PART THREE

The Sunday Oregonian.

PAGES 25 TO 32

VOL. XIX. PORTLAND, OREGON, SUNDAY MORNING, ARRIL 8, 1900. NO. 14.

BEHIND THE CURTAIN

NEARLY everybody knows that a theater is a place in which to see and hear plays, but everybody does not know that seeing a play from behind the scenes, while it takes away a great deal of the romance and glamour of the footlights, brings out much that is of curious interest. Mechanical appliances that lend realism to the play, as seen by the audience, is realism itself on the other side of the big drop curtain. Aside from those who earn their daily bread in this way, few people know much of this stage mechanism. This is probably due to the fact that little of the machinery, so to speak, is visible. If the appliances were exposed to view, the effect would be entirely different, because best impressions are created by things that are heard and not seen.

In a thrilling melodrama, while a terrific storm is raging, there come strong dashes of rain and vivid flashes of lightning. High winds sweep by, and thunder reverberates in the distance. Any one in the audience, with the least stretch of imagination, conjures up an awful tempest. But if this same interested auditor could see how these sounds are produced the illusion would vanish, the spell be broken and the blood-curdling melodrama would fall as flat as the rector's morning prayer.

Mererly Rustle of Silk.

The effect would be wonderfully changed, should the audience plainly see that all the noise of rain and wind is derived from a cylinder of silk, turned with a crank, which draws the cloth rapidly over the wooden flanges and emits the deceiving sound. When this machine is properly constructed, the imitation is almost perfect.

When the heavy villain is kicked from the seventh story of a building and six distinct crashes follow each other in rapid succession, as he falls through the skylights to the court below, the audience is thrilled and the gallery gods applaud. This feeling is caused not so much by seeing the actor kicked through the window, as by imagining his fall through six skylights; but the play could hardly be called effective, if the audience could realize that the noise of this imaginary tragedy is made by dropping a basketful of broken bottles on the floor, as many times as it is desired to prolong the supposed descent.

For these reasons it is best that as much secenry should hover around the mechanism of the stage as possible. The same play is being produced, but the effect is entirely different, according to the point of view.

Ye Footlight Autocrat.

The autocrat of the theater is the stage manager. There are others who merely think they have some importance. The star, the leading lady, or the prima donna may arrogate honors to themselves. The manager may believe it is his show. The man who owns the theater may fondly delude himself into the belief that he cuts some ice, but the individual who stands behind the scenes and directs the workings of the hidden forces is the great "I am." He is really, as well as literally, the power behind the throne, and he is greater than the throne itself. A single blunder in stage management will readily spoil the effect of the best production ever attempted.

Years ago the narrator witnessed the production of a melodrama, in a small town in the South. Everything was going lovely. The rosy-cheeked heroine had spurned the advances of the villain for the twentieth time. These two were walking on the towpath of a canal. The villain seized the girl, choked her into insensibility; threw her into the seething waters and escaped. The effect was splendid. The audience was spellbound, and hisses in the gallery were audible. In the nick of time the hero appeared on the scene. Quickly he divested himself of coat and shoes and leaped headlong into the turbid waters of the canal, to rescue the drowning girl, at the peril of his life. Unfortunately his foot caught on the crest of the towpath and brought it down to the level of the stage. There, lying flat on rugs, safe and dry, were the drowning maiden and her brave rescuer. After that, it was impossible to revive interest in the play. It fell as flat as did the towpath.

Where Lurid Lightnings Flash.

One of the prettiest of stage illusions is theatrical lightning. It is not an illusion, because it is lightning. Electricity is the same, the world over. Formerly stage lightning was made by burning magnesium, just as amateur photographers do in making flash-light pictures. But now, in all theaters with an ordinary electrical outfit, the lightning is made by touching an ordinary file, at the end of one wire, to a piece of carbon, at the end of another wire. Of course, the carbon burns brightly during the contact, which may merely be a touch, or it may be prolonged, with the requisite irregularity, by rubbing the ignited carbon along the roughened edges of the file.

