

# **FRENCH MAXIMS OF THE STAGE**

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French Maxims of the Stage by Henri Pène du Bois

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**HENRI PÈNE DU BOIS**

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# FRENCH MAXIMS



## OF THE STAGE

TRANSLATED AND EDITED BY  
HENRI PÈNE DU BOIS



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## PREFACE.

THE stage is a series, an accumulation, an agglomeration of pitfalls. It is itself a precipice. To avoid falling into it, it is not enough to have the sure foot of a mule, the eye of an eagle, the prudence of a Mohican and ten thousand little devils in one's body. It is necessary to have been born with a caul, and to have obtained, nobody knows how, inexplicable luck. Yet, in that world of the stage which is studded with traps, literally and figuratively, the best way to succeed is to have inventiveness, imagination, wit, and to know one's trade perfectly. How do you explain this?

I was once at a play which seemed to me to be paler than the washed leaves of a book. It

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was like my copy of the first edition of "Hernani" after Armand had bound it. I listened tranquilly with the resignation mingled with despair that a man must feel who, imprisoned in a cell, amuses himself in the best way that he can; but suddenly the cell crumbled. In the place of its vulgar walls were stairways of rubies, arches of sapphires under which ran rivers of melting gold, inflamed statues cut out of gigantic diamonds and holding in their transparent hands torches with pink lights. The orchestra had played a dancing tune that I knew well, and I expected Cissy Fitzgerald to come and show her immovable scarlet smile, but neither she nor any other dancer appeared. Dixey came and sang a song which was agile, precise, reckless, and the syllables of which, braided with the notes of the waltz, danced themselves. Such is the power of words. Do you think that scenic effects could have produced the same impression?

I quitted the playhouse at once with the thought that I knew the secret of the drama, and I do not hesitate to reveal this secret because I know very well that nobody will believe it to be the true secret. There is no other magic in plays that are great than the magic of words.

Oh, I know quite well, I know only too well, that this is rank heresy. Useless processions, armies, ballets, vases nine feet high erected on the stage of the Théâtre Français for no other reason than to hide Sara Bernhardt, the mechanical hairdress of Croizette, which went up with a spring, nude women in tights violet or huckleberry, or white as linen, thin as famished rats or big as elephants, gowns by Worth or Felix—all these things are elements of the modern progress on the stage. The question is as clear as daylight. The impression produced on my mind shall be produced either by the material displayed in its most



dazzling magnificence, or by the sacred Word. Haven't you to choose between the words and the show?

The show is too simple. It is lacking in gilt things, festoons, astragals, decorations, costumes, and women. I know why. Poetry creates unlimited visions. One verse of Shakespeare shows to you the forest of Titania, full of sylphs, goblins and fairies. Their wings shiver and beat. But the mind quickly accustoms itself to reality. If you say to a little girl, "A palace full of dolls," she sees them more numerous than the stars in the sky or the leaves on the trees; but if you give to her a real doll made of flesh and bone, I mean of satin and wood, she will ask for two dolls. Kiralfy showed to you 150 dancers, you counted them and asked, "Why not 300, why not other legs and other arms?"

A man living in a palace and another man living in a dungeon soon become accustomed to

their respective domiciles. The difference is only in imagination. It may be that the prisoner sees the most divine landscapes unroll before his eyes and that the host in the palace perceives only a monotonous display of mirrors. You are not so young that you could not have seen the fairy spectacles which were given fifteen years ago. They were comedies that could be mounted for ten dollars, for less, for nothing at all. The dialogues and the couplets were intrusted with the mission of transporting the spectators into the world of Red Riding Hood and Prince Charming. No spectator resisted. You saw Cinderella at the ball losing her glass slipper, and the cat lending wit to its master, and at the end of the pantomime Princess Azurine was united to Prince Charming before an altar made of wood, painted and gilded, which must have cost at least fifty cents, and on which burned red punch initially simple.

Our fairy spectacles nowadays are the very reverse of these. Two or three idiots recite old puns before a curtain. This is lifted. Then there are armies, Turks, elephants, tights, amazons with shields as bright as saucepans, and a great quantity of women uniformly dressed defile stupidly. Then there are camels, canvases, garlands, landscapes, aquariums, all ornamented with women very natural and not supernatural enough. Hypnotized by the monstrous panorama, you have in your mind pictures not of fairies, but of stuffs.

In accordance with inexorable fatality, dramatic art starts from one point to arrive at another, and there is nothing in the world capable of preventing this. It began with the ode and the sacred chant and must finish with simple exhibition. Born of the mind the drama must die in inept matter.

Universal laziness, nihilism of ideas, the desire to get everything without trouble, in