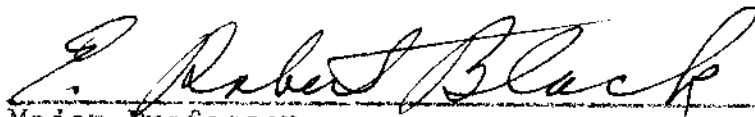



DAVID BELLASCO'S NATURALISTIC STAGECRAFT
AND STAGE LIGHTING

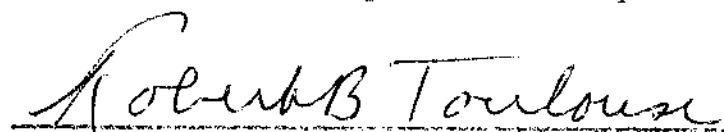
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DAVID BELASCO'S NATURALISTIC STAGECRAFT
AND STAGE LIGHTING

THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council of the
North Texas State University in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

By

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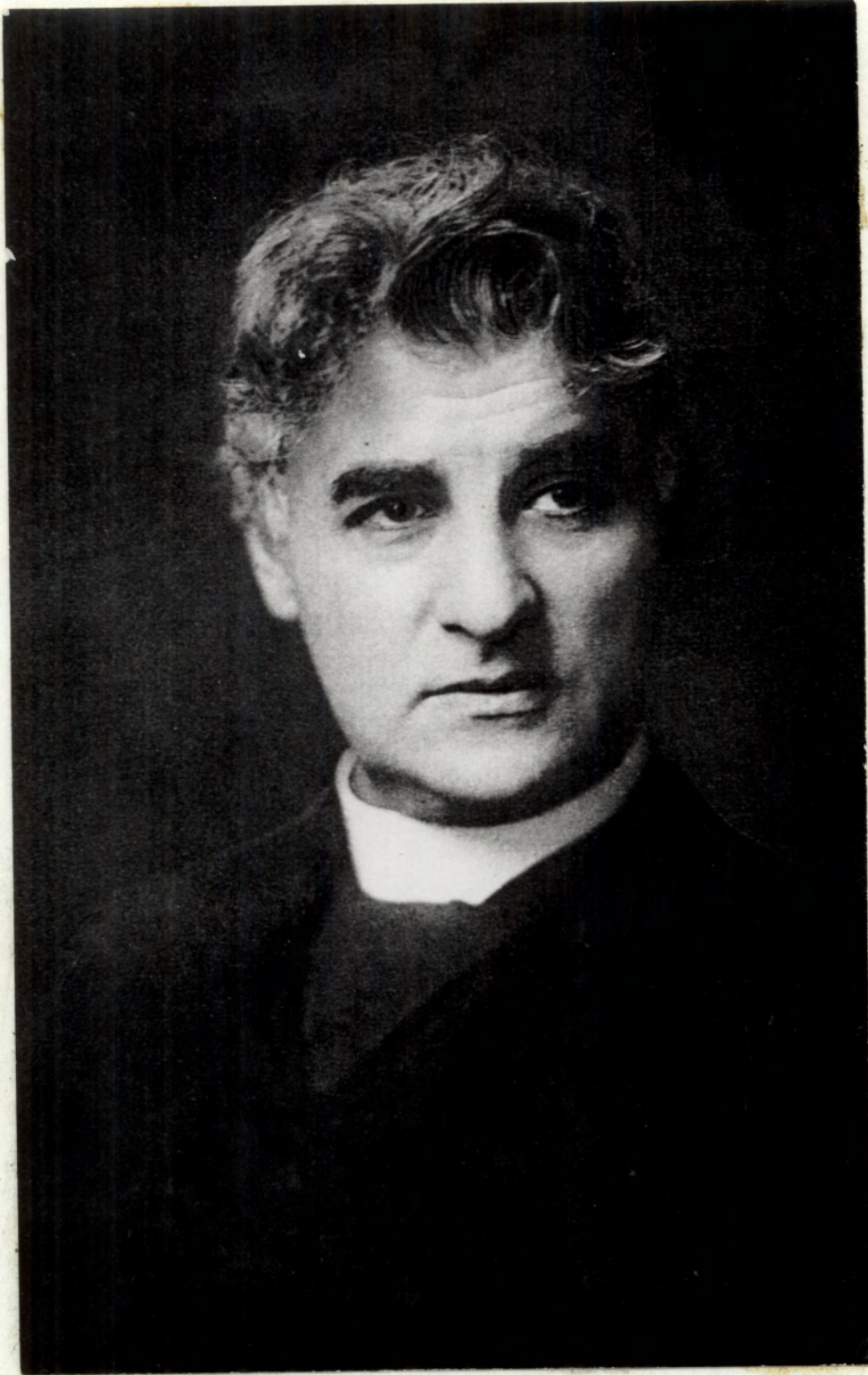


Plate 1--David Belasco

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CHAPTER I

BACKGROUNDS TO BELASCOISM

Many men spend their lives working in the theatre. Most only copy what they see around them, while a few, disliking what they see, create something new in the theatre. David Belasco was one of the few. He gave the American theatre something new--naturalistic productions. For three decades, Belasco was perhaps the most influential and certainly the most controversial producer-director in the American theatre. Praised, acclaimed, and loved by the public, he was slandered, sued, and slammed by the critics. He was affectionately, and not so affectionately, known as the "Boss," the "Wizard," and the "Governor." Although his productions were often questioned artistically, there was one fact that was never questioned--Belasco was a great showman. He seemed to know what the public liked and wanted.

Another point of agreement, among all who knew Belasco, was his love for and dedication to his work. "To David Belasco, his work was his God."¹ This statement by Thomas A. Curry, Belasco's friend and private secretary for eighteen years, accurately describes Belasco's life and work in the

¹Craig Timberlake, The Bishop of Broadway (New York, 1954), p. 400.

theatre. His work was his god and this god was the theatre. When Belasco died in 1931, the American theatre lost a great personality: a personality who had devoted his life to the theatre.

In the area of stagecraft, Belasco had, perhaps, more influence than any other single individual in American theatre history. Beginning his work in the theatre at a time when romanticism and classicism filled the American stage, Belasco led the American theatre to naturalism. Although Belasco's productions were characterized by naturalistic writing and acting, his greatest contributions to the theatre lie in his naturalistic stage settings and lighting.

Statement of Purpose

It is the purpose of this paper to make a general study of David Belasco's use of naturalism in the American theatre. More specifically, it is to determine Belasco's methods of achieving naturalism in his stage settings and lighting. From the study of his techniques and methods, an effort is made to establish his contributions to the naturalistic movement.

Summary of Design

Chapter One, introductory in nature, includes a short history of Belasco's life; in addition, for clarification of terms and for a better understanding of Belasco's work, naturalism is discussed and compared with "Belascoism."

Chapter Two is a discussion of the naturalistic techniques and stage settings used in Belasco's productions. Belasco's theory and practice in creating completely naturalistic settings, his insistence upon bringing nature to the stage, and his attention to detail are brought out. Chapter Three includes Belasco's theories on naturalistic lighting, and examples of some of his most famous lighting effects are cited. The experimentations and inventions of Belasco and Louis Hartmann, his chief electrician, are also discussed. Chapter Four is a summary of Belasco's methods and an evaluation of his contributions in the area of naturalistic settings and lighting.

Isolated scenic and lighting effects are cited from many of Belasco's productions; however, most examples and illustrations are taken from twelve of his more famous and noteworthy shows. The twelve plays, the premiere date for each, and the theatres in which they opened are listed below.

1. The Heart of Maryland
Premiere, October 22, 1895, Herald Square Theatre
2. Madame Butterfly
Premiere, March 5, 1900, Herald Square Theatre
3. Under Two Flags
Premiere, February 5, 1901, Garden Theatre
4. Du Barry
Premiere, December 25, 1901, Criterion Theatre
5. The Darling of the Gods
Premiere, December 3, 1902, Republic Theatre
6. The Girl of the Golden West
Premiere, November 14, 1905, Republic Theatre

7. The Rose of the Rancho
Premiere, November 27, 1906, Republic Theatre
8. The Easiest Way
Premiere, January 19, 1909, Stuyvesant Theatre
9. The Return of Peter Grimm
Premiere, October 17, 1911, Belasco Theatre
10. The Governor's Lady
Premiere, September 10, 1912, Republic Theatre
11. Marie-Odile
Premiere, January 26, 1915, Belasco Theatre
12. Mina
Premiere, December 13, 1928, Belasco Theatre²

The remainder of this chapter is divided into two parts: a brief sketch of Belasco's life and a discussion of naturalism versus "Belascoism." In the biographical section, the events and facts presented were selected because they tend to show early influences that affected Belasco's later work in the theatre. The second section deals with naturalism. More specifically, "Belascoism" and how it differed from the main stream of naturalism are explored. The information presented in these sections is designed as background material, and should add greater understanding and appreciation of the chapters that follow.

Belasco's Life

Of the many writers who have tried to capture in words David Belasco's personality, Niven Busch has probably said it best. In "The Great Impersonator," an article written

²Ibid., pp. 452-457.

shortly before Belasco's death, Mr. Busch, who knew and had interviewed Belasco many times, described Belasco as follows:

David Belasco has created one role that is undoubtedly immortal. It is the role of Belasco, the great producer. He has spent his life perfecting it, has built up a tradition to go with it, and for fifty years has dressed for it in a costume which he does not find the less suitable although it happens also to be the official costume of ministers of the Gospel. . . . The role has become a tradition which, renewed amazingly through three generations, has absorbed and partly concealed the stormy and immensely life-hungry and magnetic little man who created it.³

If Belasco's life was one great role, as Busch has indicated, then it must have been an exciting and interesting role to play, for Belasco's life was far from ordinary. The following is not intended to be a complete and thorough biography; it is rather a capsule of Belasco's life and work in the theatre.

Belasco as a Young Boy

It is difficult to write with certainty about Belasco's early life. There are many contradictions in what is said and what is known about this part of his life. Add to this the many apparent half-truths and illusions created by Belasco himself in "My Life Story," and one can do little more than record these contradictions.

David Belasco's father, Humphrey Abraham Belasco, was a harlequin in various London theatres. Becoming dissatisfied

³George Oppenheimer, editor, The Passionate Playgoer (New York, 1958), pp. 391-392.

with his income, Humphrey and his wife sailed for California in hopes of finding gold. On July 25, 1853, shortly after arriving in San Francisco, their first child, David, was born. Five years later the Belasco family moved to Victoria, then a trading post in the Hudson Bay Company, and it was here that David spent much of his childhood.⁴

In writing about some of the events of his early boyhood, Belasco includes two stories which can not be verified:

(1) his stay in a monastery, and (2) his joining a circus.

How much truth is in either story will never be known; however, William Winter, the author of the most complete work on Belasco, did accept those two events as factual. They are recorded here with suppositions as to their influence on young Belasco; nevertheless the reader should bear in mind that these two events, which seemed important to Belasco, may in fact, have been either highly glamorized or only a part of Belasco's imagination.

When David was about seven or eight years old, he became acquainted with a Roman Catholic Priest, Father McGuire. Having prevailed upon the parents to let him undertake David's education, Father McGuire took David with him to a monastery in the area. The training David received at the monastery during the next two and a half years influenced his actions and ideas throughout his life. In referring to the influence

⁴William Winter, The Life of David Belasco, Vol. I (New York, 1918), p. 6.

Father McGuire and the other priest at the monastery had upon Belasco, Winter states ". . . their influence endured, and it is visible in David Belasco's habits of thought, use of mental powers, tireless labor, persistent purpose to excel, and likewise in his unconscious demeanor, and even in his attire."⁵

After a few years at the monastery,⁶ David became restless and distressed by "the falseness of one of the monks to his vows . . ."⁷ When the Rio de Janeiro Circus came to town, Belasco left the monastery and took a job with the circus.⁸ Young David spent the next few months learning "to ride horses 'bareback' and to perform as a miniature clown."⁹ If the circus story is true, it could very well have been this experience which initiated Belasco's love for exciting and thrilling an audience--a love in which he indulged himself later in creating his more elaborate scenic effects.

While with the circus, David became seriously ill and was left behind in a small country town. His recovery was a tribute to Walter Kingsley, a clown who stayed and cared for David and later died from the same illness. Soon after

⁵Ibid., p. 5.

⁶Belasco said five years, Winter said two and one half years.

⁷David Belasco, "My Life Story," Hearst Magazine, XXV (March, 1914), 296-306.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Winter, op. cit., p. 6.

the death of Kingsley, Humphrey found David and returned home with his son.¹⁰

The above story of David's boyhood is like the account that Belasco told, and like the story recorded in William Winter's book. Craig Timberlake, in writing his book The Bishop of Broadway, tried to corroborate this account of Belasco's boyhood, but was unable to verify either the part of the story concerning Belasco's life with Father McGuire or his touring with a circus. Timberlake states:

A diligent search in the archives of Victoria fails to bring to light any record of service to that community of a Catholic priest named McGuire. There was, moreover, no Catholic monastery or monastic order in Victoria during the Belasco residence.

David's mother played an important role in fostering his inclinations toward the theatre. Being fond of poetry, she taught David to "memorize and recite verses."¹² She also loved the theatre and took David often. While still in Victoria, David "was frequently utilized for infantile and juvenile parts at the Victoria Theatre."¹³ In later life, Belasco often gave his mother credit for having taught him to love nature, to notice the delicacies of color, and to appreciate the little things.

By 1865, the Belasco family had grown tired of Victoria and had returned to San Francisco. It was around this time

¹⁰Ibid., p. 6.

¹¹Timberlake, op. cit., p. 15.

¹²Winter, Vol. I, op. cit., p. 6.

¹³Ibid., p. 10.

that David first began to write plays. When the news of President Lincoln's assassination reached San Francisco, it caused a riot which cost the city over \$20,000 in damage suits, and gave David the idea for his first play:

Shortly after the President's death, young David Belasco, inspired by the events of the day completed what must have been his first effort as a playwright. He named his play The Roll of the Drum and it probably received its premiere in a basement theatre operated by the twelve-year-old dramatist and stagestruck friend. The price of admission to this temple of Thespis constituted one gunny sack or beer bottle and entitled the spectator to view blood-curdling melodramas, starring David Belasco, who was also treasurer, stage manager and resident playwright.¹⁴

Even at this early age, one can see not only Belasco's love of the theatre, but also his interest and excitement in all areas of production.

While Belasco claimed to have been educated at Lincoln College, California, it was actually Lincoln Grammar School. It was at this school that Belasco received intensive training as an elocutionist. Proving to have unusual talent in the field of elocution, he appeared in public on numerous occasions. His repertoire of selections included such heart-rending pieces as "The Vagabonds" and "Curfew Must Not Ring Tonight."¹⁵ The latter was the basis for Belasco's The Heart of Maryland, which was for Belasco his first big

¹⁴Timberlake, op. cit., p. 21.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 22.

New York success; and for Mrs. Leslie Carter it was a star-making vehicle. It was in this play that Mrs. Carter made her famous climb to the top of a forty-foot bell tower, "grasped the clapper of the great bell and swung to and fro over Belasco's Maryland landscape, thus enabling the hero to effect his escape."¹⁶

It is here, with his studies at Lincoln Grammar School, that one can find the first concrete evidence of early influence on Belasco's later work in the theatre. His training as an elocutionist was probably a major factor in creating his love for melodrama. The selections that he and other elocutionists of his day used were almost always melodramatic. Indeed, as was just mentioned, he used one such selection as the basis for one of his most successful plays, which is probably a good indication of the influence of this training upon his taste and style.

