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Mr. JOHN KNITTEL AND SOME OF HIS CRITICS

"The Torch," by John Knittel, which was reviewed in our last issue, has attracted considerable comment in the London Press. Our readers may be interested in the following extracts from leading papers.

The Times is on the whole favourable, remarking on "the uproarious applause throughout the evening," but makes the rather unkind remark:—

"This play is understood to be by a Swiss gentleman. And, to judge from the pronunciation last night, most of the actors seemed to be Swiss gentlemen, too. Never was there such a guttural evening!"

"A heart-cry triumph," *The Referee* calls the performance, and continues:—

"It was a triumphant challenge on behalf of the old-fashioned emotional heart-cry, of which the so-called melodramatic of a passing generation, such as Wilson Barrett and Charles Warner, knew the secret. We have actors of the reigning race who keep something of the tradition—Mr. Matheson Lang, Mr. Seymour Hicks, and others—but none too many. Heart-cries are supposed to be out of fashion. In his book on play-writing Mr. William Archer would have it that the old Jacob and Joseph sentiment of the meeting between father and son will never again be of any use on the stage. My old friend should have heard the cheers at the Apollo when a Jewish actor had the courage to be human!"

"Mr. John Knittel is of Swiss extraction," remarks the *Evening Standard*.—

"but he has gone north for his models in play construction, and in the study of morals, at any rate as to the earlier acts of his play, which he proceeds to round off to the complete satisfaction of the young women who love to have their heartstrings strained, and then go home hugging the memory of a happy ending. It is Ibsen-cum-Pettitt . . . but Mr. John Knittel is the stuff dramatists are made of."

The *Daily Chronicle* rather severely declares that the fourth act is "a silly postscript to an otherwise entertaining letter," adding, however, that "the first three acts are strong sound drama, with at least two considerable thrills."

The *Daily Sketch* says:—

"According to 'The Torch,' a lurid play produced at the Apollo, some families in Switzerland can be strangely unlike the 'Swiss Family Robinson.' The Swiss family Winkelried were at each other hammer and tongs. In the first scene the son hit the father over a difference in politics . . . The same son, the rudest man I have ever seen on the stage . . ."

How glad one must be to learn that this bad son mends his turbulent ways in the last act, even if the critics don't approve of the happy ending!

One of the objectors, *The Observer*, says:—

"It started off very well, with an excellent first act, but it petered out and ended in a happy ending which would not have convinced a fly of its verity. No author has any right to leave us at the end of the third act with his characters in a condition of deep rage with each other, one of them being a completely callous cad, and then ask us to believe at the beginning of the fourth act that the rage has vanished and the cad has been reformed to the extent of reading the Bible regularly."

The *Empire News* is disparaging with its remark:—

"Well, 'The Torch' is hardly likely to set the Thames on fire."

The following comment on Mr. Knittel's beard evokes a Van Dyck head:—

"His small, triangular beard is the sort that one associates with Crown Princes of Ruritania."

On the Woman's page of the *Evening Standard* the setting and costumes are remarked on:—

"A charming setting among Swiss mountains is one of the attractions of 'The Torch,' and the daughter of the mayor of the little town (Sempach) has some quaint peasant costumes to wear."

The *Evening News* calls it "an all-sob play," under

the heading, Flood of tears that nearly puts out 'The Torch':—

"Never can a play have contained more sobs and shoulder-heavings than does 'The Torch,' the new piece at the Apollo. Mr. Maurice Moscovitch, in his welcome return to the London stage, waded knee-deep in his own and other people's tears."

The *Sporting Times* remarks:—

"It was a pity they all piped the eye so profusely, because it took the mind off the good stuff—and there's quite a deal of it in John Knittel's play."

The *Sunday Express* comments:—

"I do not think that we shall see quite such another first night as 'The Torch' for some time. Mr. Moscovitch has never wept such tears. His emotion was so great that when he seized the flaming torch to burn down his own house there was grave danger that his tears would put the torch out, and thus spoil the best scene in the play."

"The author is a young Swiss gentleman by the name of John Knittel. He has imagination and youth. With restraint he may do something worth while. As it is, he has given us a play which is only saved from being very funny by the genius of that great actor, Moscovitch."

This last remark seems really unkind.

From the *Weekly Dispatch*:—

"'The Torch' had a wildly enthusiastic reception, and at the end Moscovitch made one of the longest first-night speeches I remember. The gist of his remarks was that everyone connected with the production, with the exception of himself is young: 'The author is a young man, the producer is a young man, Captain Aaronsohn is a very young man. Only I am old—but, then, I know you English like old furniture.'"

Let us hope that Mr. Knittel will derive encouragement from the thought that youth is only a temporary draw-back should he read the following from the *Sunday Illustrated*:—

"The play is a very young melodrama—credible as Mr. John Knittel's first effort, but not more."

And in another paper:—

"Whether youth—except in an actress, and not always then—is a real asset in the theatre is rather doubtful. There is a very great deal to be said for experience and ripeness of judgment."

"The young manager, the young playwright, the young producer, the young actor, do not always succeed in hiding their lack of maturity. There is a certain amount of rawness about 'The Torch,' which is not very well covered up, for example."

The following letter from a Swiss reader contains an original, but, we fear, impracticable suggestion for an "All-Swiss" performance of Mr. John Knittel's new play:—

To the Editor "The Swiss Observer."

Sir,—Have you seen "The Torch" at the Apollo Theatre yet? Moscovitch gives a magnificent rendering of an old-fashioned, irascible Swiss father. The whole play, a struggle between the Past Traditional Virtue and Communistic Youth, is thrilling. Do tell all your readers about it so that they shall not miss the chance of seeing such a patriotic piece so well acted. The ideal would be a special performance, filling the theatre with a Swiss audience, and asking the Swiss Institute Orchestra to play our Swiss music in the entr'actes instead of those meaningless dances quite out of place after such tragic scenes.

The character of Ursula is also open to criticism—Swiss women feel some pride, too! And when Abel returns, he should say the virile "Father" instead of "Dad." But on the whole it is an artistic delight as well as a harrowing lesson.

Believe me, yours faithfully,

E. F.

Sept. 18th, 1922.

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