

'Noel', Bouchor Play, Christmastide Drama for Theatron Patrons

By Paul McPharlin

(Note: "Noel, or the Mystery of the Nativity," by Maurice Bouchor, will be performed at the Woman's club, Evanston, next Christmastide, exclusively for the subscribers to Theatron, which will give a season of six distinguished plays, beginning in November. Mr. McPharlin, who is writing these articles, will design and direct the productions.)

The Church in the middle ages, making the religious significance of Christmas the more vivid to the devout, would show by means of little articulated figures the drama of the birth of Christ. These figures all came to be known as little Maries, and hence the word marionette. Reviving the old custom in all its beauty, Theatron will give to its subscribers special marionette performances of "Noel, or the Mystery of the Nativity." For them there will be no admittance fee; no price could be put on the enacting of this sacred drama. But they alone will be admitted, for the performance by small figures must take place in an intimate hall in order that all may see and hear.

Written for Marionettes

Maurice Bouchor wrote this drama especially for marionettes. It was first given in Paris by the famous marionettes of Henri Signoret, so enthusiastically praised by Anatole France in essays in his "On Life and Letters." This play took artistic Paris by storm; in what we call the yellow 'nineties its serenity and naivete were refreshingly simple. Its long run was closed not because of lacking audiences, but because of sheer fatigue on the part of the manipulators. The following year it was revived by Signoret, and would doubtless have become perennial had the company continued.

The author is still living, a very old man. He has kindly read my translation and approved it; to put the original French poetry into equivalent English verse has been a difficult task, but not an irksome one. This will be the first time the play is heard in English, and its first performance outside of Paris. I am sure that its sincerity and charm will make as many friends for it here as it had abroad.


The music, written by Paul Vidal for the original production, will accompany our performances. Vidal is a pupil of Massenet, to whom the score of "Noel" is dedicated. His melodic invention and skill in harmonization prove him worthy of his master. The introduction is written in sonorous counterpoint, reminiscent of medieval chants. The ballads are based upon Provencal tunes, but the musical passages accompanying the action are "all his own invention." Voices ranging from soprano to bass are heard solo and in chorus.

The marionettes and scenes are quite different from those of the original production. They are subdued in color, polished in detail. In order to supply the few slow, graceful gestures of the characters, a special mechanism has been devised; obviously the skipping and jerking of the string-controlled marionette would destroy the grave mood of the play. The figures, at the time of writing, await only a few finishing touches. Months of rehearsal will be necessary to assure a smooth performance, and so work has begun early.

Other Plays by Figures

This is not to be the only marionette performance given by Theatron. Another play of a very different nature has already been selected, and details about it will be announced later. There are certain plays, I believe, that human actors cannot play—

religious drama, such as "Noel"; fantastic drama, full of tricks and transformations; and very low slapstick drama. The sight of two comedians belaboring each other with clubs is funny, but the ever-present danger spoils the fun of it. Wooden pates being whacked are just as funny—much more so because the violence can go to any extreme. These sorts of plays, then, that actors cannot do, Theatron will do with marionettes. Many a fine piece that is never seen on the boards can come to light with the aid of the obliging mechanical actors.



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