

# ALAN DALE ON COMIC OPERA.

THE "comic opera" epidemic is with us. Tons of people are carried nightly and matineely to the playhouses to listen to a form of entertainment that our managers are pleased to call "comic opera," and the epidemic is all the more virulent because it has transferred the period of its invasion from blazing Summer to cool, sequestered Autumn. A few seasons ago there was a deeply-rooted belief that "comic opera" could thrive only in those torrid months when the affability of audiences oozes from the pores of their skins, and life becomes a moist, unwholesome nightmare.

"Turn on 'the acrobats; let loose the imbecile jokes, rush in with the horseplay, for June and July are fleeting months and audiences wallow in assiduity during the Summer only." That was the managerial idea. It raged for a long time; it raged until its fallacy was apparent. The acrobatic jocularities known as comic opera is no longer essayed during the heated term. Managers have discovered that Summer audiences are not made up exclusively of fools; that there isn't an acrobatic comedian in comic opera-dom who can lure people away from roof gardens and the beaches; that horseplay begets excessive perspiration, and that Noah's ark jokes are indigestible when the thermometer coquettes with the hillsides.

It has all been changed, and the epidemic is with us now, when we are better able to fight it; when our systems are stronger and more compact to cope with the blatant demon of vulgarity; when there is no danger of our assimilating the germs of imbecility into our constitutions. This condition of things is far more felicitous. We were helpless during the enervating Summer. We are potent, sane and deliberate during these cool and invigorating months.

Moreover, we have time to consider things, and that is a great point. Managers tell us that they are furnishing us with comic opera, and we rush off and buy tickets for Francis Wilson, pirouetting through "Half a King;" for Jefferson De Angelis somersaulting over "The Caliph;" for half a gross of Totties and Lotties ogling their way through "The Gold Bug;" for a baby show at the Fifth Avenue, entitled "Lost, Strayed or Stolen," and for "The Geisha"—the only entertainment of the five that makes the slightest attempt to cater to those who own a pennyweight of refinement or one ounce of culture.

Fortunately for the managers, we are hungry for amusement at this time of year. We clamor for the theatre. We get back from the sea, and the mountains, from London, and from Asbury Park, N. J., desperately weary of being shut out from our festive metropolis. We take what we can get, faute de mieux, and if we are not thankful for it, we show at any rate a pleased exterior. Nearly all the alleged comic-operas in town are doing a satisfactory box office business. That fact would undoubtedly alone for everything—if we were all managers. We should look at our bank books and sing a gleeful "Tra-la"—if we were all managers. We should snap our fingers at detractors, and nasty, interfering critics and chroniclers—if we were all managers. We are not all managers, and therefore we have a perfect right to question a form of entertainment that appears to have gone hideously astray from the lovely standard set for it by Offenbach, Sir Arthur Sullivan, Lecocq, Millocker, and half a dozen others.

"We give the public what the public asks for, and the public responds," say the managers, exultant in a blithe and apparently unanswerable excuse. And press agents crowd in and to the questioning critic cry, "Who are you? Hoof! Dolt! Dolt! Penny-a-line! Who are you who dare to uplift your voice against the testimony of the box office? Write reports of what you see. Elevate criticism to the sublime pinnacle of police court chronicles. Write up a play as you would a murder trial. Don't attempt to interfere with opinions of your own. They are worthless. The time will come when office boys will be relegated to the task of theatre work."

The wish is generally father to the thought. Criticisms will be written as long as plays are produced. The public revels in criticism. The man who has been to see a play turns on the following morning to the criticism thereof before he thinks of an editorial or a political debate. If he agrees with the criticism—it is excellent. If he disagrees with it—it is absurd. He enjoys recalling the points he has enjoyed or disapproved. Managers are equally fond of criticisms—when they are favorable. They also love the unfavorable criticisms—when they are aimed at some other fellow.

In any case, the critic who regards the box office as an infallible answer to the success query is absolutely unworthy to fill his position for a day. Only last week I read somewhere that it was perfectly ridiculous to say a word against "The Caliph" or "Half a King," because these so-called comic operas were doing so well at the Broadway and Knickerbocker theatres. Ergo, they were excellent; ergo, they were exactly what the public wanted. If Mr. Charles Frohman advertised a genuine bull fight for an attraction at the Empire Theatre, think you that his box office would remain empty? Can you believe for a moment that the bull-fight wouldn't bring him in six times as much money as does that exquisite little comedy, "Rosemary"? Yet even the critic-downers will not pretend that a bull fight is a particularly commendable form of entertainment. And because it would earn six times as much money for Mr. Frohman as "Rosemary" earns, it wouldn't follow that it was six times better. Yet this is the argument used by those who assert that critics have no right to say a word when the box-office artist is kept busy.

Therefore, I make no bones about saying that with the sole exception of "The Geisha" there isn't a comic opera in this city at the present time that is worth being seen by an intelligent theatre-goer. "The Geisha" doesn't call itself a comic opera; nor does "Lost, Strayed or Stolen;" nor does "The Gold Bug;" but they are the modern substitute thereof, and as far as I am concerned, and you are concerned, they are comic operas.

