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FARCES AND PIRACIES OF MRS. FISKE'S "TESS"

BY MARGUERITE ROBERTS

FIFTY years ago Thomas Hardy was reported to be "busily engaged upon the dramatization of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*." The New York *Critic* stated: "The task is giving him a deal of trouble and Mrs. Patrick Campbell is consulted at every turn." At one time Hardy gave Forbes Robertson and Mrs. Campbell the rights to *Tess* but they let the time-limit expire. As Mrs. Campbell explained to me in New York on April 6, 1937, "I wanted to play *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, but . . . the first thing I knew he gave the play to Mrs. Fiske."

Thus it was Minnie Maddern Fiske who introduced Hardy's character on the stage. Her "Tess" opened at the Fifth Avenue Theatre, New York, on March 2, 1897. Its tremendous success is reflected in two now-forgotten farces. Of *Tess of the Vaudevilles* the New York *Sun*, March 25, 1897, said:

Marie Dressler, Frederick Backus, Frederick Clifton, and A. R. Phillips unite at the Pleasure Palace in a comical assault on a current drama, which they style a musical and farcical spasm and to which they give the title "Tess of the Vaudevilles." Messrs. Backus and Clifton are responsible respectively for the words and music of the songs, and with Miss Dressler act in the sketch, while the fourth assistant wrote the sketch. For several minutes after it has begun there is no suggestion of the Hardy novel or the play that has been made from it, and Miss Dressler is seen as a housemaid caring for a room shared by an author and a composer. She is seen to hold and put down a duster, but after this convincing exposition of the fact that she is a servant, she gets at her more important duty in the establishment, which is to act in the author's play and to sing the composer's music. She makes a comical affair of singing a new composition with which she pretends to be unfamiliar, bending over her accompanist and counting time loudly. When she comes to interpret the untried drama she is Tess and her companions are Angel Food and Alec Stoutenbottle. Leading up to the murder scene, Angel Food shouts to Tess, "We must split, I am going to Brazil, Indiana," and departs in a frenzy. As Alec sends out

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from the wings a mocking laugh of many horse power, Tess sharpens a bread knife with a corrugated edge of her shoe and disappears in the direction of the laughter. A big racket indicates that she is using the knife, and she staggers in, brandishing the weapon. She has not had time to go half way across the stage when Alec steps up to enquire if he is dead. Being assured that he has been killed, he walks back, and Tess reaches a bureau and drops the knife behind it. At sight of blood on her hand she capers in agony for a moment, and then, opening a drawer frantically, hides the telltale stain with a boxing glove. On the entrance of an officer she collapses on the floor in surrender, whereat the officer removes his uniform, and the three burlesquers wind up with a selection from the composer's opera. A swell apartment on Cherry Hill is the scene of action, and lawless as the hodge-podge is, it makes Miss Dressler's fun-making more effective than did the innings of songs and recitations that she has been having.

The take-off of Mrs. Fiske's most tragic scenes with the knife, the glove, and the officer are, of course, too obvious to need pointing-out. In Philadelphia, another farce, *Tess of Darbyville* was very popular. The *Philadelphia Record*, January 25, 1898, carried this story:

Tess of Darbyville began the second week of its highly successful run at the Eleventh Street Opera House last night. As Baby Tess, bulky Mr. Woods provoked roars of laughter, and the antics of Hughey Drugherty, Alf Gibson, and J. M. Kane delighted the large audience. Rarely has a more laughable sketch than *Tess of Darbyville* been acted at this theatre.

Perhaps there is no better indication of the dramatic appeal of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* than that given by the large number of unauthorized versions. Mrs. Fiske and Harper & Brothers suppressed some through legal means, but for more than forty years American actresses have played Tess, authorized or not.

Rebecca Warren, presented by Melville B. Raymond, played Lorimer Stoddard's version of *Tess* at the Columbia Theatre in Boston on February 8, 1904. The *Boston Evening Transcript*, February 9, 1904, said of her:

"She was especially convincing when, in the second act, after her marriage to Angel, she played the part of the

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happy bride, and the rapid change from joy to sorrow, when she learned that her new husband had not found and read the letter she wrote as her confession, was poignant with the pain she expressed in face and figure. Her despair when Angel left her affected her hearers, who paid her the tribute of appreciative silence. As well done was the passage in Alec's lodgings, where she, the faithless wife, is compelled to bear the insults of her master, anguish and torture, the stinging rebukes of the man who has tired of her — the former expressed without the aid of words, the latter repelled with tragic scorn; these fitted the exacting scene so well that, whatever may be Miss Warren's defects in the part, she is still amply to be praised for her endeavor and its success."

When Mary Lawton, in a stock company at the Castle Square Theatre, Boston, played Tess in the same arrangement on September 1, 1905, the *Boston Evening Transcript*, September 19, 1905, said that she had a difficult task, following Mrs. Fiske. "Miss Lawton is too often mechanical, and although she shows training, it is not the training of the school of experience. Throughout the earlier acts she was disappointing, and it was only during a few moments in her scene with Alec when he returns intoxicated, and in her utterance of 'Marion,' when she learns that her friend has lied to her, that she rose to the demands of the part."

In California *Tess* appeared at least three times between 1909 and 1936. I do not know whether the last presentation was a piracy or not, but Mrs. Fiske must have still had the American rights in 1909 and through 1910. On January 18, 1909, Isabelle Fletcher played Tess in Ye Liberty Playhouse, Oakland, California, with the Bishop's Players. And under the direction of Fred J. Butler, Evelyn Vaughan played Tess, February 28, 1910, in San Francisco, with the Alcazar Stock Company, of which Belasco and Mayer were proprietors.

The last record I have been able to find is of a California

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performance on May 19, 1936. From the arrangement of acts and scenes it seems that this play may have been given from Hardy's version used in London and Dorsetshire. The introduction to the playbill is, however, ambiguous: "This is a play of another Day—a Drama out of the past, presented in the manner in which Hardy wrote it—a play not of modern people, but of simple Wessex Country folk living as they lived in the Nineteenth Century."



THE ASSOCIATES' YEAR IN WATERVILLE

THE Colby Library Associates have this year enjoyed a distinguished series of addresses by visiting scholars and members of the Colby faculty. On October 20, 1944, Professor Elizabeth Manwaring, of Wellesley College, spoke on "The Romantic Garden." Her illustrated lecture traced the development in English landscaping from the classical style of the early eighteenth century to a free and often fantastically romantic fashion. On November 17, Professor Pottle spoke on "Scott and Boswell: a Study in Memory and Imagination." His address described another aspect of the shift from neo-classic to romantic taste. On December 1, Professor William Haller, of Columbia University, delivered a scholarly address on "Milton's Areopagitica: for the Liberty of unlicens'd Printing," in celebration of the three hundredth anniversary of Milton's great treatise. On January 5, 1945, Librarian Rush and Professor Samuel M. Green spoke at the opening of a loan-exhibition of the "Fifty Books of the Year," American books of outstanding physical excellence selected by the American Institute of Graphic Arts. Mr. Rush opened the exhibition, and Mr. Green spoke on "Artistic Aspects of Bookmaking." On February 16, Dr. Howard E. Roman, of Harvard University, gave a critical interpretation of the distinguished poet