

THE "PLAYBOY."

SIR,—As a rule the less a writer says about his own work the better, but as my views have been rather misunderstood in an interview which appeared in one of the evening papers, and was alluded to in your leader to-day, I would like to say a word or two to put myself right. The interview took place in conditions that made it nearly impossible for me—in spite of the patience and courtesy of the interviewer—to give a clear account of my views about the play, and the lines I followed in writing it. "The Playboy of the Western World" is not a play with "a purpose" in the modern sense of the word, but although parts of it are, or are meant to be, extravagant comedy, still a great deal that is in it, and a great deal more that is behind it, is perfectly serious, when looked at in a certain light. That is often the case, I think, with comedy, and no one is quite sure to-day whether "Shylock" and "Alceste" should be played seriously or not. There are, it may be hinted, several sides to "The Playboy." "Pat," I am glad to notice, has seen some of them in his own way. There may be still others if anyone cares to look for them.—

Yours, etc., J. M. SYNGE.

SIR,—The battle between "The Playboy of the Western World" and the Abbey Theatre pit is the old battle between realism and the forces of reaction, with which we are already familiar in other forms of art. When Manet, discarding convention and the "Ideal," painted real ladies in real gardens, playing with real babies, the Paris public was scandalised—quite as scandalised as it was by "L'Olympe," in which the same modernity, the same truth, held sway. People had been so long accustomed to regard art as a medium by which they are enabled to "see through a glass darkly" that sunlight and reality staggered and blinded them. Parallels in music and in literature will occur to everyone. The ultimate victory, of course, remains with the artist—if he is an artist; the Philistine invariably triumphs for the moment, and usually blows many trumpets to keep up his courage.

The *Freeman's Journal* calls Mr. Synge's play "a calumny on the Irish people." But Mr. Synge has not professed to put the whole Irish race on the stage in "The Playboy." What he does profess to do is to present a realistic study of certain people and certain incidents. The question is not whether Mr. Synge's peasants are the only—or even the usual—types of Irish peasant character, but whether they are true to themselves and to life. I claim that they are, and that they are at least as convincing as the blameless and attenuated specimens of humanity that we are so familiar with in the work of contemporary Irish writers of fiction. The banner of "Erin and Virtue" has been worn a little threadbare of late by some of its supporters. A conspiracy of silence helps neither art nor life.

The three or four score disturbers of the Abbey Theatre performance last night gave everyone present an admirable study of the "stage Irishman" whom they affected to disown. Mr. Synge did not need to go beyond the doors of the theatre for material for another "calumny." If, however, he should venture into the streets which surround that theatre, and describe in all its unlovely detail the typical life and the typical language of the Dublin slums, he would certainly produce a drama even less calculated to satisfy the idealistic aspirations of the Abbey "pit." We are accustomed to these sights and sounds; they are forced upon us as we walk through the city. But then, that is "real life," from which we evidently wish to escape, and which we desire to ignore—most of all when we go to the theatre. The humanity of the proceeding I leave to the moralist, with whose mission the artist has nothing to do. But at least there is this to be said for the artist—that he is not indifferent to the spectacle of life, and that his sympathy penetrates beneath "the shows of things."

The question remains whether unrelieved peasant human nature is a legitimate subject for drama. If it is—and we have had little else from the modern Irish playwright—then I maintain that it should not be cribbed, cabined, and confined within certain well-defined limits, but that it should have full scope to express itself in its own language and in its own way. The old-fashioned stage peasants do very well for comic opera; they are part of the furniture of the piece; but it is quite another affair when the peasant is treated seriously as dramatic material. We do not ask what Mr. Yeats calls "the drama of the drawingroom" to give us types; we ask it to give us real men and women. It is the same with the drama of the village.

Unless the dramatist has studied the peasant intimately and personally he is sure to bore us with banalities; or, as in the case of many of the productions of the Abbey Theatre, to give us snippets, not plays—quite charming snippets, it is true, but not to be regarded as serious drama. To a great many people, however, it will seem that it is impossible to construct really fine plays out of material so undeveloped, so little self-conscious, so limited in its range as the peasant mind. At least it is to be regretted that the contemporary Irish dramatist has not sometimes fared further afield.

With regard to "The Playboy," considered solely as a work of art, I think it inferior to "The Well of the Saints" and "Riders to the Sea," not because of its realism, but because the underlying psychological idea—the stimulating effect of hero worship, following upon a lifetime of suppression—is not sufficiently brought out. It is obscured by the wealth of dialogue and incidents; and the piece, at a first hearing, has an air of superficiality lacking in Mr. Synge's earlier work. As to the dialogue—I am not now speaking of its decorative adjuncts—it is the most masterly study we have yet had in this *genre*.

I was surprised to see in your account of last night's performance that there had been no complaints from the audience which would have justified the expulsion of the riotous element. I was under the impression that everyone in the stalls protested audibly, and many, like myself, were astonished that no use was made by the management of the able-bodied policemen who lined the walls of the pit. It seemed an extraordinary moment to choose for a policy of non-resistance, and it was certainly hardly fair to those who wished to hear the play, and who were compelled instead to endure a two-hours' pandemonium.—

Yours, etc., ELLEN DUNCAN.

January 29th, 1907.