

When Tragedy Stalks The Stage

Use of This Theme in Alexander Korda's "Men Are Not Gods" Brings to Mind Memorable Mishaps Behind the Footlights, When Death Seized the Cue

A gun is fired on stage; an actor reels, clutches his breast, topples awkwardly to the floor. A titter rises in the audience. Clumsy bit of acting. The curtain descends hurriedly.

Behind the scenes all is confusion. For the actor who took the funny fall is not shamming—will never sham again. He is dead. Someone had substituted a real bullet for the blank. Real tragedy had invaded the world of make-believe.

Tragedy leaped across the footlights to strike down President Lincoln. For many years afterwards the spectacle of the actor-assassin, Booth, with smoking gun in hand, was to haunt the spectators, gathered innocently to view a dramatic performance, and treated to a drama they hardly cared to see. This is perhaps the outstanding example of tragedy stalking the players of tragedy, but there have been numerous examples effecting the great, the near great and the lesser lights of the stage.

Caruso, the great tenor, in his last performance of "Samson and Delilah," heaved too realistically upon the pillars of the set representing the temple at Gaza. A toppling piece of scenery fell upon him, causing severe bruises, and according to some reports a lesion of the lung which later resulted in pneumonia and death.

Garrick, playing the same "Othello" is supposed to have choked more than a dozen Desdemonas half to death—so fervently did he feel his role. Macready in "Macbeth" laid on so furiously on one occasion that his Macduff spent several months in the hospital.

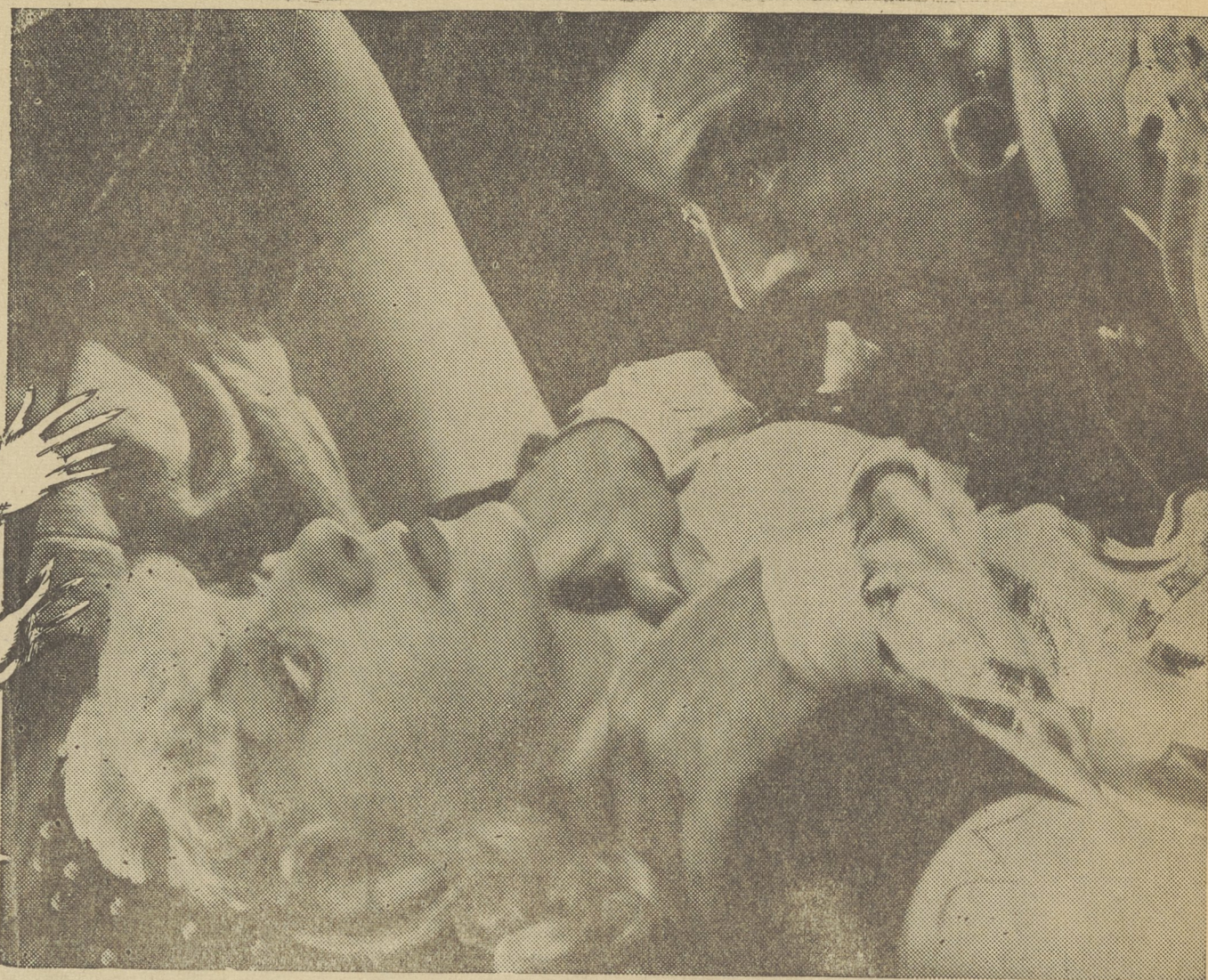
That is always a fascinating theme—the true and the actual intruding upon the mimicry of the stage, reversing the old adage—all the world's a stage. Suddenly the stage becomes a world, peopled with actual living creatures. Those are real tears the leading lady is shedding; there is something too realistic about the rage displayed by the leading man. Something has happened uncalled for by the script. Down with the curtain! Here is drama the audience must not see!