In the enactment of these melodramatic pieces, it is also possible to see Belasco's talent as an actor evolving. Timberlake describes Belasco's rendition of Matthew Gregory Lewis' "The Maniac:"

The curtains would part to reveal David lying on the floor, clad in a cast-off suit of his father's, manacled with chains, his face smudged with dirt and his hair matted with straw. His realistic impersonation of a madman was inevitably greeted with enthusiasm by his schoolmates, and his wild abandon caused a professor to comment that "the boy would one day break a blood vessel." So

¹⁶Ibid., p. 161.

successful were his efforts, notwithstanding this dire prediction, that he won a gold medal for the finest rendition of tragedy at Lincoln School.¹⁷

Belasco the Actor and Playwright

Still in his teens, Belasco began playing "bit" parts and working behind the scenes in the San Francisco theatres. His major success as an actor--the part of Prince Saucilita in The Gold Demon--brought him to the attention of the critics, but it did not establish him as a leading actor, which was his goal at that time.¹⁸

There is not much written about Belasco's acting ability, and what can be found is not very favorable. Critics claimed he distorted his face and body to the point of distraction; in addition he was handicapped by his short stature and high voice. "These factors may have conspired to keep him subordinated as an actor, and gradually his energies were directed toward playwriting and production."¹⁹ Some of his more noteworthy performances as an actor were as Armand Duval in Camille and Uncle Tom in Uncle Tom's Cabin. For several years, he continued to play small roles and work back stage. In an attempt to build a name as an actor, Belasco tried several times to play leading roles on tours. These ventures were usually underfinanced and folded before they got far.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 23.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 34.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 36.

Discouraged but not beaten, Belasco always managed to get back to San Francisco, where he would work as a stage manager, play more small parts, and occasionally adapt or write a play.

Belasco was successful as a stage manager, and his sets and special effects began to bring him more recognition than his acting. Some examples described in Chapter Two, of his early success with scenery are the "Battle Scene" in Not Guilty, 1878; the "terrific fire spectacle" in Within An Inch of His Life, 1879; and the scenes in The Passion Play, 1879. With little success as an actor compared with his recognition as a stage manager, Belasco's efforts were directed more and more toward production.

In the early 1870's, Belasco became acquainted with Tom Maguire, the legendary theatre-manager of California who-- in collaberation with Elias Baldwin--built the famous Baldwin Hotel and Theatre. When the theatre opened in 1876, David Belasco was the assistant stage manager.²⁰ The next few years found Belasco in many jobs in many theatres; writing or adapting plays, working as a stage manager, and playing many small parts in plays. His most rewarding adventures are listed in chronology below.

1877--He worked as stage manager at the California Theatre, and joined the Frayne Troupe, at Humboldt, Oregon.

²⁰Ibid., p. 68.

- 1878--He appeared with the New York Union Square Company at the Baldwin Theatre, and later traveled with the company, as stage manager. Belasco's version of The Vicar Wakefield and his Proof Positive were produced at the Baldwin.
- 1879--Belasco wrote Chums with James A. Herne, and later they formed a partnership. Chums was taken on the road with performances in Chicago, Cincinnati, Indianapolis, and New York.
- 1880--After dissolving his partnership, Belasco returned to the Baldwin, where he directed the famous melodrama The World.
- 1881--He toured with the Baldwin Company, and made a trip to New York. Later, he sold his interest in the play La Belle Russe.
- 1882--Belasco's spectacle melodrama The Curses of Cain was presented at the Baldwin. A revival of Belasco's rearranged version of The Octoroon, introducing Callender's Colored Minstrels, was directed by Belasco. He left San Francisco, traveling with the Frohman Company, and later became stage manager at the Madison Square Theatre, which marked the beginning of his work in the New York theatres.
- 1883--Belasco got his first job as director at the Madison Square Theatre.²¹

One can see from the chronology that as the years passed, Belasco the actor disappeared and was replaced by Belasco the director.

Belasco the Director and Producer

Starting with his directing at the Madison Square Theatre in 1883, Belasco's career began a steady climb, reaching a peak around 1910. As a result of the success of his

²¹William Winter, The Life of David Belasco, Vol. II (New York, 1918), pp. 473-497.

productions, naturalism or Belascoism became the dominating force in the American theatre. Belasco's plays, theatre designs, stage settings, and stage lighting were known and respected in Europe as well as in America.

As a producer and director, Belasco devoted himself fully to one style of production--naturalism. There was no area of production that did not receive his special attention. Since later chapters survey Belasco's work as a producer-director in relation to his settings, properties, costumes, make-up, and lighting, it seems pertinent to mention now, at least briefly, his directing techniques in regard to handling actors.

Some of the more notable actors and actresses who received training from Belasco were Jane Cowl, Judith Anderson, Mrs. Leslie Carter, Frances Starr, Lenore Ulric, Mary Pickford, David Warfield, and Arthur Byron. All of the ones mentioned, "at one time or another, publicly acknowledged that no previous experience of their careers had been comparable in value to his tuition."²²

Belasco's handling of actors was not always consistent, as can be seen in the contrasting quotations below:

I have never resorted to bullying in order to make my actors do as I wish; I have always found that the best results can be gained by appealing subtly to their imagination. I can convey more to them by a look or a gesture than by a long harangue or scolding.

²²Timberlake, *op. cit.*, p. 407.

.....
 I appeal to their imagination, emotion, and intelligence, and draw from them all I can. When I can get no more from them, I then give them all there is in me. I coax and cajole, or bulldoze and torment, according to the temperament with which I have to deal.²³

In one area, however, Belasco was very consistent--he expected his actors to spend long hours in rehearsal, on occasions keeping them on stage for twenty hours straight. At times, actors would be required to read a single line over and over, experimenting with little subtleties of tone or gesture, until just the right effect was achieved. Perhaps the best story of the length to which Belasco would go in getting what he wanted is the watch story:

Belasco, after hours of rehearsal, is unable to rouse his tired performers to the emotional intensity required in a given scene. In a rage he springs from his chair and claws the air frantically in search of some inanimate object against which to vent his anger at all mankind and actors in particular. In desperation he snatches a watch from his vest pocket and hurls it to the stage floor. There is a sickening moment of silence as he freezes, transfixed with horror. "What have I done," he whimpers piteously, "my mother's watch. Her last gift to me. Oh, mother, mother!" Falling to his knees he gathers the pieces of the shattered timepiece. Clutching them to his breast, he sits with bowed head and tear-filled eyes. At last he speaks. "I am tired," he murmurs gently, "a tired, evil old man, so old, so tired. Won't you try once more for me, please?" And the actors, touched to the point of tears by this heart-rending appeal, attack the scene and conquer it. At the end of the rehearsal, Belasco whispers to his assistant, "That went well, didn't it? Remind me to buy another of those two-dollar watches tomorrow."

²³Ibid., pp. 406-407.

"But, Gov'nor, you can't smash your mother's watch twice in the same play."

"There will be other plays," he replies, smiling in anticipation.²⁴

Belasco's fame does not lie, however, in his handling and directing actors; but instead, his recognition lies in technical achievements and his efforts to bring complete naturalism to the stage. The techniques used by Belasco have long since been taken over by the photographic realism of motion pictures; nevertheless, at the time he was king, he tried to create for his audiences such photographic pictures of life.

Although Belasco celebrated his seventy-fifth birthday in 1929, he was still very active as a producer and director.²⁵ After one last demanding production--Mina in 1929--Belasco spent his last two years producing a series of public-pleasing plays. His death, in 1931, was felt throughout the profession. The New York Times said, "He was the last of the completely versatile men of the theatre."²⁶ The Herald Tribune called him "Broadway's premiere showman."²⁷ He was described by Katherine Cornell as "The most picturesque and authentic theatrical figure this country has ever known."²⁸ Ethel Barrymore commented, "The whole theatrical profession

²⁴Ibid., p. 404.

²⁵Ibid., p. 392.

²⁶Ibid., p. 398.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Ibid.

will be shocked over the loss of its leader."²⁹ These were but a few of the many tributes paid David Belasco.

In this brief sketch of Belasco's life and work, one can see some of the factors which were instrumental in his becoming a leading theatre producer. First, his birth into a family who both loved the theatre and worked in it--his father a harlequin, his mother a lover of poetry and acting. If the monastery story is accepted, one can conclude, as Winter did, that diligence and self discipline, which later characterized his work, were learned during his stay with Father McGuire. The uncorroborated circus experience, learning to recite poetry, and playing juvenile parts in professional theatres were other factors which led Belasco closer and closer to a career in the theatre. His interest in playwriting and other areas of production can be seen in his efforts, as a boy, to present plays in his basement theatre. Training in elocution and the selections he performed were probably factors in developing his taste for melodrama, which brought him much criticism in later years.

One factor, more than others, was the leading force in directing the course of Belasco's career: his continuing disappointments as an actor coupled with his success and recognition as a scene designer and stage manager. More and more Belasco turned to scene building, stage managing, and

²⁹Ibid.

directing. In summary, early experiences developed his love and inclination for the theatre, while his failure as an actor and success as a designer and stage manager dictated the course of his career; and a love of nature, detail, color, light, and melodrama dictated his style.

Naturalism and Belascoism

According to most critics, Belasco was the unquestioned leader in the development of naturalistic stage settings and lighting in America. To understand the significance of this achievement, one must first have a clear picture of the type of theatre that existed in America before Belasco's influence. In addition, one must have a basic understanding of the major principles of naturalism.

Before Belasco's leadership in the theatre, the settings used in America were generally of the poorest quality. Little attention was given to "realistic" or "naturalistic" effects; furthermore, there was very little, if any, detail in stage settings. The idea of having a new set for each production was not often considered. Most theatres had only a few standard wing pieces and matching drops which were used over and over with only minor changes. An important thing to remember here is that this was not considered to be undesirable at the time; it was the accepted and customary way of staging a

production. The audience went to see the actors and the play, not the settings.³⁰

Lighting, also, was of little importance. Candles or gas lights were used for general illumination, and only rarely was any attempt made at specific or area lighting. The candles or gas lights were placed across the front of the stage in the form of footlights. In these systems the candle power was weak, the lights cast shadows across the backdrop, and there was the danger of fire. This, too, was accepted by the audiences as being the only way of lighting the stage.

The conditions described above also existed in the European theatres before the naturalistic movement there. The naturalistic movement in America came later than the movement in Europe. By the time Belasco's influence was beginning to have an effect on the American stage, naturalism had already proved itself in Europe. The European movement began with the Saxe-Meiningen Company and such writers as Emile Zola. Zola believed in determinism, and "insisted on a complete, objective and impersonal representation of truth."³¹ In his efforts to transform the theatre from a state of "trivial" and "superficial" entertainment, Zola proclaimed, "Our theatre will be naturalistic or it will not exist."³²

³⁰ Mordecai Gorelik, New Theatres for Old (New York, 1962), p. 163.

³¹ Haskell M. Block and Robert G. Shedd, editors, Masters of Modern Drama (New York, 1963), p. 3.

³² Ibid.

While Zola was crusading for plays which were naturalistic in what they had to say, Duke George II of Saxe-Meiningen was crusading for more naturalistic acting and staging. The Saxe-Meiningen Company was formed "in protest against the acting style of rhetorical and bombastic declamation."³³ The Duke developed a company which became famous for its ensemble acting. He placed a new importance on scenery and accurate, detailed costumes.³⁴

Under the influence of Zola, André Antoine opened his famous Théâtre Libre. It was here that naturalism began to take roots as a strong force in European theatre. Beginning in 1887 with Antoine's production of The Ugly Duckling, the Theatre was used as a "trial laboratory" for new naturalistic plays. The productions at Antoine's Théâtre Libre were sometimes warm and quiet, but more often they were crass and vulgar; however, they were always naturalistic.³⁵

Naturalism, as it developed in Europe, was a movement in all areas of theatre--writing, acting, theatre design, stagecraft, scenery, properties, costumes, and lighting. Leading the movement in writing were Ibsen, Strindberg, and Chekhov; and in production, Antoine, Duke of Saxe-Meiningen, and Stanislavsky. The writers wanted to show man in his environment, his conflicts with his environment, and his

³³Ibid., p. 4.

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Gorelik, op. cit., pp. 122-168.

social and political problems. They wanted "an objective study of life."³⁶ Their purpose was "to seize life . . . to dissect it with the curiosity of a surgeon."³⁷

The producers wanted to take the plays of the naturalistic writers and produce them in a true to life way--to show real places with actors walking and talking like real people. Gorelik states they wanted to bring life to the stage "by bringing an exact reproduction of life to the stage."³⁸

Antoine, breaking with the traditional type of settings, constructed a new set for each play. His sets were not elaborate but they were realistic and very detailed. He replied to critics in this way:

In modern works written in the spirit of truth and naturalism in which the theory of environment and the influence of external things has taken so large a part, is not the setting a natural part of the work? . . . Is it not a sort of exposition of the subject?³⁹

The Moscow Art Theatre placed even more emphasis on naturalistic settings than Antoine. The actors and designers would visit and study places which they planned to reproduce on stage. Many times properties and costumes were brought back and used in the plays.⁴⁰ Even though naturalistic settings were emphasized, the Moscow Art Theatre gained its

³⁶Ibid., p. 153.

³⁷Ibid., p. 132.

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹Ibid., p. 139.

⁴⁰Ibid., pp. 144-145.

world recognition mainly from naturalistic and ensemble acting. Stanislavsky and Danchenko developed a new approach to acting--the actor must not play the part, he must live the part.⁴¹

Naturalism in European theatres developed as a result or as a part of an over-all change in the social, political, and economic conditions in Europe in the latter part of the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth centuries. The common man was beginning to demand, and get, a better way of life. Social and class distinctions were fading away, and economic conditions for the workers were improving. With more and better educated people, there was an increased interest in science and questions concerning man's significance in the world. Accordingly, theatre audiences were changing--the working class, with better pay and more leisure time, began going to the theatre. With the changing audiences, "the drama's center of interest was no longer the heroic deeds of rulers but the study of individual will and conscience."⁴²

The extent to which the naturalistic movement in Europe and its leaders influenced Belasco is hard to determine. Belasco did not admit being influenced by the European movement; quite the contrary, in fact, he claimed to have been first with most of the innovations. In the area of lighting he states he was first to do away with footlights:

⁴¹Kenneth Macgowan and William Melnitz, The Living Stage (Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1955), p. 414.

⁴²Gorelik, op. cit., p. 152.

I think that we may fairly and without vanity claim to have revolutionized stage lighting. I confess that I have at times felt some annoyance when I have been informed by young writers in the press,--who were not born until long after I had made great improvement in lighting,--that in dispensing with footlights I have 'imitated' Mr. Granville Barker, Mr. Max Reinhardt, and various other so-called 'innovators.' Such statements are nonsensical. My first regular production without 'foots' was made in 1870,* when I staged Morse's "Passion Play" in San Francisco.

*At which time Mr. Granville Barker was two years old!--J.W.⁴³ [The footnote in this quotation was added by William Winter's son Jefferson who finished and published this work after his father's death.]

In the area of stage design and stage technique, Belasco also claimed many firsts. In his Madison Square Theatre, he claimed he had the first double stage in the world--invented by Steel Mackaye. At the Belasco Theatre, Belasco installed footlights that would automatically sink below the level of the stage floor. At the same time an "apron" would slide out over the orchestra pit. This transformed the stage into a type of "thrust stage."⁴⁴

As stated by Belasco, these technical innovations were first used in America by Americans, and not in Europe as most writers would have one believe. Belasco not only spoke in his own behalf, but he also spoke for American theatre in general:

⁴³William Winter, The Life of David Belasco, Vol. II (New York, 1918), p. 247.

⁴⁴David Belasco, The Theatre Through Its Stage Door (New York, 1919), pp. 242-243.

I fear I have been rather too tolerant of the attacks by many of our writers on the subject of dramatic art, whose eyes are fixed on the foreign stage and to whom it never seems to occur that our native accomplishments in the theatre are entitled to recognition and encouragement.⁴⁵

Whether influenced by the naturalistic movement in Europe to some degree, or not at all, David Belasco had his own ideas and beliefs about naturalism. Belasco's favorite expression in regard to his belief was "to hold the mirror up to nature." "The stage," he said, "is a mirror in which are reflected the manners and peculiarities of life . . ."⁴⁶ He believed that actors, directors, electricians, in fact all artists of the theatre should use nature as a guide in their work. He insisted that for these artists, "the book of nature is never closed."⁴⁷

In the areas of naturalistic scenery and lighting, Belasco's leadership is generally unquestioned; however there is some dispute as to his leadership in bringing naturalistic acting to the New York stage. In the writing of his life story, Belasco relates how he introduced naturalistic acting to New York:

Coming to New York as a stranger, I knew I had a task before me to introduce the new style of acting which I felt was destined to take the place of the melodramatic method. . . . I introduced the quiet acting . . . It was all new, and

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 245.

