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Newsletter—Literary Issue

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Edited by Bernice Slote

Twice a year literary issues of the Newsletter will present new Willa Cather material: reprints of some of Cather's early, hard-to-find, and still uncollected journalistic writings; early reviews, interviews, and notes about Cather's work; bibliographical information; and—from Cather readers—original brief notes, observations, explications, or short critical articles. (Submit manuscripts to CATHER NEWSLETTER, 201 Andrews Hall, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, Nebraska 68588).

. . . In This Issue . . .

☆ Five 1894 Reviews
by Willa Cather

Beginning in the fall of 1893, when she was just under twenty and a junior at the University of Nebraska, Willa Cather began writing play reviews and other dramatic criticism for the **Nebraska State Journal**. By early 1894 she was the official "Journal critic," reporting events on the busy Lincoln stage (as many as one hundred theatrical companies might come through in a season)—and reporting expertly with color, wit, feeling, and sharp integrity. Some of these reviews have been reprinted in **The Kingdom of Art** and in **The World and the Parish** (see these books and Lathrop's **Willa Cather: A Checklist of Her Published Writing** for complete listings), but many others are still to be enjoyed by Willa Cather's readers. This issue of the **Newsletter** presents for the first time five of the 1894 reviews not reprinted (except for a quotation) since their first appearance. They are unchanged except for the correction of misspellings; all are from the **Nebraska State Journal**. The productions reviewed range from romantic drama to melodrama and comedy, to magic shows and amateur opera. Well known theatrical figures like James O'Neill (father of Eugene) and Julia Marlowe were frequently in Lincoln and in the Cather reviews. Best of all, Willa Cather is able to take us there and show us in vivid detail exactly how it was—"last night at the Lansing." B.D.S.

Five 1894 Reviews By Willa Cather

"THE COUNT OF MONTE CRISTO"

Last night Mr. James O'Neill played the "Count of Monte Cristo" to a half filled house. Doubtless the weather was largely responsible for the aching void in the dress circle, for Mr. O'Neill has always been very popular among Lincoln play goers. Of Mr. O'Neill in the title role little need be said. He is Edmond Dantes so perfectly that the public won't have him in any other



Willa Cather as "the JOURNAL critic"

This photo is from the Dorothy Canfield Fisher papers, Department of Special Collections, Guy Bailey Library, University of Vermont.

role any more than they will have any other man play Edmond Dantes. Last year Mr. O'Neill wanted a change, and he tried to wean his audience to some new play by playing the "Count of Monte Cristo" the first night and his other play the second, but though Mr. O'Neill may grow tired of playing Edmond Dantes, the public is never tired of seeing him play it, so this year he has gone back to his first love. Mr. O'Neill makes a wonderfully light and youthful Dantes, and it is not easy to be light and youthful on the stage. His scene at the office of the procureur du roi was particularly easy and spirited. As the count he was—well, he was James O'Neill as the Count of Monte Cristo, and whatever may have been his vocal flourishes for gallery applause, we must overlook them, for his virtues were many, his faults they were few. For the role of the romantic actor we wish such trite and choice bits of rhetoric as "the pen is mightier than the sword," and "the world is mine!" could be stricken from the plays they burden and make ludicrous. Mr. Edward Morgan as Villefort was very handsome and, strangely enough, he could act. All the men of the company were good. What they most need is a competent leading lady. Mademoiselle Celeste is a dream of beauty. There are few handsomer women to be found in either the higher

or lower walks of the profession, but her acting is weak, insipid and pointless. She is innocent of all art or even of a clever imitation of it, and her voice was a continual and painful surprise. It rather startles one to hear the tones of a cavalry officer issue from such very bewitching lips. She is undoubtedly better than Mr. O'Neill's former Mercedes, who was neither fair nor talented, but there is great room for improvement. It is certainly strange that the leading lady of the romantic drama should always be so atrociously bad when she has nothing under heaven to do but wear gorgeous apparel with moderate grace and scream "Edmond!"—or whatever his name may happen to be—with moderated tenderness.

January 26, 1894

"THE LOVE CHASE"

One of the largest and certainly the most "select" audience of the season assembled at the Lansing last night to see Julia Marlowe in Knowles' comedy, "The Love Chase." Whoever goes to see Miss Marlowe to be stirred or thrilled or moved intensely will be disappointed. Whoever can divest himself of the idea of emotional ranting, which most people think necessary to acting, will be pleased and delighted and charmed beyond measure. There is no one living and probably no one among the shades who can act the delicate, non-committal roles of classic comedy as Miss Marlowe can.

