

ATHALIE AT HARVARD.

Racine's Masterpiece Produced for the First Time in America.

(Correspondence of YALE ALUMNI WEEKLY.)

Cambridge, Dec. 14.—The presentation of Racine's "Athalie," by the French department, during the past week has received the warm endorsement of audiences which taxed the capacity of the College theatre. Owing to the unexpected demand for seats, an extra performance was given on Saturday afternoon. Not since the Phormio of Terence was produced in the same auditorium in 1894, have so many distinguished guests assembled to partake of the University's hospitality and entertainment. Presidents and professors of many New England Colleges attended, as well as scholars, literati and critics besides the immediate circle of the college world.

The number included President Crafts and Professor Van Dael of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, President Seelye and Professor Duval of Smith, President Capen and Professor Fay of Tufts, President Chase of Bates, President Butler of Colby, Professor Dow of Dartmouth, Dean Hodges of the Cambridge Episcopal School, President Lee of the French-American College of Springfield, Rev. Professor and Mrs. Cheyne of Oxford, Eng., President Bronsahan of Boston College, Professor Angel of Bates, Professor Gettis of Boston University, President Irvine and Professor Vermont of Wellesley, President Agassiz, Miss Irwin and others of the faculty of Radcliffe, Professor Eckstadt of Mount Holyoke, Hon. Roger Wolcott, Col. Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Dr. and Mrs. John Fiske, Dr. Charles Eliot Norton, Hon. Robert Treat Paine, Mr. Alfred Hemenway, Mr. T. Jefferson Coolidge, Hon. Sherman Hoar, Hon. Solomon Lincoln, Maj. H. L. Higginson and Mr. R. C. Lehmann.

It is highest praise to say that in the present instance the University has maintained the high standard of previous similar efforts. The same care in preparation, exquisite attention to details, and taste in the selection of costumes and stage setting, which have provoked enthusiastic admiration on previous occasions, were again in evidence. Harvard alone of American universities seems able to reproduce the great plays of the past with that ease and facility with which they are revived periodically at the English universities. Without interference with the curriculum or apparent, excessive effort, excellent results have been achieved. In 1881, a memorable representation of the *Oedipus Tyrannus* of Sophocles stirred other colleges to emulation. In April of 1894 the Phormio of Terence was revived with such success that a witness of the same play, as given several years previous, by the students of Westminster School, in obedience to the ordinance of their charter from Queen Elizabeth, declared that "Harvard's novel enterprise even surpassed in merit the traditional excellence of the ancient English school." Stimulated by the example of the departments of Greek and Latin, the English department invited the pupils of the American Academy of the Dramatic Arts of New York to produce Ben Jonson's "Epicocue" at Cambridge; and the play was given in March, 1895, in Sanders' Theatre, with a strictly Elizabethan stage, and an Elizabethan audience composed of carefully drilled Harvard students.

For some years the Cercle Français of Harvard has presented annually a French comedy to Cambridge audiences with continued and increasing success. The most meritorious was, perhaps, "Le Malade Imaginaire," by Molière, which was given in Cambridge and Boston in December, 1895.

It was not until this year, however, that the French department gave its official recognition to this annual play. The consent of the College authorities was secured to present the play in Sanders Theatre. The field of previous effort had been limited to comedy. It was a bold step, therefore, when the department decided upon Racine's masterpiece. Mr. F. C. de Sumichrast, the head of the French department, who, as a member of the Cercle, had been the leading spirit in the production of the comedies by that Society, assumed the direction and management of the more-ambitious venture. He has worked faithfully to make the achievement creditable to the department, and his success is well deserved.

STORY OF THE PLAY.

The tragedy of Athalie, dating near the close of Racine's life, can hardly be said to be typical of the period. Written to order for the school girls of St. Cyr, the limits of the author's volition were closely prescribed. Mme. de Maintenon asked from him for her girls "un petit ouvrage propre à inspirer la piété." The play holds its place as the author's masterpiece for its simplicity and beauty as a creation in literature; not for dramatic power. The story follows closely the biblical account of the fall of Athaliah and the crowning of Joash after he has been reared in the temple by Jehoiada. Around this slender narrative, Racine constructed his five-act tragedy, and gave to it the name of the ill-fated Queen, whose death, following the disclosure of the identity of Joash, forms the climax of its dramatic movement.

DESCRIPTION OF THE STAGE.

No attempt was made to revive the stage conditions in France at the close of the seventeenth century, and so make the stage conform to that of the period of the first production of the play, as did the English department two years ago, when presenting the "Epicocue."

But the scenery on the stage was designed for the play. There was no change of scene during the five acts.

To the height of the music balcony above, the stage was framed in a representation of the front of a castellated curtain wall of the ancient temple at Jerusalem, with flanking towers, apparently composed of blocks of marble veined with rose and amethyst. The curtains, of some rich, wine-colored material, embroidered in silver designs of severe classic simplicity, divided in the middle of the proscenium opening and were drawn back to either side, where they fell in soft folds over little colored marble railings that extended out for two or three feet along the front of the stage. The stage setting showed an ante-room to a chamber occupied by the High Priest. It appeared to be hexagonal in shape, with three curtained doorways at the back, the center one being reached by a flight of a few low, broad steps. There were also two smaller doorways, uncurtained, on each side of the room. The decorations of the walls of the ante-chamber were in soft, neutral tints of a light, restful character—pale yellow, amber, light orange and similar shades—and the frieze showed the cherubim with outspread wings and the trefoil repeated again and again, while the swinging curtains were also in light colors, with pale blue borders.

