THE QUESTION OF A NATIONAL THEATRE

THE idea of a National Theatre is at first glance an attractive one. The arts which cluster round the drama are arts which all men love, and each of which has individually established claims for respect and consideration far beyond the mere faculty of giving pleasure. One and all they can be, and are, of great educational value, teaching the power and worth of organisation in very high forms. Music and the plastic arts generally—all arts and crafts which deal with form and colour, are willing to assist in the development of dramatic form. This has been the gift of several ages; that which high civilisation has won in one phase of strenuous effort at advance. If, then, all the arts can be united in some formal and continuous manner so as to create a veritable temple of arts dedicated to human profit and worthy delight, the possibility of an effort to effect this is surely well worthy of consideration.

So far, this is true in principle. It applies to the drama and the theatre; it is only when we try to localise it that trouble begins. In an enlightened age like our own it is too late to begin to consider ethical values in the matter. It is apparent to all who have eyes to see and minds to understand that the theatre is an existing fact and that it has come to stay. But we are now in the stage when the direction of its working is still within our power. Drama and theatre have each educational possibilities for good or ill; it is for us to discriminate and to help. This can best be done by countenancing publicly that which is worthy; the exercise of *force majeure* is but a poor device in the government of the free.

For more than three hundred years we have had in this country a worthy drama and many good theatres controlled by worthy men—drama and theatres with high aims and lofty self-respecting ideas of their own values in the domains of art and thought. Beginning a century and a half later, but running synchronously since then, has been another form of entertainment, without the lofty art-aims and devoted to personal rather than organised effort. The time is coming fast—if, indeed, it has not already come—when the guardians

and supervisors of State discipline will have to make some sort of choice between these two classes of public amusement. Such must—and probably shall—be shown in approval of one rather than in disapproval of the other; an estimable acceptance rather than a ban. As such approval must take some recognisable form, expressing itself either in material shape or honourable recognition, if not in both, it may be as well to consider in good time what must some day be thought over. For this purpose let us consider the question at present in the air through a strenuous setting forth by a few newspapers and many clamant personalities: that of a National Theatre. The occasion of this setting forth is in connection with the World's Memorial to Shakespeare, to which end a powerful committee has been at work for some three years or more. Those who have been persistently calling out for a National Theatre for quite a number of years past have, naturally enough to them, seized the occasion for making the claim on behalf of the memory of the great poet. How they can explain in what way Shakespeare is to be specially honoured by the realisation of a scheme which they hold to be required for other reasons, is a little difficult for ordinary people to understand. But, be this as it may, let us consider the idea of a National Theatre on its own merits and without reference to honouring anyone, however great.

The idea must be of an actual physical theatre—a place for producing and acting plays under the most favourable conditions; a theatre in the abstract means absolutely nothing whatever. A theatre is by its very nature one of the most concrete and practical workshops in the world; it is a place for *doing* certain things, and for the purpose must be as real as the life of which it is a part—civic or national, as may be. It is in fact a theatre built and aided or supported by some external power and with some resources outside itself. Ordinarily speaking, a theatre is supported by its own efforts. Some capital—or credit which can take the place of capital—may be required at first; but in the long run it must stand or fall by its own work. The plea, therefore, for a supported theatre can only be put forward on the ground that it may be of some special service in the organisation of public life; that it can supply something impossible under ordinary commercial and individual conditions. Granted, then, that such an institution might be of some direct service, the questions to be considered are: how far such an undertaking might fulfil its objects, and at what cost it could be organised and maintained. All things are relative, especially in statecraft, and where we are still so far off ideal perfection in the fulfilling of public needs and the organisation of public life the price of commodities for public use is an all-important and unavoidable question.

As to price, then, the requirements and necessary conditions of a National Theatre should be shown in howsoever a rudimentary way, so that students of the subject may form some estimate of the

eventual cost. In the first place, as to the theatre itself. This being a national matter must naturally be placed in the national capital—in this case, London. It should be in a prominent and central position; it would not serve its purpose if placed in a back street or in a suburb. It should be of such dimensions and elevation as to serve in some sort as a monument of taste worthy of the nation which in its own way it represents. It should serve as an accredited model for all lesser and local enterprises dedicated to workings of a similar kind, with regard to safety, hygiene, resources, convenience, ease, comfort, elegance, and good taste—in all ways a model and exemplar of what should be and is capable of achievement. Thus it would set a standard—a series of standards—of excellence in many ways which would eventually tend to public good, and would thus justify its creation. Again, in its working it should show similar perfection, similar excellence in the adaptation of means to accepted ends. If such a theatre did not observe these requirements, what possible purpose could it serve? It would be merely one more theatre amongst a whole crowd of others; an eleemosynary undertaking upborne by external resources and thus unfairly competing against similar industrial enterprises unsubsidised in any form.

