THEATRES AND MUSIC HALLS.

TO THE EDITOR OF "THE DAILY TELEGRAPH."

SIR—As manager and actor I beg to be allowed publicly to protest against the proposed bill drafted by the London County Council for the better management (?) of theatres and music halls. What the intention of this body may be I do not know. I willingly credit them with a desire to benefit the community that elected them. What the result of their bill will be is obvious to anyone who has the least experience of theatrical management. For years the London managers have been striving to refine their entertainments, improve the character of their plays and the quality of the acting. It is not too much to say that the English stage can now hold its own against any other in the world.

The most eminent French and German actors admit freely that our stage management and productions are unrivalled—that nothing so absolutely complete can be seen upon their own stages. This result has been achieved without help of any kind from the State, and in the face of many difficulties, not the least of which was the ignorant interference of the happily-defunct Metropolitan Board of Works. The power of that body was tempered fortunately for us by that vested in the Lord Chamberlain's office. It is now proposed to hand over all the objectionable power of the Board of Works, the authority possessed by the Lord Chamberlain, and that of the licensing magistrates to the County Council. Why? may one ask. Are the theatres badly managed? Are our plays immoral? Are they badly acted? Are our buildings unsafe? Is the Lord Chamberlain incapable of performing the duties assigned to him? If all those things are so—and they are not—who are the men best calculated to alter and improve them? Men who are so crassly ignorant of the stage and its requirements that they scarcely know whether the proscenium is at the front of the stage or the back, whether the flies are in the cellar or on the roof, and would be puzzled to tell you, if you submitted a play to them, whether it was a tragedy, a drama, a comedy, or a farce.

Are our judges chosen from the Army, or our generals from the Bench? Is there anything so paradoxical about the stage that it is necessary to know absolutely nothing about it to be fitted to direct and control it? Is it too much for us to ask that those who now harass and interfere with us, and would practically, if this wretched bill be passed, hold us as puppets in their hands, should at least know something of the strings that are to guide us? Is the experience that we have gained by years of hard work in the cause of our art to go for nothing? Are we, who have learned, to be schooled by the untaught? I have no quarrel with the County Council as individuals. Individually they have treated me with courtesy and consideration; as a body, they or their representatives caused me intense anxiety, and but for the insistence and common-sense of one gentleman would have put their and my masters, the public, to great inconvenience. Will it be credited that they did not grant me a licence to open the New Olympic theatre until past three o'clock on the day of the initial performance? and even then I had to get the Lord Chamberlain's consent before I could legally open the house. Every seat was taken, and people were coming from all parts of London—from Liverpool and Manchester, from Leeds and Birmingham especially, to witness the performance. And what was the reason of the delay? Relays of men had been working night and day to complete alterations insisted upon by the Council, to the detriment of my rehearsals. Practically they were completed. At all events, everything that was necessary for the welfare and safety of the public had been done, although some minor details were incomplete, but the great stumbling block was this: the Lord Chamberlain's representative, a gentleman to whom the public and my profession alike owe a deep debt of gratitude, had made some admirable suggestions, prompted by his great practical experience. Among them was one of great value to the public, viz., a moveable queue at the pit entrance, which would reduce the crush and pressure at the pay-box, allow the people to filter in, protect the pit from draught, and yet open outwards at the pressure of a finger. This door was erected. The architect to the County Council declined to allow the theatre to open until this most valuable and useful arrangement was done away with and the aperture bricked up. No offer of boards or battens would be accept, even though they were strong enough to resist a charge of elephants—it was to be brickwork, or no licence. A similar queue I have had in practical working at the Grand Theatre, Leeds, for twelve years; by it I have controlled crowds of thousands of trippers, and have never yet had an accident of the slightest kind. I was informed that I must submit my plan to the County Council, who did not meet for two or three weeks. It was not a question of the safety of the public; it was a question of this man's authority. I do not blame the man, I blame the system. He could not allow anything that the Council had not in session sanctioned, and they had not formally sanctioned the obvious improvement suggested by the Lord Chamberlain's representative. This is but one instance of many showing the absolute necessity for the appointment of an officer of experience and knowledge, with the power to immediately grant permission for urgent alterations. Imagine the inconvenience to the public if at that late hour—too late to make any announcement of the fact—the theatre had been closed.

