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ENGLISH PLAYERS  
IN  
SWITZERLAND

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1918-1920

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During the war considerable attention was paid by the belligerents of most countries to artistic propaganda in neutral countries. For instance, in 1917 Switzerland received two visits from the Deutsche Theater ensemble under the direction of Professor Reinhardt, and visits from the Comedie Francaise, the Burgtheater of Vienna, and other German, French, and Austrian companies, the performances being of a high artistic level. No company, however, came from England, and this fact was largely commented upon by the residents of Zurich and other Swiss towns who would have been glad of an opportunity of comparing the merits of British artists with those of their Continental colleagues. There were, however, several British artists scattered over Switzerland; where they had taken up their abode for various reasons. Some were there for their health, some were interned, and others had quitted territory of the Central Powers on parole. Two of these,

Mr. James Joyce and Claud W. Sykes, formerly a member of Sir Herbert Tree's company, came to the conclusion that, as there were no hope of any company coming out from England, these various artists in Switzerland ought to do something. Mr. Joyce and Mr. Sykes therefore decided to give a performance in Zurich, and with great efforts organised a company which played Oscar Wilde's witty comedy, *The Importance of being Earnest*, at the Theater sur Kaufleuten on April 29, 1918. A crowded house awaited them, and in June another performance was arranged. Attracted by the chance of once more acting in their native tongue, various other, hitherto undiscovered, British artists reported themselves to Mr. Sykes, upon whom the duties of producer had devolved, and it was felt that such performances ought to take place regularly.

The promoters of the enterprise were aware of one difficulty which constantly faced them—that of funds. It must be borne in mind that the Continental companies which visited Switzerland for propaganda were in receipt of large subsidies from their respective Governments, and thus able to face box-office deficits with equanimity, whereas single bad night might very seriously cripple the resources of the "English Players." (The company was so named after the company of English actors which toured Europe in the sixteenth century.) The money necessary for the first two performances had been contributed by the two promoters, and though

financial success had attended their effort., their resources were ridiculously slender, and they knew it was hopeless for them to dream of receiving from the British Government the aid that other Governments gave to their artists who were performing work of the highest national importance. Indeed, the English Players were very soon destined to fall upon hard times, for in July, 1918, when a tour had been booked for Geneva, Lausanne, and other towns in Western Switzerland, the land was stricken by the epidemic of Spanish influenza, and theatrical business suffered accordingly. Although the performances met with the approval of their new audiences, these, alas were scanty, and the company returned to Zurich in a crippled state.

#### INFLUENZA AND IMPECUNIORITY.

The epidemic continued all through the autumn, and had a bad influence on the audiences which visited the English Players' performances of Bernard Shaw's *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, Stanley Houghton's *Hindle Wakes*, and Robert Browning's *In a Balcony*. In 1919 prospects became brighter, and the company continued its work, visiting Lucerne, Berne, and St. Gall several times, in addition to the Zurich performances. Great attention was attracted by the production of Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer*; this was the first time the English Players had attempted a classic, and the result fully justified the attempt. In the autumn of 1919, however, several members of the company left to go to England, but other artists were obtained from London to replace them. Mr.

Joyce and Mr. Sykes had, indeed, wished to enlarge the company very considerably, but the difficulties attendant upon getting permission for actors to enter Switzerland prevented this, and the scope of the company remained restricted. Mr. Sykes had always wished to add some Shakespearian works to the company's repertoire, but he never had enough performers to fill all the long casts of such plays, and this desire remained, therefore, unaccomplished.

It was also hoped that the company would go on tour in some Allied and neutral countries, but this hope was frustrated by the low rates of exchange prevailing. Operations for the winter season of 1919-20 were therefore reluctantly restricted to Switzerland. Unfortunately misfortune after misfortune attacked the company this last season. Such misfortunes would have been easily borne by a subsidised company, but they proved too heavy for the unaided resources of Mr. Joyce and Mr. Sykes, who, after continuing the struggle till a new epidemic of influenza overtook the country (including most of the members of the company), saw themselves compelled to abandon the enterprise at the end of February.

Is there no patron of arts in any of the English-speaking countries who will realize the service that can be done to England by performances of British masterpieces in their mother-tongue on the Continent? All the members of the English Players would like to continue their work, but they lack the sinews of war, and therefore, to the great disappointment of their supporters in Switzerland, further performances have had to be discontinued,

as the promoters of the enterprise can bear the unequal burden no longer. There is a good field for work, but there are bound to be many ups and downs in any theatrical enterprise, and specially so for any undertaking of that nature in a foreign country. Moreover, the ideal which the English Players have constantly kept before them—to present in a worthy manner only the very best plays—cannot be achieved without considerable preliminary expenditure. Rather than depart from that ideal, Mr. Joyce and Mr. Sykes reluctantly suspend their activities, though with the hope that the work they have done may bear fruit in future years, and lead to a better appreciation of British art and literature in Europe.