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 229.

⁴⁷Ibid.

those who saw went away stunned and puzzled. We were considered extremist at the Madison Square Theatre, but we persisted, with the result that our method prevails to-day.⁴⁸

William Winter, critic for the New York Tribune and author of the most detailed work on the life of Belasco, took note of this claim by Belasco:

Long before Belasco's advent the New York audience had seen, enjoyed, admired, and accepted Edwin Booth . . . Lester Wallack . . . Emery . . . all of whom (and many more might be mentioned) were conspicuously representative of the most refined, delicate, "natural," "quiet" style of acting that has been known anywhere.⁴⁹

As indicated by Winter, Belasco did not introduce naturalistic acting in New York; however, he should be given credit for making naturalistic acting the most accepted and widely used method.

While Stanislavsky was a great leader of the naturalistic movement in Europe, he was very much impressed with the acting and with the productions in America. In 1923, while visiting in New York, he wrote his friend Nemirovich-Danchenko:

It is a great mistake to suppose that they don't know good actors here . . . The whole theatrical business in America is based on the personality of the actor. . . . Plus the most lavish production, such as we don't know. Plus the most marvelous lighting equipment, about which we have no idea. Plus stage technique which we have never dreamt of. . . . Such an actor as David Warfield, whom I saw in the part of Shylock, we have not got. And Belasco's production of The Merchant of Venice exceeds in sheer lavishness

⁴⁸Winter, op. cit., Vol. I, p. 152.

⁴⁹Ibid., pp. 152-153.

anything I ever saw, and as for its technical achievements, the Maly Theatre could envy them.⁵⁰

Gorelik, in New Theatres for Old, used the term "Belascoism" to describe what he considered a specific American form of naturalism.⁵¹ There seemed to be several differences between Belascoism and naturalism as it developed in Europe. First, and probably the most significant difference was in the general purpose. In Europe, naturalism was a study of man--his environment and problems. For Belasco, naturalism was simply a better, more true-to-life style of production. He was not concerned with environment and how it affected men's lives, as they were in Europe; but rather with environment as a type of atmosphere which reflected realistically the time and place of the story he was presenting. Neither was he concerned with man's social, political, or economic problems. In the strictest sense of naturalism, the setting was to provide environment; indeed this was the goal for which Zola and Antoine had aimed. On the other hand, "it was not meaning, but effect that was important,"⁵² in "Belascoism."

The writers and producers of Europe were interested in social comment; accordingly they wished to enlighten their audiences and make them think. It was their belief that to

⁵⁰Timberlake, op. cit. p. 371.

⁵¹Gorelik, op. cit., p. 162.

⁵²Ibid., p. 163.

accomplish this goal they must show man in his real environment--the spectators could recognize themselves and their fellow man and could learn from the experience. One can find no such goal in a Belasco production. Despite denials from Belasco, his main objective was to entertain. Rarely did his plays deal with ordinary people, and when they did, they were highly romanticized. Romanticism, in fact, could be seen in all of his productions. The characters in his plays were usually hero and heroine types. Many of his plays were set in romanticized sections of the country--a gold mining camp on Cloudy Mountain in The Girl of the Golden West or a Southern plantation in The Heart of Maryland. Also, the romantic settings of foreign lands were used: in Japan, Madame Butterfly; in France, Zaza and Du Barry; and in Mexico, The Rose of the Rancho. The mere lavishness of a Belasco production tended to romanticize it. Sets, costumes, lighting, all were lavish--realistic and accurate in every detail, but lavish. In these romanticized productions, Belasco wanted his audiences to believe they were seeing the real thing, not for their enlightenment, but for their entertainment. As stated below, he wanted to interest and hold the attention of his audiences:

When I set a scene representing a Child's Restaurant how can I expect to hold the attention of my audience unless I show them a scene that looks real? They see it, recognize it, accept it and

then if the actors do their part, the audience forgets that it isn't looking into a real place.⁵³

In referring to Belasco's romanticized naturalistic productions Gorelik stated: "Belasco's melodramas had a mixture of sweetness and light in a blend to which, it is likely, he had a unique claim. If any social criticism remained it was reduced to a whisper."⁵⁴

The type and quality of the plays presented in European theatres also differed with the type and quality presented by Belasco. European theatres were producing quality plays by Ibsen, Strindberg, Chekhov, Hauptmann, Shaw, and others; at the same time Belasco was producing melodramatic plays written by himself or adapted plays and stories by little known authors. The plays presented in Europe were characterized by little action and much discussion; Belasco's plays, on the other hand, were full of action with a minimum of dialogue. It was the quality of the plays he produced that brought Belasco more criticism than any other factor.

In summary, naturalism as it developed in Europe was a movement in writing, acting, and stagecraft. While settings were important and should add environment, the message of the play was the most important factor. Producers and directors like the Duke of Saxe-Meiningen, Antoine, and Stanislavsky developed naturalistic acting and stagecraft--with detailed

⁵³Winter, op. cit., Vol. II, p. 455.

⁵⁴Gorelik, op. cit., p. 162.

and accurate costumes and scenery; at the same time, Ibsen, Strindberg, and Chekhov were writing plays dealing with the common man and his problems. Their plays were filled with social and political criticism aimed at enlightenment. Belasco's form of naturalism was a romanticized form of naturalism. He was less concerned with social and political criticism, and more concerned with detailed and lavish settings, lighting, and entertainment.

This chapter has surveyed Belasco's life and work to determine early influences and to show the relation between "naturalism" and "Belascoism." It is now possible to proceed with a careful investigation of Belasco's naturalistic settings and lighting. His romanticized view of life and his passion for details were important factors in his stage scenery. Chapter Two will show how these factors were reflected in his stage settings.

CHAPTER II

BELASCO'S NATURALISTIC STAGECRAFT

In an effort to crystallize the methods and techniques used by Belasco in creating his naturalistic stage settings, it is necessary to discuss factors that are both directly and indirectly related to his stagecraft. Included first in this chapter are some of Belasco's general characteristics and attitudes which influenced his naturalistic stagecraft. Next, a look at his theatres--their design, equipment, and flexibility--will show the facilities needed and used by Belasco for his productions. Third, a step by step survey of how his scenery was created indicates his specific methods and techniques. Since Belasco considered stage properties and costumes as an intricate part of naturalistic settings, his techniques in these areas are cited. Beyond the actual design and construction of scenery, additional techniques used by Belasco to create atmosphere of time and place and to create photographic stage pictures are discussed. To add emphasis to the points made in the discussions, some of Belasco's scenic effects, pictures, illustrations, and property plots are also included. It is hoped that this chapter will give the reader insight into Belasco's methods.

General Characteristics

The critics and writers who knew David Belasco personally and observed his work first-hand were unanimous in acclaiming his love for and dedication to his work. For Mr. Belasco, the theatre was "almost his entire life."¹ H. A. Harris put it this way:

He is more than a workman, he is a human dynamo and during the months when a play is in course of construction and production everything else must give way. His almost phenomenal power of concentration is one of the greatest secrets of his success.²

Even Belasco's severest critics did not deny the quality which he brought to the American stage. Where his critics could challenge his selection of plays and his occasional over-emphasis of detail, they could not, nor did they, challenge his expenditures in time and money in order to bring first quality productions to the stage. As one critic wrote: "Mr. Belasco himself has rendered a great service to the theatre. He has maintained a standard of production that deserves much gratitude."³ Another critic wrote: "He has contributed more to the actual working stage in New York than anyone since the time of Augustin Daly."⁴ William Winter assessed Belasco's

¹H. A. Harris, "David Belasco--The Man and His Work," Cosmopolitan, XLVII (November, 1909), 755-764.

²Ibid.

³"Mr. Belasco's Quarrel With the Experimental Theatres," Current Opinion, LXII (March, 1917), 184.

⁴Montrose J. Moses, "Belasco: Stage Realist," Independent, XXCVI (May 29, 1916), 336-337.

work in this way:

As a stage manager he is competent in every particular and has no equal in this country to-day. No theatrical director within my observation, . . . has surpassed him in the resolute, tireless capability of taking infinite pains.⁵

The time spent in preparation and rehearsal for a Belasco production has rarely been equalled. Belasco would spend months in planning a production. Occasionally he would spend even longer: "Two years were spent in planning the production of Mima."⁶ After the preliminary preparation, Belasco would spend weeks and sometimes months in rehearsal. He had no qualms about postponing an opening if he felt the show needed more work.

The weeks and months of rehearsals required for a Belasco production become even more significant when one considers that his rehearsals lasted fifteen or sixteen hours.⁷ His actors did not seem to mind the long rehearsals. Belasco's ability to get his actors to work such long hours is explained by H. A. Harris: "He, like no other stage producer, invariably manages to inspire his company with his own enthusiasm."⁸

Belasco seemed to have superhuman strength and endurance when it came to work. In 1929, when he was seventy-five, he

⁵William Winter, The Life of David Belasco, Vol. I (New York, 1918), p. 160.

⁶Louis Hartmann, Theatre Lighting A Manual of the Stage Switchboard (New York, 1930), p. 119.

⁷Harris, op. cit., pp. 755-764.

⁸Ibid.

undertook his most ambitious production--Mima. Louis Hartmann described the last month of rehearsal:

The last four weeks were taken up almost entirely with rehearsals, each of which started at ten A.M. and usually lasted until three A.M. the following morning. David Belasco spent at least twenty hours out of every twenty-four in the theatre. When the rehearsal was over he would still remain, absorbed in watching his staff make the changes he had ordered during it. Five A.M. was the time the crew generally left the theatre, to return at nine-thirty to be ready for the next rehearsal at ten.⁹

In addition to the hours, weeks, and months spent on a production, Belasco spared no expense. His willingness to spend unlimited amounts on a show was certainly an important factor in what he achieved. His methods of production would have been completely different if he had been forced to work on a limited budget. Most of what made him famous--lavish sets, beautiful costumes, and outstanding lighting effects--were things that cost great sums of money.

Belasco was not rich. He made what money he had in the theatre. Most of what he made on one show went into the production of the next. He made a profit on some shows and lost money on others. The mere fact that profit was not always Belasco's primary goal is a testimony to his love of the theatre. In answer to why he produced unprofitable plays, Belasco answered:

Neither desire for money nor personal aggrandizement enter into my ambition to achieve better

⁹Hartmann, op. cit., p. 120.

stage presentations. I am repaid for months of labor, for enormous expenditures and resultant losses if, when my production is complete, it sets a new standard of excellence.¹⁰

Belasco's profits were small or non-existent on some of his more outstanding productions: The Darling of the Gods, Du Barry, The Merchant of Venice, and Electra.¹¹ In The Darling of the Gods, Belasco's original investment was over \$78,000. In addition to the original cost, the expense of running the show was so much that at the end of a two year run the show had only a net gain of \$5,000.¹² His greatest financial and critical disaster was Mima. On this play, he lost a quarter of a million dollars.¹³

In general, one can conclude that (1) a deep love of and dedication to the theatre, (2) long periods of time spent in preplanning and rehearsals, and (3) unlimited budgets were three distinguishing characteristics of Belasco's methods. Keeping these general characteristics in mind, it is possible to discuss more meaningfully Belasco's specific methods of staging plays.

¹⁰David Belasco, "Why I Produce Unprofitable Plays," Theatre Magazine, XLIX (February, 1929), 22, 68.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²William Winter, The Life of David Belasco, Vol. II (New York, 1918), p. 85.

¹³Craig Timberlake, The Bishop of Broadway (New York, 1954), p. 392.

Theatres and Staff

Although in the early parts of his career Belasco directed and produced plays in several different theatres in San Francisco and New York, his later and more important productions were produced in his own theatres. The design of the stages in these theatres was an important factor in Belasco's naturalistic stagecraft.

Belasco built and managed two theatres in New York. One theatre was located at Broadway and Forty-second Street, the other, on the north side of West Forty-fourth Street, between Broadway and Sixth Avenue.¹⁴

Belasco acquired his first theatre in 1902 from theatrical manager Oscar Hammerstein. Since the new theatre did not meet his requirement, Belasco immediately began remodeling. The entire interior of the theatre was ripped out, leaving only the four outside walls and part of the roof. Belasco also had the front part of the theatre excavated in order to have basement storage rooms and a work shop. When the remodeling was completed, some five months later, David Belasco and New York had one of the finest and best equipped theatres in the world. The lighting system was without question the best in the world at that time. The remodeling cost more than \$150,000.¹⁵

¹⁴Winter, op. cit., Vol. II, p. 238.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 53.

The auditorium and lobby of the new Belasco theatre were exceptionally beautiful and luxurious. The seating capacity was nine hundred and fifty persons: three hundred in the gallery, two hundred in the balcony, and four hundred and fifty on the main floor.¹⁶

The stage was designed to give as much flexibility in scene design and construction as possible. The entire acting area was made up of a series of close-fitting trapdoors. The center section of the stage was a large elevator which could be lowered into the basement. When the elevator was in the basement, a platform loaded with a complete set could be rolled on the elevator and raised to stage level. Several of these platforms with complete sets could be used during a single show. The platforms were fifteen feet wide and thirty feet long.¹⁷

In addition to the moveable platforms and trapdoors, the stage had a complete fly system. It was one of the few theatres in the world, at that time, to have a counter weight system.¹⁸

The footlights were installed in such a way as to diffuse the light evenly across the entire stage. Each lamp in the footlights and in the border lights was placed in a separate

¹⁶Ibid., p. 58.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 56.

¹⁸Ibid.

compartment. All lights, including the house lights, were controlled by dimmers.¹⁹

Belasco built his second theatre in 1906. This theatre was originally called David Belasco's Stuyvesant Theatre. In 1910, the name was changed to The Belasco Theatre.²⁰

The original cost of the building with its later improvements was nearly a million dollars. The stage in the new theatre was basically the same as the one in his first theatre. The stage was somewhat larger--eighty feet wide and twenty-seven feet deep--with the same trapdoors and elevator platforms. The new theatre did have an adjustable apron which could cover the musician pit. The auditorium was one of the first not to have supporting pillars, giving everyone in the audience an unobstructed view of the stage.²¹

The design of Belasco's theatres gave him the flexibility he needed in producing naturalistic plays. This flexibility was a great aid to him. Since it was Belasco's practice to build heavy, solid scenery, it would have been next to impossible to present his multiple-set shows without an elevator stage. In most cases, the sets were too heavy and bulky to be flown or even to be moved into the wing areas. With the sets built on platforms or wagons, they could be lowered into the basement and another set brought to stage level.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 57.

²⁰Ibid., p. 239.

²¹Ibid., p. 240.

The interlaced trapdoors, fly area, and counter weight system gave additional flexibility, and were often used in conjunction with the elevator and platforms.

Belasco's basement workshops--scenic and electric--were also important in making his stages completely flexible. In the scenic workshop, modern equipment enabled his craftsmen to construct the heavy scenery he used; accordingly, the electric workshop turned out apparatus to create the naturalistic lighting needed for each show. By maintaining workshops in his theatre, Belasco established a practice that has since been taken over by resident, amateur, and educational theatres--having all services under one roof. When Belasco began his work in the theatre, no other producer followed this practice.

As one studies Belasco's stagecraft, it becomes more and more evident that without flexible, well-equipped theatres Belasco's naturalistic settings would have been less spectacular. For instance, as can be seen later in the chapter, many of his more famous and complicated sets would not have been possible on a small ill-equipped stage.