Mr. Jefferson De Angelis, who has burst upon us this season as a star, must have a fine opinion of New York when he ventures to make his lullaby bow in such a chowder as "The Caliph." He must be vastly impressed with the culture of New York, when he thinks we accept unquestioningly as comic opera his ten tumbles and his twenty nightly bruises. He knows perfectly well, however, that there are always people to be found who regard a tumble as the supremest form of wit, and a kick in that portion of the anatomy that is never mentioned in polite society as the most ebullient thing in jocularly. I admit that there are hundreds of people who adore this, and upon whom the saddest quip would be lost. Yet there is a certain standard by which we measure decency and indecency, and the critic who sees eight hundred kick-and-tumble lovers buying seats for "The Caliph" is not justified in jumping to the conclusion that the comic opera is a gem of beauty and exactly what the New York public wants, and must have. When I criticized "The Caliph" I devoted myself almost exclusively to Mr. De Angelis's marvellous acrobatic work. I was accused of sarcasm, and I deny the impeachment. I was doing my duty to the kick-and-tumble public, and to Mr. De Angelis, I merely pointed out, for the benefit of those who like kick-and-tumbling, that this form of art was to be found at the Broadway Theatre. Those who like it—and there are enough in this city to furnish Mr. De Angelis with money to buy saive for his nightly contusions—are now going to see "The Caliph." Those who don't like it—and thank goodness they exist in the proportion of about 95 per cent—are staying away. The people who don't like such grotesque experts in a refined playhouse are the cultured ones. How pleased they would be to hear that "The Caliph" was a huge and overwhelming success because, forsooth,

New York owns enough buffoon-lovers to make clownishness worth Mr. De Angelis's while!

Francis Wilson is quite happy, at the Knickerbocker Theatre, with "Half a King." Mr. Wilson is, however, such a favorite, and decidedly such a favorite, that much of his work is accepted without cavil. His ideas of New York audiences are, however, decidedly uncomplimentary, and his aim is to give this metropolis the worst side of his art—the clown's side. Wilson is an artist. He showed us that fact in "The Chief" and in his admirable contribution to the "star cast" of "The Rivals." I like Wilson immensely, but I am not going to close my mouth when I see him rioting about the stage of the Knickerbocker in the sheer interest of the guffaw-mongers.

"I read your objection to Mr. Wilson's quip, 'I'll spank your panties when I get you outside,'" said a theatrical man, the other day; "and I don't see why you object. The public roars with laughter. It is so thoroughly Wilsonian!"

So it is, but it is that portion of Mr. Wilson's Wilsonianism that belongs to the music halls, where, thanks to the tinkle of glasses and the fumes of tobacco, Mr. Wilson don't object to a spice of vulgarity. At the Knickerbocker Theatre, however, Mr. Wilson gives you a whole spice-box-full, and I can't see why he should be upheld in such a course, just because there are people who will laugh at it. A dash of vulgarity in the right place will do nobody any harm. Prudes are the most irritating people on this earth, but there is a time, and there is a place, for all things.

"Half a King" is really nothing more than a variety "turn," done by Francis Wilson with delightful accessories, and with Miss Lulu Glaser to make you believe for a moment that it is comic opera. Wilson is certainly strong enough to stand alone, and stand alone he could, if he chose, without the hypocrisy of setting himself up as a comic opera artist. In the part of Tireschappe, the mountebank, Francis Wilson is no more the central figure of a comic opera than is Albert Chevalier at the Garrick Theatre. Chevalier is honestly personified. He advertises a raffle-like program with "Albert Chevalier and his own company" as the attractions. At the Garrick Theatre, all that the management would have to do to build up a modern comic opera around this performance would be to get a couple of handsome scenes and hire a few jaded "supers" and nice old ladies to come trooping on at the close of each act, as the chorus.

Wilson, minus his scenery and his chorus, would give an entertainment of the same calibre as, though less refined than, that of Albert Chevalier. His managers, however, believe that the public can be gulled into the belief that "Half a King" is comic opera, and because folks troop to the Knickerbocker and applaud Wilson when he says "I'll spank your panties," they reason that it is comic opera, and the only comic opera that the New York public wishes to see.

"Lost, Strayed or Stolen" and "The Gold Bug" come to grief because they have no central figure to bear the onus of production. If Francis Wilson had played the comedy part in the former piece it might have been more uproariously received, and everybody would have sworn it was a success. There is, however, hope for "Lost, Strayed or Stolen." It contains a great deal of good material, and it is neither acrobatic nor exclusively vulgar. It is not comic opera, though. Nobody has yet discovered what it is, and if it can only keep folks guessing I should imagine that the box office would profit considerably. A prize of \$100, to be given to the first person who suggested a seemingly classification for "Lost, Strayed or Stolen" would undoubtedly pack the Fifth Avenue Theatre.

