THE AMERICAN AUDIENCE.

WHAT is the difference between an English and an American audience? That is a question which has frequently been put to me, and which I have always found it difficult to answer. The points of dissimilarity are simply those arising from people of a common origin living under conditions often widely different. It is, therefore, only possible for me to indicate such traits in the bearing of the American playgoer as have come under my own personal notice, and impressed me with a sense of unfamiliarity.

Every American town, great or small, has—I believe, without exception—its theatre and its church, and when a new town is about to be built, the sites for a place of amusement and a place of worship are invariably those first selected. As an instance, take Pullman, which lies some sixteen miles from Chicago, pleasantly situated on the banks of the Calumet Lake. The original design of this little city, which is almost ideal in its organization, and has the enviable reputation of being absolutely perfect in its sanitation, was conceived on the lines just mentioned. Denver City, which is a growth almost abnormal even in an age and country of abnormal progress, has a theatre, which is said to be one of the finest in America. Boston, with its old civilisation, boasts seventeen theatres, or buildings in which plays are given; New York possesses no less than twenty-eight regular theatres, besides a host of smaller ones; and Chicago, whose very foundations are younger than the beards of some men of thirty, has, according to a printed list, over twenty theatres, all of which seem to flourish. The number of theatres in America and the influence they exercise constitute important elements in the national life. This great multiplication of dramatic possibilities renders it necessary to take a very wide and general view, if one wishes to get a distinct impression as to how audiences here differ from those at home. So at least it must seem to a player, who can only find comparison possible when points of difference suggest themselves. For a proper understanding of such difference in audiences, we must ascertain wherein consist the differences of the theatres which they frequent, both in architectural construction, social arrangement, and that habit of management which is a natural growth.

By the enactments of the various States regulating the structure and conduct of places of amusement, full provision for the comfort and safety of the audience is insisted on. It is directed that the back of the auditorium should open by adequate doors directly upon the main passage or vestibule, and that through the centre of the floor

should run an aisle right down to the orchestra rail. Thus the floor of the house is easy of access and exit, is generally of large expanse, and capable of containing half, or more than half, of the entire audience. It is usually divided into two parts—the orchestra or parquet, and the orchestra or parquet circle—the latter being a zone running around the former and covered by the projection of the first gallery. The floor of an American theatre is, as a rule, on a more inclined plane than is customary in English theatres, and there is a good view of the stage from every part. Outside the parquet circle, and within the inner wall of the building, is usually a wide passage where many persons can stand. Thus in most houses there is a great elasticity in the holding power, which at times adds not a little to the managerial success. I cannot but think that in several respects we have much to learn from our American cousins in the construction and arrangement of the auditorium of the theatre; on the other hand, they might study with advantage our equipment behind the proscenium.

It is perhaps due to the sentiment and tradition of personal equality in the nation, that the entire stream often turns to one portion of the house, in a way somewhat odd to those accustomed as we are in England to the separating force of social grades. To the great majority of persons, only one part of the theatre is eminently eligible, and other portions are mainly sought when the floor is occupied. The very willingness with which the public acquiesce in certain discomforts or annoyances attendant on visiting the theatre, would seem to show that the drama is an integral portion of their daily life. It cannot be denied by anyone cognizant of the working of American theatres that there are certain facts or customs which must discount enjoyment. Before a visitor is in a position to settle comfortably to the reception of a play, he must, as a rule, experience many inconveniences. In the first place he has in some States to submit to the exactions of the ticket speculator or "scalper," who, through defective State laws, is generally able to buy tickets in bulk, and to retail them at an exorbitant rate. I have known of instances where tickets of the full value of three dollars were paid for by the public at the average rate of ten or twelve dollars. Then, through the high price of labour, which in most American institutions causes employers to so dispose of their forces as to minimize service, the attendance in the front of the house is, I am told, often inadequate. Were it not for the orderly disposition and habit of the public, trained by the custom of equal rights to stand, and move *en queue*, it would not be possible to admit and seat the audience in the interval between the opening of the doors and the commencement of the performance. Thus the public are somewhat "hustled," and from one cause or another too

often reach their seats after having endured much annoyance with a patient submission which speaks volumes for their law-abiding nature; but which must sorely disturb that reposeful spirit which the actor may consider essential to a due enjoyment of the play.

Once in his seat the American playgoer does not, as a rule, leave it until the performance is at an end. The percentage of persons who move about during the *entr'acte* is, when compared with that in England, exceedingly small, and sinks into complete insignificance when contrasted with the exodus to the *foyer* customary in continental theatres. In the equipment of the American theatre there is one omission which will surprise us at home—that of the bar, or refreshment room. In not a single theatre that I can call to mind in America have I found provision made for drinking. It is not by any means that the average playgoer is a teetotaller, but that, if he wishes or needs to drink during the evening, he does it as he does during the hours of his working life, and not as a necessary concomitant to the enjoyment of his leisure hours. Two other things are noticeable: first, that the audiences are sometimes very unpunctual, and to suit the audiences the managers sometimes delay beginning. The audience depend on this delay, and the consequence frequently is, that a first act is entirely disturbed by their entry; secondly, that, after the play, it is a custom, in a degree unknown in any European capital, to adjourn to various restaurants for supper.