A necessary accompaniment to stage lighining is stage thunder. The time-honored thunder-maker is a sheet of iron, suspended by a rope, shaken hard or gently, according to the exigencies of the case. But this contrivance has been, in a large measure, supplanted by a long, narrow trough, with a cannon ball rolling in it, similar to the trough that carries the balls home in an old-fashioned bowling alley. Wooden cleats impede the progress of the ball, which may be rolled very fast for a loud peal of thunder, or very slow for a long, low rumble. This trough is placed high over the stage, and, in some theaters, extends above the auditorium. This heightens the effect.

To Produce Rain.

With lightning and thunder, it is often desired to produce rain. The appearance of falling rain is sometimes caused by suspending many fine, polished wires and vibrating them in a glaring light. This illusion is a fine one, if continued but for a few seconds. The sound of rain is usually made by shaking shot on a drum. Bits of paper, gently dropped from above, are used to imitate falling snow. These productions of rain, thunder, wind and lightning are the most realistic of the illusions of the stage.

A splendid example of this was shown in Portland in the recent magnificent scenic production of "Anthony and Cleopatra," by the Walsh-McDowell Company at the Marquam Grand Theater. With the exception of a few flashes of lightning, nothing was seen; but enough was heard to make the storm scene wonderfully realistic. No big Eastern theater could surpass this effort, in splendid scenic effects.

The illusion of sound is very frequently brought into use in the production of a play. It is often essential that the arrival of persons on horseback, or in carriages, shall be heard before the persons are seen. Rumbling of wheels, either of a light buggy, or of a heavy ordnance wagon, is imitated with a small vehicle, which looks like a railway freight car, in miniature. This is run along a wooden track and is left empty or loaded with weights, to suit the requirements of the individual case. Sometimes, the requisite noise is made by using oblong wheels, or cutting sections out of the round ones. The clatter of horses' feet is made by a man striking soft or hard substances with a mallet.

Artillery and Rifle Fire.

The real thing is brought into use when single shots from a gun or pistol are required. In military plays, like "Shenandoah," where cannon shots and volleys of musketry are used, the powder smoke obscured the view of the stage and the invention of smokeless powder was consequently hailed with delight. In productions where loudness is not especially desired, a hard blow on a big bass drum represents the discharge of a cannon, and a volley of musketry is made by rapid strokes with rattans on a dried calfskin.

The operation of these devices is ordinarily left to the stage hands, but some well-known actors have been known to perform these duties, if they are connected with their own roles, that they may guard against blunders. Sometimes a very small mistake in stage setting or in the operation of stage mechanism would make the best work of a Booth or a Barrett appear inane, and even ludicrous.

A glaring instance of this was noticed in Portland, when Frederick Warde last visited this city. In his excellent presentation of "The Merchant of Venice," in the trial scene, the Judge's desk was loaded down with modern law books, bound in sheep. Codes of Oregon and copies of Blackstone and Kent were on every side. By a slight mistake, the entire tragedy was made supremely ludicrous.

Putting on Comic Opera.

One of the biggest jobs in a theater is putting on a comic opera. Twenty minutes before the time to ring up the curtain, many queer things are in evidence. None of the singers are in view. The regiment of principals, chorus and ballet is yet in its dressing-rooms, hard at work "making-up," pulling on silk tights and getting into their silks and spangles. The stage is turned over to the "hands," but do not imagine for an instant that the boards are empty. Scene shifters are down below; men to work the ropes are up in the flies; electricians, limelight men, carpenters and other stage men of one kind and another are here, there and everywhere. It takes lots of hard work by these men, who are never seen by the audience, to get the thing going before the first one of the dozens employed as principals, coryphees, ballet and chorus sets foot on the boards. They run about carrying furniture or properties and depositing them wherever they like, and shove wings and bits of scenery here and there in an apparently haphazard fashion.

While this is going on, men begin letting down huge drops, from away up aloft and pulling up others. Fragments of palaces on the Rhine, whole sections of farming country, lots of city real estate, thousands of square miles of sky, a whole peach orchard, a river and a mill, are seesawed up and down from the stage to the flies and back again. When the men aloft and their partners on the stage get through with all this seemingly aimless, but, in reality, orderly proceeding, the last piece of scenery has been shifted and everything has disappeared, except, for example, the interior of a Venetian palace. In five minutes, order has come out of chaos; what looked to be worse than three Spring movings has been accomplished, and the stage is ready to "ring up."

