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The Norwich Players

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# *The Norwich Players*

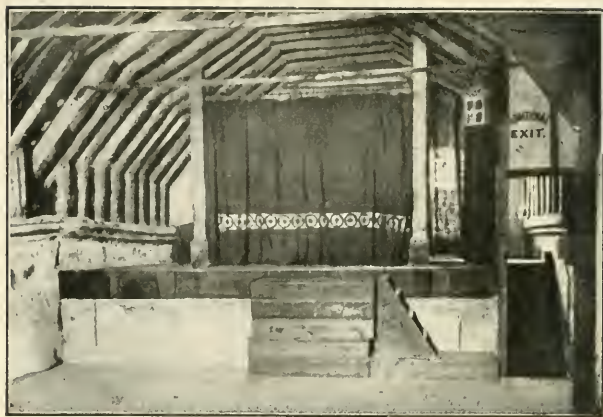
*A History, an  
Appreciation and  
a Criticism*



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## THE OLD MUSICK HOUSE

**B**LOMEFIELD, in his history of Norwich, says—

“The capital messuage, commonly called the MUSICK HOUSE, was anciently the great messuage of *Moses the Jew*, a man of great wealth and ability in the time of *Will. Rufus*; he left it to *Abraham the Jew*, his son; and he to *Isaac the Jew*, his son; from whom it was anciently called ISAAC’S-HALL; from him it became an *escheat* to King *John*, whose son *Henry III.* gave it to Sir *William de Valeres*, knt.; it afterwards came to *Ralf de Erlham* and by him was sold to *Richard*, son of *Henry de Norwich*, who in 1259 conveyed it to *Will. de Dunwich*. In 1290 it was owned by *Alan de Frestone*, Archdeacon of *Norfolk*, at which time there was a chapel in the house; and in 1316 Sir *Constantine de Mortimer*, knt., lived in it, whose chaplain, *Clement de Suffolk*, priest, was then suspended for

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marrying two servants of Sir *Constantine's* in it; and the chapel was put under interdict for the future, it being proved that it was detrimental to the church of St. *Etheldred*, in which parish it was situated.

“In 1368 *John de Catfield*, rector of *Stratton*, was trustee to the Lady *Eve de Andelee*, and Sir *James de Andelee*, knt., her son, for the *place* in St. *Etheldred's* and St. *Clement's* parishes in *Conisford*, called *Isaac's-hall*; it after belonged to Sir *Will. Benhall*, knt., then to the Lady *Kat. Felbricke*, widow of Sir *Simon Felbricke*, knt., then to Sir *William Yelverton*, knt., and in 1474 was the city house of *William Yelverton*, Esq., by whom it was sold to Sir *John Paston*, knt., who resided in it in 1488. In 1626, *John Paston*, Esq., owned it; and in 1633 it was the *city house* of the Lord Chief Justice *Coke*.

THE STORY OF THE  
NORWICH PLAYERS



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## THE STORY OF THE NORWICH PLAYERS

### I. *Their Formation.*

THE Guild of the Norwich Players was formed in 1910, and consisted of nine members, all men, and all under 30 years of age. Nugent Monck was their producer and their leader. Their purpose was solely æsthetic. They intended to devote their leisure time to the performance of dramatic works of art, the tendency of which was to show the beauty of truth and goodness and the ugliness of vice. At first they chose as their material the religious drama of the Middle Ages, and gave invitation performances in the beautiful Tudor house of their producer. A performance of the medieval Interlude "Youth," given at "The Crypt" in those early days, was an unforgettable experience. The original members of the

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Guild all had an intense love for their art, which gave an extraordinary depth and sincerity to their performance. The spectators were carried back to the past centuries of faith, when religion was part and parcel of the daily life of the people. The few feet that separated audience from players was bridged by spiritual imagination, and the whole room was thinking and feeling in unison. The scene that was being enacted was no mere spectacle, but a personal experience, and no greater triumph than that can be achieved by a producer or an actor.

