

The Rise of the First Jewish Theatrical Trust

It has long been known among dramatic critics that the reason for the maintenance of “ Ben Hur” in the theater for nineteen years is this: it is the most successful of all the vehicles for pro-Semitism now on the stage. That will appear to be a prejudicial statement in the minds of the thousands who have seen and enjoyed “ Ben Hur,” but there is truth in it. The point which should not be overlooked, however, is that *if* “ Ben Hur” is useful in framing the public mind favorably toward the Jews, it is not because of a pro-Semitic intention in the story. That may be the intention of the producers, Messrs. Klaw and Erlanger, but it was not the intention of General Lew Wallace.

It would seem that art and fate conspire against the propagandist play, for in no other way can the failure of a vowedly pro-Semitic drama be explained. Perhaps there was never such a serious and even strenuous attempt made to force the Jewish controlled theater into the service of pro-Semitism as has been made in recent months. And the attempts, with one possible exception, have been failures. Lavishly produced, heralded by an unbroken claque of press announcement, swathed in an initial chorus of praise, sponsored by officialdom which had been dragged out to stand godfather to the productions, they nevertheless have failed.

Be it said to the credit of the American Jew that he has been one of the causes of the failure. A most significant and hopeful sign was the reaction of the intelligent Jewish community against the attempt to utilize the stage as a hustings to boost the Jew into an unreal eminence and desirability. Certain competent Jews wrote their opinions about this with much freedom and wisdom. And they evinced a spirit, which, if it could be made to permeate all Jewish activities, would quickly dispose of the Jewish Question under whatever phase it may be considered. It is this spirit of judging Jewish interests in the light of the whole which promises a helpful and lasting solution of all the differences which unfortunately have been permitted to arise between the people of Judah and the others.

The fact of Jewish control of the theater is not of itself a ground for complaint. If certain Jews, working separately or in groups, have succeeded in wrenching this rich business from its former Gentile control, that is purely a matter of commercial interest. It is precisely on the same footing as if one group of Gentiles won the control from another group of Gentiles. It may be regarded as a business matter. In this, as in other business matters, however, there is the ethical test of *how the control was gained* and *how it is used*. Society is usually willing to receive the fact of control with equanimity, providing the control is not used for anti-social purposes.

The fact that old-time Gentile producing managers usually died poor—Augustin Daly being about the only exception—while Jewish producing managers wax immensely wealthy (there being on this side the exception of the late Charles Frohman), would indicate that the Gentile managers were better artists and poorer business men than the Jewish managers. At least poorer business men, perhaps; and in any case working on a system whose chief object was to produce plays and not profits.

The advent of Jewish control put the theater on a more commercialized basis than it had previously known. It really represented applying the Trust Idea to the theater before it had been

largely applied to industry. As early as the year 1896 the Theatrical Trust controlled 37 theaters in strategic cities. The men composing this alliance were Klaw and Erlanger, Nixon and Zimmerman, and Hayman and Frohman. All but Zimmerman were Jews, and his racial origin was a subject of dispute. This group was later joined by Rich and Harris, of Boston, and Joseph Brookes, all known as Jews.

Controlling these theaters, the Trust was able to assure a long season to both managers and playing companies. Outside the Trust, the managers and companies were left to make arrangements between each other, which resembled a species of barnstorming.

The effect on the independent theaters and managers was disastrous. The Trust boosted royalties on plays from \$50 to \$450 and eventually to \$1,000 a week. This of itself cut off the material of the stock companies with which the independent managers endeavored to keep open their houses.

The running out of the stock companies by excessive charges for the use of plays that had already been used in the regular theaters of the Trust, really served Jewish interests in another way. The motion picture industry was coming to the front. It was a Jewish enterprise from the first. There never was any need to drive Gentiles out of that, because the Gentiles never had a chance to get in. Thus, the driving out of the stock companies threw the empty theaters over to the “ movies,” and the benefit was again confined to a particular racial group.

This will answer the question so frequently asked by people who wonder why the theaters they formerly saw offering plays at all seasons, are now devoting the larger part of the year to “ movies.”

It was not to be expected that this sort of thing could be put through without a struggle. There was a struggle and a severe one, but it is ended with what the public can see today.

