

A New Departure in Art

by

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'I remember once being called on to be humorous under circumstances which made me feel that fun was as difficult to catch as a bat with a fishing rod.' With the cultivated instinct of listeners, which all actors must be able to pretend to be, the Company gave simultaneously that movement of eagerness which implies a strained attention. The perfection and simultaneity of the movement was art, but the spirit of truth lay behind it, for all felt whatever was coming was real. The Low Comedian, with the trained instinct of an actor, felt that his audience was with him - en rapport - and allowed himself a thought more breadth in his manner as he proceeded:

'I was playing "Con" in The Shaughraun for want of a better, having been put into the part because I could manage a kind of brogue. We had a wretched Company, and we went to wretched

places, places nearly bad enough to do us justice. At last we found ourselves in a little town on the west side of the Bog of Allen. It was hopeless business, for the people were poor; the room we played in was an awful hole, and the shebeen which they called a hotel where we all stayed was a holy terror. The dirt on the floor had caked, and felt like sand under your feet. As to the beds -'

'Oh, don't, Mr Parmentire; it's too dreadful!' said the Leading Lady, shuddering. So he went on:

'Anyhow, the audience - what there was of them - were fine. They weren't used to play-acting, and I think most of them took what they saw as reality - certainly while the curtain was up. We played three nights; the second night when I came out a big-made young man came up to me and said:

"Kin I have a wurrd wid ye, sorr?"

"Begob! but ye may," said I, in as near a brogue as I could get to his. "Twinty av ye loike!"

"Then whisper me," said he, and, taking me by the arm, he led me across the street where we were alone. "What is it?" I asked.

"I seen ye, sorr, at the wake to-night. Begorra, but it was an illigant toime. Shure the fun iv that would have done good to a rale corpse, much less to his frinds. I wondher now wud ye care to do a neighbourly act?" He said, this with considerable diffidence. There was something genial and winning in his way, as there is generally with Irishmen; so I said as heartily as I could that I hoped I would, and asked him how I could do it. His face brightened as he answered:

"Well, there's a wake to-night, a rale wake, yer ann'r, at Kenagh beyant and the widdy is in a most dishtressful state intirely. Now, av yer ann'r as is used to the divarshins iv wakes would come, shure it might help to cheer her up. It's only a rough place, surr, an' the byes an' the girrls is all there is; but there's lashins iv whiskey an' tobaccy, an' wan iv the quality like yer ann'r will be mighty welkim."

'That did it! For a man who took me for one of the quality I would have done anything! I tell you, you have to be mucking about for a spell in such places as we had been, and treated with the

contempt which used to be the actor's meed in his private life in such places in my young days, to appreciate fully the help such a thing was to one's self-esteem. I told my pals that I was going to a local party, for I didn't want to disturb my new dignity all at once, and went off with my friend. We went on a donkey cart without springs. Such a cart, and such a road! There was a bundle of straw to sit on, so I was comfortable enough; except when the jolting through an unusually deep rut banged me about more than was consistent with physical self-restraint. At last we stopped where a small house stood back some hundred yards from the road. The light was coming through the little windows and the open door, that seemed quite bright through the inky blackness of the night. I separated myself from the straw as well as I could, and got down. A small boy appeared out of the darkness, like an attendant demon, and took away the donkey and cart. It seemed to fade into space, for, as it disappeared through a gap in the hedge, the wheels ceased to sound upon the soft turf. My friend said:

"Stiddy, surr! the boreen is a bit rough!" He was right; it was! I stumbled towards the house through what seemed the bed of a small watercourse floored with peculiarly uneven boulders. When we got near the house, the light from within told more on the darkness, and as we came close to the projecting porch, the white oblong of the open doorway to the right became darkened as a figure came out to meet us - an elderly woman with grey hair and a white cap and a black dress. She curtsied when she saw my dress, and said with a certain air of distinction that most Irish-women have in their moments of reserve, and which all good women have in their grief:

"Welkim, yer ann'r. I thank ye kindly for pathernisin' this house iv woe!"