### *II. The Old Musick Room.*

THE room at the Crypt soon became overcrowded, and in 1914 the Players started their shows at the Musick Room, a small and interesting building whose history dates back to Norman times. A number of mediæval mystery and morality plays were given there, including the Norwich mystery of "Paradyse." One of the most striking as well as the most original of the plays given at that period was "Merchandise," an adaptation by one of the Players of a West

## *THE NORWICH PLAYERS.*

Country legend. The legend deals with the visit of Joseph of Arimathea to England, unknowingly bringing the Child Jesus as ship-boy. The ship-boy effects the sudden conversion of a wild farmer-lad, and the scene in which this occurs was acted with consummate skill. The broad Norfolk accent of the farmer added to the dramatic contrast of the two types—the earthly and the spiritual. As for the acting, one forgot to criticise—the actors actually were what they represented. Whether the casting was exceptionally fortunate, or whether the players were inspired beyond their usual powers by the dignity of the little episode, the result was well-nigh perfect. Another example of religious drama presented in such a way as to satisfy æsthetically without the slightest lapse from reverence, was the performance of “Job,” given at St. Andrew’s Hall, Norwich, Covent Garden, and Stratford-on-Avon. The “Book of Job” as the Hon. Sybil Amherst prepared it for the stage, startled even the Shakespeare lovers who heard it during “The Week” in the Stratford Memorial Theatre.

## THE NORWICH PLAYERS.

### *Nugent Monck as a Producer.*

AFTER religious drama, Elizabethan was the field in which the Norwich Players achieved the highest artistic success. Their producer had been through a long course of training under William Poel in Shakespearean production, and he introduced into his own theatre the apron stage, direct lighting, a minimum of scenery, and all the other improvements which distinguish the new æsthetic school of production. Instead of the one "star" and a score of dimly-shining candles, the new type of Shakespeare producer gives us an even level of excellence, from the serving-wench with her four-line part to the heroine herself. Instead of heavy grease-paint necessitated by a glare of footlights, we now have the slightest make-up, hardly discernible by the front row of stalls, and a system of lighting from the front, which becomes in the hands of a clever producer an invaluable instrument for the achieving of beautiful effects. Nugent Monck excels in the art of lighting and stage effect without the usual accessories of the commercial theatre.

## *THE NORWICH PLAYERS.*

ONE of the characteristics of the Norwich Players has always been their speed—indeed, Musick Room audiences have been known to murmur that they were not getting their money's worth, so quickly did the performance come to an end! Nugent Monck likes to play straight through, with the exception of a few minutes in the middle to allow the Players to get their breath. Occasionally his actors are not able to combine swiftness of delivery with clarity, but these are the neophytes, and after a very short time they learn to take up their cues with lightning speed, and rap out their words like any Frenchman.

NUGENT MONCK'S particular genius as a producer lies in the dignity with which he clothes all his productions, so that whatever little "fads" he introduces in the way of virginals for accompaniments, the solemn tolling of a bell instead of the three knocks of the French theatre, the non-appearance of his cast at the end of the play to take a "call," and the strict anonymity he insists on for all the performers, he can never be accused of bad taste.

## THE NORWICH PLAYERS.

### *The Effect of the War on the Norwich Players.*

By the summer of 1914 the Norwich Players had given some twenty plays, all of the romantic or religious type, and had won a reputation for themselves in London and in Stratford, and, far harder task, had just begun to find honour in their own country. Then came the War, and the cessation of all artistic enterprise. The Players were scattered far and wide, one of them never to return. The Producer found himself in Egypt, where he immediately set to work, in the intervals between his official duties as Orderly in the R.A.M.C., to produce plays for the men. He found in Egypt some excellent material, both for his cast and for his own intellectual and artistic development. He produced Shakespeare in a hospital hut. The fame of this achievement reached London, and an article in the *Times* described his work.

IN the autumn of 1919 the Players, together with many other such societies, picked themselves up from among the ruins, and surveyed the prospect before them. Their producer was back in the

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Crypt—the Musick Room had not been shattered by German bombs—so far, so good. But of the original band of Players, only two were available. What was to be done? Start again, of course. With admirable courage and energy, Nugent Monck and his friends scoured Norwich for fresh actors, secured a certain number of guarantors for their first season, and drew up a programme calculated to please their new public. Thus, to all intents and purposes, they were re-established, just as if the War had never been, and in September, 1919, the first show of the New Era was given.

### *The New Era.*

OUTWARDLY, the Norwich Players were resuscitated. Inwardly they were a new growth, as yet only in embryo. All sorts of causes militated against the re-appearance of the pre-War Guild. As has been said, the old Players had disappeared, all save two; the producer had been through experiences which had broadened him in many ways. Then financial difficulties had to be faced; it would no longer be possible to produce for the joy of pro-

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ducing. Thus a compromise became necessary—a compromise between art and economics. The Players would continue to maintain their high standard, but to a certain extent they would be obliged to consult popular taste and produce old favourites, such as “The School for Scandal,” “Much Ado About Nothing,” and “Candida.”