The very fact that the bill may enable a manager to make of his theatre a drinking free-and-easy should be enough to condemn it. We are constantly being told that we managers think of nothing but our pockets. My theatre is calculated to hold nearly 3,000 people. If I obtain a drinking and smoking licence, and slightly alter the form of my entertainments, I may reckon on the profit from refreshments served to this vast number of people nightly. Is it my pocket I am thinking of when I oppose with all my might the bill which would enable me to get that profit?

The best interests of the community are served by well-managed theatres. I claim that our London theatres are well managed, and that this bill will tend to degrade and lower the character of the performances and the taste of the public. As the music hall ascends towards the theatre, the theatre must descend to the music hall in order to compete with it. Though there are men who would prefer not to go where drinking and smoking form parts of the attraction—there are many more who would, and the pits and galleries where these things are not allowed would suffer considerably. The two things should be kept totally distinct. One should no more expect to get drama at a music hall than whisky at a bookseller's.

The argument that the indecency and inanity of the comic songs need the moral antidote of the dramatic sketch is surely unjust to the music-hall artists as a body. There are comic singers who are neither indecent nor silly. Let those who are both be stopped by the law. People go to the music halls to enjoy their drinks, their smoke, the variety entertainments and music, not to see dramas and forty-minute sketches—would-be forty minute dramas. The music hall has its mission, so has the theatre. These missions are distinct, and ill must betide both when they are commingled. If a change be necessary—and I freely admit that it is—let it be in the direction of the Lord Chamberlain's office. Invest that with greater power; let it have sole control of the theatres; let an officer be elected who shall have had practical experience of the construction of theatres, and the requirements of the public safety. Let his office be permanent, and let the London managers be taxed on the assessment value of their theatres, to pay him a salary sufficient to place him above the possibility of corruption. Let him be at all times ready to decide upon alterations and give consent thereto. Let the present system of licensing plays continue. Theatres are increasing in numbers yearly—the struggle of the London managers becomes daily a harder one. This bill will make his position unendurable. I suggest that a petition against it be kept at the doors of all theatres, and that all lovers of the drama be asked to sign it.

When once the public mind is aroused to the danger of the bill we shall have loyal assistance. Theatres, for the sake of public safety, require supervision. Practical supervision no manager objects to; but he has a right to protest against unnecessary and unpractical meddlesomeness and harassing interference.

Every practical person who has read this bill condemns it. If it passes into law I firmly believe the theatres, music halls, actors, singers, and the public will alike suffer from its provisions. All owe you, Sir, gratitude for opening your columns to a discussion upon its demerits. I personally beg to thank you for so doing.—I am, Sir, your obedient servant,

WILSON BARRETT.

New Olympic Theatre, Feb. 28.

TO THE EDITOR OF "THE DAILY TELEGRAPH."