Granted, again, that such a theatre so conducted would make for public good, let us count the probable cost.

Such a theatre should cover a large space. A small theatre would be of no use; and, besides, we have already in London alone some three score of theatres, most of them of inconsiderable size. It should be large, so as to contain those who, as parts of the nation, must be considered in some respect its owners; and again, as prices should be cheap, so as to give facilities to poor as well as to rich, it would take a large auditorium to hold a sum compatible in some degree with the necessary expenses. In addition there should be ample space for plenty of staircases, passage-ways, crushrooms, cloakrooms, offices, bill-rooms; in fact room for all the proper and decent, not to say commodious, working of a large establishment employing a vast number of hands. Those who are not familiar with theatres would be astonished to know the number of persons employed in a large theatre. For instance, in the management of the old Lyceum Theatre Henry Irving employed as many as six hundred persons of one kind or another; the number seldom if ever ran below four hundred and fifty. Again, on the stage side there is to be considered not only the stage—which for such a theatre, where frequent changes of bill would be expected, should be of very considerable size—but room to store away and take out with facility much scenery, properties and wardrobes. Much space would also be needed for dressing-rooms, green-rooms, and sanitary appliances for many people of either sex. Also a good many workshops, for such matters as demand instant attention. All these requirements mean great space, and in London space in a prominent

centre—and especially large space—means great money. For instance, when the Strand widening began and the southern side of the thoroughfare was thrown back, where the entrances to the Savoy and Cecil hotels now are, the ground behind the houses at the eastern end was sold at what the appraisers called 'eight shillings a foot.' This, at thirty years' purchase, which was the arrangement announced, worked out at 12*l.* per foot. It may convey some idea of the value of land when I say that the freehold of the old Lyceum—no 'hinterland' remember, but a space surrounded on three sides by thoroughfares—would have worked out to a capital value of some 250,000*l.* or 300,000*l.* The area of the old Lyceum, though covering a good space, would not be nearly large enough for the erection of a proper 'National' Theatre.

The building, too, of such a theatre would be a costly affair, for such, as representing a phase of the ambition of a great and wealthy nation, should be worthy of it. The mere size and stability of structure necessary to achieve safety and comfort would alone be costly; the architecture and handsome material of construction might represent any sum within the bounds of reason. In any case, it would not be possible to acquire such a space and to erect an adequate theatre on it for a less sum than half a million of British money.

Then as to the working. There is no comparison at all between the expenses of a big and a small theatre. Such is not a mere matter of multiplication. Size is in itself a matter of cost and brings with it a host of collateral expenses. As a National Theatre should be of standard excellence, the expenses would necessarily be greater than are required for one conducted by private enterprise and with naturally limited means. It may afford, however, some basis for estimating expense if I give some approximate details of expense of working the old Lyceum by Henry Irving. And here let me say that I confine what I say to the working of the old Lyceum; I have no knowledge whatever of the new—except that, standing on the same space, it holds in its auditorium twice as many people as could find place in the old. In Irving's time the old Lyceum held some two thousand people, all told; I am advised that it now holds with convenience some four thousand—perhaps an eighth more than Drury Lane. Let me also say that in such figures as I give I trust to my notebooks and such memoranda as from time to time I made, with the expressed consent of Sir Henry Irving, for future use. At his death I handed over, of course, all the books and property of all kinds to his executors.

I take a period of twenty years from the summer of 1878 to the summer of 1898, a time of great prosperity—such a time as may not be counted upon in the permanent management of a theatre. Then, if ever, was the time when an enthusiastic and bold-hearted player could in his own person do what in other nations is done for the theatre by the State or the Municipality. For twenty years Henry Irving conducted his theatre so well and to such splendid purpose that

throughout the world it was held as the exemplar of what might be done in dramatic art, and it—and he—were held in international honour. During those twenty years he played in London in all six hundred and twenty weeks, divided into some twenty seasons varying in length from thirteen to forty-seven weeks. In this time, or rather for this time, he spent in expenses of his theatre nearly a million of money—or, to be more exact, over 965,000*l.* sterling. Expenses of the stage alone (counting in thousands of pounds only) totalled as follows:

	£
Salaries	280,000
Supers	16,000
Stage staff and expenses (expenses of manufacture not included)	100,000
Lighting (gas, electric, and limelight)	32,000
Orchestra	47,000
The cost of producing plays (without including plays bought or produced, but not included in the period)	153,000

The expenses of what is called the 'Front of the House' were as follows:

	£
General staff of the theatre (not including the stage)	30,000
Expenses of working	56,000
Sundries	12,000

Then there were incidental expenses difficult to place in any departmental category:

	£
Law and audit	3,000
Insurance	7,000
Expenditure on the upkeep of the theatre and its belongings	48,000

Other working expenses included

	£
Printing	13,000
Newspaper advertising	57,000
Bill-posting	15,000

In addition to the above and many other expenses were the purchase of plays, and authors' fees amounting to some 13,000*l.* for the period.