WHAT the future holds in store depends chiefly on the people of Norwich. It is an open secret that nearly all repertory theatres are backed by some wealthy patron, if not actually run as a financial speculation. The Norwich Players depend solely on “the door.” Most repertory theatres boast a hall with a seating accommodation of 300 at least. The Old Musick Room holds one hundred, and unless the prices of tickets are put so high that only a tiny minority of the population can afford them, seven performances must be given before the most modest profit can be made. And if those seven performances are not well attended, even that modest profit does not appear!

ALL other repertory companies are paid for their labours. The Norwich Players



## THE NORWICH PLAYERS.

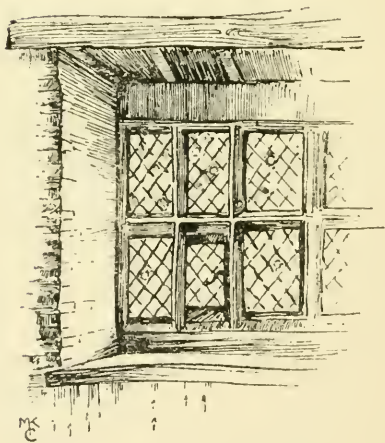
cannot yet afford to take salaries. Therefore they are all obliged to earn their living by other means and can devote only their leisure hours to acting. The disadvantages of this condition of affairs are obvious.

NEVERTHELESS, in spite of the many difficulties before them, the Players are making good headway. They are giving monthly performances, each running for six nights and a matinée. They work hard and then produce works harder. Whether their efforts are justified or not remains to be seen.

EVERY town has the Repertory Theatre it deserves. Art for art's sake has been proved an untenable theory. Art should not seek, primarily, to please, but if it does *not* please, then its existence is not justified. It has failed in its mission, which is, to interpret man to himself. The art which is above the heads of the people is either unreal or born out of due time, and as unsatisfying as any anachronism. A dramatic work of art especially should be popular as well as æsthetic, since the audience is an essential factor in its composition. The problem of how

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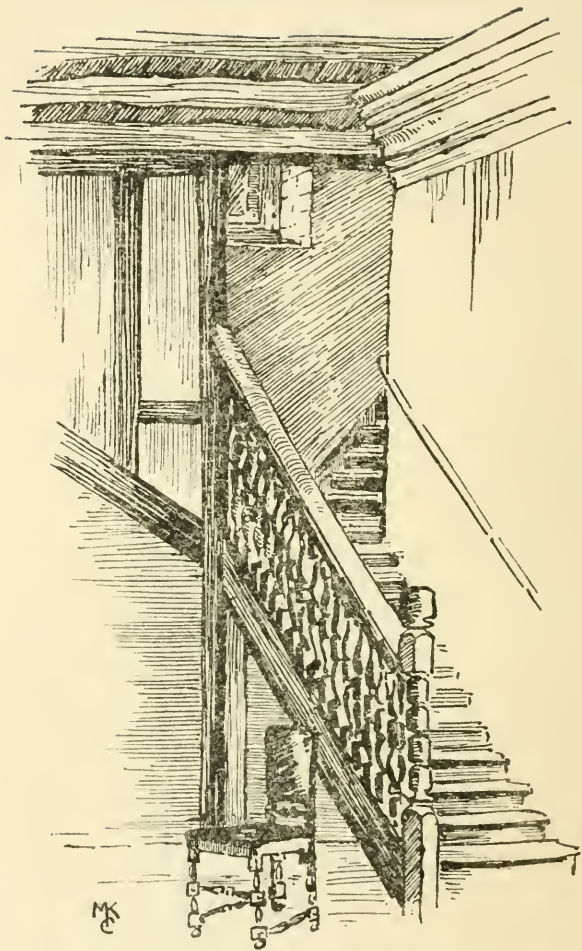
to combine popularity with good taste is one with which the Norwich Players must grapple, for on it depends that more materialistic, yet no less important, problem, of how to make two ends meet.



Window in Green Room.

THE NORWICH PLAYERS  
AND THEIR PRODUCER

*A Personal Impression.*



Entrance to Green Room at the Old Musick House.

## THE NORWICH PLAYERS AND THEIR PRODUCER.

### *A Personal Impression.*

THE moving spirit of the Norwich Players is Nugent Monck. It is asserted by some admirers that he has genius as a producer. That may well be. That he has more than a little talent, much ingenuity and indefatigable energy and patience, only those who understand the difficulties of presentation at the Old Musick House can fully appreciate. It is not merely that the producer understands the limitations of both stage and actors. He does more. He realises their possibilities—the possibilities of a stage which will barely take an average-sized dining room carpet and human material with sincerity and enthusiasm and a taste for the theatre, but without tradition and without experience.

