

THE FREEDOM OF THE PLAY.

DISCUSSION AT THE ABBEY THEATRE.

THE MAN WHO HID THE MAN WHO KILLED HIS FATHER.

There was a very large audience in the Abbey Theatre last night, when a public discussion took place in reference to the freedom of the theatre and to Mr. Synge's play, "The Playboy of the Western World." Every part of the theatre was crowded. There were a number of ladies present. Mr. P. D. Kenny occupied the chair. There were numerous speakers, and it was nearly midnight when the debate closed. The speakers were frequently interrupted, and at times the noise was very loud. Those in sympathy with the play were often hissed and booed.

The Chairman, when about to address the audience, was frequently interrupted by some of the occupants in the gallery, but he said he was not going to be put off his purpose. He had got to take the chair, and if order was not kept he would take care it would not be his fault. The purpose was to offer as wide and full and free a discussion as possible. (A Voice—"The police are in the greenroom.") The Chairman remarked that a theatre was not a political institution. (A Voice—"It should be a national one though.") The Chairman retorted that whether it was, or whether it should be a national one, it was protected by the police against rowdyism. (Loud applause.) It was extremely courteous on the part of the management of the theatre to set apart an evening for the purpose of discussing the points of difference between them and the public.

Mr. W. B. Yeats, who was warmly applauded, opened the discussion. Regarding the manner in which Mr. Synge's play was received, Mr. Yeats said that during the performance every now and then some one got up in his place and tried to make a speech. On Saturday an old gentleman stood up in the front row of the pit after the opening of the third act, and was probably very indignant that the police did not allow him to speak. He (Mr. Yeats) hoped he was there that night. They never desired anything but the most free discussion, that they might get at last some kind of sound criticism in this country. But before the discussion commenced he would do his best to answer a few of the more obvious arguments, for there was no use wasting time on stupidities or on misunderstanding of each other's point of view. He saw it said again and again that they have tried to prevent the audience from the reasonable expression of dislike. He certainly would never like to set plays before a theatrical audience that was not free to approve or disapprove, even very loudly, for there was no dramatist that did not desire a live audience. They had to face something quite different from reasonable expression of dissent. On Monday and on Tuesday night it was not possible to hear six consecutive lines of the play, and this deafening outcry was not raised by the whole theatre, but almost entirely by a section of the pit, who acted together, and even sat together. It was an attempt to prevent the play from being heard and judged. They were under contract with their audiences; they received money on the understanding that the play should be heard and seen. They considered it was their duty to carry out that contract. It was stated by Mr. O'Donoghue "that the forty dissentients in the pit were doing their duty, because there was no Government censor in Ireland." The public, he said, was the censor, where there was no other appointed to the task. But were these forty alone the public and the censor? What right had they to prevent the far greater number who wished to hear from hearing and judging? They themselves were preventing judgment, and keeping the play from the eyes and ears of its natural censor. They called to their aid the means which every community possessed to limit the activities of small minorities who set their interests against those of the community—they called in the police. There was no stalwart member of the Sinn Fein party who would not do the same if he were to find a representative of that active minority, the burglars, fumbling with the lid of his strong box. They thought it puerile to say that they could not use the laws common to all civilised communities to protect themselves and their audience against the tyranny of a clique. They might as well refuse to stamp their letters because the King's head was upon them. At no time would he have ever hesitated to do what they had done. When "The Countess Cathleen" was denounced with an equal violence they called in the police. That was in '99, when he was still President of the Wolfe Tone Commemoration. He would indeed despise himself if for the sake of popularity and a vague sentiment he were to mar the task to which he had set his hands. Some seven or eight years ago the national movement was demoralised, and passed from the hands of a few leaders into those of large numbers of young men organised in clubs and societies. These young men made the mistake of the newly franchised everywhere. They fought for causes worthy in themselves with the unworthy instruments of tyranny and violence. Gentlemen of little clubs should not mistake the meaning of the theatre last week; it meant something for the management, but it meant more for them. When the curtain of "The Playboy" fell on Saturday night he was confident that he saw the rise in this country of a new thought, a new opinion, that had long been needed. It was not all approval of Mr. Synge's play that sent the receipts of the Abbey Theatre last week to twice the height they had ever touched before. The generation of young men and girls who were leaving schools or colleges now were weary of the tyranny of clubs and leagues. They wished again for individual sincerity, the external quest of truth, all that had been given up for so long that all might crouch upon the one roost and cry in one flock. (Applause.)

Mr. W. J. Lawrence said that, viewing the reception the play got on Saturday night, and the verdict of the Press, the National Theatre Society would have been well advised to withdraw the play at once in deference to public opinion. Mr. Yeats by his attitude had struck one of the strongest blows of modern times against the freedom of the theatre. Mr. Yeats's attitude was an argument for the retention of the censorship in England, and an argument for the establishment of the censorship in Ireland. (Applause.)

Mr. Sheehy Skeffington thought the play was bad; the organised disturbance was worse; the methods employed to quell that disturbance was worst of all. He regretted that Mr. Yeats missed the opportunity of enlisting on his side the sympathies of the Dublin public, but enlisted instead the sympathies of the "garrison." If they were to have the freedom of the theatre, they must also have the freedom to comment on what occurred on the stage. (Applause.)

Mr. Cruise O'Brien objected to Mr. Yeats' theory of dragooning people into one's theories of art.

Mr. O'Hoey took exception to the attribution to the Irish people of characteristics which are not, which never would be, theirs.

Mr. Richard Sheehy maintained that the audience had a perfect right to protest in the strongest manner against the play.

Mr. J. B. Yeats said that he preferred the vitality, the vigour, and the vivacity of Mr. Synge's sinners to the saints that had been left by Carleton. They wanted truth; they did not want doctored truth.

A number of other speakers addressed the meeting.

Mr. W. B. Yeats, in concluding the debate, explained that after calling in the police he thought it was a right and manly thing that he should go to the full length. He did not want to charge a mere rowdy, like some of those who were making a row that night. (Applause.) He chose a man he could respect, knowing that the dispute that lay between them was one of principle. Reference was made that night to the garrison, but he asked them to remember that when they were offered the support of the "garrison" on condition that they would withdraw "Kathleen Ni Houlihan" they refused, and it was the author of "Kathleen Ni Houlihan" who spoke against the Royal visit when all the patriots were trembling and sat silent. (Applause.) Having spoke in defence of Mr. Synge's play Mr. Yeats explained where the author got the central idea of it. Some ten years ago Mr. Synge and he, as well as others, were in the Isles of Arran. On coming out of a fishing boat one day a crowd of people gathered round them. The people brought up to them a very old man who they said was the oldest man on the island, and all gathered round him in reverend admiration. The old man made the following speech:—"If any gentleman has done a crime we'll hide him. There was a gentleman who killed his father, and I hid him in my house, six months till he went away to America."

The proceedings then ended.