As the audience *en bloc* remain seated, so the length of the performance must be taken into account by managers; and commonly two hours and a half is considered the maximum length to which a performance should run, though I must say that we have at times sinned by keeping our audiences seated until eleven o'clock, and it has been even later. Of course in this branch of the subject must be also considered the difficulty of reaching their homes experienced by audiences in cities whose liberal arrangements of space, and absence of cheap cabs, renders necessary a due regard to time. In matter of duration, however, the audience is not to be trifled with or imposed on. I have heard of a case in a city of Colorado where the manager of a travelling company, on the last night of an engagement, in order to catch a through train, hurried the ordinary performance of his play into an hour and a half. When next the company were coming to the city they were met *en route*, some fifty miles out, by the sheriff, who warned them to pass on by some other way, as their coming was awaited by a large section of the able-bodied male population armed with shot guns. The company did not, I am informed, on that occasion visit the city. I may here mention that in America the dramatic season lasts about eight months—from the beginning of the "fall" in September till the hot weather commences

in April. During this period the theatres are kept busy, as there are performances on the evenings of every week day, and in the South and West on Sunday evening also, whilst matinées are given every Saturday, and in a larger number of cases every Wednesday. In certain places even the afternoon of Sunday sees a performance. It is a fact, somewhat amusing at first, that in nearly all towns of comparatively minor importance the theatre is known as the Opera House.

I have dwelt on the external condition of the American audiences in order to explain the condition antecedent to the actor's appearance. The differences between various audiences are so minute that some such insight seems necessary to enable one to recognise and understand them. An actor in the ordinary course of his work can only partially at best realise such differences as there may be, much less attempt to state them explicitly. His first experience before a strange audience is the discovery whether or not he is *en rapport* with them. This, however, he can most surely feel, though he cannot always give a reason for the feeling. As there is, in the occurrences of daily life, a conveyance other than by words of meaning, of sentiment, or of understanding between different individuals, so there is a carriage of mutual understanding or reciprocity of sentiment between the stage and the auditorium. The emotion which an actor may feel, or which his art may empower him successfully to simulate, can be conveyed over the floats in some way which neither actor nor audience may be able to explain; and the reciprocation of such emotion can be as surely manifested by the audience by more subtle and unconscious ways than overt applause or otherwise. It must be remembered that the opportunities which I have had of observing audiences have been almost entirely from my own stage. Little facility of wider observation is afforded to a man who plays seven performances each week and fills up most of the blank mornings with rehearsal or travel. I only put forward what I feel or believe. Such belief is based on the opportunities I have had of observation or of following out the experience of others.

The dominant characteristic of the American audience seems to be impartiality. They do not sit in judgment, resenting as positive offences lack of power to convey meanings or divergence of interpretation of particular character or scene. I understand that when they do not like a performance they simply go away, so that at the close of the evening the silence of a deserted house gives to the management a verdict more potent than audible condemnation. This does not apply to questions of morals, which can be, and are, as quickly judged here as elsewhere. On this subject I give entirely the evidence of others, for it has been my good fortune to see our audiences seated till the final falling of the curtain. Again, there

is a kindly feeling on the part of the audience towards the actor as an individual, especially if he be not a complete stranger, which is, I presume, a part of that recognition of individuality which is so striking a characteristic in American life and customs. Many an actor draws habitually a portion of his audience, not in consequence of artistic merit, not from capacity to arouse or excite emotion, but simply because there is something in his personality which they like. This spirit forcibly reminds me of the story told of the manager of one of the old "Circuits," who gave as a reason for the continued engagement of an impossibly bad actor, that "he was kind to his mother." The thorough enjoyment of the audience is another point to be noticed. Not only are they quick to understand and appreciate, but there seems to be a genuine pleasure in the expression of approval. American audiences are not surpassed in quickness and completeness of comprehension by any that I have yet seen, and no actor need fear to make his strongest or his most subtle effort, for such is sure to receive instant and full acknowledgment at their hands.

There is little more than this to be said of the American audience. But short though the record is, the impression upon the player himself is profound and abiding. To describe what one sees and hears over the footlights is infinitely easier than to convey an idea of the mental disposition and feeling of the spectators. The house is ample and comfortable, and the audience is well-disposed to be pleased. Ladies and gentlemen alike are mostly in morning dress, distinguished in appearance, and guided in every respect by a refined decorum. The sight is generally picturesque. Even in winter flowers abound, and the majority of ladies have bouquets either carried in the hand or fastened on the shoulder or corsage. At matinée performances especially, where the larger proportion of the audience is composed of ladies, the effect is not less pleasing to the olfactory senses than to the eye. Courteous, patient, enthusiastic, the American audience is worthy of any effort which the actor can make on its behalf, and he who has had experience of them would be an untrustworthy chronicler if he failed, or even hesitated, to bear witness to their intelligence, their taste, and their generosity.

HENRY IRVING.