In considering the above figures as some sort of standard of expenses of a great theatre, it must be borne in mind that the heaviest items of the lot—those of salaries and expenses of production—are, from the fact that the theatre was a private one, in reality much lower than they should be for matters of comparison. With regard to salaries, Henry Irving is only put down at a nominal salary—nominal to an actor of his 'drawing' power. It is a practical custom in England for an actor who is also a manager to put himself in the salary list at only a 'living wage' and not at his earning power. Irving thus put himself at 70*l.* per week; so that out of the 280,000*l.* above given only 43,000*l.* in

twenty years is charged for his services. Actors of his calibre (when there are any) get quite 100*l.* for each performance, so that, had that computation been entered on the books of the theatre, another 320,000*l.* at least should have been added to the 280,000*l.*, making by this item alone in all 600,000*l.* So also in the case of the 'twin star,' Miss Ellen Terry. Her engagement was made in such a way that for London her salary was only about one-third of what she got in the provinces, and less than a fourth of what she got in America. If her salary were to be put down at its value—comparative to her earnings when paid as salary in later years—the total would become over 750,000*l.* In such case the weekly salary list for London computed from the figures given above, instead of being 450*l.*, as I calculated, would be over 1200*l.* per week. And the weekly expense account would spring from 1400*l.* (without counting rent, rates and taxes, and authors' fees) to over 2100*l.*

I in no way take Irving's figures as final for a National Theatre; but only as showing what was actually paid by a capable and earnest man doing his best for the art he loved and for the good of the drama and the theatre in their highest aspects, and without any statistical aim.

But even suppose that the services of actors adequate to the class of performance could be obtained in the general working for the sums set down for the working of the old Lyceum, the cost of working the National Theatre for a year of fifty weeks (leaving two weeks for cleaning, redecorating, &c., on the average) would run to a sum of at least 75,000*l.* per annum. Take the average receipts for each week 'by and large' at 1000*l.*—which would be quite as great as could be expected in a theatre working all the year round—there would be an annual deficit of at least 25,000*l.*, which would have to be met in some way. Capitalise this annual sum at the rate of Consols—$2\frac{1}{2}$ per cent.—and a primary endowment of 1,000,000*l.* sterling would be required.

At the present rate of Consols—$87\frac{3}{4}$ per cent., say 88 per cent. to leave a margin—the initial cost, 500,000*l.*, and the fund for upkeep, 1,000,000*l.*, would require an issue of $2\frac{1}{2}$ per cent. Consols of some 1,700,000*l.* sterling. Such would be the price which would have to be paid for the furnishing and upkeep—reckoned at the lowest figures—of a National Theatre. With this knowledge before them, statesmen could reckon whether that which was to be purchased would be worth the price. For their proper understanding of the subject certain matters would have to be considered—matters not of figures, but of possibility of fulfilling the duty imposed by such an undertaking. The building of the theatre and its adequate equipment would be a comparatively easy task. To these would come expert artists, workmen, and men of business, just as they do in the case of a private concern. But the making of laws and regulations for the government of the public institution, as the theatre would necessarily become after its launching, whether it were

founded by the State, the city, a philanthropic syndicate, or a munificent individual, and the selection of the *personnel* of the governing body would be a seriously difficult matter. In the bye-laws careful provision would have to be made against misuse of power, nepotism, peculation, favouritism in all forms, and the thousand-and-one manifestations of personal dislikings and jealousies which are apt to hamper the steps of pure justice in artistic life. By the nature of the undertaking anyone appointed to the governing body would have to be appointed for life, or with an age limit and a pension—all of course subject to good conduct. It is of the essence of the desirability of any form of public service that it is continuous service, not subject to chance or merely commercial change. If there were not such advantage, no man whose services would be of any worth would forgo the possibilities of private enterprise and merge his personal ambitions in work of public import. In this matter public service must be regarded as a sort of insurance—the hedging against chance—a sheltering one's individual risks behind the laws of average. It is for this reason that adequate service can usually be had for public work under the standard wage of its class.

In the figures which I have given no provision is made for pensions. I do not feel bound to state any, as I am not formulating any scheme for founding a National Theatre, but only suggesting certain matters which would have to be considered in case the advisability of such an institution should be favourably considered by the powers that be. In Austria, where certain theatres are under public management, their actors belong to the Civil Service, and are under and amenable to the rules governing such. And, should our own State take up the matter of a National Theatre, there would be much clamour for a similar system.