THE producer comes to the first rehearsal with a complete idea in his mind,

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and his sometimes witty, always vivacious and revealing comment on the characters at once places the actors *en rapport* with the idea of the play. Put in another way, the producer imposes his own idea of the play, and of each individual part, on the actors at the very beginning. Nugent Monck gives you the impression that his conviction of each character is the only one which will fit in perfectly with his complete conception of the play. You don't argue, because in all probability you come to the first rehearsal with a very hazy impression of the play, and an imperfect sense of the possibilities of your own part. What is more, the producer has a very happy knack of proving to the player of the smallest and most insignificant part that he has an opportunity of making a huge personal success. This means that the actor who says only "My lord, the carriage waits" says it with a sincerity and conviction, and even joyfulness, which is a tremendous help to the production. As Synge said, in art one must have reality and one must have joy.

THE following plays have been produced since the Autumn of 1919:—

## THE NORWICH PLAYERS.

“Much Ado About Nothing.” Shakespeare.

“The Land of Heart’s Desire.” W. B. Yeats.

“Omar Khayyam.” A dramatic version of Fitzgerald’s poem by Nugent Monck.

“Nishikigi.” A Japanese Noh play, translated by Ezra Pound.

“The Comedy of Errors.” Shakespeare.

“The King’s Play,” “The Shepherd’s Play,” etc., etc., Mediæval Mysteries.

“The School for Scandal.” Sheridan.

“Love’s Labour’s Lost.” Shakespeare.

“The Beggar’s Opera.” John Gay.

“The Mimes of Herōdas.”

“Romeo and Juliet.” Shakespeare.

“Candida.” G. B. Shaw.

“The Hippolytus of Euripides.”

Now there was only one failure among these, if we except the dramatization of “Omar Khayyam,” which its producer himself allowed was “clap-trap.” This single failure was the Yeats play. Chiefly the fault was in the dramatist-poet. No poet can be more ineffectual than Mr. Yeats—it is the defect of his poetic

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qualities. The play is a mere babblement—slight, verbose, characterless and full of the peculiarly naive Irish poetic cliché, which at one time seemed so fresh and delightful. As a ballad of a dozen stanzas “Heart’s Desire” might be quite beautiful, but as a play it is ineffective, joyless, unreal. The producer’s failure may therefore be excused. Of the others “Much Ado about Nothing” and “Nishikigi” were the outstanding artistic successes of the season. The latter in particular was a strangely beautiful and moving piece of work. Whether the conventions used in the production—the semi-monotonous chant of the speakers, the strange gestures and curious dancing, the exquisite dresses—whether these were archæologically correct, or not, does not matter in the least. An illusion of reality in unreality and joy in grief was produced, a sensitive and moving drama was projected into the auditorium, and a beautiful momentary glimpse given of things half-expressed and wholly inexpressible, evanescent yet eternal. Nishikigi was a personal triumph for Nugent Monck, the producer. What the audience could not know was



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that the acting in the little play was also a personal triumph for him. Of course, in a sense, this is the case with all the Norwich Players' productions, but in Nishikigi it was so in a very special sense. From start to finish the producer called the tune, while the actors danced to his piping. Gesture, intonation, every little inflection was, to those who knew the producer, an almost perfect reproduction. It is unlikely the Norwich Players will do anything so good again.

"MUCH Ado About Nothing" was produced without scenery, and save for a break a little more than half-way through, the action was continuous. The play was cut, ruthlessly. It gained dramatically something of what it lost poetically. "You have no stomach, signior." Thus it is with most audiences, even a Music House audience—the majority have no stomach for pure poetry. However, "Much Ado About Nothing" is a brilliant though too seldom played comedy, and save for some obvious and perhaps unavoidable errors of casting was excellently played. Benedick Beatrice and Dogberry were the out-

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standing acting successes. Before saying anything about the production generally, I should like to enquire into the reason for the excellence of these three actors. In each case the actor had identified himself with the part. There was no attempt at what is generally but mistakenly understood as acting. The actor was himself or herself, hence the reality; he or she obviously took great pleasure in the acting, hence the joy. Thus we had a Benedick who was a man beneath the quips, not a parrot on the one hand repeating well-conned repartee, nor on the other hand a swash-buckling buccaneer. If you like, he was a gentleman. In passing, it may be mentioned that the producer often implores the actors not to be too gentlemanly. There is undoubtedly a danger of the Norwich Players' performances being too refined—by which is meant, chiefly, a disinclination on the part of the players to let themselves go. The Beatrice had self-possession and charm—she avoided skittishness or rather achieved a dignity of behaviour in the bouts with Benedick which the more experienced actress, who looks on the

