(January 10, 1927)

Address

By Mr. William Faversham.

President George H. Sedgewick: The theatre, without any doubt, is an institution which is intimately related to the life of the community. One has only to remember that it has its origins away back before almost any other institution that we can think of or name. And it has continued during these thousands of years always having a place in the community and a call on the people. The subjects of the drama have, of course, been exceedingly varied. In the beginnings they seemed all to be about the gods and now they seem to be mostly written for the gods.

We are very glad to have today as our guest a gentleman known to the people of Toronto before a great many of us were. He tells me he was first here in 1888 and from that time he has always been an outstanding figure in the drama on this continent and has always been a welcome guest in Toronto. He has views on the theatre which I am sure will be of interest to us.

Mr. William Faversham: When one thinks of the honor the Canadian Club has done me in asking me to come here, one naturally is a little nervous. You hear many great men and I felt in a way that the theatre might seem trivial to you, but after I received this letter I thought that probably I ought to go. I am not a speaker. I can only talk and say what I can of our institution. And after all as the chairman said the theatre has been an institution almost since the beginning of the world. It is much older than the Christian religion and it has gone through its troubles and trials, in the days of the Greeks and of the Romans and in the time of Oliver Cromwell. When he was bossing England the first thing he did was to throw into the sea a great number of what he called mountebanks.

They tried to destroy the manuscripts of Shakespeare, but a lot of Shakespearean actors managed to get away in boats and got to Scandinavia and they managed to pull together some of the original manuscripts, of which so many were burned. A lot of people will tell you that there are still a lot of original Shakespearean manuscripts left. They are about forty per cent. right and sixty per cent. wrong, because when the actors were driven off they might have their parts sticking in their pockets and between them they would sit down afterwards and pull them together. That is the way Shakespeare was done.* After the return of Charles the Second the women at Hampton Court begged and prayed him to restore the theatre and get back the classical plays. They succeeded and, incidentally, it might interest you to know that this was the first time that a violin was permitted to be played in England. Oliver Cromwell arrested the first lot of Italians and although he did not do anything to them because of causing trouble with Rome, he shipped them back. But Charles had them.

In the days of David Garrick they went through the same thing. I expect at that time they were doing what they are trying to do to our institution now—drag it down in every possible way. Garrick appealed to the women of England and they not only got behind him, but got their husbands and fathers to come forward and subsidise the stage and made the English stage the greatest up to that time.

We jump forward to the greatest man, I suppose, who ever lived in the dramatic profession—Sir Henry Irving. Some people disagree that Irving was a great actor, but he was at best a great actor and he was a great statesman and a great publicist and he did more for our profession than any man who lived in the memory of any of us. He was finally caught where he could not help the theatre without being underwritten. He wanted to do fine things and he interested Baroness Burdett-Coutts who went behind him. The stage was revolutionized and people flocked into London to see Irving. He took Edwin Booth, who was down and out, and practically starving in London, and co-starred

*These views as to the original MSS. of Shakespeare are not upheld by the best modern critics.

with him and made Booth a lot of money. Booth, who had been very fond of strong drink, got from Irving a good lesson. He came back to America, saturated with Irving's ideas and became finally one of the greatest English-speaking actors that ever lived.

These men all tried to conquer a condition that arises every few generations,—the downward grade of the theatre. Of course what I am going to say does not apply so much in Canada because you have here a sort of public censorship. If people believe a thing is not clean they get up and quietly walk out. A year ago last October a play was put on—one of the most disgusting I have seen in many years. I was asked to play in it by Mr. Shubert and refused. They had a very good house the first night, but many people left; and I think the gross receipts were about $1,400 on the whole week, proving that Toronto people don't want filth in their theatres.

Now I have made it a point from New York to New Orleans, from San Francisco through to Canada to speak on this subject and I think I have done more good in Canada than anywhere. You know the factory that manufactures these so-called plays is very close to you across the border, and they arise out of the real estate speculator's brain. He buys a bit of property, puts up a building with a moving picture profile front and calls it a theatre. They cannot get plays enough to play in them so they take anything with a little filth in it. That is why so many of these plays that leave New York die. People are beginning to show their distaste for these plays. We have got to such a condition in New York that men and women, contemporary with me on the stage, who have passed all their lives in good honest work in the theatre and have spent fortunes on it are not able to work in these plays. I have thrown down five or six plays this year that were so disgusting that it was impossible for me to tell you the plots of them. I was asked a week or two ago by one of the most prominent managers in New York to go to see the opening of a new play that he was putting on. He said, "It is a marvellous play," and I said, "All right, I will go and see it." I went. There were twenty of us in the party. The woman who

sat next to me was a very worldly woman—a smart, go-ahead, New York woman. The language at the end of the first act was so terribly strong and the play so disgusting that it was impossible to stand it. This lady asked me to take her to the car and said she would smoke cigarettes until the play finished. I said, "I will stay with you," but she said, "No, you were asked to see the play and you have got to stay," so I saw it through.