She is one of the few artists, and one of the very few lady artists who have intellect enough to admire comedy and realize its dignity. The sense of comedy is the saving sense in art. Without it tragedians become ranters, emotional actors blubberers. A woman must have a great deal of artistic feeling and good taste in these days of sobbing, sinning, French emotional drama, to have the moral courage to play in a drama in which the heroine isn't married and doesn't kill herself, but does behave herself and does live happily forever after.

Her work is so ethereally delicate and so entirely and simply natural. One remembers every pose, and yet they were so well done that we hardly remember them as poses, one recalls every expression of her face because they were so beautiful. I would rather see Miss Marlowe again as Constance than in anything else I can think of, but I can think of several things I would rather see than see Miss Marlowe as Juliet. Miss Marlowe has beauty, art, delicacy and grace divine, but her fondest admirers cannot accuse her of power, passion or intensity. She could not be miserable nor look miserable on the stage. She could not gag or sigh or heave or fall about over the furniture or get shot, and heaven knows we do not want to see her do it. We are tired of actresses who hold it their duty to suffer, the whole country has become exhausted over them. The whole American public has made up its mind that it don't want Julia Marlowe to suffer, nor to play suffering roles. We don't want to see her bowed by a weight of remorse or sin or misery or even excessive love, we want her always fresh and charming and beautiful as she is now, dainty as painting in porcelain. A critic pleased is a critic disarmed, and when one sees the curtain drop on Miss Marlowe one has nothing left but a dream of "unimaginable eyes." If mention is to be made of the stars of the company, their name is legion. Henry Jewett as Wildrake could not have been improved upon.

Miss Woodward as Lydia did some very strong acting and moved the house to repeated applause. The Widow Green was an artistic creation, a whole artistic universe, in fact, and her conquests in the audience were more lasting and loyal than Waller. One might expatiate for hours upon the separate excellencies of the company. They were all actors and they all seemed to harmonize and fit together marvellously well. It is with sorrow that we see that company go, though the only suffering they have caused us is by their departure. Take them all in all "we shall not look upon their like again" this season, at least.

"The Love Chase" is a tangle chase indeed; three couples in bewildering pursuit, with no hope of getting them straight till the very end of the very last act. Except in this cumulation of perplexity there is nothing very original about the play. Sheridan Knowles was a clever playwright, but certainly not inspired. This comedy rests, perhaps, too much on intentionally grandiloquent monologue, and every actor—at least every actor who plays the part of a gentleman—needs the contagious rollicking exuberance of an Alexander Salvini. Few of the actors, last night, had anything approaching this. Of all the men, Wildrake was almost the only one whose work was really spontaneous.

The play is thin, padded and stuffed in many places. It has one peculiarity, possibly a merit. The dialogue is divided with approximate equality between the six principal characters. One fault of this distribution was, of course, that we saw too little of Miss Marlowe and altogether too much of some other people, especially of the blandly insufferable Trueworthy. "The Love Chase" is certainly not a "star" play, and Miss Marlowe's pre-eminence was not a result of mere circumstantial prominence.

Of course the whole comedy centres in marriage and in giving in marriage. In this it differs from the many modern plays that prefer to deal with the old question, "Is marriage a failure?" The tempting of the honest serving girl seems an echo from the good old novels of Richardson, and the whole play breathes, not only in subject, but in its whole nature, the suggestion of a period that is now past.

Miss Marlowe has chosen a play that suits her much better than some others that she has attempted. It brings out all her grace of girlishness and all the coy perverseness that is her greatest charm. In fascinating Wildrake she fascinates every one else—all but perhaps some girls who are too envious to do anything but detest her. It is a play that suits her and a play that she suits. All one regrets is that she is not on the stage throughout every scene. But perhaps if Knowles had been so gifted with prophecy as to foresee so adequate an actress, he would have removed even this shadow. Perhaps, too, he would have given Constance just a little touch of final triumph, and not left her at the end quite so unequivocally humiliated.