Belasco surrounded himself with an exceptionally qualified staff: a staff whose dedication and work came close to matching his own. Many of his stagehands, electricians, and office personnel worked for Belasco during most of the three decades that he was the leading producer in New York. Foremost among these were Thomas Curry, Elizabeth Ginty, and Louis

Hartmann. Thomas Curry was Belasco's "secretary and constant companion for eighteen years."²² Elizabeth Ginty worked with Belasco in writing many of his plays. In The Bishop of Broadway, Craig Timberlake wrote:

As for Miss Ginty, the extent of her literary contribution to Belasco's plays will probably never be known. Much more than a mere secretary, she was an intelligent woman, who remained with the producer until his death, performing the multiple functions of a devoted companion, trusted lieutenant and astute literary adviser.²³

Louis Hartmann was Belasco's chief electrician for thirty years. It is doubtful that Belasco could have won his reputation in the area of lighting without the dedicated work of Hartmann. In the Foreward of Hartmann's book, Theatre Lighting, Belasco praised Hartmann's work and loyalty:

Mr. Hartmann is an expert in lights, shading and coloring, an artist who paints with light-beams and diffused glows instead of pigments and brushes. The results that have been achieved in my experimental laboratory in the twenty-eight years of our association have raised him to the status of an inventor. Never in all of these years has he failed to meet my most exacting requirements.²⁴

Other loyal and dedicated members of Belasco's staff deserve mention--Ben Roeder, his business manager; Howard Bookbinder, bookkeeper; "Matty,"²⁵ property man;²⁶ and

²²Timberlake, op. cit., p. 400.

²³Ibid., p. 178.

²⁴Hartmann, op. cit., p. v.

²⁵Although "Matty" apparently served Belasco for many years, it was not possible to determine his full name.

²⁶George Middleton, These Things Are Mine (New York, 1947), p. 276.

William Dean, general stage manager.²⁷ The service of these and other longtime employees of Belasco was an important factor in the long list of Belasco productions.

Without his modern, flexible, well-equipped theatres and without a competent, dedicated staff, Belasco's leadership in naturalistic staging would probably have been less.

Scenery: Design and Construction

The sets for a Belasco production were always built with great care. When starting to work on a play, he would begin by planning all of the scenes himself rather than following the set descriptions in the manuscript. He said of this planning, "I consider where a window or door, a balcony or a fireplace, will be most effective."²⁸ After he had developed some definite ideas about a particular scene, Belasco would then make a rough sketch of the scene. After completing his sketches he would then send for his scenic artist:

When I have settled these matters approximately, I send for my scenic artist. With him seated in front, I take to the empty stage and, as far as possible, try to act the whole play, making every entrance and exit and indicating my ideas of the groupings of the characters and their surroundings. This process, which would probably seem farcical to a casual onlooker, will consume perhaps four or five evenings, for not one detail can be left to chance or put aside until I am satisfied that it cannot be improved.²⁹

²⁷Harris, op. cit., pp. 755-764.

²⁸David Belasco, The Theatre Through Its Stage Door (New York, 1919), p. 53.

²⁹Ibid., p. 54.

The scenic artist would then make detailed drawings of the scenes. After these drawings were approved, the scenic artist would construct the actual scene models. The models were about four feet long, and complete in every detail. After the models were complete, Belasco and his staff would experiment with the models--changing colors, furniture, textures, etc. until he had the exact naturalistic effect he wanted.

Up to this point, with the exception that Belasco actually spent four or five days acting out the entire play for his scenic artist, his methods were very similar to those of other producers. In the next step, however, there is an important departure from the accepted or customary procedure. With a goal of complete naturalism, Belasco had his scenery constructed with solid materials. In addition, he did not follow the common practice of having the scenery contracted; it was all built in his workshop under his direction. Solid scenery is completely naturalistic in principle; nevertheless, most naturalistic producers did not carry naturalism this far. Whereas they would emphasize details, real properties, and accurate costumes, they continued to construct scenery by using canvas. To Belasco, however, a shaking wall destroyed the true-to-life illusion he was trying to create:

I will allow nothing to be built out of canvas stretched on frames. Everything must be real.

²⁹Ibid., p. 54.

I have seen plays in which thrones creaked on which monarchs sat, and palace walls flapped when persons touched them. Nothing so destructive to illusion or so ludicrous can happen on my stage.³⁰

In praise of Belasco's solid scenery, critic Francis Lamont Peirce wrote: "The walls of his rooms never shake and sway and threaten to collapse with the closing of a door. . . . The Belascoan backdrops have an ingratiating way of remaining stationary and smooth."³¹

The scenery was built in sections in the workshop, and then brought to the stage and assembled:

At last comes the order to put them together. Then for three or four days my stage resembles a house in process of being furnished. Confusion reigns supreme with the carpenters putting on door-knobs, decorators hanging draperies, workmen laying carpets and rugs, and furniture men taking measurements.³²

The sets were assembled on stage approximately two weeks before a production had its premier. Here again is an important departure from the norm of his time. In a naturalistic production, where the set was such an intricate part of the play, it was almost a necessity that the set be ready several weeks before opening. This was particularly true in a Belasco production where he used numerous details to aid his actors in creating the atmosphere he wanted.

³⁰Ibid., p. 61.

³¹Francis Lamont Peirce, "Youth, Art, and Mr. Belasco," The Drama, VII (March, 1917), 176-191.

³²David Belasco, The Theatre Through Its Stage Door (New York, 1919), p. 76.

Belasco's sets were constructed in what is sometimes called the "practical set" method. That is to say that everything was three-dimensional and solid. The windows were not just painted on canvas, or merely openings in the wall, but they were real windows that could be raised or lowered.³³ The sets appeared real, and in facade, at least, they were real. With this type of set, Belasco believed he had accomplished his goal--"how can I expect to hold the attention of my audience unless I show them a scene that looks real?"³⁴ An example of this type of practical, solid set was found in Belasco's production Du Barry. The last scene in this production was a reproduction of a narrow street in Paris. The street was lined with solid four-story, three-dimensional houses. Madame Du Barry was brought down this street on her way to execution; men and women could be seen in the upper windows and balconies of the buildings along the street. This set was so large and heavy it had to be built onto the back wall of the theatre.³⁵ In 1926, Belasco's production of Lulu Belle had a similar setting: a street scene in New York showing five-story tenement houses complete with occupants.³⁶

³³Arthur Edwin Krows, Play Production In America (New York, 1916), p. 130.

³⁴Winter, op. cit., Vol. II, p. 455.

³⁵A. Nicholas Vardac, Stage To Screen (London, 1949), p. 116.

³⁶Timberlake, op. cit., p. 386.

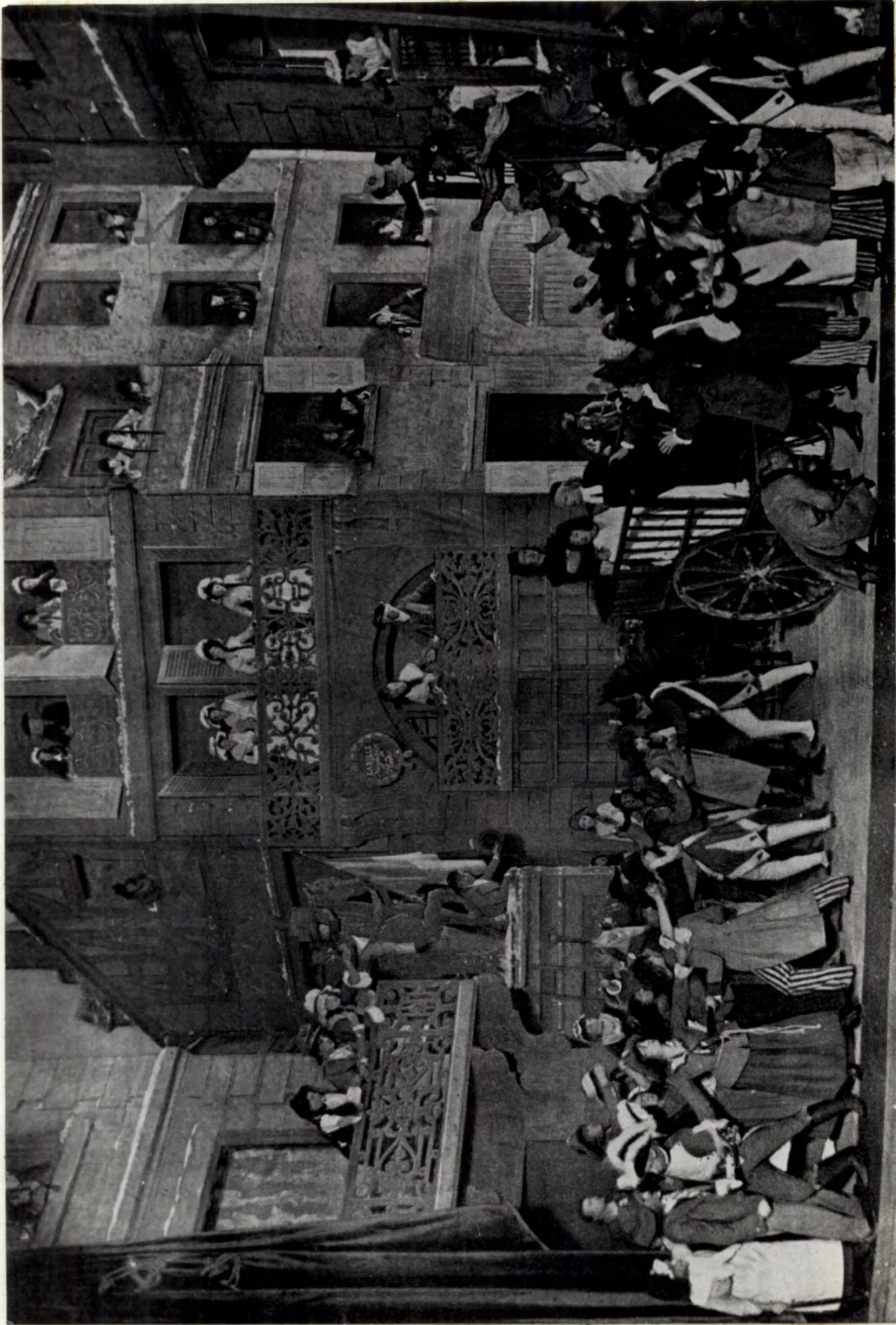


Plate 2--The solid three-dimensional set used in Belasco's production of Da Barry.

Usually Belasco's scenic artist and carpenters could reproduce exactly what he had in mind. On occasion, however, not being satisfied with a copy of what he wanted, Belasco would go after the real thing. When he produced The Easiest Way, he wanted an exact copy of a room in a cheap theatrical boarding house. The set was built several times but each time Belasco felt the illusion was wrong. It did not look cheap and shabby, only poorly built. Finally, he went to a cheap boarding house and bought the "patched furniture, thread-bare carpet, tarnished and broken gas fixtures, tumbled-down cupboards, dingy doors and window casings, and even the faded paper on the wall."³⁷ Belasco then completely rebuilt the room on his stage. With this reproduction of an actual room, Belasco felt he had brought to the stage the ultimate in naturalistic staging. It should be noted here that while this set was perhaps as close to nature as possible, it was a departure from his usual method of scene construction. Another, and somewhat more famous, example of this type of scenery was used in the last act of Belasco's production of The Governor's Lady. For the last scene in the play, he had the Child's Restaurant Company build a set that was a complete reproduction of one of their restaurants. The company not only furnished the equipment and walls for the set, but they also furnished a complete supply of cakes, pies, and

³⁷David Belasco, The Theatre Through Its Stage Door (New York, 1919), p. 77.



Plate 3--The cheap boarding house room in The Easiest Way.

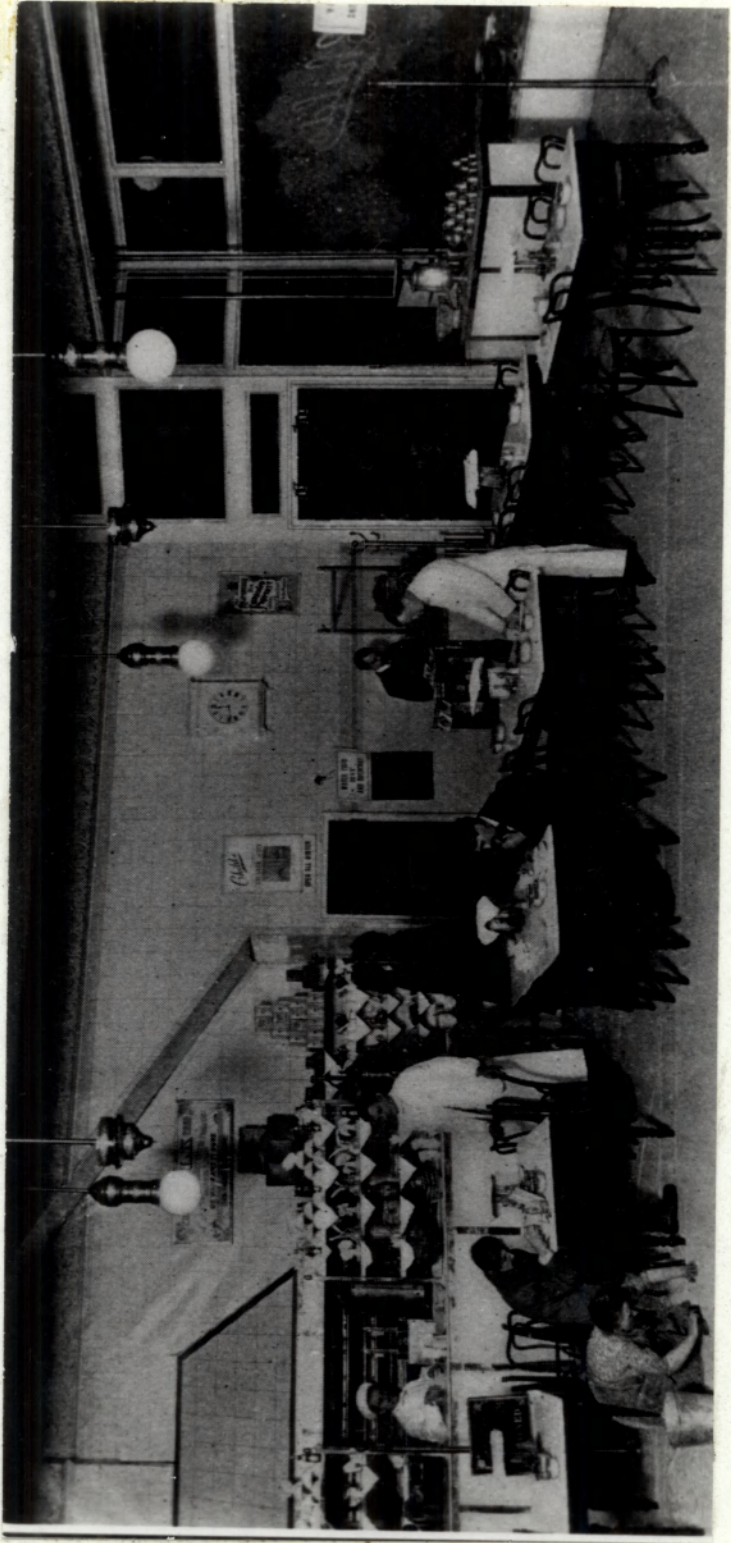


Plate 4--The Child's Restaurant in The Governor's Lady.

other food for each performance. In this set "one could have filled an order for two fried eggs, a cup of coffee, and some incidentals common to an institution of the kind."³⁸ The set also had "an elevator to send butter-cakes from the griddle in the front window, to the room upstairs."³⁹ Again, by having an outside firm do the work on this set, Belasco was not following his customary methods of constructing scenery.

The above-mentioned scenes in The Easiest Way and The Governor's Lady have been, for many years, singled out for criticism. Whether one is inclined to agree with Mr. Belasco--that he brought to the stage the ultimate in naturalistic staging--or with his critics, who felt that he had gone too far, it should be pointed out that these two scenes were not characteristic of Belasco's methods. In these two scenes, Belasco presented completely naturalistic scenery; however, in trying to determine his general techniques and methods, one must note that he used different methods to create these two scenes.

Properties and Costumes

Belasco was concerned with all elements of production. He wanted every aspect of his productions to be as natural and realistic as possible. The properties and costumes used in his productions were always accurate in every detail. All

³⁸Krows, op. cit., p. 193.