Out of this rises another question, which would be sure to come to the fore: Would the great body of actors, theatre managers, and theatre-workers, outside the tally of those employed in the National Theatre, gain any material advantage? It is hard to imagine how they would. That private enterprises would suffer from the opposition of an endowed or subsidised theatre, not answerable to ordinary commercial conditions, would be apparent; and where an ordinary theatre suffers in pocket the suffering necessarily runs right down the line. But wherein could be an advantage? At present there are in this country many thousands of actors of one kind or another. There are, according to the *Era* Almanack, throughout the country more than six hundred licensed theatres, each of which employs a considerable number of players and workers of various kinds. This number does not include music halls, of which there are a vast number, and most of which employ a certain number of players who oscillate between the playhouse and the music hall as the pinch of poverty compels or the desire of wealth urges. The question of stage operatives will not be

considered here ; they have their own guilds and trade unions ; we are only concerned, for the present at all events, with the players. Accepting, then, the British players as but ten thousand, only a very small percentage of any class of them could be provided for in a National Theatre. In this, however large it might be, there would only be possibilities for a hundred at most (' supers ' are not considered in any way as ' actors ' in stage-land). It would doubtless be good in the long run for the few who were chosen ; but the many left, numbering ninety-nine per cent. of the entire body, would have to bear amongst them an evil far exceeding the others' good.

There would, doubtless, be also contingent evils : the manifest advantages to mediocre players to be settled for life by an engagement in the National Theatre would beget intriguing of the fiercest kind. A player looking for such an engagement would naturally try to rally to his service all the forces which he could influence ; so that the official or body with whom finally the selection rested would have an uneasy time in the storm-centre of such opposing forces.

Again, the *personnel* of the officials would be a difficult matter were such an institution to be founded ; and it would not be long before charges of favouritism or self-interest began to fly wide. *Quis custodiet ipsos custodes* would be an important apophthegm in the case of officials entrusted with such varied and irresponsible patronage. Indeed, the directorate would be difficult of choice. A director or chairman of directors for such a purpose should have a lot of almost opposing qualifications. He should have large stage knowledge and experience ; he should know what is called ' the world ' ; he should have natural and cultivated taste ; and, supremest quality of all, he should have an open mind—with the least possible share of prejudice himself, and be proof against the prejudices of others. He should not be too young, since such is to be without experience, nor too old to be unreceptive of new ideas. He should be transparently as well as actually just ; and yet should be stalwart in standing by his considered and matured opinions. In fact, he should be a paragon. The most natural selection would be a theatre manager who would be willing to glide his own ambitions into the channels of his new undertaking. But such an one would in no case be fairly young—young enough to have left the needed stock of energy for theatre direction ; or else he would be one who, having failed in his own ambition, was seeking calmer waters for his declining years. Ambition dies hard ; in the full swing of its realisation no man is willing to forgo his quest. There is also another objection to a former manager : such men have always—rightly or wrongly—fixed ideas of policy, and they have many friends and *protégés*, to many of whom they must be under some sort of obligation, even if the same be only for good wishes and unquestioning belief. Such obligations are many-winged and many-footed, and are apt to fly or crawl into the scales of justice.

This difficulty, however, need not be here considered. There are plenty of good men—good and suitable in every way, and no one who has any experience of life doubts that when the Hour strikes the Man will appear. The three points to consider are: (1) Could the thing be done at all? (2) Would the cost be prohibitive? (3) Would it be advisable: (*a*) in the interests of art; (*b*) good for the world of the theatre; (*c*) profitable directly or indirectly to the great public? The second of these we may almost dismiss. This is a rich country, and whatever work makes, in the estimation of Parliament, for good can have sufficient money provided for its doing. The first may be answered in the affirmative, if qualified by acceptance of the third; anything within reason can be done if the consensus of opinion is in its favour. It is in the third point that difficulty lies. 'Your *If* is the only peacemaker; much virtue in *If*,' says Touchstone.

If a National Theatre would be advisable in the interests of art, good for the world of the theatre, and profitable to the great public, then we may regard it as a work to be some day undertaken by the State.

This, always remembering, of course, that it be deemed worth the cost. But there must be no mistake about the cost. It does not do to calculate by subsidy fixed per annum or varying as required. It must be theoretically capitalised before we can consider the matter fairly. This capital amount would be *at least* a sum of 1,500,000*l.* sterling—1,700,000*l.* of money at its present value. More might be required later in case receipts did not come up to the estimated amount, whatever that might be. For it must not be forgotten that if such a theatre were to justify its name as 'National,' it should be kept open as far as possible all the year round. Thus only the dwellers in other cities of the nation might visit it during their occasional staying in the capital.

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