Giddy Girls Come In.

By this time the ballet, the chorus and some of the lesser characters of the cast have begun to put in an appearance, popping up from their dressing-rooms below the stage. The main portion of the feminine chorus is packed very much like sardines in a box. While all this paradoxically quiet row-de-dow is proceeding, the self-possessed stage manager, unruffled by the seeming confusion, is strolling around, looking at the men at work, taking in everything at a glance. He orders this bit of scenery shifted up six inches; then he has that one set back a trifle; this bunch of electric lights is moved to the right a bit, and so on. Every one of the stage hands instantly does what he tells him.

A few minutes more, and they begin to get ready for action. The orchestra is tuning up on the other side of the curtain, and the stage manager gives the order to "call everybody." Up they come from the dressing-rooms, in pairs, groups and dozens and in all sorts of costumes—ballet, chorus and everybody, except the principals, who, in a dignified way, keep to the dressing-rooms until their "cues" are near. All the girls wander in, whether they are in the first scene or not, and perch themselves on anything that comes handy for a resting place. Some of them sit down so readily that their shoes must hurt their feet, and they stretch their legs out in front of them, so as not to bag their tights at the knee. It is a crush and jam of ballet girls, chorus people and actors; a kaleidoscopic array of color in satins and silks; a maze and tangle of elaborate costumes and bright ballet skirts, a superb confusion. Then the autocrat gives the order to "clear the stage."

The "Invisible Chorus."

"Of all the operas that Verdi wrote, the best to my mind is 'Il Trovatore,'" sang Owen Meredith. Well, in that pretty opera, the prettiest scene is where the invisible chorus sing "Miserere." This was rendered with fine effect last week at Cordray's by the Boston Lyrics. Nothing could be seen from the front; but were the members of the chorus singing those beautiful words, with clasped hands and agonizing glances, as the unsophisticated may have fondly supposed? Not much, my Mary Ann!

The "Miserere" comes after all but, the principals are off the stage, and the tender song is not given in costume. The chorus and the ballet are grouped awkwardly in the wings, in their street clothes and wraps, and are impatiently waiting for the oysters and hot coffee that will come a little later, down the street. Lots of illusion is knocked out of one, when he sees, from behind the scenes, the "invisible chorus" at work.

The fellow who constructed the line, "Distance lends enchantment to the view," probably spent an evening behind the scenes. Looking at the chorus and ballet, at close range, is an illusion-killer. A good "make-up" will make an ugly girl look pretty at a distance, but, near by, the effect is something terrible. It would not be fair to say all chorus girls are ugly, for some of them are pretty enough to look well, in spite of the make-up, but it is only charitable to maintain a discreet silence on the subject.

Nearly everybody knows something of "make-ups," and little will be said of them in this article. Grease paints which have held their own for years are still in vogue, and, paradoxical as the statement may seem, the poorest "make-up" an actor can have is no "make-up" at all. That is the way a corpse is "made up."

Pandora's Box.

The greatest show behind the scenes is the property-room. This is a veritable Pandora's box. It is a horn of plenty. Everything imaginable can be found here. A well-regulated property-room is a junk shop, where everything has been bought and nothing sold, from medieval times down to the present day. Guns, pictures, skulls, a throne, old clothes, bottles, furniture, paintings and bric-a-brac galore, are piled up in endless confusion.

The larger theaters have nearly everything required in the production of a play in the "make-up" room, but in the provincial towns, where plays are infrequent and good plays never come, very little stock is kept on hand. When the aggregation of barnstormers does come, the property man, who is also ticket-seller and stage carpenter, has to rustle all over town to procure enough "properties" to give a third-rate performance of "Uncle Tom's Cabin."

Lighting the Stage.

The lighting of a stage is a matter of the greatest importance. It is an art and a profession in itself. Of late years, electricity has generally taken the place of gas. A complete modern outfit includes three rows of footlights across the front, shaded from the audience. When a strong light is desired on the scenes, reflectors are brought into use. One of the rows of footlights is in clear bulbs; one is in red, and one is blue. They can be used separately or in combination.