"The Gold Bug" people have not yet begun to rebel at the harsh criticisms that greeted the advent of Mr. Glen McDonough's chef-d'oeuvre. Disapproval was too unanimous. It is only when one critic or two critics arise and expose the flimsiness of a play that the critic-laters come forth to revile. At the Casino there seems to be a general cautious impression that "The Gold Bug" must be a failure because five or six critics have set it down as such. All the regular first-night critics last Monday went to see Miss Held at the Herald Square. "The Gold Bug" was briefly discussed; yet the gloom around the Casino is awe-inspiring. This seems to me vastly absurd, inasmuch as the public has not yet had a chance to judge, and "the public," the vast, think-for-themselvs public, is the great managerial war cry.

Messrs. Canary & Lederer certainly followed in the footsteps of Francis Wilson and Jefferson De Angelis, and endeavored to give the public what they believed that the public wanted. Tradition at the Casino insists upon bevy of tall, sweet ladies with impossible names, swarming upon the stage and surrounding a loud-mouthed comedian or two, alive with the topics of the day, from Bryan to the bicycle. In "The Gold Bug" all this is done—done very stupidly, tamely and wearily, in my opinion. If, however, the first-night critics had visited the Casino Monday night, and the lamentable delay that kept the performance from the public until 9 o'clock had been avoided, I frankly believe that to see Messrs. Canary and Lederer would have snapped their fingers in my face, and when I told them that "The Gold Bug" was neither comic opera nor amusing musical comedy, would have said: "Who are you? We have given our patrons what our patrons are accustomed to get, and our box office proves success." "The Gold Bug" is just about as excellent to the cultured play patrons as are "The Caliph," "Half a King" and "Lost, Strayed or Stolen."

There is only one theatre to visit if you wish to enjoy the dream of dainty musical work, and that theatre is Daly's, where "The Geisha" is. There you get no coarse tomfoolery, no strutting, lime-lighted, centre-of-the-stage "star;" no "topics of the day" (the very thing you go to the theatre to forget); no perpetual chorus, no mungery or contortions. The wit is expressed in the music; the smiles are drawn forth by clever melodious concerts. You are not clubbed into mirth, or sandbagged into demonstrative mess. "The Interfering Parrot" doesn't make you shriek aloud in boisterous joy. It tickles you quietly, and the impression stays with you. You go home and try the "Parrot" on your piano, and next night you buy another seat for "The Geisha." You don't see any press agent paragraphists coming forth to assert that "The Geisha" is just the thing that the public cries for. The fact is self-evident. Good wine needs no bush.

The comic opera variety show is a fraud on the public, in my opinion. It is an injustice to that most delectable entertainment, the variety show, and it is a Peckinhamian treatment of comic opera of the "Robin Hood" and "Rob Roy" stamp. When I want variety, I'll go to Koster and Blais', and Olympia, thanks. There I can smoke and talk, and wander around; see the acts that I want to see, and turn my back on those that affront me. I'm not obliged to sit in reverent silence while buffoons fill out an entire evening with a pretence at comic opera. Thirty minutes of Francis Wilson in "Half a King," twenty minutes of the specialties in "Lost, Strayed or Stolen," a few glances at Miss Marie Cahill in "The Gold Bug," and one tumble from Jefferson de Angelis in "The Caliph" would suit me admirably.

Comic opera must return to its original idea—that of telling an amusing, mirth-reeking story, with incidental, characteristic music, bright costumes and joyous surroundings. It must cease to be the medium for variety "turns," otherwise it will drive us all to the halls, and—such is the tendency of the times—we shall not require very hard driving.

ALAN DALE.



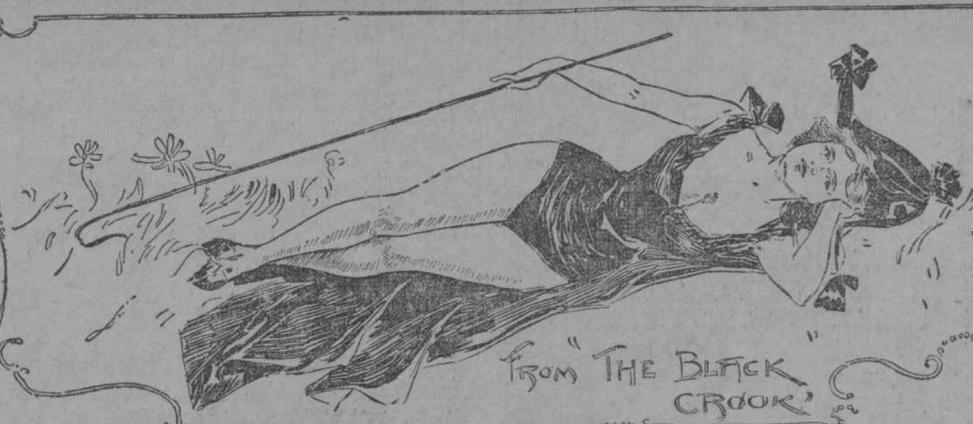
THE LITTLE SECRETARY  
"HALF A KING"



FROM THE GEISHA



THE HAPPY CHORUS



FROM THE BLACK CROOK



IT'S WINE THAT SETS THE WITS ASTRAY  
FROM HALF A KING



FROM THE CALIPH



INDISPENSIBLE WITH SOME OPERAS