As a spectacle the whole play was attractive because unique. From the moment when the curtains were withdrawn, disclosing the dim interior just before the dawn, with two shadowy, white-robed Levites standing motionless before the main doorway, ready to draw back the curtains for the entrance of the High Priest, the effect was always pleasing to the eye. Sometimes the play of colors was joyous in the extreme; at other times, the empty temple, bare of furnishings, with its somber neutral tints, impressed one with the contrast.

LES NOMS DES PERSONNAGES.

In preparing for the presentation of Athalie, a new departure was made in selecting the cast. In the previous plays all the parts had been taken by students in the University. In the play this year, instructors in the French department as well as graduates of the University, and students and graduates of Radcliffe were included. The cast was thus arranged:

- Joas.....Miles. Mary Coolidge
- Athalie.....Louise Cushing
- Joad.....M. de Sumichrast
- Josabet.....Miles. Clara May
- Zacharie.....Grace Forbes, Radcliffe
- Salomith.....Celia Gould, Radcliffe
- Abner.....MM. Marin la Meslée
- Azarias.....Lydiard Horton
- Ismael.....Archibald Tisdale
- Edouard Malone
- Horace Stanton
- Norman Hall
- Percy Brayton
- Henri Brigham
- Charles Wright
- Mathan.....
- Nabal.....Georges Cabot Ward
- Agar.....Mlle. Joséphine Sherwood, Radcliffe

The impersonation of the wicked queen by Miss Cushing was exceptional, and her work would bear comparison with professional talent. Prof. de Sumichrast in the role of the High Priest, had a most difficult part, and filled it acceptably, appearing at his best where the dramatic action was most pronounced. His manner seemed formal, but that was because all the formalities of the Jewish religion were exemplified in the character which he impersonated. Mr. La Meslée, an instructor in the French department, who has seen service in the French army, took the part of Abner, one of the principal officers in the king's guard, and his military bearing gave dignity to his office. His pure French accent brought out the music of the language apart from any forced emphasis on the metre of the lines. The part of Josabet was excellently filled by Miss Clara May, and Miss Coolidge, in the role of the boy-king, showed careful study of her part, and was the most attractive figure in the tableau that concludes the last act.

Priests and Levites in white robes and imposing head dresses attended the High Priest, and a chorus of young women of the tribe of Levi occupied the stage during the choral parts. These handmaids of the temple, in their floating gauzy veils, loose hair and flowing draperies of lilac and violet, pale yellow, delicate tints of blue, pink and green, and pure white, whether gracefully swinging wreathes of roses or waving dark green palm branches, mingled in lovely accord with the priests in their gorgeous turbans and holy vestments, and the Levites in their glistening white robes.

The verses to the chorus, which are regarded as the finest bits of lyrical poetry in the seventeenth century, were sung by the Cecilia Society of Boston, while the beautiful music of Mendelssohn was interpreted by thirty artists from the Boston Symphony Orchestra.

It was strong proof of the excellence of the presentation, that a cast of amateurs, appearing in a drama so severe that it has failed signally when presented in France, was able to hold, as it did, the almost uninterrupted attention of the audience.

J. WESTON ALLEN.

Chamber Concerts Stopped.

The Committee in charge of the Chamber Concerts have announced that, owing to a lack of funds no concerts will be given as formerly. These concerts, at which the famous Kneisel Quartette of Boston was the attraction, have, unfortunately, never been self-sustaining and the deficit has been growing larger each year.

The price of admission to these concerts has been kept down to a very low figure to enable men of small means to benefit by them. A proposed rise in the price of admission was rejected, as that would make a certainty of a still smaller audience.

Another reason for the discontinuance of the concerts this year is that the Kneisel Quartette have refused to play here this season at the same price as last year, which is much less than they are accustomed to receive elsewhere. This would necessitate a higher price for tickets if the Kneisel Quartette were engaged, and would in the end prove a financial loss to those in charge. It was also impossible, owing to previous engagements of the Kneisel Quartette, to secure suitable dates for New Haven.

It will be necessary before the concerts can be renewed to have a guarantee fund established and it is hoped that this may be accomplished before next year. In this way the concerts would be put upon a firm financial footing and those who take an interest in their welfare would be insured against the loss hitherto attached to them.

Looking to the Future.

[Editorial in Waterbury American.]

Prof. Hadley does not make it in the form of a complaint, but states it as a fact, that champion debaters are not honored as champion athletes are. The winners of the Harvard debate are comparatively forgotten, while the winners of the Princeton football game will be immortalized in college records. We had been thinking, and had taken occasion to say, that it seems this year as though

the forensic heroes had risen in College and in public estimation and that the promise was of progress in the right direction. Perhaps we were deceived by appearances. The Springfield Republican notes that the condition stated by Prof. Hadley reveals the same human feeling that makes military heroes honored above statesmen, jurists and scholars, and says that while this feeling continues debaters will not be glorified as athletes are. But it thinks the time is coming when they will be.



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