual of shorthand, as to be an actor without having acted. The whole thing is in the doing. The training and equipment are of course antecedent ; and it is in this preparatory stage of art work that application and its result—education—are of value. Actors should always bear in mind that success in a part is not the reward of a spasmodic effort, but of the long, slow, patient, strenuous attempts at perfection. Shakespeare’s wise saying : “The scholar’s melancholy, which is emulation,” is hard to understand outside the arts. But there it is altogether understandable ; there it belongs. In the emulation necessary for perfection—even for its seeking—the whole world is open : and

amongst the contestants is one's own self. To use a phrase in the terminology of athleticism : in the breaking of records one's own record may be included. This is the prime quality of advance, the active principle of self-sacrificing effort. And I am bound to say that I have always noticed it in American actors. The danger which attends it is, that ambitious youth may take the striving for fitness to succeed as the striving necessary for success in an immediate object. Strenuousness is much in the art world ; but it is not all. This reminds one of the story of the determined Scot, who declared that he would become a *maestro* of the violin. When his friends expressed doubt as to his powers, and asked on what quality he relied for success, he answered :—

“A'll do it by main strength !”

The American has great self-reliance as well as much strength of purpose, and if the winning of success is to be achieved by application he will doubtless win it. But he, like all others, must remember that art is a world by itself, and has, in addition to the laws which govern all other human efforts, its own laws, which must be observed under penalty of failure. In that world matters cannot be “rushed.” *Ars longa* has come to be accepted as a truism unneeding explanation. The very strenuous quality in its people which makes America great stands in their road in the doing of art work. Strenuousness has its own self-consciousness, and self-consciousness is the bane of true art. Theoretically we might argue that the result of this very strenuousness as applied in wrong direction would lead to failure ; thus the quality which makes good artisans would make bad artists. And this is exactly what happens in fact. Stage art is an excellent opportunity of testing the theory, for here so much depends on the individuality of the artist that the general drift of things is only a minor cause of happenings. We find that American players are admirable in the smaller parts, but that in the higher walks the same relative excellence is not observed. In all arts there are many levels between excellence and greatness ; in stage art, with again varieties of individuality as a cause, the levels are endless. In organising a theatrical company a manager could hardly do better than to recruit a full share of American players ; but in all probability he would have to look in the theatre world generally for his “stars.” Of course, it must be here borne in mind that every nation has its own social observances, its own peculiarities of accent, its own types of character ; and that for the re-production of these certain education or experience is necessary. So that if re-production of national type, or manner, or accent is required, the best results

can be had from those artists who are familiar with them. It used to be supposed that a fully equipped player should be able to assume at will accents and such like accessories of character ; but a too rigid adherence to this belief is throwing away natural advantages. Surely a "Down-east," or an "Out-west " type can be better assumed by one who knows the special world represented. On the other hand, the personal peculiarities—whether they be due to race or nationality—which enable actors to represent, almost without study, certain strongly marked characters, are out of place in the representation of classical characters, who on the stage represent average or natural types of emotion or passion. The perfect Hamlet, for instance, or perfect Ophelia should not have a brogue, or a twang, or a lisp, or even that Attic broadness which can win fame and fortune on the variety stage. A Romeo and Juliet who chewed, the one tobacco and the other gum, would be out of place even in a canvas Verona. On the other hand, it would be fatal for Hamlet or Macbeth, Juliet or Beatrice, to be self-conscious in the midst of a scene of sweeping passion. Self-consciousness and strenuousness are most excellent qualities—when in their proper places. And their proper place is in the educational stage of advance—in the preparation for supreme effort, not during the effort itself.

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