March 1, 1894

"THE ENSIGN"

Last night at the Lansing "The Ensign" was presented to a crowded and enthusiastic house. It was certainly one of the most sympathetic and responsive audiences of the season. Young America was there with all his helpful enthusiasm and hopeful credulity, and it would take a more cynical critic than the present one to laugh at his patriotism or his happy faculty of

being pleased in spite of drawbacks. "The Ensign" is like most military and naval dramas, a sort of Fourth of July carried on all the year round, with the usual stars, stripes and patriotic speeches. The note of the screaming eagle runs all through it. It has plenty of thrilling situations and several climaxes that are both thrilling and legitimate. Act one was good because it had a man in it, a real live man who could laugh and talk and kiss a pretty girl. Men are rare on the stage and we appreciate the midshipman. The second act was weary by reason of the quarrel therein, but endurable because of the hair erecting scene at the end. Act three was gratuitous. A trial is generally a bore to anyone but attorneys who receive the fees and the unfortunates who pay them. Act four was very moist, and must have caused several special handkerchief sales. Act five was very affectionate and was served up with universal paleness. Indeed fifth act complexions must always be rather hard on the white part of the makeup box. In this play, as in all others, in the first act the actors were of lobster redness and were gradually toned down through the play until they reached the ghostly stage in the last act. On the whole the play is as good as the average public deserves, it is visible and audible and exciting and contains enough patriotism and profanity to be forever dear to the hearts of the American people.

As usual the hero had the worst part and was the worst actor. In fact the whole play was very usual. The role was played by Mr. Edwards. It is unfortunate that Mr. Edwards can't be a hero and a good fellow at the same time. So far as we are aware, American naval officers are not at all saints, and are very different men from the young deacon who trod the deck of the Jacinto last night. The young ensign was entirely too good for this wicked world, and we were rather glad when he so nearly got out of it. We felt all the time that he ought to be in his Sunday school class and not around on a ship where he might learn to swear. Mr. Edwards could not make love at all, unless he improves he ought not to be allowed to try it with such a pretty Alice as Miss Gaunt. He cannot even kiss properly or enthusiastically, and that certainly is one of the most primitive of amorous accomplishments. Perhaps that also was because he was so good. At any rate he was surely a laggard in love, whatever he was in war.

Mr. George Wright as Midshipman Watson was a jolly tar and a bit of an actor, quite a bit, in fact he was the chief masculine attraction of the play. He was lively, natural and generally up in his business. Coxswain Jack was good, but very nearly spoiled it all when he got onto his "poor old mother," in whose last illness and funeral exercises we were not sufficiently interested.

Of course Mr. Deal was good, a man must be good, and mighty good to suggest "Old Abe." Miss Gaunt as Alice Greer deserves sincere congratulations, she is pretty and conscientious, and she makes the part very inoffensive and endurable, which, considering the part, is a great deal. Miss Edith Wright as Mary is undoubtedly the star, leading man and leading lady and redeeming angel of the play. She is not too sweet nor too pert, nor too soft a la Fauntleroy. The critic has not lately seen a child actress of such promise.

March 2, 1894

HERRMANN THE MAGICIAN

The Lansing was well filled last night, especially in the parquet, for everybody was anxious to sit well

forward to see "how it was done." But they did not find out. Herrmann is too deep a magician for any ordinary critic. Undoubtedly there is a fine technique in magic and an expert critic might find and explain to us some of Mr. Herrmann's shortcomings. But it is enough for us to know that we were mystified, and delightfully, too.

Probably the most entertaining parts of the program were those where Mr. Herrmann was alone on the stage. The more carefully prepared scenic effects were startling, but they took too much time to prepare, considering the very short time they lasted. Even the "Chicken Polka" failed to amuse in some of the longer waits.

Among the best things was the trick with the canaries. Four birds, all alive and singing, should not be improved by being wrapped up in paper and shot with a pistol. And yet, when Mr. Herrmann treated them so, they came out all the merrier. Then there were hats that proved to be filled with flowers, rabbits that (h)id under the coat collars of people in the audience, handkerchiefs that vanished at a word, and a general uncertainty as to what anything was or where it would turn up next.

The most striking thing was the little spirit scene. A good many had, for the first time in their lives, the privilege of seeing a real and uncannily impressive ghost, and a set of banjo-playing skeletons that made the flesh creep. There seemed to be dozens of them, flocking out of everywhere, and they danced a wild bony dance to the tune of "Ta-ra-ra Boom de aye." The house was pitch dark, and all one could see was the white forms capering wildly on the black background, how far or how near one could not well tell. This scene of the spiritualistic manifestations was the only one of the more carefully prepared scenes that really was worth the long waiting. "After the Ball," an exhibition of a trick mirror, was disappointing. One wants something more thrilling than mere disappearances. The same thing applies to the much advertised "Escape From Sing Sing," and to the "Magic Swing."

