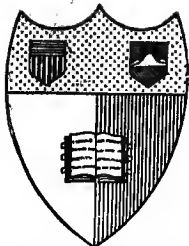


PN

2594

P69





Cornell University Library

Ithaca, New York

FROM THE

BENNO LOEWY LIBRARY

COLLECTED BY

BENNO LOEWY

1854-1919

BEQUEATHED TO CORNELL UNIVERSITY

Cornell University Library
PN 2594.P69

Suggestions for establishing an English



3 1924 026 122 626

olin



Cornell University Library

The original of this book is in
the Cornell University Library.

There are no known copyright restrictions in
the United States on the use of the text.

SUGGESTIONS

FOR ESTABLISHING AN

ENGLISH ART THEATRE.

BY J. R. PLANCHÉ,

Somerset Herald.

LONDON:

WYMAN & SONS, 81, GREAT QUEEN STREET,
LINCOLN'S-INN FIELDS, W.C.

1879.

SUGGESTIONS FOR A NATIONAL THEATRE.

THE desirability of the establishment of a theatre in London "not wholly controlled by the predominant taste of the public" was eloquently advocated by Mr. George Godwin, editor of the *Builder*, in his speech as chairman of a meeting of the Society for the Encouragement of the Fine Arts, at their rooms in Conduit-street, when the late Dr. Doran delivered his lecture, "For and against Shakspeare," and the question then mooted has since been unanimously answered in the affirmative at the Social Science Congress at Cheltenham, where Mr. Godwin reproduced his arguments, strengthened by the cordial support of Mr. Henry Irving, Mr. Hermann Vezin, and several others eminently qualified to pronounce their opinions on the subject.

A considerable number of gentlemen, well-wishers to the cause, including many of the theatrical profession, having both publicly and privately expressed their approval of the main object of the movement, the views of some of the original promoters of it are now formulated for

the consideration of all who are interested in its success.

In the first place, it is necessary to declare as explicitly as possible that no rivalry or competition is contemplated with any existing establishment, the objects of the direction of the proposed theatre being strictly limited :—1. To the restoration to the stage of the masterpieces of the great dramatists of the last three centuries, which with some very few exceptions have been either wholly neglected or spasmodically revived by modern managers, and are unknown to the present generation of playgoers. 2. The production of original plays of the highest class, which for commercial or other reasons have, notwithstanding their intrinsic merit, been unable to obtain representation. And 3. The general cultivation and encouragement of histrionic art and the welfare and respectability of its professors. It is believed that these objects can only be attained by the foundation of a theatre on the model of the Théâtre Français at Paris; but it is almost hopeless to expect that, although thousands upon thousands are annually voted by our Parliament for the support of academies, museums, school-boards, and other institutions connected with art and education, it would sanction the appropriation of the smallest subsidy in aid of an art in which are combined the graces of all the others, and of a school which for educational purposes surpasses any as yet existing.

In default, therefore, of such assistance from Government, at any rate at present, as is afforded to the National Theatre in France, the stability of a National Theatre in England must be assured by annual subscriptions amounting to a sum sufficient to cover the natural expenses, and guarantee the direction from loss and the company from a calamity of too-frequent occurrence, — the choice between taking half-salaries and a sudden termination of their engagements, perhaps in the very middle of the season.

As the raising of such a fund is necessarily the first step to be taken, and as unless satisfactorily effected the project must fall to the ground, it may be held useless to enter into an explanation of the mode in which it is suggested the fund should be employed and the theatre conducted; at the same time it is obvious that without some information on those subjects it would be idle to expect any one to subscribe. The following propositions, embodying the principal points of the scheme, are therefore respectfully submitted to the public for consideration.

It is estimated that the sum of £20,000 would be amply sufficient to cover the whole expenses of a season of eight months, or, more strictly speaking, thirty-two weeks, commencing at the end of October and terminating at the end of June. This estimate is formed on the rough calculation that the total average daily expenditure would not exceed £100 or £600 weekly

(£19,200) at starting, that expense being naturally reduced by the gradual increase of scenery, dresses, and decorations available in future seasons, the original cost of which must be defrayed during the preceding, and would eventually constitute a valuable property.

The subscribers to this fund to be considered proprietors, who should have a first charge on the receipts of the theatre of 3 per cent. per annum interest on the amount of the sums individually subscribed, and in whom should be vested the property of every description belonging to the theatre, before or behind the curtain. They should have power to appoint the treasurer of the theatre and box-office keeper, and be legally secured against any responsibility beyond the amount of their original subscription. Their privilege to be limited to their personal free admission to any part of the house before the curtain, except the private boxes, with the liberty of securing a seat in advance of the performance.

Assuming the sum raised, the next step would be the possession of a theatre the auditorium of which was capable of accommodating without inconvenience, at moderate prices (say, stalls, 7s.; lower boxes, 5s.; upper ditto, 3s.; pit, 2s.; and gallery, 1s.), a sufficient number of persons to produce a receipt of not less than £250 per representation, at periods of special attraction, exclusive of private boxes, the number of which

would have to be regulated according to the construction of the theatre.