A recent motion picture utilizes this theme for a tense sequence—for a variation of the ancient theme of the play within a play. On the stage the players are enacting the familiar murder scene from "Othello"—but with a passion they have never displayed before. An uneasiness creeps through the audience. Desdemona pleads for her life—are those the lines that Shakespeare wrote? Yes, but they sound too real for blank verse, too real for artistic tragedy. They sound almost as if—

The motion picture is "Men Are Not Gods," an Alexander Korda film starring Miriam Hopkins. Sebastian Shaw plays the gloomy Moor, with Gertrude Lawrence as his Desdemona, in the play within the play. And Miss Hopkins is the London stenographer, who, seated high in the balcony, suddenly realizes that the couple on the stage are not play-acting, that genuine tragedy impends. Her shriek rises high, and severs the ghastly union that had been, for one fateful moment, effected between the real and the make-believe.

What playgoer has not conjectured upon the possibility? Suppose the leading lady is really jealous of the leading man. Suppose the knife she plunges into his breast is real, and his death-gurgling not merely clever acting. It can happen. It has happened.

Perhaps the earliest recorded instance of tragedy invading the world of make-believe was in the case of the old-time Passion Play performed several hundred years ago before King John II of Sweden. The actor in the role of Longus the Centurion performed so passionately as to cause the



The Death-Bed Scene from "Othello," as Played by Sebastian Shaw and Gertrude Lawrence in "Men Are Not Gods"

into Allworth's role, reading the script for the completion of the third act. The audience was not informed of Allworth's death until the final curtain.

There have been numerous minor mishaps, bordering just short of tragedy. A French actress, Mme. Benoin, in Prague, during a suicide scene, seriously stabbed herself with a stage dagger whose spring got out of order. Incidentally, accidents of this nature have been common enough to bar the use of such daggers.

In all of these cases, it is worth noting, the audience was unaware of the shift from the sham tragedy to the genuine. Resourceful actors covered up the true significance of what the audience was witnessing, so that to the irony of the situation was added the applause of the innocent witnesses who saw death before them, and accepted him as part of the entertainment.