Mme. Herrmann's dances were beautiful, especially the last one, when all the colors of the rainbow were turned on from six calcium lights. It is a pity that more of the stage was not draped in black, for the effect would have been better. Still, it was really wonderful as it was, being by far the best dance of the kind seen in Lincoln this season.

Mr. Herrmann won everybody from parquet to gallery. His smile, like his shower of picture cards, was far-reaching, and he ultimately won even the most obdurate of the (gallery) gods to silent attention. He went so far at the end as to explain one simple trick with a few eggs and handkerchiefs, one that, he said, one could learn by practice—for three or four years.

Everybody went away trying to explain how he did it. The only trouble was that their explanations were all different. But then, after all, no one really wants the tricks explained. We would almost like to forget that they are tricks, and believe them, as the children do, to be real magic, and Mr. Herrmann, with his little black wand, to be a real magician.

March 30, 1894

"THE CHIMES OF NORMANDY"

An unusually large audience witnessed the presentation of the "Chimes of Normandy" by local talent at the Lansing theatre last night. Planquette's

famous opera has seldom been better rendered by amateurs. The whole performance was under the direction of Mr. J. H. W. Seamark, which alone would have insured its excellence. Of the individual stars little need be said. Most of them are known too well to need a formal introduction to the public and their work has been approved by wiser critics than I. Miss Minnie Gaylord's clear soprano voice and her general vivacity of feature and piquancy of carriage made her especially fit for the role of Serpollette. Her singing was lively and spirited and her manner engaging. Her tones, of course, were clear and her notes correct, as they always are. Undoubtedly her best scene was the last, in which her costume and acting were decidedly "catching." Jessie Huffman is a new star on the operatic stage, but it is safe to predict that this will not be her last appearance. She can be handled as severely and critically as a professional, for there was very little suggestion of the amateur in either her acting or her singing. While she is not gifted with a great range of voice, it has in it those elements which amateurs seldom, almost never, possess, warmth and color. It is highly sympathetic and can adapt itself to different phases of feeling. It is not a voice of great range, but is strong and full and it has light and shade in it. Her articulation was clear and distinct, as it always is in singers who have the dramatic instinct. Her acting was easy and free and her attention was directed upon the stage, not the audience. Her dismissal of Grenicheux lacked power, but her serious simplicity in the last act made one readily forget that Miss Huffman was undoubtedly the prima donna of the evening, for she had and expressed feeling which is the purpose of art.

Mr. Seamark is an equal success as manager and "leading man." His tenor was never better than last night, and never more full of that sweet and poetic quality which is his forte. His "Cold Sweat is on My

Brow," and "Silent Heroes," were beautifully sung. In dialogue Mr. Seamark is not so natural as when singing.

Dr. Eddy as Jean Grenicheux was one of the strong singers of the company. His work was often and heartily applauded. The performance owed much to the two excellent comedians, Arthur Kellum and Harry Shears. Mr. Kellum scored a decided hit in the last scene. Mr. W. Keens played a difficult part well. His work in the second act showed careful study and considerable talent.

The chorus was exceptionally good. It was strong and it could sing. Excepting the chorus with De Wolf Hopper, there has been no chorus on the Lansing stage this year that could at all compare with the one there last night, and nothing has been so well sung there as that wonderful chorus, "Silent Heroes." One scarcely knew the Lansing orchestra. The orchestral music of the opera is one of the greatest charms and is certainly superior to that of almost any modern opera. The orchestra rose nobly to the occasion and covered itself with glory. Perhaps Mrs. Raymond's stick had a good deal to do with it. Certainly orchestras do not often have the good fortune to be conducted by a musician of such skill and a conductor of intelligent tact.

On the whole the performance was very much above the average amateur performance, and musical Lincoln should feel proud of herself. Of course, though, it was an amateur performance and one had to excuse such things as unexplainable pauses when somebody forgot his cue, and an excessive and inordinate use of "blushes of roses" by the feminine portion of the chorus. But amateur stage complexions are always sights for the gods. It's their first chance at being as beautiful as possible and they make the most of it. W. C.

June 7, 1894

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