"God save all here!" said my cicerone as he removed his caubeen.

I repeated the salutation, feeling a little bit chokey about the throat as I followed the woman into the house.

The room was a good-sized one, for it was no peasant's hut I was in, but a substantial farmhouse. Seated about it were some thirty or forty people of both sexes, old and young. Nearly all the men were smoking, some short cutty pipes as black as your hat, others long churchwardens, which manifestly came from a batch which lay on a table beside a substantial roll of "Limerick twist." The tobacco was strong, and so were the lungs of the smokers, so

the room was in a sort of thick haze, which swayed about in visible wreaths whenever a passing gust drove in through the open door. There was a huge fire of turf on the hearth, over which hung a great black kettle puffing steam like a locomotive. The air was fragrant with whiskey punch, of which some great jugs were scattered about. The guests drank from all kinds of vessels of glass, crockery, tin, and wood, each of which seemed pro bono publico, for they were attacked at times by those nearest with the utmost impartiality. As there was manifestly not seating room for so many people, a good many of the women, old as well as young, sat on the men's knees in the most matter-of-fact way and with the utmost decorum.

'My cicerone, who was on all sides saluted as "Dan," took a pipe from the table and filled it. One of the girls, shifting from her living stool, took a blazing turf from the fire with the tongs, and held it to him as a light. He then helped himself to punch from the nearest vessel, looking round the room and repeating the salutation: "God save all here!"

'The widow herself pressed me into an armchair, vacated for the purpose by a powerful-looking young man who had been sitting with a girl on each knee. She then handed me a steaming jorum of punch in one of the few glass tumblers which she had wiped with the corner of her apron before filling it. She also gave me a pipe and tobacco, and brought me herself a sod of turf with which to light it when filled. This was the evident courtesy to a stranger, which, through all her grief, was a duty not to be overlooked.

'Nearly all those present seemed cheerful; some of them laughed, and I could not but feel that the instinct and purpose of the occasion was to counteract in some way the gloom and grief which were centred round the black coffin which rested on two chairs in the centre of the room. I could not myself but feel moved and solemn as I looked at it. The lid was laid on loosely, slightly drawn down so as to show the dead face which lay, still and waxen, within. A crucifix of black wood with the Figure in white lay on the coffin lid, together with some loose flowers, amongst which a bunch of arum lilies stood out in their white beauty.

'I think I really needed the punch to brace me up, for there was something so touching in the whole affair - the deep-felt grief held back with so stern a purpose, the sympathy of so many friends, all giving what comfort they could with their presence, combating the chill of death with the warmth of living and loving hearts - that it almost broke me up. It was evident that they had had some music,

for a flute lay on the table, and a set of bagpipes stood in a corner. I sat quiet and waited, for I feared that, in my ignorance, I might jar on some feeling of those afflicted, either by some sin of commission, or of omission. I felt a little uncomfortable occupying a chair all to myself when every other seat in the place did double or treble duty; and I found myself beginning to speculate whether some of the girls would come and sit on my knee. But they didn't.'

'Showed their good taste!' said the Tragedian with a saturnine smile as he reapplied himself to his toddy.

'That's just it, Bones!' answered the Low Comedian sharply, 'showed their good taste! Remember that these weren't the pothouse rabble that you are accustomed to. They were decent, respectable folk, who could be familiar enough with one another without any ill thought of their neighbours or themselves, but they wouldn't lower themselves by a like familiarity with strangers, especially when they had any mistaken idea that their guest belonged to the quality.'

'Anyhow, they showed their good taste, whether according to Bones's idea or mine, and so I sat in solitary grandeur, and was by degrees fetched up to the level of the acceptance of fact by the whiskey punch. The restraint of the presence of a stranger wore away shortly, and I listened with interest to some of the music, quaint old airs with a lilt in them, and always an underlying note of pathos. This was especially manifest in the bagpipes, for the Irish bagpipes so far differs from the Scotch that it produces a softness of tone impossible to the other. You do not know, perhaps, that the Irish pipes have half-notes, whilst the Scotch have only full ones.'

