

**MANNERS AND  
MOVEMENTS IN  
COSTUME PLAYS**

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Manners and movements in costume plays by Isabel Chisman & Hester Emilie Raven-Hart

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**ISABEL CHISMAN & HESTER EMILIE RAVEN-HART**

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ISABEL CHISMAN  
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*The Authors.*



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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTORY

It is not life that on our stage we show  
But voices crying, "Ah, that Life were so!"

EVAN JOHN—Prologue written for a production of Dryden's *Aurengzebe*.

SOME years ago there was a company of players who used to tour the villages of North Ireland with plays about "the '98"—that is, the rebellion of 1798 which was led by Lord Edward FitzGerald. Their purpose was of course political and the performances, although not exactly forbidden, were certainly not in the interests of law and order. An Irishwoman who owes her love of the theatre to these stolen early experiences says she has never felt anything like the waves of excitement and enthusiasm which used to spread from actors to audience. Tightly wedged in an old barn they watched countless variations of the story of rebels (croppies), yeomen and informers which always culminated in the threatened hanging of the hero and a last-minute reprieve.

Between the acts there were songs: "The Croppy Boy," "The Shan Van Vocht" (little old woman, meaning Ireland) and "Who fears to hear of '98? Who blushes at the name?" ("An' I hope *you* don't!" spoken with meaning to the audience.)

<sup>1</sup> "Here were blood, lust, love, passion. Here were

<sup>1</sup> Edna Ferber, "The Showboat."



warmth, enchantment, laughter, music. It was anodyne. It was Lethe. It was Escape. It was the Theatre"—or what the theatre means to most of us, although apparently there are people who go solely to improve their minds. When the dramatic critic of the B.B.C. asked listeners to write and tell him the most memorable moments of their theatre-going experiences, 90 per cent. of the references were to costume plays.

Two main problems confront the producer who wishes to tackle this type of play: acquiring the necessary historical information, and using this information with dramatic effect. All too often a costume play fails to convince because the characters lack reality; they are so obviously modern men and women in fancy dress.

The more one studies the past, the more strongly one feels that human nature has changed very little in essentials and that history indeed repeats itself. For example, the modern American custom of "cutting in" caused trouble in sixteenth-century ball-rooms, and during the same period a special form of galliard was introduced to circumvent certain "indiscreet" young gentlemen who had formed the "bad habit" of keeping to one partner. Again, in Molière's *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* (1670), the dancing-master gives a lesson on the minuet; a hundred and twenty years later Bunbury published a cartoon called "The Long Minuet" in which he caricatured contemporary ball-room dancers; in both cases the faults of memory or movement are precisely those one meets with when teaching the dance today.

So long as players are content to think of their ancestors as rather remote beings who wore queer clothes and did strange things with their arms and

legs, so long will the fancy-dress atmosphere persist.

Studying a period is rather like studying a part. Supposing you were shown a photograph of someone with whom you were to spend several years alone, the only other white person on a leper island, shall we say? Imagine how you would study that photograph—feeling, as it were, for the spirit behind the features. Many actors use this method when creating a historical rôle—they are searching for something more than mere physical resemblance—and it is in the same way that one "feels" for the impression of a whole period.

The sources of information are many and varied. Books on etiquette and costume, pictures, diaries, letters and other contemporary literature, tombstones, local legends, coins, postage stamps, fans, all contribute their share, but it must be remembered that this information can only be definite up to a point. How difficult it is to reconstruct the Edwardian years really satisfactorily, even with the help of the many people still living to guide us! A distinguished doctor once remarked that the facts of the medical profession were less to be relied on than any because they were founded on deduction, and this applies also to period research. In fact, only recently, two dancing-experts deduced exactly the opposite from approximately the same set of facts! From a dramatic point of view it did not matter which opinion was correct—the one to choose would be that which gave the greater stimulus to the players' imaginations, and which would therefore be likely to produce more convincing performances.

When you have studied your period remember "the play's the thing" and apply your knowledge with discretion. For example, yo-yo or bandalore, as it was then called, was very popular about 1800. Intro-

duced into a straight play of the period, *it would merely distract attention from the main action*—"Look, she's playing yo-yo!" "Fancy, yo-yo!"—whereas in one of the sharply defined period episodes of a Cochran revue it would probably be extremely effective. On the other hand, when the Princess makes her first entry in Masfield's *Philip's the King*, she is in a state of extreme anxiety and suspense. She meets her father with the words, "Has no news come?" But the Spanish court was noted for its strict ceremonial etiquette and *the atmosphere of the play is actually heightened* as she pauses to curtsy and kiss his hand before stammering out the all-important question.

There is one more point to bear in mind, and that is that absolute *historical accuracy is not always dramatically effective* for the same reason that drawing-room naturalness will not carry conviction in a theatre and that a ball-room fox-trot must be adapted before it is suitable for exhibition work. Period manners and customs other than those connected with public ceremonies will frequently need a similar touch of what is known as "artistic exaggeration."