SIR—We seem to be getting on a wrong line. I was pained to find Mr. Irving striking a wrong key-note by suggesting that there should be a difference made between music-halls and theatres in forming this proposed censorship. Mr. Irving's deflection from the proper line of argument has resulted in reawakening the rancour of the gentle, loving, charitable Mr. Pinero, which in itself must make him regret the act. In order to get to the proper issue as quickly as possible I will at once admit that in the theatres alone is there anything like stage art to be found, that music-hall entertainments, when they are not hopelessly stupid and dull, are an unwholesome savour in the nostrils of morality, and that from them all that is beautiful and true is absent. I am sure all my music hall friends will agree with me that such is the sad state of affairs. As a matter of fact, we ought not to be allowed to live at all. Well, that's settled; and now to business. If the theatre managers have a good and wise censor, why should not we? Why are they not even charitably desirous to pass him on to us when they have done with him, so that our literary, intellectual, and moral status might be improved, rather than we should be thrown to fanatical wolves. One thing must be admitted. Our two businesses—the worship of "art" and the worship of music hall entertainments—are carried on by very similar means. We all come on the stage, either "single spies" or "in battalions," and sing, talk, dance, and pose to the best of our respective abilities. A censor of the one can be the censor of the other, and I quite agree with the contention in Monday's leading article—that censorship, if there is any need for it at all, should be in the hands of a very special and carefully-selected body, and then they could easily see after the good conduct of both theatres and music halls. Nay, more; I should suggest that some of our clergymen would be none the worse for a little "editing." If the scope of a censor's office were as wide as it might be, we should have been spared the spectacle of a pet parson vulgarly and un-Christianly accusing a number of other parsons of "playing the harlot" because they went one afternoon to see a charming and highly moral play. So, after all, the question of censorship is a pretty comprehensive one. But there seems to be some soreness in the theatrical breast because of some music-hall proprietors allowing "pilules of plays" to be administered to their patrons. And, if the pilules do them good, why not? If I were a music hall proprietor, instead of only a poor inartistic music-hall singer, and any man dared to come to me and say, "Why do you put dramatic sketches on your stage?" I should reply by asking, "Why do you wear a green tie? Because you choose to do so. Well, for exactly the same reason I have plays upon my stage, and if I thought it desirable to play 'Coriolanus' or 'La Traviata' I should play it." In the name of common-sense, why will people high in the dramatic world come forward and exhibit themselves in the ridiculous position of arguing that while on the one hand dramatic art is elevating in its tendency, yet on the other that the music halls, which they all declare, with wonderful unanimity, need elevating, must not take advantage of that elevating influence because people smoke and drink in the said music-halls? What have the smoking and drinking to do with the sketches? Is the quarrel with the actor or the waiter? If there is anything injurious to the community in the conduct of the one or the other, try to correct it; but if there is not, where is your ground for objection? There are times when it behoves all concerned in public entertainments of a legitimate kind to combine heartily to oppose avowed enemies, and yet here they are trying to impose shackles and gags on one another. Earlier in this letter I used the expression, "if there is need for any censorship at all." Who is the censor of the newspapers? Who revises the speeches of prominent politicians, whose greed for power has caused them to excite to—or at least condone—boycotting, crime, outrage, and foul murder? I have in my possession a copy of a certain number of a weekly paper which contains a column or more of the most filthy suggestiveness, which caused many a hardened man of the world to shudder with disgust and something like shame, and for which the perpetrator richly deserved punishment. Many people know to what I allude. Who was the censor in that case? Are all our journals free from reproach on the score of morality? Where is their censor? You cannot legislate for bad taste. You should have no power to do more than inflict a specific punishment for a specific offence against a specific law by a specific individual.

I have been amused lately with the proposition that I, as a singer of songs, shall be compelled to go every Monday morning, songs in hand, to the office of some authority under a sort of literary Contagious Diseases Act, and there be examined as to the fitness of such songs for public representation. "Oh, Morality, what rubbish is spoken in thy name!" We shall have soon to declare the particular way in which we will shape our mouth during each line of the song. I can quite admit the advisability of a special court of decision as to offences against public morality, to have jurisdiction after those offences have been committed, but not before, my dear sir—not before. If leading lights in the entertainment world choose to let themselves be treated differently to their fellow-subjects, namely, as individuals who are more likely to do wrong than not, very well; but I must confess that it is not a position which contains much dignity as far as I can see, and I do not like it. In short, I object to the censor altogether. As to the construction of buildings, I most certainly agree that there should be a permanent Government department to attend to it; but I will not dwell upon that, as it is out of my line of business at present. One of these days we shall all combine, and then our actual enemies will be astonished at our united strength. It ought not to be so very difficult to see what wants altering for the better, and so avoid talk of closing this place and taking away that licence, when doing so must injure many who have done no wrong. There is an old joke which is not without its application even to serious subjects. A cart full of rubbish was being driven past a church when all of a sudden the cart collapsed, and left the heap of rubbish in the road. It was the cause of grave inconvenience to some of the inhabitants, and at last a meeting was held to decide as to whether they should remove the rubbish or the church. The story does not give the conclusion arrived at.—I am, Sir, your obedient servant,

CHARLES COBORN.