Here a sort of modified snort was heard in the immediate neighbourhood of the Musical Director, and a remark was made, sotto voce, in which the words 'grandmother' and 'eggs' were distinguishable. The Low Comedian turned a swift glance in the direction, but said nothing, and, after a pause, went on:

'Presently Dan got up and said:

"'Widdy, this gintleman here is the funniest wan that iver I seen. Maybe now ye wouldn't mind av he was to give us a taste iv what he can do?"

'The Widow gravely nodded as she replied: "Shure, an' av his ann'r will pathernise us so far, we'll all be grateful to him. What like kind iv fun, Dan, does his ann'r consave?" I felt my heart sink. You know I'm not bashful.'

'You're not! not by a jugful!' interrupted the Tragedian. The Low Comedian smiled. He understood, from the low 'h-s-s-s-h' that ran through the saloon that the audience were with him, so he reserved his repartee, and went on:

'Not as a general rule, but there is a time for everything, and here, in the very presence of death, perpetually emphasised to me by the light of the candles which surrounded the coffin, flickering through the smoke, levity seemed out of place. Dan's chuckle of laughter as he began to speak almost disgusted me:

"Oh, byes, but he's the funny man entirely. I seen him to-night play-actin', an' I thought I'd laugh the buttons from aff iv me britches."

"What did he do, Dan?" asked one of the girls.

"Begob, but he reprisinted a corpse. 'Twas the most comical thing I iver seen." He was interrupted by a violent sobbing from the widow, who, throwing her apron over her head, sat down beside the coffin, one hand leaning over till it touched the marble cheek and rocked herself to and fro in floods of tears. All her self-restraint seemed broken down in an instant. Some of the younger women sympathetically burst into tears; and the scene became almost in a moment one of unmitigated grief.

'But the very purpose for which the wake is ordained is to combat grief and its more potent manifestation. The stronger and more experienced spirits in the room looked at each other, and prompt action was taken. One old man put his arm round the widow, and with a fair use of force, raised her to her feet and led her back to her seat by the chimney corner, where she rocked herself to and fro for a little, but in silence. Each "boy" who had a crying girl on his knee, put his arms round her and began to kiss and pet and comfort her, and the crying soon ceased. The old man who had attended to the widow said, in a half-apologetic way:

"Don't mind her, neighbours! Shure, 'tis the ways iv weemen when their hearts is sore. It's hard, it is, for the poor souls to bear

up all the time, an' yez mustn't be hard on thim when they're bruk down. It's different wid us min!" There was an iron resolution in the man's bearing, and a break in his voice which showed me that he was one of those whose self-control was accomplished with effort. "Who is he?" I asked from the man sitting next me.

"Shure, an' he's the brother iv the corpse, surr!" came the answer. The apologetic words were received with a series of sympathetic nods and shakings of the head and muttered words of acquiescence:

"Thru for ye!"

"Begob, but that's so!"

"Weemin is only weemin, afther all!"

"The poor crathur; God be aisy wid her in her sorra!" In the midst of this, Dan went on just as if nothing had happened. That he was right in his endeavour was shown by the brighter look on the faces of all as he resumed:

"'Twas the funniest thing I iver seen! He was the corp himself, and him not dead at all. Tear an ages! but that was a quare wake intirely. Wid the corpse drinkin' the keener's punch whiniver she nodded her head." Here the keener, sitting on a low stool on the side of the coffin away from the fire, hearing through her somnolence the implied slight to her function, woke on the instant, and, with a half-angry look at the speaker, said: "Keeners doesn't sleep - not till the words is said over the grave." Then, as if to show that she herself was wide awake, she raised a keene which, beginning low and sad, rose and rose in pitch and volume till the rafters seemed to buzz and ring with the mournful sound. Thenceforth, and throughout the remainder of the night, she keened at intervals, generally choosing such times as the interruption of the current proceedings would bring into prominence the importance of her lugubrious office. No one, however, considered her professional labours as an interruption, but went on just as if nothing were occurring. It was embarrassing at first, but after awhile no more interrupted one than the ticking of a clock or the whistling of the wind, or the rush and clash of waves. Dan proceeded:

"Thin he tuk the shnuff, an' threw it in the faces iv the polis."