³⁹Ibid.

possible storage space in both Belasco Theatres was filled with second-hand furniture, pictures, vases, whatnots, lamps, and all types of junk that might sometime be used on the stage. Belasco had a passion for antiques and junk shops. Willard J. Friederick, in his book Scenery Design for the Amateur Stage, described Belasco's search for stage properties:

His penchant for naturalistic detail was carried over to the least property. No theatrical substitute for the real property was ever used; the real article was provided, regardless of the time, trouble, and cost involved in its procurement. His reason was that, even if the audience didn't know it the actors did and would find it more natural to feel the mood of the play.⁴⁰

Most producers leave the selection of properties for someone else--not Belasco. He enjoyed working on this type of detail. He said of his search for properties: "My explorations in search of stage equipment are really the most interesting parts of my work. I attend auction sales and haunt antique-shops, hunting for the things I want."⁴¹

Belasco believed the costumes to be as much a part of naturalistic scenery as the sets and properties. In the usual Belasco fashion, he gave a great deal more time and consideration to the costumes than most producers of his day. If the play were a costume play, Belasco would begin planning and designing the costumes months before the show opened. He

⁴⁰Willard J. Friederick, Scenery Design for the Amateur Stage (New York, 1950), p. 10.

⁴¹David Belasco, The Theatre Through Its Stage Door (New York, 1919), p. 76.

would study photographs and paintings of the period, and have his costume designers recreate exact copies of the costumes of the period. In the book Stage to Screen, Nicholas Vardac gives the following description of the costumes in Belasco's production of Du Barry:

The lavish and accurate reproduction of costumes and properties of the period defies description. Nothing was artificial, everything was reproduced as if from a plaster cast of the original. Embroidered costumes were not simulated with printed or stamped patterns, but showed the depth of genuine needlework with an amazing thoroughness of detail.⁴²

For productions other than costume plays, Belasco would have his actors go to clothing shops in New York to have their costumes made. If the characters of the play were the type that would not have been able to afford tailor-made clothes, Belasco then sent his actors to the department stores to buy ready-made clothing.⁴³

To check the costume completely, Belasco conducted what became known as his "dress parade."⁴⁴ These sessions were different from, and in addition to, the regular dress rehearsals. The cast did not run through the play; they merely

⁴²Vardac, op. cit., p. 115.

⁴³David Belasco, The Theatre Through Its Stage Door (New York, 1919), p. 61.

⁴⁴Although it is impossible to say with certainty, it seems likely that the customary term "dress parade" originated with Belasco since he was one of the first producers to be concerned with the effect of light on costumes. He did say, "what has become known as my 'dress parade,'" which would indicate that he originated the practice.



Plate 5--Costumes for Du Barry

walked back and forth on the stage. This enabled Belasco to check each individual actor as to the detail of his costume and the effects of various lights on his costume.⁴⁵

In justification of his great attention to sets, properties, costumes, and lighting, and in answer to the critics who said he overemphasized these things, Belasco said:

But all these adjuncts of lighting, color, and costumes, however useful they may be, and however pleasing to an audience, really mark the danger-point of a dramatic production. No other worker in the American theatre has given so much time and energy to perfecting them as I; nevertheless, I count them as valuable only when they are held subordinate to the play and the acting.⁴⁶

Atmosphere and Photographic Naturalism

In discussing Belasco's methods and techniques, one must include his efforts to create proper atmosphere and his completely naturalistic stage pictures. It is difficult to find a review of a Belasco production or any critical analysis of his work that does not mention the atmosphere in his productions. Winter said, "His judgement, taste, and expert skill in creating appropriate environment, background, and atmosphere for a play and the actors in it are marvelous."⁴⁷ Another critic wrote:

⁴⁵David Belasco, "Aids to the Actor's Art," Munsey's Magazine, LXIII (March, 1918), 265-279.

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷Winter, op. cit., Vol. I, p. 160.

As a composer of stage pictures and as a master of the minutiae of stage management, David Belasco has long held foremost rank in this country. He has achieved this prominence mainly by reason of one thing: the ability to create convincingly the atmosphere of the time and the place, in which his many successful plays have been set.⁴⁸

Belasco believed that the atmosphere in his plays came mostly from his actors. He claimed that one of the main reasons for having real properties on stage was more for his actors than for his audiences. There is no reason to doubt this statement when one considers that many of the little details, on which Belasco insisted, were things that the audience would have never known whether they were real or artificial. In an interview with Archie Bell, Belasco stated, "If everything on the stage is Spanish, and the actors are thoroughly steeped in the atmosphere, they will radiate it, and there comes the real artistry. . . ."49

Almost every critic agreed that Belasco's creating a believable atmosphere for each production was the main reason for his phenomenal success. The public loved this atmosphere. They went to a Belasco play "to be hypnotized by the Belasco atmosphere."⁵⁰ In an article by W. P. Eaton, in which he criticized the quality of many New York productions, the

⁴⁸"Plays by Belasco and Fitch," Harper's Weekly, L (December, 1906), 1867, 1875.

⁴⁹Archie Bell, "David Belasco Attacks Stage Tradition," Theatre Magazine, XIII (May, 1911), 164, 166, 168.

⁵⁰David Belasco, Six Plays (Boston, Mass., 1929), p. 144.

Belasco atmosphere was praised:

. . . as a stage manager Mr. Belasco is a genius. We all know how in a long succession of his productions he has evoked for each the proper atmosphere: in The Girl of the Golden West the romantic charm of Bret Harte's California; in The Darling of the Gods and Madame Butterfly an exotic atmosphere that seemed to us aliens, at any rate, like Japan;⁵¹ . . . in The Easiest Way the stifling, sordid atmosphere of the Tenderloin . . .⁵²

How did Belasco create his famous atmosphere? In an attempt to answer that question, Adolph Klauber, a reporter for the New York Times, observed Belasco in a rehearsal of The Music Master. Mr. Klauber related the usual innumerable little details to be found in the Belasco set--details that ninety percent of the audience would never notice, or details like a clean spot on the wall where a cuckoo clock had been taken down to be sold. Of that clean spot on the wall, Klauber wrote: "That bit of clean wall illustrates in an unmistakable way just why David Belasco is head and shoulders above other stage managers when it comes to realizing 'atmosphere.'"⁵³ Mr. Klauber also gave a glimpse of Belasco in action:

I want all that furniture polished; make it shine. We've got to make them see that Miss Houston

⁵¹Mr. Eaton was probably referring to an earlier article in which a Japanese criticized Belasco's production of The Darling of the Gods as not being at all like Japan.

⁵²W. P. Eaton, "The Neglect of Stage Management," American Magazine, LXXI (January, 1911), 400-401.

⁵³New York Times, October 2, 1904.

is a good housekeeper. But those globes up there. Well, she's too old to climb up there. They're too clean. Take 'em down. They want to look as if they'd never been washed. Now mind, no paint on them. Get dirt, real dirt.⁵⁴

Another technique Belasco used in creating atmosphere was the building of extra rooms behind the main set. When the door or doors to the main set were open the audience could see through into these additional sets. In like manner, "a Belasco window never opens upon a flat background that merely suggests the sky or a garden or a building wall, but always reveals outside a detailed landscape scene or an intricate architectural composition."⁵⁵

In creating atmosphere and in emphasizing detail, Belasco was often criticized for making his sets appear cluttered and overcrowded.⁵⁶ While this is probably true in some cases, at times Belasco was praised for his simplicity. In his productions of Marie-Odile and Little Lady in Blue, his sets were almost bare.⁵⁷ For Marie-Odile, he used "four walls, a table, a few chairs, an image of the Madonna, a painting, two or three pigeons, and a small cast."⁵⁸

⁵⁴Ibid.

⁵⁵"An Indictment of David Belasco as the Evil Genius of the Theatre," Current Opinion, LVIII (February, 1915), 96-97.

⁵⁶Ibid.

⁵⁷Peirce, op. cit.

⁵⁸James Gibbons Hunker, "David Belasco," Outlook, CXXVII (March 16, 1921), 418-422.



Plate 6--The naturalistic but uncluttered set for Marie-Odile

Belasco sometimes used the technique of decorating the auditorium in order to assist in creating atmosphere. When Belasco directed the Passion Play in 1882, he "transformed the auditorium to represent a cathedral, and used hangings of sackcloth. . . ."59 He did the same thing when he produced Marie-Odile.60 In Mima, "the setting was carried out into the auditorium as far as the balconies. . . ."61 The boxes and balconies were covered with metal. "The interior of the Belasco Theatre resembled the engine room of a battleship."62

Belasco also had the practice of beginning his plays in ways that would allow the audience to grasp the setting, mood, and atmosphere of the play before the action or dialogue began. One technique he used was to begin a play with five to ten minutes of insignificant and simple action. The beginning of Marie-Odile was described by Arthur Krows:

It was some time after the curtain rose, before the heroine, who was discovered dusting the convent table, chairs, floor, and so forth, or any other character, uttered an intelligible word. Nuns passed and repassed, the bell was rung, Latin prayers were mumbled, and so on. The complete atmosphere of the convent was conveyed with the scene before the play began.63

In praise of this type of beginning another critic described

59Krows, op. cit., pp. 175-176.

60Ibid.

61Hartmann, op. cit., p. 119.

62Timberlake, op. cit., p. 391.

63Krows, op. cit., p. 172.

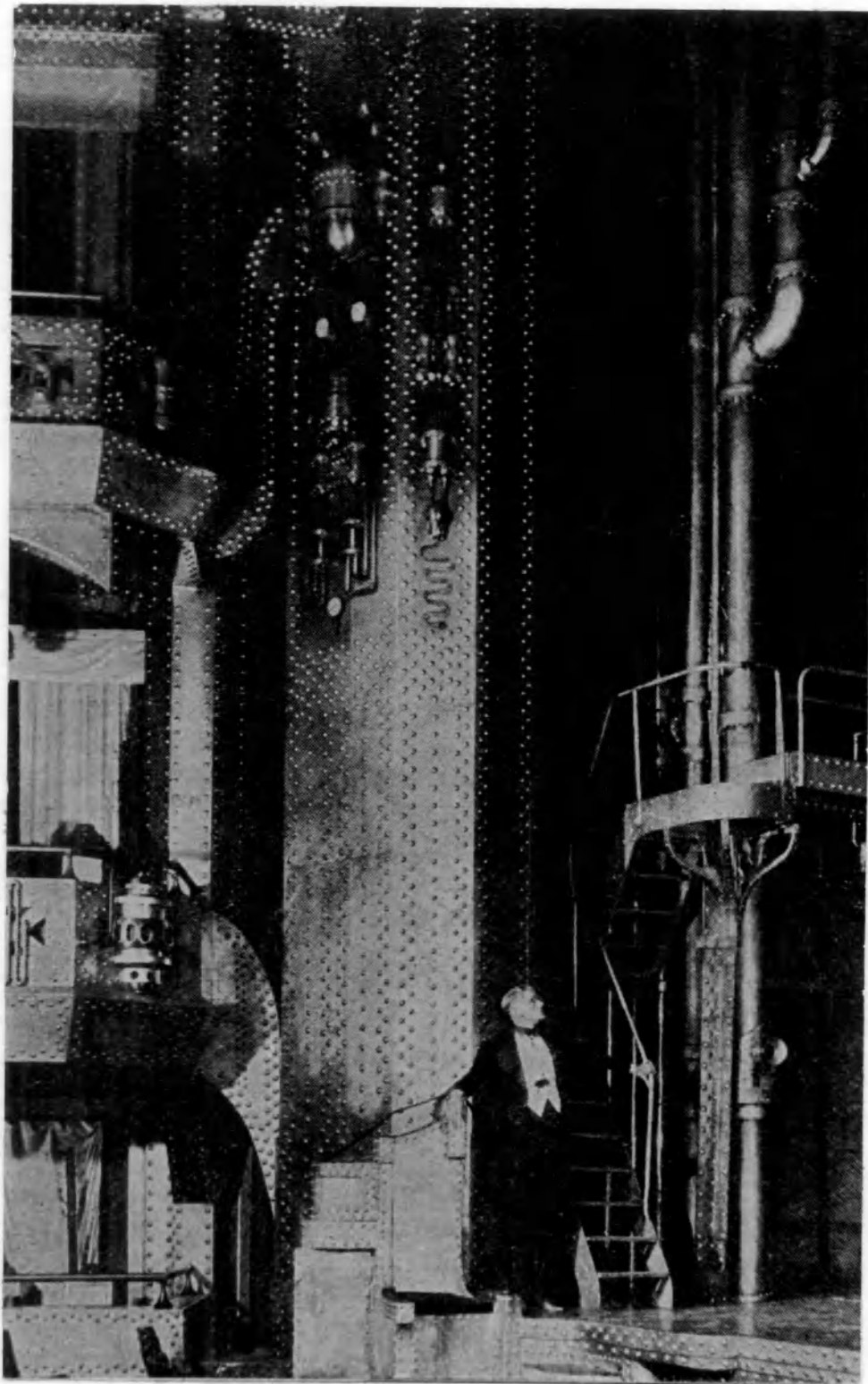


Plate 7--Set decorations were sometimes carried into the auditorium as in this scene from Mima.

the beginning of The Rose of the Rancho:

. . . the rising curtain discloses Padre Antonio, the Superior of the Mission, dozing over his wine in his embowered porch. Across the garden, stretched at full length beside a flowery trellis, and sound asleep, is Don Luis de la Torre, a "spark" from Monterey. Instead of having these figures spring to action, Mr. Belasco permits them to remain undisturbed for five minutes or more while a Spanish girl with a live parakeet upon her arm comes in and noiselessly fills her earthen jar with water from the well in the Mission Garden.⁶⁴

The elaborate use of backdrops, or more accurately, frontdrops, was another technique created and used to establish atmosphere at the beginning of a play. Painted backdrops had been in use for centuries before Belasco began his stage productions; however, he used them in a way other producers had not considered. In 1910, Belasco introduced a new purpose for painted drops. For his production of Madame Butterfly, he used a series of "picture drops" arranged at the proscenium to set the mood of the play. As the house lights dimmed, the drops were shown to the accompaniment of music. William Winter described them in the following manner:

A notably effective scenic innocation was the precedent use of "picture drops," delicately painted and very lovely pictures showing various aspects of Japan,--a rice field, a flower garden, a distant prospect of a snow-capped volcano in the light of the setting sun, and other views,--by way of creating a Japanese atmosphere before the scene of the drama was disclosed.⁶⁵

⁶⁴"Plays by Belasco and Fitch," Harper's Weekly, I (December, 1906), 1867, 1865.

⁶⁵Winter, op. cit., Vol. I, pp. 482-483.

Belasco used a similar device in The Darling of the Gods; however, it was just one scene with different sections being lighted at different times.⁶⁶

In The Girl of the Golden West, Belasco introduced still another innovation in the use of drops and painted scenery. The play "takes place in 1849 around a mining camp on Cloudy Mountain, California,"⁶⁷ To create the atmosphere of this mining camp high in the California mountains, Belasco first had the mountain scene painted on the front curtain:

It consists of a scene painted in "poster" manner, representing four trees well in the foreground, behind which is a stretch of neutral color dotted with . . . sage brush. Back of this stretch rise blackish green mountains over the central dip in which shines a setting sun, and above which are clouds of red and yellow and gray. The sun is illuminated by placing a light behind it.⁶⁸

The audience saw the above-described painted curtain as they entered the theatre. When it was time for the play to begin, the house lights were dimmed slowly, and at the same time the sun faded out. The curtain "rose silently and unseen as the lights were brought up on a panoramic view moving vertically across the proscenium opening . . ."⁶⁹ The panorama began where the painted curtain had stopped. It showed the same scene at sundown. As the painted canvas began to roll

⁶⁶"The Story of The Darling of the Gods Told in Six Pictures," Theatre Magazine, III (February, 1903), 42-43.

⁶⁷Vardac, op. cit., p. 126.

⁶⁸Ibid., pp. 126-127.

⁶⁹Ibid., p. 127.

upward, it gave the same effect as a motion picture "booming" downward from a great height. The scene moved down from the mountain top to a small cabin on the side of the mountain. From the cabin, the panorama moved slowly down a path to the foot of the mountain and stopped with a view of the outside of the Polka Saloon. At this point, light could be seen coming from inside the saloon, and music and singing could be heard. The lights faded, and the panorama was raised out of sight. As the lights were brought up once more, the audience saw the first scene of the play--inside the Polka Saloon.⁷⁰

The scenes in Belasco's productions were often described as being photographic. Some writers believe that Belasco's photographic scenes had a direct influence on realism found in the motion picture industry. Mordecai Gorelik, in his book New Theatres for Old, explains what he believed to be Belasco's influence on the American motion picture.