The opposition offered by the artists was prolonged and dignified. Francis Wilson, Nat C. Goodwin, James A. Herne, James O' Neil, Richard Mansfield, Mrs. Fiske and James K. Hackett stood out for a time, all of them with the exception of Goodwin bound by a forfeit of \$1,000 if they deserted the cause of a free theater.

Joseph Jefferson was always with the actors in this opposition and continued of the same mind to the end, playing in both Trust and anti-Trust houses.

It is a matter of record that Nat Goodwin was the first to give in. He was the head and front of the opposition, but he had his weaknesses which were well known to the Trust, and upon these they played. One of his weaknesses was for New York engagements, and he was offered a long engagement at the Knickerbocker Theater. He was also given the promise of dates wherever and whenever he wanted them. Goodwin thereupon deserted the alliance of stars and became the henchman of the Trust. (The “ Trust” was the name by which the new control was known in these days. The racial name was not given although the racial nature was plainly discerned.)

Nat Goodwin's star began to decline from that day. He made a final essay as Shylock, and with that he was practically ushered out as a headliner of the serious stage.

Richard Mansfield and Francis Wilson were delivering nightly curtain speeches against the Trust wherever they appeared, and although the public was sympathetic it was very much like the present state of affairs—what could the public do? What can an unorganized public ever do against a small organized, determined minority? The public hardly ever appears as a party in any of the movements that concern itself; the public is the prize for which the parties strive.

The Trust dealt strongly with Wilson. His dates were canceled. Neither his status nor his ability was of any avail to him. One of the Trust made an open statement: “ Mr. Wilson is a shining mark, and we determined to make an example of him for the benefit of the lesser offenders.”

Wilson's strong spirit was finally subdued to see “ reason.” In 1898 the Philadelphia members of the Trust offered him \$50,000 for his business, and he took it.

In due time Richard Mansfield also surrendered, and Mrs. Fiske was left alone to carry on the fight.

The Theatrical Trust, which must be described as Jewish, because it was that, was at the beginning of the new century in full control of the field. It had reduced what was essentially an art to a time-clock, cash-register system, working with the mechanical precision of a well-managed factory. It suppressed individuality and initiative, killed off competition, drove out the independent manager and star, excluded all but foreign playwrights of established reputation, fostered the popularity of inferior talent which was predominantly Jewish, sought to debase the service of the dramatic critics of the public press, foisted countless “ stars” of mushroom growth upon a helpless public while driving real stars into obscurity; it handled plays, theaters and actors like factory products, and not began a process of vulgarizing and commercializing everything connected with the theater.

If space permitted, a number of opinions could be presented here from men like William Dean Howells, Norman Hapgood and Thomas Bailey Aldrich, whose concern was for the theater, but who voiced no other observation as to the racial influences at work.

Their concern was justified. It is quite possible that many who read this article are not interested in the theater, and are, in fact, convinced that the theater is a menace. Very well. What principally makes it a menace? This—that the stage today represents the principal cultural element of 50 per cent of the people. What the average young person absorbs as to good form, proper deportment, refinement as contrasted with coarseness, correctness of speech or choice of words, customs and feelings of other nations, even fashions of clothes, as well as ideas of religion and law, are derived from what he sees and hears at the theater. The masses' sole idea of the homes and the life of the rich is derived from the stage and the movies. More wrong notions are given, more prejudices created by the Jewish controlled theater in one week, than can be charged against a serious study of the Jewish Question in a century. People sometimes wonder where the ideas of the younger generation come from. This is the answer.

As was just said, all the original opposers of this new control of the theater surrendered and left Mrs. Fiske to fight alone. She had, however, an ally in her husband, Harrison Grey Fiske, who was editor of the New York *Dramatic Mirror*.

Mrs. Fiske herself had said: “ The incompetent men who have seized upon the affairs of the stage in this country have all but killed art, ambition and decency.”

Her husband wrote in his paper: “ What then should be expected of a band of adventurers of infamous origin, of no breeding and utterly without artistic taste? * * * Let it be kept in mind that the ruling number of these men who compose the Theatrical Trust are absolutely unfit to serve in any but the most subordinate places in the economy of the stage and that they ought not to be tolerated even in these places except under a discipline, active, vigorous and uncompromising. Their records are disreputable and in some cases criminal, and their methods are in keeping with their records.” (First printed in the *Dramatic Mirror*, December 25, 1897; reprinted March 19, 1898.)