"An' what did he do that for, wastin' it on the likes iv them?" asked a fierce-looking old woman.

"To make them incapable, for shure!"

"Make them incapable! Wid shnuff! Wid shnuff!" she said with fine scorn. "Musha, but that's not the way I'd make the polis incapable - more'n they are already. It's wid a blackthorn on their skulls, an' plenty iv it at that!" There was a slight pause, which was broken by an old woman, who said in a conversational way:

"Who'd a thought, now, that there was that comicality in a wake? Musha, but I've been attindin' them for half a hundhred years, an' I niver seen a funny wan yet."

'Dan at once championed his own choice.

"Maybe, acushla, that was because this gintleman wasn't the corpse on the occasion. Av he had a-been like I seen him the night, it's houldin' in yer stummick wid laughin' ye'd be!"

"Corpses does be gineraly sarious enough!" remarked an old man. "I'm thinkin' it's grateful we'd be to wan what'd give us divarshion iv any kind." Dan didn't seem to like these interruptions. There was something of the spirit of the impresario in him, and he manifestly wished to exploit what he considered his funny-man addition to the entertainment, so he began to explain:

"Musha! but won't yez undhershtand that this wasn't a real corp, but a man what was only purtendin' to be wan. It was play-actin' and his ann'r is the funniest man I ivver seen."

'Limited opportunities have very dreadful effects!' murmured the Tragedian; but no one took any notice. The Low Comedian proceeded:

'Dan turned to me and says he: "Wudn't yer ann'r do somethin' funny?"

"Good God!" I said, "I couldn't be funny in the presence of the dead - it wouldn't be respectful!"

"Put that out iv yer mind, surr," said the brother of the corpse; "shure, all these frinds an' neighbours is here out iv respect, an yet they does what they can to cheer up the poor widdy woman that has but little to comfort her in her sorra. It's well, so it is, to help

her to forgit!" This was so manifestly true that I bowed to the occasion, and said that I would do what I could to amuse them. I would just take a minute to think of something, if they would pardon me. With true Irish delicacy they began to talk to each other, ostensibly letting me alone as I wished. Dan smiled round with the consciousness that his efforts were about to be crowned with success, and remarked for the general good:

"Begob, there was wan quare thing, at the wake I'm tellin' yez iv - all the girrls on the flure wint wan afther th'other an' kissed the corpse!" There was a murmur of incredulous astonishment from all, and many whisperings and strugglings between the girls and the men who held them on their knees.

"That wouldn't do you, Katty!" remarked one young man to the girl beside him, but her retort came pat, "It'd be a good custom for you, avick, for the only chance you'd iver get in yer life is whin ye're dead." Then there was a pinch unseen, and a most manifest smack on the man's face which would have given a less hardy person a headache for a day. It was evident that conversation was being made on my account, for the next remarks kept on the subject of me and my work.

"Begob! but play-actin' is a mighty curious thing intirely!" said a man. "I seen some iv it wanst at a fair in Limerick. Shure, they was bins that was play-actin',⁴⁴ an' cute enough they wor."

"I seen a man wan time at Ballinasloe Heifer Fair turnin' music out iv a box, an' him wid a monkey dhressed up like a ginerall!"

"An' I seen dogs what would climb up a laddher an' purtend to be dead, an' would jump as high as yer head through a hoop. I wonder, surr," this to me, "if ye would jump a bit through a hoop. Mind ye, it's a mighty divartin' thing to luk at, an' would do the widdy a power iv good."