. . . Belasco Naturalism has been perpetuated in still wider fashion through the American picture.

Let us note that the American cinema was coming out of its swaddling clothes at the very time when Belascoism was the standard of American dramatic art. The record indicates that Belasco Naturalism appeared on the scene in time to affect the whole future of the motion picture.

.
You will find the Belasco touch in the next Hollywood picture you go to see; and you may well ask yourself what Hollywood could have done without it.⁷¹

⁷⁰ibid.

⁷¹Mordecai Gorelik, New Theatres for Old (New York, 1962), pp. 166-168.

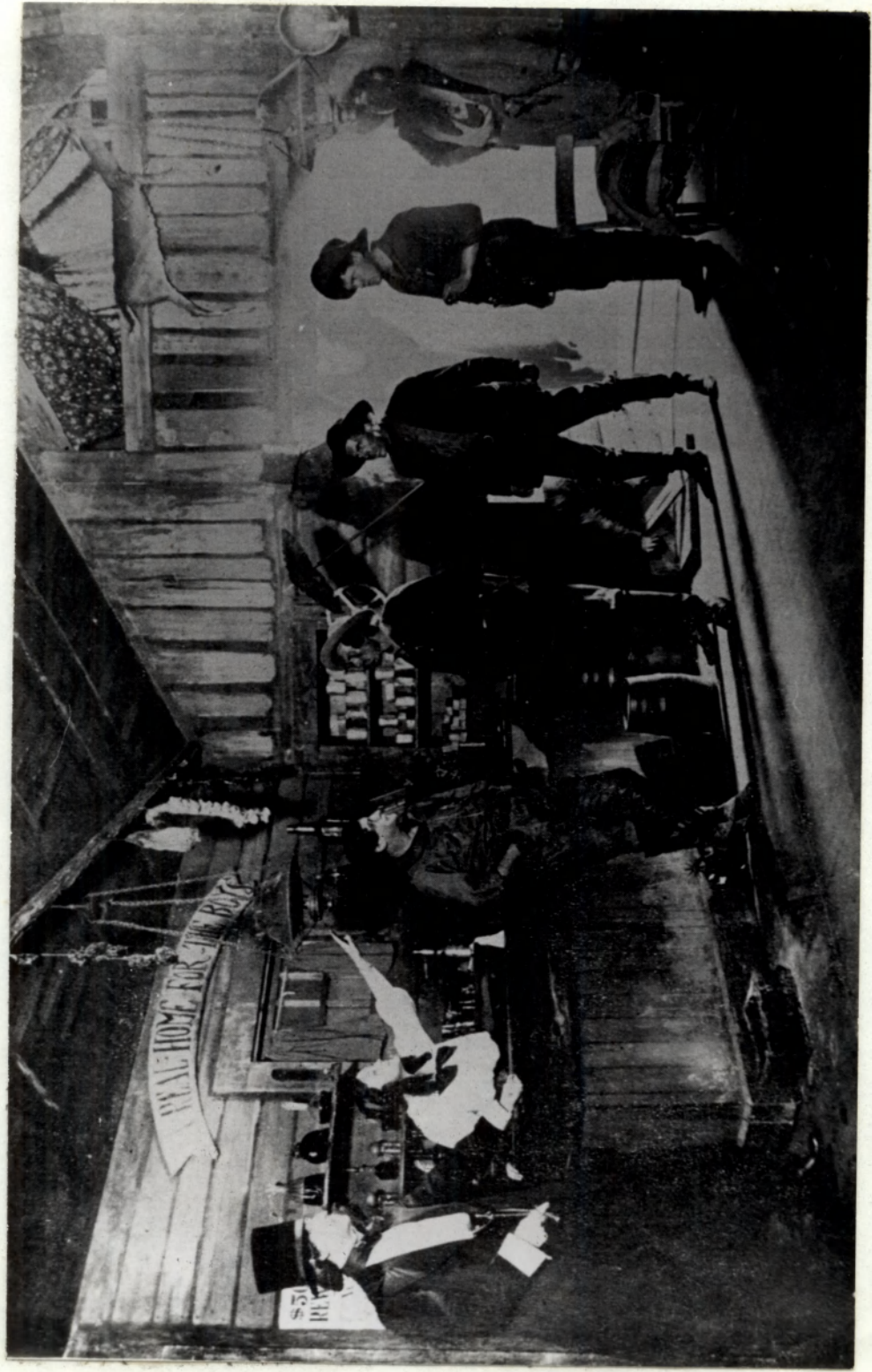


Plate 8--The Polka Saloon scene of The Girl of the Golden West as revealed at the end of the panorama.

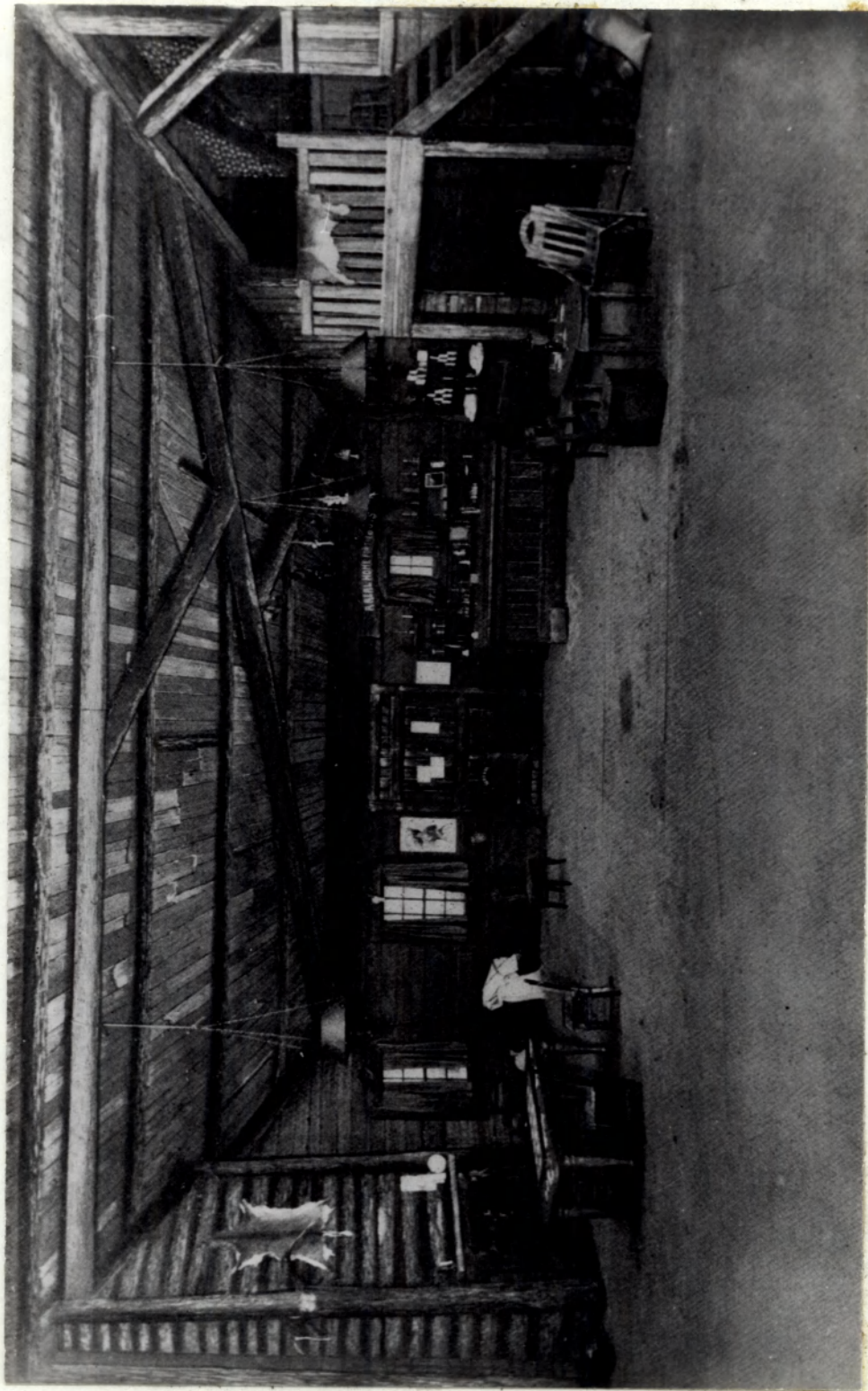


Plate 9--The Polka Saloon scene when The Girl of the Golden West was produced as an opera.

In contrast to Gorelik's opinion, is the opinion of Nicholas Vardac, author of Stage to Screen. Mr. Vardac states that Belasco's photographic realism was an attempt to survive and compete with the motion pictures. However, Belasco's comments about the motion picture industry and the fact that writers were describing Belasco's settings as being photographic as early as 1879 perhaps indicate that Belasco was not copying the motion picture industry. There are some techniques, however, used by Belasco that seem to have been borrowed from the movies. The use of picture drops showing scenes to create mood, such as he used in Madame Butterfly, was similar to opening scenes in movies. The panorama scene in The Girl of the Golden West with its "booming" down effect could have been copied from motion pictures. One critic described a scene in Mima which resembled a motion picture technique:

Four hydraulic elevators . . . raise and lower scenery and bring into view the series of episodes in the first act. These interludes are set and peopled on the stage and then raised to the flies. Traveling downward they are picked up by ingeniously arranged lights in a way that gives the impression of a motion picture fade-in.⁷²

It is impossible to determine whether scenes like these only resembled techniques used in motion pictures or whether they were actually copied. If one or two techniques were borrowed from the movies, it is still safe to say that on the whole

⁷²New York Times, December 23, 1928.

Belasco's photographic scenes were only his attempts to bring nature to the stage, and to reflect life in a realistic way.

The term "photographic" was first used to describe the scenes in Passion Play, which Belasco directed in 1879. One writer said the play was "the most picturesque production in San Francisco's annals . . ."73 William Winter described the play as "a long series of dialogues accompanied by pictures and tableaux."74 Vardac said:

There was rarely any imaginative or suggestive kind of scenery, costume or property. Even the supernatural was literally and photographically treated. . . . The success of the production stands in evidence of the nineteenth-century taste for pictorial realism and of Belasco's successful illustration of the Biblical story.75

All through Belasco's career, he was both praised and criticized for his stage picture techniques. One critic said that one doesn't need ears to enjoy a Belasco production, for the visual pictures told the story. Belasco, on the other hand, did not see his productions in this light. He defended them in the following passage:

If for however brief a time scenery, accessories, or any of the details of the environment, no matter how clever they be in themselves, distract the audience's attention from the play proper or cease to be other than mere assisting agencies, their value is destroyed and they become

73Oral Summer Coad, The American Stage, Vol. XIV (New Haven, Conn., 1929), p. 182.

74Winter, op. cit., Vol. I, p. 117.

75Vardac, op. cit., p. 110.

more a hindrance than an aid and consequently, an inartistic blunder.⁷⁶

In 1901, at the Garden Theatre in New York, Belasco's production of Under Two Flags opened. In this production Belasco again used stage pictures and naturalistic sets to such a degree that Vardac wrote that the production was "in apparent response to the stimulation offered by the photographic realism of the motion picture."⁷⁷ Whatever Belasco's reason for producing the play, he must be commended for successfully producing a story that most producers would not have attempted. The mountain pass scene in the play was a masterpiece of solid three-dimensional scenery. "At the extreme height of the stage Bedouins could be seen hidden behind rocks and crags waiting in ambush . . ."⁷⁸ The sand storm scene in this production was another outstanding scenic effect.

A description of the storm as reported in the New York Sun, February 10, 1901, and reprinted in Vardac's book, gives some indication of its effect:

The wind sighs in the distance and rages as it comes near. . . . The light of day fades to dimness. The sand that is blown in these storms of the African desert came lightly at first, but soon so heavily as to look like furiously driven hail. Rapid reflections on gauze curtains, in conjunction with the noises of the wind and the

⁷⁶David Belasco, The Theatre Through Its Stage Door (New York, 1919), p. 189.

⁷⁷Vardac, op. cit., p. 112.

⁷⁸Ibid., p. 113.



Plate 10--Mountain Pass scene in Under Two Flags

bending of trees, make a really awe-inspiring imitation of natural phenomenon.⁷⁹

Very few directors could have successfully produced, on stage, a play that required as much action as Under Two Flags.

The atmosphere of time and place and photographic naturalism were outstanding characteristics of a Belasco production. The techniques he used, consistently gave the result he wanted: a completely naturalistic production.

Outstanding Scenic Effects

Belasco followed the practice of including one or two outstanding scenic effects in each production. Although these effects usually brought a great deal of publicity and delighted his audiences, they often raised the cost of the production to a point where profits were very small. The effects were naturalistic or believable, and were well integrated into the productions. Descriptions of some of these unusual effects are included here.

It was in The Darling of the Gods that Belasco gave his audiences the famous "River of Souls" scene. This scene was a sort of purgatory where the soul drifted for a thousand years before entering Japanese Heaven. Belasco came on to this scenic effect by accident:

The noted producer spent \$6,000 on elaborate mechanism to show the souls of Yo San and her lover floating through the thousand years, and at the last moment he remained unsatisfied. Then

⁷⁹Ibid.

a stage hand chanced to pass across the stage between the gauze drops. As he did so, he cast twenty shadows. It was the big idea. Discarding all his expensive machinery, Belasco had eight girls walk across the stage as the stage hand had done. From their shadows, they looked like no less than one hundred and fifty persons. And all it cost was \$200.⁸⁰

While a scene depicting purgatory or any supernatural place could never be truly real, in this case the scene was naturalistic in the sense that Belasco's purpose was to make this fanciful scene as believable as possible--to give the illusion that this might indeed be what Japanese Purgatory was like.

In The Girl of the Golden West, Belasco came up with another spectacular naturalistic effect. It was a blizzard scene. William Winter's detailed description of that scene gives the reader an insight into Belasco's stagecraft. Even though it is long, parts of that description are included here because it is the most detailed report of any of Belasco's scenes.

Nothing of the kind which I have ever seen in the theatre has fully equalled in verisimilitude the blizzard on Cloudy Mountain as depicted by Belasco in the Second Act of this fine melodrama. . . . When the scene, the interior of the Girl's log-cabin, was disclosed the spectators perceived, dimly, through windows at the back, a far vista of rugged, snow-clad mountains which gradually faded from vision as the fall of snow increased and the casements became obscured by sleet. Then the sense of desolation, dread and terror, the audience heard the wild moaning and shrill whistle of the gale, and at moments, as the tempest rose

⁸⁰Krow, op. cit., p. 228.

to a climax of fury, could see the fine-powdered snow driven in tiny sprays and eddies through every crevice of the walls and the very fabric of the cabin quiver and rock beneath the impact of terrific blasts of wind,--long-shrieking down the mountain sides before they struck,--while in every fitful pause was audible the sharp click-click-click of freezing snow driving on wall and window.

.
 . . . operation of the necessary mechanical contrivances required a force of thirty-two trained artisans,--a sort of mechanical orchestra, directed by a centrally placed conductor who was visible from the special station of every worker. . . . the perfectly harmonious effect of this remarkable imitation of a storm necessitated that every performance exactly the same thing should be done on the stage at, to the second, exactly the prearranged instant.⁸¹

In addition to the effect created, it is important to note the behind the scene activity necessary to produce such an effect.

In the play Within an Inch of His Life, Belasco introduced a striking mechanical effect, copies of which can be seen in the theatre today. The newspapers of the day called it "the terrific fire spectacle."⁸² The scene was nothing more than "flames" made by a series of red and yellow strips of silk, and fanned from beneath by bellows and lit with colored lights.⁸³ In this particular scene the effect appears to have been closer to realistic technique than a naturalistic one, that is to say he did not use a system of real fire but rather a system that looked like real fire.

⁸¹Winter, op. cit., Vol. II, pp. 205-207.

⁸²Winter, op. cit., Vol. I, p. 114.

⁸³Ibid.