In Syracuse the other night they produced a play called "Ballyhoo" or "Hullaballoo," or something like that. It was a tryout. The audience finally got up and called out "Shame." The manager dropped the curtain and called in the police. They put the manager and the company out of the theatre. The police locked the doors and told them that after they had gone before the Police Commissioners they could get out. That is what happened in Syracuse. In New York Mayor Walker sent for the manager and said, "This is going a little too far. You will have to take this stuff out." The manager said "If I take that out the play won't go," and the Mayor replied, "We don't want it to go if it is like that." The manager said "We will take it out, but it will be a failure." It was a great failure.

That is the sort of thing they are doing and that is the sort of thing you are keeping from this city. Then I compare that with the names of the great artists that you have had in this city in my time. In 1888 I played here with Mrs. Fiske, twenty years after I was born, and I remember such names here as Irving, Booth, Harvey, Salvini, Forbes Robertson, Sothern and Maude. Do you realise that it is going to be a long time before you will see such people again. You have had the joy of having in this city in the old days a great tradition. You cannot stop the English element from going to the theatre. At the present time you cannot get the attractions to come here because they have only dirty attractions and Canadians will not have them. And so all you have to do is to sit tight—that is the only thing that will save the theatre—and support local stock companies which will give you the best plays.

I have seen since I have been in Toronto two jolly good performances. One of them was a popular play by one of

our greatest authors, produced in New York a few years ago, and the performance here a week or two ago was so much better that you would hardly know the play. These stock companies are naturally going to bring to the theatre young men and women who will be educated in the drama. They will be educated behind the footlights and from them will spring such talent as the great actors I have mentioned.

Before my time it was impossible to travel a company because you could not afford to pay the fares and they used the visiting star system and local stock companies learned to watch these men who had won their laurels. The actor who goes into a theatre with a most elementary education, if he is in earnest can become an educated man and a man of the world. He may not be a financier; they seldom are, but he has a general knowledge that mostly surpasses that of the ordinary layman. The theatre teaches so much. It teaches you all the forms of art—music, painting, history, deportment, sculpture, and above all it teaches you care of the physique. Without a good physique you have no chance in a profession like mine. And, therefore, my claim is that the theatre is one of the educative institutions of the world. It is so much better to teach a lesson by example than by reading. A boy who is taken to a play will never forget because ninety-nine per cent. of the people remember what they hear and see and one per cent. remember what they read.

There has been injected between the theatre and literature something that has become a very big institution—the moving picture. But after all it does not speak. That also has been going through the experiences of the stage. I am glad to know that in Canada they don't permit these horrible pictures. But they are permitted in the United States and generally they are the pictures that decry England and make England and everybody look small except themselves. I saw one the other night, of the Northwestern War away back in the sixties, and it was the worst misrepresentation I have ever seen in my life. I had the honor as a boy in India of knowing the general who commanded the troops. I was so disgusted that I tried to find out where it came from and it was made in the backyard of the Metro studios

in Hollywood. I felt I should like to say something public about it and was almost calling up my friend Charlesworth, and then I read an article in your papers about this British-Canadian or British Commonwealth Moving Picture scheme. I called up the editor of the Star, but he was not there and I was referred to his assistant and asked him if it was true and he said "Yes." I was introduced to these people and learned that they were trying to put in Australia and Canada and India and Africa their own moving picture factories which would show to advantage anything connected with the British Empire and it struck me as being a very fine scheme. I am not very well versed in the scheme but I think the idea is a good one.

The time has come when you have to stop these misrepresentations of England and Canada. Go over any of the United States pictures that deal with the war. I saw a picture of war scenes made in Hollywood where the men were supposed to wear British uniforms and I would have liked to stop them. Every uniform was wrong. When the scene was run off in the projecting room to Englishmen, it was a joke. Some of the players were wearing forage caps on the tops of their heads, with a strap under the chin.

I think your censorship of the picture is just as necessary as your censorship of the theatre. You won't let a dirty play come into your city and yet I could go round on Sunday and buy the Sunday edition of any of the big New York papers and open their illustrated portions which have figures of half dressed women, advertising women's underwear. And these are permitted to be sold in your city on Sunday. It seems to me that if I had cut out some of these pictures a little while ago and sent them in an envelope to some friend in the west to show him what was happening I would have been put in prison for sending obscene pictures through the post.

In speaking of these things to people I am often told. "Faversham, you are old-fashioned. You don't believe in anything that is natural." Well, because a thing is "natural" is no reason why it should be shown on the stage. You would not want shown what happens when you get up in the morning and go to the bathroom. But that is exactly what they will be doing.

