

AN IMPRESSION OF "THE PLAYBOY"

SIR,—My excuse for venturing to put forward publicly my unfavourable impression of "The Playboy of the Western World" is that I have been for over three years an enthusiastic admirer of Mr. Synge's work. I witnessed the first performance of each of his three previous plays—"The Shadow of the Glen," "Riders to the Sea," and "The Well of the Saints"—and I have, in various little academes, ardently and consistently championed these dramas against those who charge them with unreality, morbidity, libelling the Irish character, and so forth. When Mr. Yeats, speaking at University College a couple of years ago, declared that the battle for dramatic freedom in Ireland was destined to rage around Mr. Synge—when he prophesied for Mr. Synge a European reputation in twenty years' time—I shared that opinion and concurred in the prophesy. And I do so still—that is why I take the liberty of uttering a friendly warning to Mr. Synge, in the hope that the unfavourable criticism of his admirers may induce him to refrain from wasting his capacities on work unworthy of him, and thus retarding the fulfilment of Mr. Yeats' prophesy.

"The Playboy of the Western World" is described as a comedy, but its "humour" is of such a low and vulgar type as to disgust, not to amuse, any mind of ordinary refinement and good taste. This does not apply, I hasten to say, to the first act, which contains much genuinely humorous writing, and which was received with general applause by Saturday night's audience. But the promise of this act is woefully belied by its successors. The second and third acts were listened to with growing impatience and irritation. As another spectator put it to me, they are written in "the language of the gutter, with just a touch of quaintness." The quaintness could not long keep at bay the disgust of the spectators at the growing coarseness of the dialogue. I am not squeamish, and have no puritanical objection to strong language on the stage, provided it can be made to subserve an artistic purpose. But here it appeared to be gratuitously dragged in, as if the author had set himself to find out exactly how much his audience would stand. If that were his object, he achieved it. One particularly objectionable phrase, towards the close of the third act, snapped their strained patience, and the remainder of the play was only audible in fragments above the noise of vigorous groaning and counter-cheering. Personally, I took part in neither, my predominant feeling being one of regret at Mr. Synge's bad taste; but I must say that, in my opinion, the hostile demonstration, manifestly spontaneous and sincere, was thoroughly justified and distinctly healthy.

There are other faults in "The Playboy." It is badly constructed, and is too thin for three acts; it shows in a marked degree that obsession by the sexual idea which is the obverse of one of Mr. Synge's qualities; it overdoes the grotesque in character and incident. But these, though legitimate subjects of criticism, would not of themselves have provoked open attack, as this deliberate vulgarity did. Of course, we must preserve due measure in our condemnation. There is no pantomime or musical comedy which is not, in its veneered grossness, many times more offensive to any cultivated taste than "The Playboy." But the Abbey Theatre audience is a thinking one, and takes its drama seriously; and it is well for the future of Irish dramatic art that it should be so. I hope, however, that no one interested in Irish drama will condemn "The Playboy" at second-hand. It will be produced all this week, and there is ample opportunity for theatre-going Dublin to form an opinion independent of any published criticisms. The excellent work Mr. Synge has already done entitles him to so much consideration from the public. But should the final verdict prove definitely hostile, should the audiences of the week endorse the view so forcibly expressed on Saturday, then, I submit, "The Playboy" ought to be permanently withdrawn from the boards, and Mr. Synge should prepare to do some work really worthy of his talents.

This is not a general critique of the performance, so I have nothing to add about the admirable acting which vainly endeavoured to save the play from censure. I sincerely hope Mr. Synge will not again subject Mr. Fay and his company to such an ordeal.—Yours, etc.,

F. S. S.