The "Battle Scene" in Not Guilty was another outstanding scene. Belasco, with his usual modesty, described it as "spectacular."⁸⁴ For this scene Belasco crowded on the stage several hundred people, horses, and cannons. Of this scene, even his critics were complimentary. One critic wrote, "the Battle Scene, in the Fourth Act, was about the most realistic ever produced on the stage."⁸⁵

Belasco's most ingenious and elaborate scenic effects occurred in his production of Mina. For this play, the stage had to be remodeled. It took months to build the great iron machine which filled the stage and had numerous motors and working parts. The set had to be built in such a way that it would collapse and appear to be destroyed at the end of each performance. To build the set: "Tons of iron were used for supports and decorations. Forty-five thousand nickel upholstery nails were used to give the effect of rivet heads."⁸⁶ The larger cylinders of the great "psycho-corrupter" served as acting areas. The doors of the cylinders were opened and closed by motors. Four elevators were used to raise and lower other scenes. These scenes, called "visions," were described by Louis Hartmann:

The "visions" were set on an elevated platform, in front of which there was a round gauze ten feet in

⁸⁴Ibid., p. 110.

⁸⁵Ibid.

⁸⁶Hartmann, op. cit., p. 119.

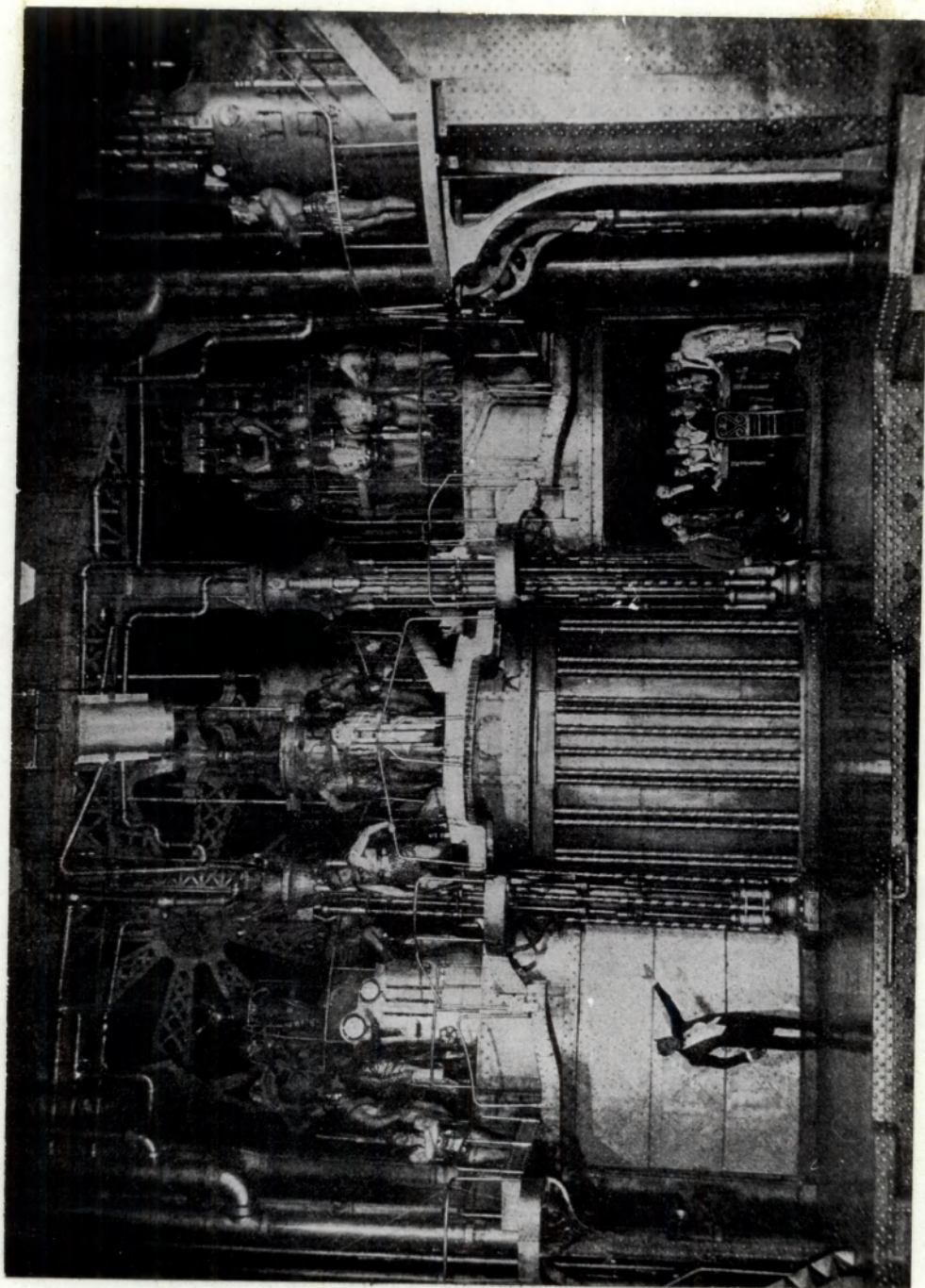


Plate 11--The great "psycho-corrupter" in Mima as it was seen throughout most of the play. One should note the three large cylinders which served as acting areas. The metal doors on the side cylinders moved up and down while the center one revolved.

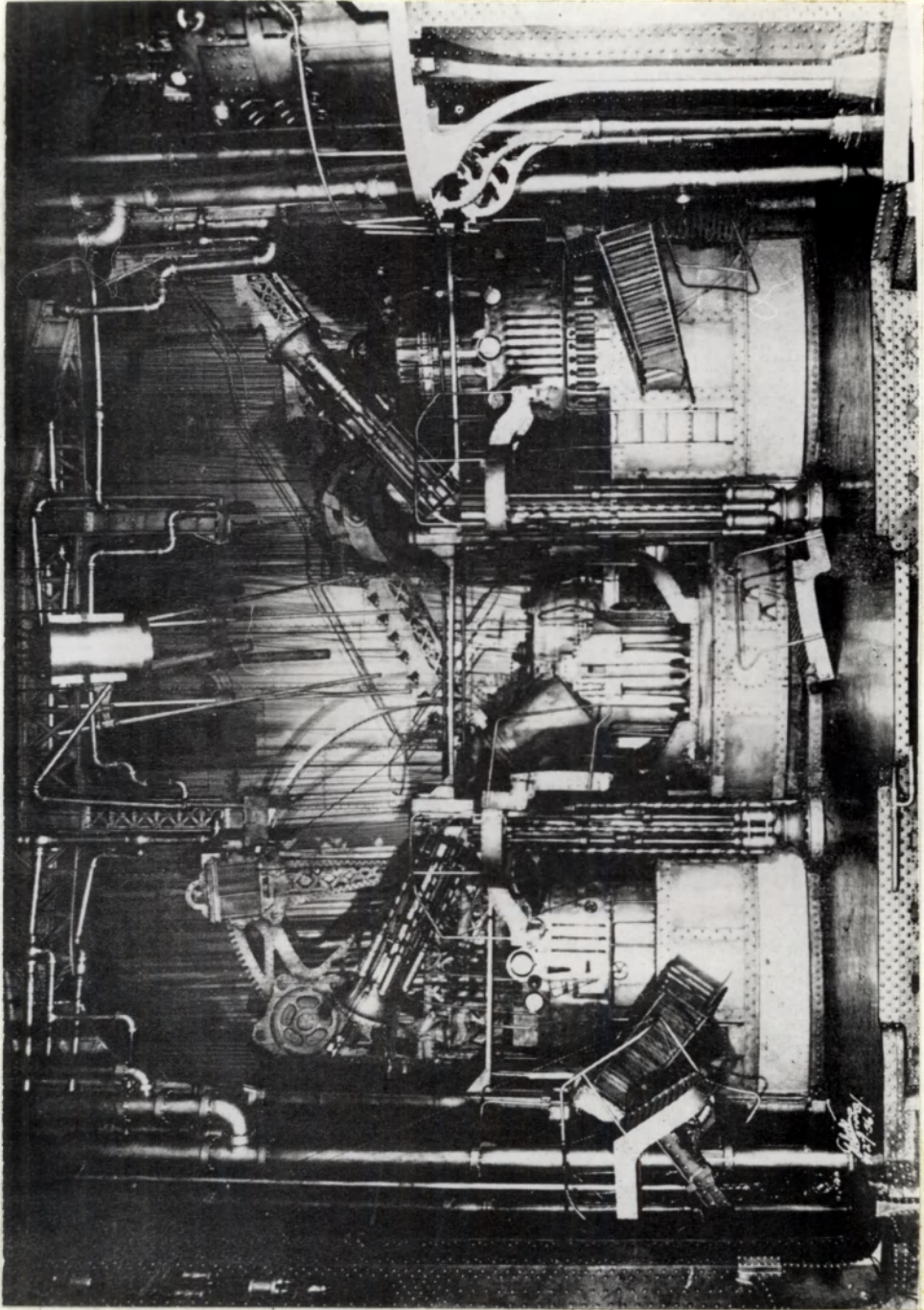


Plate 12--The "psycho-corrupter" in Mima as seen at the end of the play when it appeared destroyed.

diameter, framed in a black velvet drop. When the lights were gradually brought up on the "vision," the elevated platform was twelve feet above stage level. As the lights came on, the scene started slowly to descend, the lights being raised at the same speed as the movement of the sinking platform. The resultant illusion was that the scene was suspended in the air; and as it slowly went down it seemed to float.⁸⁷

Mima was Belasco's most costly production. He had hoped the production would be his greatest contribution to the theatre. The critics were amazed at the set, but they were not pleased with Molnar's "hackneyed dramatic sermon;" the production was therefore a costly failure. The play lost a quarter of a million dollars.⁸⁸

Gorelik described two outstanding naturalistic effects in Belasco's 1917 production of Tiger Rose:

. . . a log cabin was shown in a forest of the Canadian Northwest; the stage was covered with pine-needles upon which the actors trod, wafting the scent into the auditorium. In the second act of the same play there was a rainstorm so convincing in its effect that at the end of the act spectators, going to the lobby were astounded to find that it was not raining outside the theatre.⁸⁹

Belasco's audiences soon began to expect these naturalistic effects, and many times came just to see them. Some of the effects were genuinely new and very inventive, while many were just variations of earlier devices. Most of these naturalistic touches were so real that Belasco was often

⁸⁷Ibid., p. 120.

⁸⁸Timberlake, op. cit., p. 392.

⁸⁹Gorelik, op. cit., p. 164.



(1919)

Plate 13--Log cabin in Tiger Rose

called the Wizard." Perhaps Belasco's naturalistic lighting and scenic effects would no longer seem unusual, but to Belasco's audiences, unaccustomed to the realism of the modern movies, he was truly a Wizard.

Illustrations

To add emphasis to points made in regards to Belasco's naturalistic stage settings, pictures and scene designs of three Belasco productions are included. First, the set for The Return of Peter Grimm was selected as an example of Belasco's naturalistic interiors--solid, cluttered, and detailed. In contrast, the set from Madame Butterfly is presented to show that Belasco also created simple, uncluttered, naturalistic sets when that type of set was appropriate to the play. The third scene selected serves as an example of Belasco's naturalistic exterior settings.

The picture and scene design of The Return of Peter Grimm (pp. 77 and 78) illustrates several points made in the chapter. First, from the picture, it is possible to see why Belasco's scenes were often referred to as photographic naturalism. The room appears, in every respect, to be a real room--complete with rugs, whatnots, pictures, and real wall paper. If the characters, in their posed positions, were removed, it would be very difficult for someone, seeing the picture for the first time, to determine that it was not a real room. The scene design illustrates other characteristics of a



Plate 14--Solid, cluttered set in The Return of Peter Grimm.

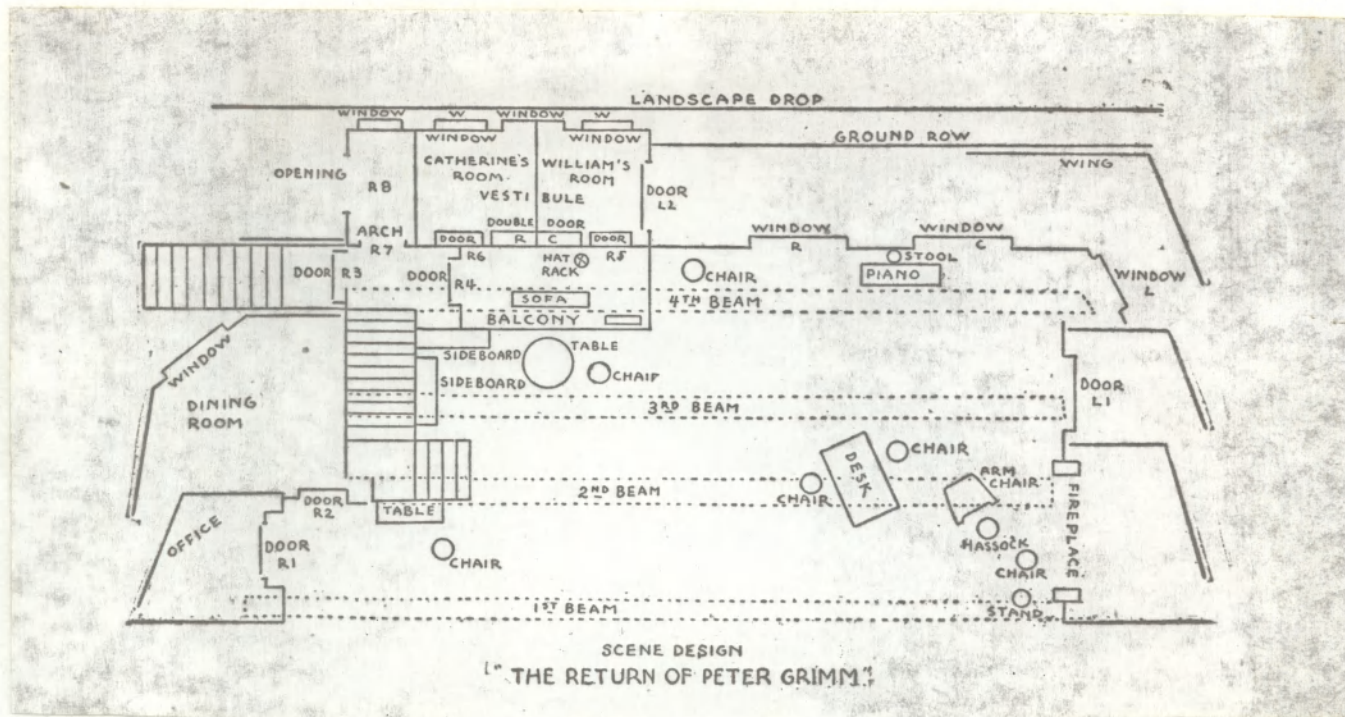


Plate 15--Scene design for The Return of Peter Grimm

Belasco set. On first glance and without knowing Belasco's methods, it might not appear to be much different from the average floor plan; nevertheless, differences can be pointed out. First, one should remember that all the walls, windows, doors, and the fireplace would have been constructed from solid materials like those used in a real room. Second, it is important to note the several secondary or additional rooms--office, dining room, Catherine's room, and William's room. Although it is not indicated in this particular scene design, Belasco often furnished these side rooms. One can see, however, that there are windows in these additional rooms. The location of the ground row and landscape drop would indicate a three-dimensional scenic effect as seen through the windows.