The general control of the theatre to be exercised by a board of directors, say seven in number, none of whom should be either dramatists or actors, but men of acknowledged eminence in literature and art, and whose names and character would be a sufficient assurance to the public that their councils would be guided by sound judgment, cultivated taste, and strict impartiality. Their services should be gratuitous. Their privileges, — the appointment of the acting manager, free access at all times to every part of the house, and a commodious private box for their joint occupancy, but not for disposal.

The acting manager to be entrusted with the formation of the company, the appointment of the stage-manager and his subordinates, the heads of the scenic and mechanical departments, the master and mistress of the wardrobe, and the musical director, all salaries being submitted to the board of directors for sanction previously to the signature of an engagement.

The acting manager to select the plays for representation (the board of directors having the power of veto), and to decide on the days for their production and repetition. Also to make out "the bill of the play," which should contain simply the title of the piece, the name of the author, the distribution of the characters, the time of

performance, and the prices of admission, or other necessary information.

With respect to the time of performance, independently of the rapidly-increasing favour with which morning, or more correctly speaking, afternoon representations appear to be regarded by the public, there are many and very important advantages attending such a practice, which induce the promoters strongly to recommend its adoption by the directors of a National Theatre. First of all, the inestimable one to the actor, whose daily labour terminates at an early hour in the evening, leaving the remainder of it to be devoted by him to repose, recreation, or study according to his inclinations, and affording him valuable opportunities of visiting other theatres and witnessing the impersonations of the most distinguished artists, English or foreign. To the public the advantages are equally considerable. The hours from three to six p.m. are specially those which are most at the disposal of the fashionable world, and for all classes the convenience of morning dress, particularly in bad weather, the liberty obtained for social or domestic enjoyment in the evening, and the ability to reach even a distant home without the risk of "missing the last train," especially when accompanied by children,—an anxiety which not only detracts from the pleasure of the spectators, but constantly compels large parties to rise and hurry from their seats before the fall of the curtain, to the

great annoyance of both actors and audience, as well as regret to themselves,—must surely be obvious to every one. Nor should we omit to call attention to the profit derivable from the occasional letting of the Theatre in the evening for concerts, lectures, &c. Still this is a point which would remain open for discussion.

It now only remains for us to suggest the mode by which the subscriptions and receipts should be apportioned for the general benefit of the institution.

Taking the aforesaid estimate of the weekly expenses as fairly correct, the first sum to be provided would be the interest on the £20,000 subscribed, amounting to £600, which, for the better security of the proprietors, it is proposed should be taken from the receipts at the doors daily. Excluding Passion-week, Ash-Wednesday, and, say four or five days before Christmas, the number of play-days in the season would amount to 180, and the deduction to about £20 per week, which must be regarded as rent.

We now come to the working expenses of the establishment, the largest portion of which would of course be the salaries of the company and its officers. Here we arrive at a point on which there will probably be more difference of opinion than any other. It being impracticable, in the first instance, to place the actors engaged in this projected theatre in a relative position to the *Membres Sociétaires* of the Théâtre Français, the

question is how nearly we can enable them to approach it beneficially, both as affects their pecuniary and professional interests.

As it is the avowed intention to avoid to the extent of their power any cause for the hostility of contemporary managements by competition with them in the market for the services of popular artists, the promoters suggest that the highest salary should not exceed £25 or £30 per week. Actors and actresses who, in consequence of their individual attraction, can and do command double such sums, are not expected to reduce their terms for the love of art or the cultivation of it in others. The principal object of the national theatre is the education of the profession as much as that of the public, and its promoters confidently believe that there are hundreds on the metropolitan and provincial stages who only require the opportunity, under judicious guidance, to develop the latent genius that is smouldering in their souls. Every day the list is increasing of young and intelligent women and men who have attracted the notice of the press and the experienced playgoer; and independently of them, the list of supporters of a proposed national theatre includes members who have already won their spurs as far as it has been possible for them to do so in the class of characters to the interpretation of which they have been limited, and which, whatever their merits, are not to be named in comparison with those in the standard drama of this country which they have

the laudable ambition to prove they are worthy to illustrate.

To them and all who are inclined to volunteer in this "forlorn hope," as some consider it, of the English stage, the following propositions, founded on the usages of the "Théâtre Français," are offered for their consideration. As no play, however attractive, would be repeated any number of days consecutively, the same principal performers would not be called upon to appear more than twice or three times in the week. If, however, any of them should be required to strengthen the cast of pieces performed on alternate days, they would in addition to their fixed salary receive a stipulated sum per diem, on the principle of the French theatre, known therein as their "feu"; and it is also suggested that the members should have a beneficial interest in the success of the institution by a distribution amongst them of one-third of any profits resulting from it in the shape of a percentage according to the annual amount of their fixed salary; the other two-thirds being appropriated, one to a fund to be called the directors' fund, to provide for casualties or extraneous expenses, and the other to the formation of a fund for the gradual paying-off of the subscribing proprietors, with a view to eventually transferring the entire property of the theatre to the members for their sole use and benefit.

It is unnecessary here to enter into details

affecting minor though not less important arrangements, as they must depend upon the adoption or modification of the above programme, which is respectfully submitted to the provisional committee, which has been already formed, and to all well-wishers to the movement.