There have been similar tragedies and near tragedies intruding upon the set in motion picture production as well as on the stage. Dick Rosson, location director for Samuel Goldwyn, tells the story of not one but a series of deaths during the location shooting of "Viva Villa." None of them, incidentally, was accidental.

The first to go was an extra, stabbed by a Bowie knife flourished too enthusiastically. It developed that the assailant meant what he was doing—there had been a feud over the affections of some local belle.

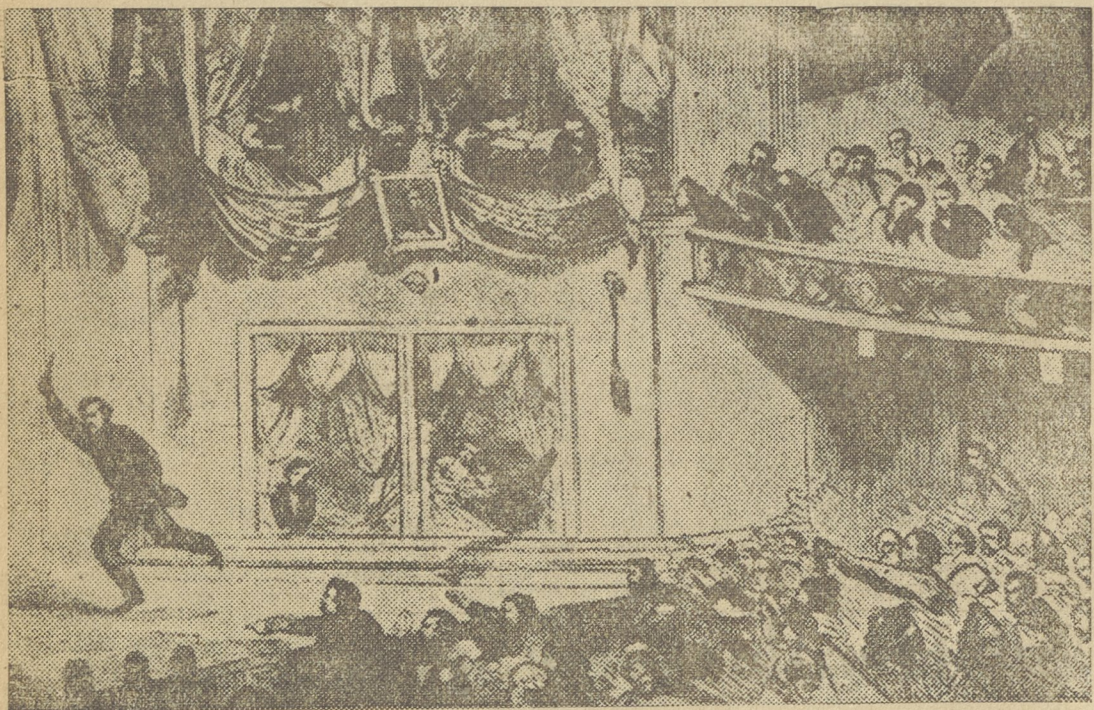
The next one went in somewhat similar fashion when a Mexican slipped a real bullet into the chamber of his gun during a mock execution scene. Here was the perfect crime. The victim was hit between the eyes, and no one ever discovered who was the murderer among the group of ex-



Miriam Hopkins, as the Stenographer in the Fateful Scene from "Men Are Not Gods"



MacReady in the role of Macbeth



When Tragedy Leaped Across the Footlights to Strike Lincoln—From a Contemporary Drawing

death of two fellow actors. Enraged the King bounded to the stage, sword in hand, and with a single whistling swipe decapitated poor Longus. What followed, surpassed the bloodiest of Elizabethan dramas, for the audience arose in fury and literally tore His Majesty to pieces.

