

**LITTLE ITALY: A
TRAGEDY
IN ONE ACT**

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Little Italy: A Tragedy in One Act by Horace B. Fry

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HORACE B. FRY

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Mrs. Minnie Maddern Fiske
as *Giulia* in "*Little Italy*."



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ITALY

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IN ONE
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HORACE B. FRY



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PREFACE



WHEN a play has found favor not only with the public but with many of the critics, there may be a valid reason for printing it, for somehow the world is disposed to withhold the rank, no matter how humble the work might be entitled to, until it shall have emerged in type and between binder's boards.

Some years ago *Punch* gave a picture of several enthusiastic amateurs gloating over a very old violin. They are eulogizing its admirable construction, its beautiful lines, graceful neck, even the pegs seemed to come in for their share. It is at the moment when an unappreciative Philistine, who happened to be present, is asking: "But how will it sound?" The picture shows the indignation of the group which believes it is squelching the Philistine's impertinence with: "Look at the varnish!"

When a play in type is under inspection, it is of very small consequence that its construction and dialogue may be up to the highest literary standard, but "How will it act?" is the question, and nothing atones for the absence of this essential.

Fortunately for the author of "Little Italy," his modest play fell into the hands of Mrs. Fiske. This lady, with

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the skill of a Duse, incarnated his ideas so thoroughly that justice requires that she be regarded as not only his interpreter but collaborator. Equally fortunate was he with Mr. de Belleville, whose creation was worthy of a Salvini; and to Mr. Tyrone Power the author also admits his acknowledgments. Therefore he may say, with all reserve: the question of "How will it act?" has been settled.

Before the passage of the copyright law of 1891 there was little protection and no property that was unassailable in a manuscript play. These conditions must have existed for centuries. Mr. H. W. Mabie, in his admirable life of Shakespeare, says of the Elizabethan stage (p. 140): "These plays were, in some instances, not even printed; they existed only as unpublished manuscripts. In many cases a play did not exist as an entirety even in manuscript; it existed only in parts, with cues for the different actors. The publication of a play was the very last thing desired by the writer, or by the theatre to which it was sold and to which it belonged, and every precaution was taken to prevent a publicity which was harmful to the interests of author and owner. Shorthand writers often took down the speeches of actors, and in this way plays were stolen and surreptitiously printed; but they were full of inaccuracies—verse passages become prose, etc." But in our day we have changed these conditions.

Inasmuch as reading a play on the morrow of seeing it is a delight—provided it is a good play—we are led to refer to the opinions of one if not the greatest of modern dramatists, Alexandre Dumas, fils. He has recorded

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them on the subject of writing and printing plays, believing their value and interest to be enhanced if in type. His prefaces were his favorite channels wherein the social problems exploited on his stage were conveyed as his legacies to the world—the prefaces, generally as long as the plays, prove the beneficial task the stage can perform. He has given his reflections with so much frankness on this subject and the cognate one of dramatic writing at the hands of M. Scribe, that it has been thought desirable to translate the preface to “Un Père Prodigue,” and give it as an entertaining appendix to “Little Italy.”

The copyright law is now beneficent to all concerned—to the playwright, the novelist, the manager, and the public. The latter need be no longer cheated, at least with impunity, by barnstorming organizations and pirated plays. And if the printed novel makes the most welcome or popular introducer of the play based upon it, why may not an original play introduce itself, stand on its own merits, and secure its own vogue? That the play is not such easy reading as the novel is conceded, and for the reasons M. Dumas details; yet much of the difficulty may be the fault of the author rather than the reader. At all events, the fashion of former times, when plays were read, can come round again, and the taste of a past century can revive; for, since leisure is growing less in our strenuous lives, while our imaginations were never so alert, the concentrated form of the play that the laws of dramatic writing exact may commend it to the readers of our day who have little time to luxuriate in the amplitude of the novel.

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With apologies, therefore, the author presents the short domestic tragedy of "Little Italy," claiming that it truly depicts an obscure form of life in New York City, and that such a woman as *Giulia* really lived there. Nostalgia is a malady not confined to rich or poor, and true love, however humble, will scour the world to find its lost object. These themes appeal to all, and might entertain the reader who never saw the play enacted. "Little Italy" is only one more of "the short and simple annals of the poor."

H. B. F.