London, Feb. 27.

TO THE EDITOR OF "THE DAILY TELEGRAPH."

SIR—In reference to the threatened County Council Theatre Bill, I venture to ask what is the necessity for any change at all? Why should the licensing authority and charge of theatres be taken out of the hands of the Lord Chamberlain? The freedom from any fire calamity in London is surely a proof that the present system has worked well, and that the Lord Chamberlain and his officers have efficiently performed their duties. The present authority is most popular with the London managers, it is presided over by gentlemen of lengthened experience in theatrical matters, and all its requirements are the result of careful personal investigation. If any further powers are needed, which I doubt, why not give them to the Lord Chamberlain, and furnish him with an efficient staff of duly qualified inspectors? On the other hand, I maintain that the County Council are not a proper body to be entrusted with the increased powers they ask, for this, among other reasons: They are a changeable body, and the probability is that with every re-election there would be fresh demands and new fads, and consequently no finality to their vexatious and expensive requirements. The bill contains very many dangerous clauses, some of which—for the minor theatres in particular—mean little less than confiscation, and I sincerely trust the public and the Press will assist us to oppose it.—I am, Sir, your obedient servant.

SARA HAYCRAFT LANE.

Britannia Theatre, Hoxton, Feb. 27.

TO THE EDITOR OF "THE DAILY TELEGRAPH."

SIR—The discussion raised by the new Theatres Bill of the County Council, which has gradually widened into a debate on "Free Trade in Amusements," has done no harm, if it promises to do little good. It has given the public the views of most of our principal actors, authors, and managers. Instead of sulking in their tents they have come out into the open, and shown that they are as clever with their pens as they are with the implements of their craft. If they see bogies it is a pardonable weakness. Their fathers and grandfathers saw similar bogies when the time came to abolish the monopoly of the patent theatres. The stage is nothing if not conservative.

The time has now come to abolish the dramatic restrictions under which the music halls are supposed to work. I say supposed to work advisedly. Nine out of ten halls are breaking the law every night, both in town and country. They have not the courage to play regular pieces—to give pure, unadulterated Offenbach and Maddison Morton—but fall back upon dramatic abortions called "sketches," that would set Mr. Pinero's and Mr. Jones' teeth on edge. The bigger halls, lulled into a false sense of security by the want of a legal decision in Wigan v. Strange (1865), are feeding upon spectacular ballets of the type once regarded as the sole property of the opera-houses. This state of things cannot be allowed to continue. Legislation must at once protect these "disorderly" exhibitions, or twenty simultaneous prosecutions must put a stop to them. The public may not like this; but who are the public? Only forty millions of tax-payers!

No men have more claim to speak with authority in the cause of art than the bulk of those who have addressed you on this subject. But, as the Americans say, What is the matter with art? It pays better than Consols; it pays better than grinning through a horse-collar. ...

COVENT-GARDEN THEATRE.

CRYSTAL PALACE CONCERTS.

THE HORSE SHOW.

KENSINGTON GARDENS RAILWAY.

PAINT AND POINT.

PRINCESS'S.

LAW INTELLIGENCE.

QUEEN'S BENCH DIVISION—FEB. 28.

DIVORCE DIVISION—FEB. 28.

POLICE INTELLIGENCE.

THE RIOTING AT THE DOCKS.

THE ADVANCE IN DOCKYARD WAGES.

THE NAVY.

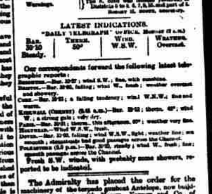
THE GERMAN EMPIRE.

ATTEMPTED MURDER OF A POLITICAL AGENT.

AFFAIRS OF THE PORTE.

CANADIAN ELECTIONS.

"DAILY TELEGRAPH" WEATHER OBSERVATIONS.



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