I really could not stand this; it was too damned humiliating - our Art compared with the antics of a hen, a monkey, and a dog, as if we were all comrades of equality. But it was all meant in so kindly a way that I made up my mind to sing a comic song. I gave them "Are you there, Moriarty!" for all I was worth. Artistically, it was a success, though, the subject being a glorification of police, was, I felt after I had begun, deplorably inappropriate. They were a splendid audience, and after I had begun to entertain them, I felt I could depend on them thoroughly, so played with the thing, and did it as well as I could. But at first it was dreadful to stand up there looking

down on the dead man in his coffin, and facing the widow with her swollen eyes, with the crucifix and the flowers and the death-lights right under me to try to be comic. It was the ghastliest thing I ever knew, or that I ever shall know. I felt at first like a fiend and a cad and a villain and a scoffer, all in one. In fact, I may say that in that awful moment I realised what it must be to be a tragedian! It was only when I saw the apron slowly drawn from the face of the widow, and her poor, worn eyes brightening up perceptibly through her tears, that I began to understand how salutary was the purpose of the wake. Finally, I gave them "Shamus O'Brien" as a recitation, and that went like wildfire. So we passed right into the dawn, when the grey came stealing in through the narrow windows and the open door, and making the guttering candles look dissolute; when the men were nodding their heads, and the girls were, many of them, fast asleep in their arms with their heads on the frieze-clad shoulders, and their ruddy lips open in sleep. Well, anyhow, I was mighty tired when I came away to drive into Fenagh in the donkey cart and the straw, but felt the effort was not wasted when the whole band of friends - they were real friends now - came down the boreen to see me off, and the poor widow looked gratefully at me as she waved her hand from the open door with the first red of the coming dawn falling full upon her with a sort of promise of hope.'

When the applause had subsided, the Manager stood up and said:

'Ladies and gentlemen, before we go any further I want to see one thing done - to see two very good friends of mine shake hands. Two very good fellows; two leaders and representatives of the great branches of the art that we all love, and whose exercise is our vocation, Tragedy and Comedy. Not that I know such a thing is necessary, for in the close companionship which our work necessitates we can chaff one another without mercy. But there are some strangers here, these gentlemen' - here he pointed to the railway men - 'who are our guests; and I should not like them to think that the girding at each other with passages of humour and satire which has been going on between the accomplished representatives of the buskin and the sock was other than in perfect good fellowship.'

Both men saw the necessity of the case, and each standing up held out a hand.

'Gags, old boy, here's your good health and your family's, and may they live long and prosper,' said the Tragedian.

'Bones, my old pal,' said the Low Comedian, 'here's a nail in your coffin and no hair on your head; and when I regard those hyacinthine locks of yours and see the strength and symmetry of the form of which all your comrades are so proud, I think that is tantamount to the farthest-off manifestation of ill that I can imagine.' The men, who were really old and tried friends, though they had eternal passages of arms, shook hands cordially. The MC grasped the fact that the situation was complete.

'Next!' he said, indicating the Prompter with the hand which did not contain the hot grog. So the Prompter began:

I suppose I must confine myself to some personal experience, and that connected with the theatre. It is a pity I am so limited; as if I were free to speak of the adventures of my youth by flood and field, "I could a tale unfold" that would "freeze your young blood and make each particular hair to stand on end like quills upon the fretful porcupine."

'Talking about floods, what was that about a flood of which you were speaking to Gags the other night? It seemed mighty interesting to both of you.' This from the Heavy Father.

'Oh, that,' answered the Prompter, with a short laugh. 'That wasn't half bad; but it wasn't what you'd call a story; and though I was there, anything that happened was not strictly personal to me. Mr Hupple was there too. He can tell you more about it than I can, for I only knew about going through the flood and what the conductor said; but he heard the confessions.'

'Never mind about him now,' said the MC. 'We shall come to him presently.'

'Tell us about your part, anyhow.' This suggestion came from the Manager. So the Prompter took it as a command - or as a stage direction, at any rate. Bending low, he said:

'Whatever you wish, Mr Benville Nonplusser, must be done.'