Over the stage are from three to five adjustable rows of border lamps, arranged to be raised or lowered to fit the scenery, but always screened from the front. Behind the side edges of the stage opening are other lines of them. The entire number in a well-appointed house is from two to three hundred. All these lights are connected with a keyboard at the prompter's desk. A bunch light is a cluster of from seven to 30 electric bulbs on a standard, with a polished reflector behind them like the beacon of a locomotive, and a holder for sheets of colored gelatine, in front. Of course, the lights can be set wherever needed.

If it is desired to throw a still stronger glare, a calcium light, consisting of a piece of calcium, burning in combined jets of hydrogen and oxygen, is used. Two gas cylinders and a man to operate them render this apparatus somewhat expensive. Nearly as good results can be obtained from an electric arc light, placed in a box, open in the front and mounted on a tripod.

Designs Adhered To.

The original designs of the scenic artist are adhered to more or less faithfully in the practical workings of all the lights. The effect of moonlight is gained with a light blue shade. Various kinds of sunlight require amber or yellow mediums.

Firelight calls for a tinge of red. In the case of a conflagration, the red glows are increased by throwing the lights on clouds of steam, emitted from pipes. There are flashes of the same kind of red fire the boys set off on Fourth of July nights. Actual flames are blown from a torch with a hand bellows, but are little used. Then, on the other hand, are scenes so dark that the moving figures in them are scarcely discernible.

The importance of mechanical appliances to the profession, or rather the business, of theaters is growing. Years ago, in Shakespeare's day, and even in a much later period, scarcely any scenic effects were attempted. Acting was merely a reading of lines. At best, it was a kind of elocutionary concert. For this reason, Skakespearian dramas and all plays of the Elizabethan era have to be divested of much of their tedious dialogue before they are acceptable to the modern manager. Should "Hamlet" or "Richard the Third" be produced in their entirety in this age, nothing but empty chairs would witness the closing scenes. Many successful plays have been launched in recent years, plays that have made fortunes alike for manager, actor and playwright, that have little or no literary merit. Their success depended almost wholly on the art of the scenic artist and the stage manager. As the seasons go by, the "business" of the stage is more and more recognized as important. It may be harrowing to the soul of the dramatist to have whole paragraphs and even pages of his most poetic and beautiful lines ruthlessly cut out, and its time and place on the programmes given over to more mechanical effects, but such occurrences come often and may be catalogued in the "seamy side of the profession." Not all theater-goers care for blank verse and epigrams; but few people exist whose souls are not in some degree stirred with red fire and glittering tinsel. Moralists and preachers may lay this down to the general decadence of the stage, but the fact remains that when only a simple story is desired, people read it. They attend theaters to see things.

On the Other Side.

It may not be commonly known, but it is given out as true, that in many of the most elaborate and perfectly constructed theaters built in modern times more money is spent in the cost of construction of that part of the playhouse behind the drop curtain than the other and more frequently seen part. The acoustics and the seating qualities of the auditorium must be nearly perfect, the decorations and the furnishings must be the most artistic that money can procure; but it is on the stage itself and on the wings, flies and drops that the most careful work of architects and draughtsmen are employed. Studies men are sent to all parts of the world to study stage effects, and the mechanical appliances for producing them, that the illusions that are produced on the other side of the footlights may be as near to natural as human ingenuity can conceive.

In an Old Volume.

Rose-leaves, who pressed you?
Was it some pale lover,
Who smoothed you and caressed you—
You who could not move her?
Did he steal and hold you
(Burning like a lover)
Did he keep and fold you
Over and over?

Rose-leaves, who pressed you
'Neath a leathern cover?
Some coquette who chid you
To deem her heart no rover?
Did she smile? Or, sighing,
Over and over,
Did she kiss you, dying,
Last gift of her lover?

Rose-leaves, I care not
If coquette or lover.
Almost I dare not
Let my warm lips hover
Round you, so seeming.
There! I drop the cover
And leave you to your dreaming
Over and over!

—Post Wheeler in New York Press.