This attack was regarded, foolishly and wrongfully of course, as an attack on the whole House of Israel and, as is always the case when one Jew is censured for wrongdoing, all the Jews in the United States came to the rescue. Pressure was brought to bear on a famous news company which handled the circulation of the most important magazines in the United States. Leading hotels were induced to withdraw the *Dramatic Mirror* from their news stands. *Mirror* correspondents were refused admittance to theaters controlled by the Trust. Any number of underground influences were set in operation to “ get” Fiske and his business.

Suit was brought against Fiske for \$10,000 damages for the strictures he had printed upon the personal character of certain members of the Trust. Fiske replied in his answer, setting up various facts against specific members of the Trust, their records, actions, and so on. One he accused of carrying on business under a fictitious name (“ cover name,” as it is known in Jewish circles). Another he accused of charging managers for advertising expenses that were never incurred. Another he accused of issuing “ complimentary” tickets in which he did a private speculative business of his own, selling them and pocketing the proceeds. Another he accused of specific crime for which he had been arrested and convicted.

He charged that the Trust as a whole advertised in various cities that “ the original New York company” would play, charging exorbitant admission fees on the strength of this advertisement, when in truth these were secondary companies and not the one advertised.

A strange court hearing was held in which the magistrate did not wish to hear any of Fiske’ s testimony, even forbidding him to enter official records of the criminal proceedings had against a certain member of the Trust. The magistrate did not seem to want to hear what Fiske based his statements upon. There was a serious shooting scrape involving a woman, but the magistrate did not want to hear about it. There was even considerable difficulty on the part of Fiske’ s lawyer in procuring the attendance of Abraham L. Erlanger at court, although he was one of the complainants.

All the important questions asked of Klaw were overruled.

As to Al Hayman, the court overruled all questions relating to his real name and the circumstances under which he left Australia. The facts were not brought out in this hearing, but the whole character of the hearing was made known to the public. Fiske was bound over to the Grand Jury, with \$300 bail in every allegation of libel.

The Grand Jury lost no time in dismissing all the complaints against Fiske. The Trust members had come off badly because of their evident unwillingness to meet the case. They were revealed to be a much lower type of men than the American public had supposed was in charge of the American theater. They were shown to be a type that would not even stop at demanding the discharge of a local newspaper reporter whose critique of their plays did not please them.

The fight of the dramatic critics first against the bribery and then against the bludgeoning of the Theatrical Trust makes a story of which echoes have frequently come to the American public through the press. Conciliatory at first, with managers, actors, playwrights and critics, the Trust, as soon as it gained power, showed the claws beneath the velvet. It had the millions of dollars of the public coming its way, why should it care?

Whenever a critic opposed its methods or pointed out the inferior, coarse and degrading character of the Trust productions, he was ordered barred from the Trust's theaters, and local managers were instructed to demand his discharge from his newspaper. It is with mingled feelings that an American is compelled to relate that in many, many cases the demand was complied with, the papers being threatened with the loss of Sunday advertising! But here and there courageous writers on the Stage held to the honor of their profession and refused to be bribed or intimidated.

Writers like James S. Metcalfe, of *Life*; Hillery Bell, of the *New York Press*; Frederick F. Schrader, of the *Washington Post*; Norman Hapgood, on the *New York Evening Globe*; James O'Donnell Bennett, of the *Chicago Record-Herald*, stood out against the Trust and made their fight. Metcalfe went so far as to bring suit against the Trust for unlawful exclusion from a place of public amusement. The courts were kind to the Trust. They decided that a theater may pick its patrons. Even in very recent years the Trust has followed blacklisted dramatic critics in an effort to prevent their employment by newspapers.

The Theatrical Trust does not exist in the form it did ten years ago. It grew arrogant and bred secret enemies among its own people. A new force arose, but it also was Jewish, as it originated in the Shubert brothers with David Belasco. Instead of one, the American have now a dual dictatorship of the stage. The rage of the day is not plays, but playhouses. With not three plays of any character to distinguish them from the dregs of the stage, there are now building in New York alone a dozen new playhouses. The theatrical business has entered upon its real estate phase. There is money in renting chairs at the rate of \$1 to \$3 an hour. The renting of the chairs is a reality. The Stage is rapidly becoming an illusion.

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