The theatre was not meant to be "natural." It is meant to show what we hope will be thought natural. The bits of scenery you see on the stage are painted by artists. You know it is not an eight foot brick wall two feet thick, but you accept it. It is the same with the actor and the play. It is not meant to be real. The actor does not speak with his real voice on the stage. He could not do it. He gives you what he hopes will seem the right emphasis. But these fellows come along and tell you that we don't want realism. We do want realism of the right kind. There is nothing more real than "Seven Keys to Baldpate" or "Lightnin' ".

People will go to the theatre to see clean plays. "Iolanthe" ran in New York and did enormous business. That was followed by the "Pirates of Penzance" which is running to enormous business. A man said to me the other day "The stock companies only revive this and revive that." I have no use for the word "revival." Your fathers and mothers and grandmothers and grandfathers used to go to see "Aida" and "Faust" and you never hear the word "revival" used about them. But why should not actors revive a play that is good? It is the only play that can be revived, and with help and encouragement they will succeed.

Personally I think that all big cities should assist in subsidizing the theatre. I talked with President Eliot of Harvard a year ago about education through the drama, just before Baker left there, and after this talk they called together a lot of men and women of Boston and undertook to get a theatre built. A theatre has been built there. The city underwrote 52 per cent. and private subscriptions the other forty-eight and I have never seen such a theatre in my life. It is the most beautiful I have ever seen. They play plays two weeks—sometimes three and four, but they could not have done that unless they were underwritten. It is a wonderful educative institution, something like Hart House which, although a little small, is doing wonderful work. I think that is the kind of theatre you should have in every big city. It does not cost much and it should pay fifteen to thirty or perhaps forty per cent. on the money if you have a good director and good manager. Something like that is needed because you must not let your children grow up with a moving picture brain.

I live in a place, a country place, on Long Island Sound, a great community for Italian fishermen, and in the last three or four years we have had a tremendous lot of shooting there. It is nothing to go along the roads and see a dead man shot through the head, or perhaps a wounded man shot through the shoulder, always Italians. We had them so often that I called on the Chief of Police and he said many of these Italians were new immigrants who went to the moving pictures. They could not read and only understood the action. They saw people shooting one another and thought that was the thing to do. That is an absolute fact. They thought that was the way people should live in America.

One more thing about the theatre. Of course you know that in London they have been trying to push a lot of these dirty plays of New York and to a certain extent they have got in there. They are very charming and clever in London about these things, as they always are. In a big city like that they sneak in, but here is a city where they cannot sneak in. A week or two ago a play came here, one of the worst I have ever seen. It played to enormous money in New York and went to California and even in Hollywood—a place much belied—they made them cut it. I did not see it here, but I heard from people that it was a very rotten play although it had been severely cut and a lot of people left in the middle of the play. It speaks well for your city and I beg you to keep your eyes open and not let these plays get in. Let us fight to bring back good stuff and I think we can do it and it won't take more than a couple of years longer to clean this thing right out.

You cannot live on the plays you get from England. They cannot afford to bring them, except one company now and then. You have had Matheson Lang by good fortune this week and last year Martin Harvey and a little while before Harry Esmond, but you cannot get enough and you have to rely on the factory in New York, and it would be better for your theatres to close up than accept their filth.

Another thing. Support your stock companies. I think it is wonderful what they do. They go to rehearsals on

Tuesday morning and play the following Monday night and eight performances in the week. You have a drawing population round Toronto of nearly a million people and a good play should run two weeks, which would make their work lighter. Before I sit down I am going to tell you a little story. I daresay some of you gentlemen may have been in the theatre and heard it.

There is a gentleman in Chicago you may know, a famous financier, Leiter. He is a most charming chap, but the biggest man you ever saw for the telling of wonderful stories. One day we were in the club and there was a friend of mine there who used to be Master of the hounds at Melton Mowbray, one of the finest riders in the world, who has done a lot of big game shooting. He is a very quiet chap and hardly ever says a word. Leiter was telling about his wonderful exploits—snakes a mile long and so on, very picturesque and wonderful, and McNeil sat there listening quietly, drawing at his pipe with his eye on Leiter and never taking it off him. Finally Leiter said, "McNeil, you must have had some tremendous experiences in big game shooting?" "No," "What sort of a time did you have with the Prince of Wales?" Leiter asked, "Oh, nothing much. I was just a sort of janitor." "But you must have had some terrible experience?" "Well," he said, "one morning in Africa I was awakened by an orderly who came running to the tent crying, "Sahib, Sahib, there is the biggest tiger in the world outside the compound up a tree." I pulled on a bath robe and a pair of slippers, took my rifle and went out. I found I had only three cartridges. I did see a large tigress as he said and I took the first aim at it and missed and she came halfway down the tree. I took another shot and missed and the tiger jumped to the ground, I fired and missed again and she started coming bounding towards me so I turned round and ran for the tent. I could feel her close to me, with her claws at my shoulders and her hot breath on my neck, just as I clutched the lapel on my tent. . ."

"My God," said Leiter, "What happened?"

"Well," he said, "It killed me."