Shakespearean drama seems to have been singularly unfortunate for its players. In 1860, in Memphis, Jenny Stanley, playing the role of Cordelia in "King Lear," narrowly escaped death during the scene in which she

was brought in upon the stage by Lear with a rope around her neck. The rope became entangled, and she was actually strangled to insensibility.

Edmund Kean's last stage appearance was in "Othello." He was playing the title role to his son's Iago, at the Covent Garden Theatre. Worn out by sickness, he had been warned against appearing, but persisted in obedience to the tradition of the stage. He managed to reach the great scene in the third act. Uttering the words, "Othello's occupation's gone," he fell

exhausted into the arms of his son. "God," he whispered, "I am dying. Speak to them, Charles!"

Similarly, Sir Henry Irving made his dramatic departure from the stage in a scene in which real Death made an unexcused appearance. He was playing Becket at Bradford, England, in 1905. In the great last scene of the play, when the murderers invade the cathedral, Becket turns to the altar and with out-stretched arms cries out, "Into Thy hands, O Lord, into Thy

hands." The moment these lines were spoken, Irving fell unconscious to the stage. He died as they were taking him from the theatre to the little hotel where he had been stopping.

One could multiply examples. A serious mishap during the enacting of "The Indian Emperor" was responsible for the retirement of the famous English actor, Farquhar, from the stage. Playing the part of Guyomar, the star dangerously wounded the player taking the part of a Spanish general. The actor recovered, but Farquhar swore never to walk the boards again, and he kept his oath.

Newspaper files, if carefully searched, will yield up scores of records of real tragedy "stealing the show." As, for example, the following:

"Clarence Hitchcock, 31, died in St. Vincent's Hospital of a bullet wound in the neck. He was playing the role of a lover in a drama based on the old 'badger game.' They had reached the point where Tinker, playing the outraged husband, discovers his wife in the arms of the other man. His cue on making the discovery was to shoot the lover.

"Tinker had a blank cartridge pistol for the scene, but he also had in his pocket a loaded .38 revolver for which he had a permit. Inadvertently, he drew the wrong pistol and fired.

"Tinker was held on a homicide charge but was taken ill with scarlet fever and had to be taken to the hos-

pital. His condition was aggravated by remorse, for the two players were friends. Tinker faces arraignment for homicide as soon as he is released from the hospital."

Even more startling was the case of Frank Allworth, who dropped dead on the stage during the first-night performance of "Portuguese Gal," starring Lenore Ulric, at the Broad Street Theatre in Philadelphia, on September 2, 1935.

Allworth was playing the part of a tipsy policeman. Midway in the second act he reeled and collapsed, clutching Miss Ulric's hand as he fell. The audience tittered appreciatively at the realism of his acting.

Even Miss Ulric stated later that she thought Allworth was acting, as he made a heroic effort to gasp out the unfinished line, gruesomely appropriate: "That's luck for me."

Allworth, however, failed to rise. The curtain was wrung down, and James Hagan, one of the authors of the play, made a short curtain speech explaining that there had been an accident. Within a few minutes Allworth was dead, presumably of a heart attack. He was 35 years old and married, a member of the Lambs Club, and regarded as an actor of high ability.

Incidentally, the performance was completed, under the most trying conditions any cast has ever experienced. E. Hartford, stage manager, stepped

tras simulating the execution squad.

Small wonder, therefore, that this theme has in itself been adopted by the stage, and in turn by the motion pictures. In mystery play and melodrama the theme has been repeated, with players enacting roles they might some day be called upon to play in good earnest.

"Men Are Not Gods," which utilizes the theme for its basic scene, was written by Walter Reisch, who also directed the screen play. The cast, in addition to Miriam Hopkins, Gertrude Lawrence and Sebastian Shaw, includes A. E. Matthews, Rex Harrison, Laura Smithson, Winifred Willard, James Harcourt, Noel Howlett, Sybil Grove, Lawrence Grossmith and others.

It will be released through United Artists.