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part as a plum, can never realise. If this Beatrice had no great depth, she had grace and sincerity. In the serious parts Beatrice demands an experienced tragic actress, who without expressing tragedy can yet feel it. The famous "Kill Claudio" is a test of greatness. To avoid a fall at that fence, skill of the highest kind is necessary. It is the better part to walk round by the gate. The Dogberry was richly Shakespearean. A pleasant innovation was the use of the Norfolk dialect for all the low comedy parts. It is not too much to say that the humour and the effect of reality was heightened tremendously by this device. A better Dogberry it would scarcely be possible to conceive. One felt indeed that Dogberry was a Norfolk man. Such vast and terrible unconsciousness was devastating.

For the rest, the parts were capably played, in no case much below the level of the average professional touring company.

As a producer, Nugent Monck is at his best in Shakespeare. That is my own impression. I am told by many who

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saw the pre-war productions, particularly those which took place in the producer's own fourteenth century house called "The Crypt," that he is better in the production of Mediaeval Mysteries, that indeed the production of Youth, Holly and Ivy and Merchandise (a Norfolk version of a Cornish Mystery) were things of wonder and beauty. I speak only of things I have seen. The Wakefield Mysteries produced at Christmas, 1919, were interesting, but they lacked conviction. This may have been the actors' fault. Mysteries and Moralities must be acted with passion and sincerity. One felt that actors and audience were out of touch with the spirit of the things—the Old Musick House was a house of mourning—there was no reality and no joy. Perhaps I am altogether wrong; maybe these things ought to be done in a spirit of reverence. But the lugubrious gloom which infected the stage and the audience was about as truly reverential as the uncomfortable silence which follows the Benediction, when the stiff-kneed congregation hold on tensely while the minister affects a private colloquy with

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his Maker. Even that sparkling comedy, "The Shepherds' Play" suffered from too much gloom.

IN the three Shakespearian productions, "Much Ado About Nothing," "The Comedy of Errors," and "Love's Labour Lost," Nugent Monck showed real flair as a producer. A definite atmosphere clothed each play. Although the "cuts" were severe, and to my mind inimical to good acting in all except the principal parts, the idea of each play came out clearly, convincingly and with extraordinary effect. Charm is the producer's chief characteristic—quaintness and charm. Take the Church scene in "Much Ado" as an example. The priest accompanied by his acolytes in red came on and stood with his back to the audience, while the curtains opened discovering the whole of the cast who moved slowly forward to the priest, the two principals a little in advance of the rest on a small white stage-cloth. The effect of this cloth was, when Claudio waves the priest on one side, to isolate Claudio and Hero for the tragic scene as no other method on so tiny a stage could possibly do.

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A trifle, but Nugent Monck's productions are full of such trifles of stage-management which are as effective as they are quaint and charming.

WHAT I have said about "Much Ado" applies equally to the other Shakespearian productions, except "Romeo," which did not quite reach the same high level.

OF the remaining productions, "The Beggar's Opera" and "The Hippolytus" of Euripides were most notable. Both were well-acted. The jollity of Gay's farce, precursor as it was of our modern musical comedies, infected the actors with a like spirit of joyfulness. They revelled to some effect.

THE Hippolytus was a different affair altogether. It has been considered so fully in another place recently that I need not say more than that it ranks as a production with "Nishikigi." It was a beautiful and an inspiring thing.

IN conclusion, I find it difficult to believe that the Norwich players were ever better than they are to-day. Indeed, it is probable they were never quite so good. The notion that things were better in one's youth, that the school or college

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deteriorated after our day, that the garden and home of our childhood was brighter, that Dickens and Thackeray, Tennyson, and Browning were giants compared with the authors of *Clayhanger* and *Tono Bungay*, of the *Dynasts* and *The Growth of Love*—this notion, summed up in the phrase that the old actors were the best, is probably illusion. “Distant objects please,” says Hazlitt, that incomparable critic and essayist, “because we clothe them with the indistinct and airy colours of fancy.” In five years’ time I also may say the players are not what they were. But it will not be true—unless, perish the thought, they achieve perfection in the interim. Meantime one is pleased to note that “moral uplift,” which some say was once part of the Players’ creed, has given place to the more healthy attempt to amuse. When the moralist enters the theatre the artist makes his exit.

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