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NOTE

THE foundation of the Nationaltheater in Hamburg in 1766 was the first serious attempt to provide a German theatrical company with a fixed abode and at the same time to introduce a new system of management. Hitherto, actors had led a wandering life as the mere employees of a "Prinzipal," usually an actor himself, whose theatrical ventures ended all too frequently in bankruptcy and the dispersion of the company. The evil effects of this system, both on the welfare of the actors and the dignity of the profession, were vigorously exposed by Johann Elias Schlegel in two articles: *Schreiben von Errichtung eines Theaters in Kopenhagen* (1746) and *Gedanken zur Aufnahme des dänischen Theaters* (1747). Inspired by the publication (1764) of these articles in the posthumous edition of J. E. Schlegel's *Werke* (1761–70), a Hamburg journalist, Johann Friedrich Löwen, published in 1766 a *Geschichte des deutschen Theaters* and busied himself with the project of a National Theatre for Hamburg. He had been to some extent anticipated by the actor-manager, Konrad Ackermann, an old-fashioned "Prinzipal," who had in 1765 taken the novel and decisive step of erecting a private theatre for the accommodation of his company. This new venture was not a success and Löwen seized the opportunity to interest a group of Hamburg merchants, headed by Abel Seyler, in his plans for the acquisition of Ackermann's theatre. His object was to establish a National Theatre, not for the private profit of the shareholders, but for the better promotion of the dramatic and histrionic arts. An agreement was signed in October, 1766, by which Ackermann leased his theatre to the new syndicate for a period of ten years from Shrovetide, 1767. Löwen was appointed "artistic director" and assumed the chief part in the management. The services of most of Ackermann's company, including Konrad Ekhof and

Sophie Hensel, were retained and Löwen began to look round for some distinguished poet who would be willing to lend the theatre the advertisement of his name.

At this date Lessing was already famous both as a dramatic poet and as a literary and aesthetic critic. He had visited Hamburg in 1756, was acquainted with Ekhof, and seemed in all respects well qualified to bring fame to the new theatre, if his services could be secured. Moreover, he was still smarting under his failure to obtain the post of librarian of the Royal Prussian Library, having been passed over in favour of an obscure Frenchman. He was therefore well disposed to consider an offer from Hamburg or indeed from anywhere. The first proposal made by the syndicate was that he should become their official poet and regularly write plays to be performed in the theatre. Lessing found himself unable to pledge himself to a regular output. It was then agreed that he should be employed as "Konsulent," with a seat on the board of directors, and that he should write a regular series of critical articles on the performances.

The scheme of the new theatre met with strong criticism, excited partly by the grandiloquent and truculent propaganda of Löwen, partly by the dubious financial standing of the chief promoters. Lessing himself soon encountered unexpected difficulties. The actors showed themselves restive under the mildest criticism; Susanna Mecour prohibited all mention of her name from the outset; Sophie Hensel rebelled after the publication of No. xx, with the result that Lessing abandoned all criticism of the performers and confined himself to a discussion of the plays. The theatre opened on April 22, 1767, with a performance of Cronegk's *Olint und Sophronia* and the very thorough discussion of this play in the first five numbers of the *Dramaturgie* testifies to the zeal with which Lessing began his task. As the weeks passed, however, public interest in the theatre declined. The relatively high standard of the performances did not appeal to the general public,

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critics were hostile, and there was constant dissension on the board of directors. In December, 1767, the doors were closed and the company migrated to Hanover. Performances were resumed in May, 1768, but the second season was even less successful than the first and the theatre was permanently closed in November of that year. Ackermann resumed control of the company at Easter, 1769. Lessing had resigned his post in December, 1768, and on April 17, 1770, he left Hamburg.

The articles collected under the title of *Die Hamburgische Dramaturgie* appeared at first twice weekly according to contract. After three months publication was delayed and the articles then ceased to keep pace with the performances. In fact, the later numbers are little more than independent essays on various aspects of dramatic theory. The two volumes together contain one hundred and four numbers, of which the first eighty-two were published separately until April, 1768, and the remainder together at Easter, 1769.

In making the present selection the Editor has thought fit, in order to give continuity to Lessing's discussion of the Historical Drama, to insert the extracts from Articles LIV-LVI, which deal with Banks' *The Unhappy Favourite; or the Earl of Essex*, immediately after the articles (XXII-XXIV) dealing with T. Corneille's play on the same subject. The present first volume concludes with Nos. XXVIII-XXIX, Regnard: *Le Distrait*. The second volume will embrace the sections dealing with the "three unities" and the interpretation of Aristotle's definition of tragedy.

G. WATERHOUSE

April, 1926

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