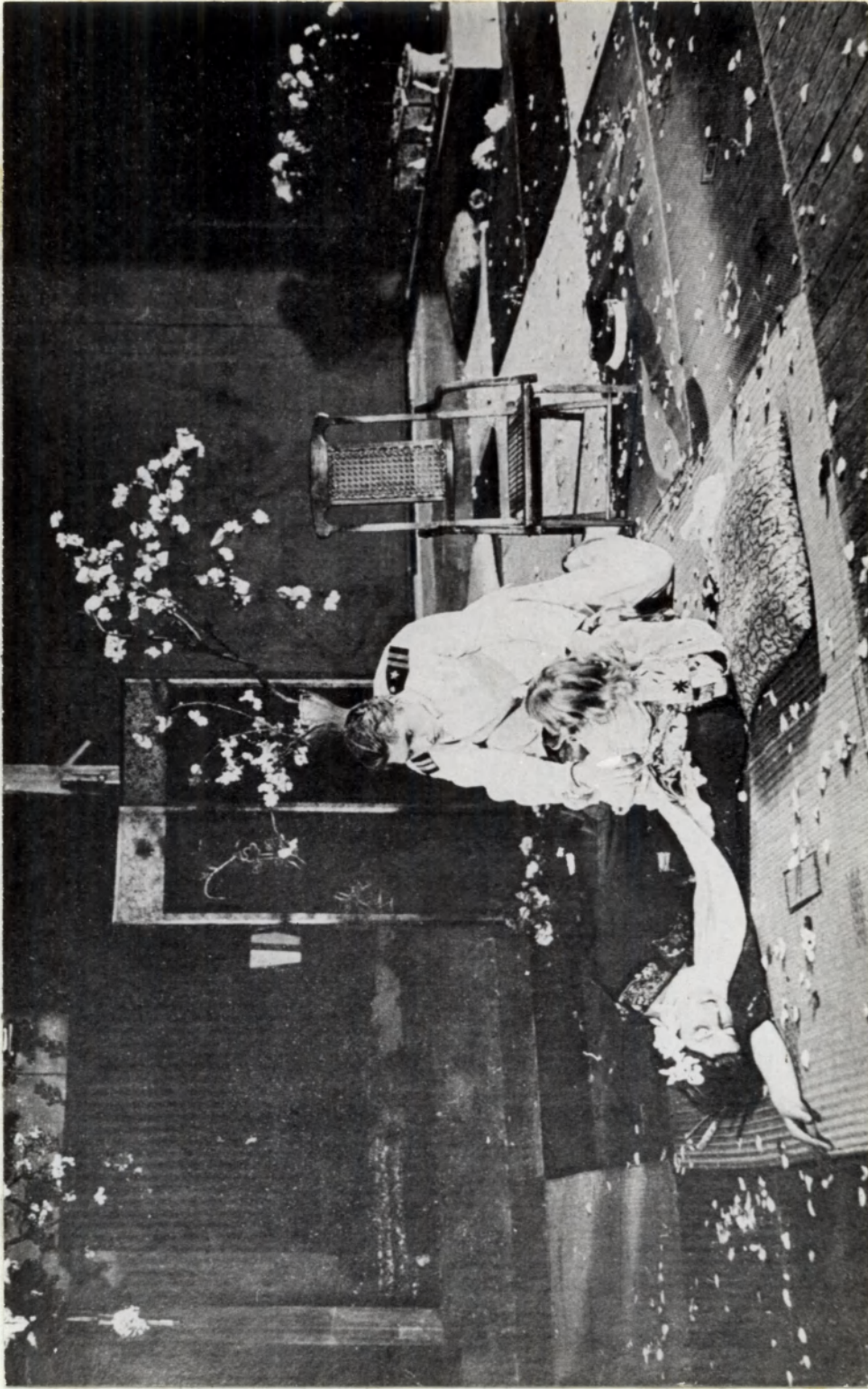


Plate 16---Set for Madame Butterfly

The scenery in Madame Butterfly (p. 79) was very simple in comparison to most other Belasco sets. In this case it was simplicity, which was true to Japanese life, that made the scene naturalistic. From the scenic wall panels to the silk-covered windows and floor mats, the scene appeared to be very real, and indeed very much like scenes one can see in modern Hollywood movies with oriental settings.

The last example to be considered here is the first scene of Belasco's production of The Rose of the Rancho. By putting together bits and pieces of information gained from several different sources, it should be possible to determine how Belasco proceeded in creating naturalistic scenery.

The setting for the first act of this play was the garden of San Juan Mission in southern California. The basic set was constructed in the following manner. The right side of the stage was the exterior of Padre Antonio's house. Up stage right, as part of the house, there was a vine-covered porch. Near the back of the stage and running horizontally there was a hedge fence with a stone arch and gate set in it. Behind the fence there was a painted backdrop which showed a view of the front of the Mission with its bell tower. On the left side of the stage just inside the hedge fence a large flower could be seen. The remainder of the left side of the stage was filled by a large grape arbor. To complete the set, an old fountain was located in the center of the garden.

By taking the set and applying the known facts about Belasco's methods, together with the property plot, it is possible to determine how he created a completely naturalistic set. First the exterior view of the Padre's house would have been constructed from solid materials to approximate an adobe facade. The Mission backdrop, of course, was painted on canvas; however, Belasco experimented for several weeks changing the colors of the Mission walls and the colors of the lights until he found a combination which added dimension to the painting.

In the property plot, one can see the numerous, minute details with which Belasco dressed his set. Since the scene was to represent a garden, Belasco covered every available space with trees, foliage, and flowers. The careful layout of each flower bed indicates the planning and thought behind each Belascoan detail. One can conclude that when Belasco saw, in his mind, a flower bed, he did not see just some flowers, not even some geraniums, poppies, hollyhocks, azaleas, etc.; but he saw nine geraniums, eighteen poppies, three hollyhocks, one azalea, etc. It was surely this type of analytical planning which made Belasco's naturalistic sets unique.

From the property plot, or other sources, it was impossible to determine how much of the vegetation was real. It can be noted, nevertheless, that the plot does state that the Pheonix palm was real and the fruit trees had fruit.

As one notes the detailed planning and thought that must have gone into creating this scene, and the completeness of the set, it should be remembered that this was but one of three equally complete and detailed scenes used in the production.

Property Plot

The Rose of the Rancho

ACT I

Down R. Flower Bed containing:

- 9 Geranium plants.
- 18 Poppy plants.
- 3 Hollyhock plants.
- 1 Azalea plant.
- 3 Tube rose plants.
- 1 Century plant.
- 1 Lily plant.

Down R. on scene:

- 1 Lattice of fuchsia.
- 1 Lattice of roses.

On arbor, hanging on scene:

- Rose vine and roses.
- Bird cage.

In arbor:

- Table.
- Armchair.
- Footstool (Janet).

On table:

- 2 Glasses.
- 1 Jug.
- 1 Bottle with cold tea.
- 4 Books.
- 1 Money box.
- 1 Leather cushion on chair.

Shawl on arbor.

Geranium in window.

Stone seat at foot of arbor.

L. of arbor, flower bed containing:

- 4 Geranium plants.
- 1 Century plant.
- 12 Poppy plants.
- 3 Sets of hollyhocks.

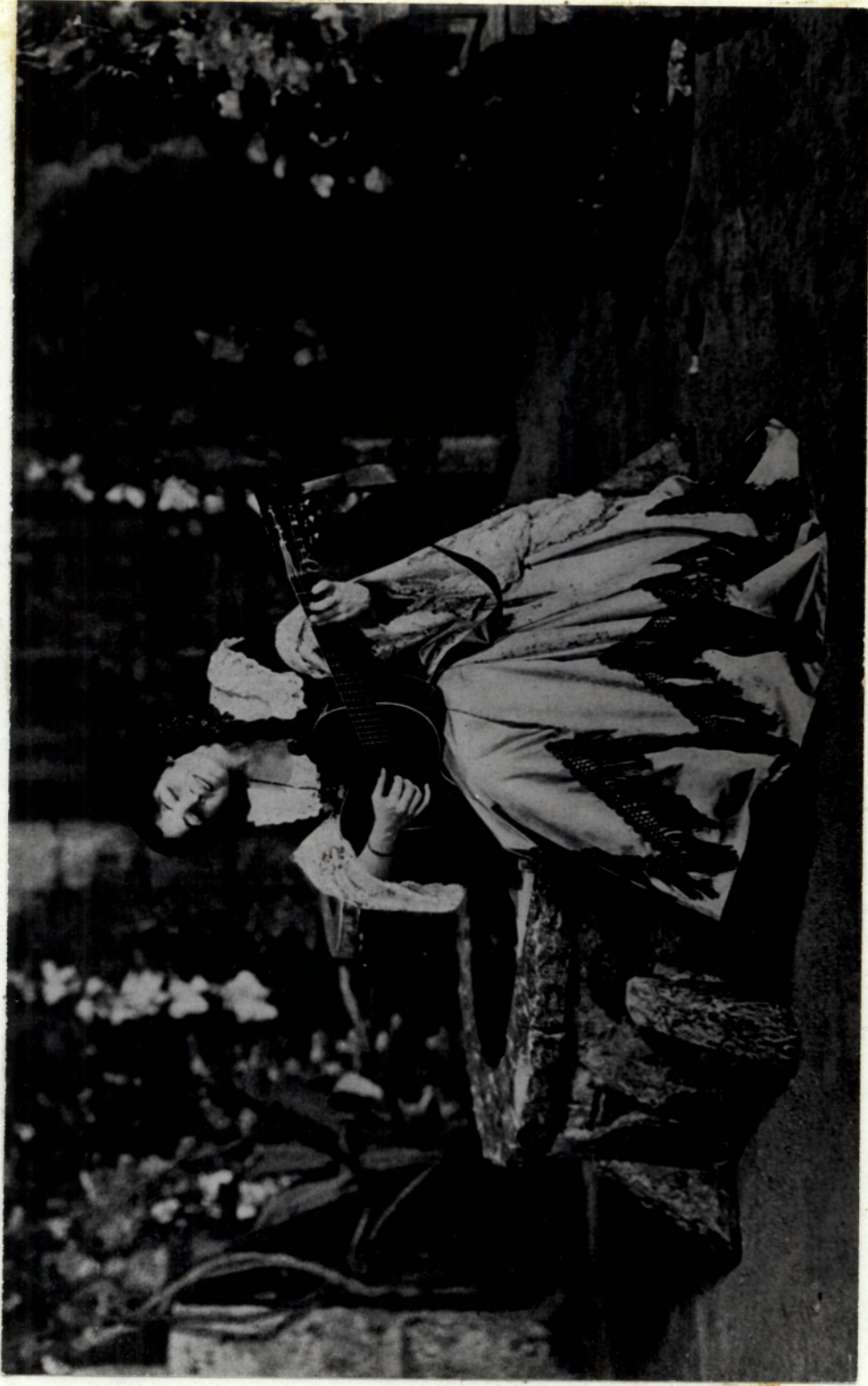


Plate 17--Garden scene from The Rose of the Rancho

1st set of 3.

2nd set of 2.

3rd set of 4.

On wall distributed:

7 Hollyhocks.

On L. of wall:

1 Hollyhock.

Center: 1 fountain with 2 water pans and 2 gourds
--curb is broad to sit on.

Down L. 1 bed containing:

6 Assorted plants and 12 poppies.

On arbor:

2 Geranium vines on front.

2 Geranium vines on top.

1 Tub of water in fountain.

1 Gourd dipper on fountain.

1 Orange tree with fruit R.

1 Orange tree with fruit L.

1 File of oranges L.

Several oranges on ground.

1 Small fig tree with fruit L.

1 Grape vine on back.

Bird house on arbor.

In arbor:

1 Long stone seat with rug.

1 Small flower bed containing:

2 Geranium plants,

6 Poppies.

1 Real Phoenix palm

1 Small bench.

1 Basket of fruit.

1 Jug of tea and glass.

1 Set of hollyhocks of 3.

Back:

1 Tree.

1 Peony bush.

1 Rose bush.

1 Orange blossom bush.

1 Set bricks and grass mats.

1 Phoenix palm on 2nd W. wing.

Off Stage:

Cushion.

Foot-warmer.

Prayer-book.

Large parasol.

Wheelbarrow, 2 baskets of grapes.

Cart, etc., up L. with horse to carry four.

Grass up C.

6 Doll sticks 4 feet long each.

8 Large boxes of confetti at each entrance.
 4 Trays of cascarones for servants.
 Red rose and pink tuberose for Juanita.
 Candies for Donna Petrona.
 Jewelled stagg for El Tecolero.
 Cigarettes for ten men.
 Box of snuff for Donna Petrona.
 Embroidery for four women on small tambour
 frames, needles, etc.
 60 Coins for twelve men.
 Basket of seeds for Manuel.
 Heavy battering-ram effect off C.
 Small stone seat--up L.
 3 Water jugs up C.
 1 Lariat for Ortega.
 3 Cow-bells down R.
 1 Lariat.
 Coins for Sunol.
 Tuber Rose for Kearney.
 Cigars for Kearney.
 1 Set of chimes off R.
 Bell off L.
 Rebecca clay water-jug off L.
 Parrot for girl to carry on her finger off L.
 Effect of creaking cart off L.
 Old whip for Sunol.
 Guitar with broad ribbon for door L.
 2 Cups and plates for chocolate off R.
 Cigarette case and matches for Luis.
 Cigars and matches--Kincaid.
 Mule tingle.
 "Entry Papers."

ACT II

Down R:

Lantern in arbor.
 Tree stump and hanging vase with flowers.
 Grape vine in arbor.
 Table on same.
 Fruit basket.
 Red silk shawl.
 5 Dowel sticks for fight.
 3 Tambourines.
 Stool.
 Basket of Flowers under table.
 Long bench.
 Over table to Balcony:
 1 Bracket.
 Tambourine on same.

Center:

Glass with flowers.
 Bracket on scene of scones.
 Watering-trough with flowers and grindstone.
 Bird cage under balcony.
 1 Chair under balcony.
 1 Peg for lariat on scene C.
 1 Green hide lariat on peg up L.
 Bench and 2 tambourines.
 1 Tambourine on window.
 On Scene I: Iron horseshoe candle-holder.

Under Balcony:

1 Lantern and on scene I wood picture.

On balcony:

Rug on balcony.
 3 Boxes for serpentine and 2 boxes for confetti.
 2 Lanterns.
 1 Vase of flowers on edge of balcony.
 1 Vase of flowers on ceiling.
 2 Pictures on backing Juanita's room.
 1 Box of flowers Center.
 1 Vase of flowers on end.
 1 Madonna in niche with lantern.

Off Stage:

Down R.
 4 Scones to be carried on lit.
 2 Single candlesticks lit.
 2 5-arm candelabra.
 3 Lanterns on pole.
 1 2-figure confetti fight.
 1 Box confetti.
 2 Stools and 4 chairs--1 armchair.
 Heavy lock chain and iron bar on gate.
 1 Large Indian water jug of flowers.
 Silver platter of cascarones on table.
 1 Table, 30 x 40, to be carried.
 Indian rug and footstool to be carried.
 2 Baskets confetti balls to be carried on.
 1 Basket of flowers to be carried.
 1 Drum to be carried.
 1 Bench for musicians.
 1 Gun rack containing 25 guns.
 1 Crash of breaking in a stone wall.
 1 Doorbell and knocker.
 1 Lantern for Padre.
 1 Lantern for Kearney.
 1 Box Mission sweets for Padre.
 1 Ram for Kearney.

1 Gun for Kearney.
 2 Cigars for Kearney.
 1 Saddle and wagon.
 Documents for Kinkaid and cigar and matches.
 6 Doll sticks 4 feet long each.
 Rosin boards off L. 2--R. 1.
 Sprinkle rosin on stage where dances occur.

ACT III

On Stage:

1 Barricade consisting of:
 1 Frame piece.
 4 Boards.
 2 Stones.
 1 Set rock.
 1 Arbor over barricade.
 1 Lantern in barricade.

On Wall:

1 Breakaway vase and crash.

On Stage:

1 Chair.
 2 Scones on posts.
 1 Arbor piece with grape vine.
 Lantern on same.

Off Stage R:

Crash.
 Bundle of clothes.
 Lantern in pail.

Off Stage L:

A tray of dishes containing:
 5 cups and saucers.
 1 Teapot.
 1 Creamer.
 Document for Sammy.
 1 Pistol for Kearney.
 1 Shawl for Kinkaid.
 3 Revolvers.
 1 Lantern.
 Glass crash.⁹⁰

⁹⁰David Belasco, The Rose of the Rancho (New York, 1908), pp. 136-142.

Summary

Having reviewed Belasco's stagecraft in detail, it is now possible to make some observations and generalizations. First, each production, and each element of that production, was of the highest quality. Within his style--naturalism--he could not be equaled. The quality he brought to stagecraft was the results of unusual dedication, perserverance, and planning. As producer, director, and many times playwright, his productions were "Belasco" in every detail, and all elements were considered important and received his personal attention.

In general, Belasco's naturalistic scenery was solid, three-dimensional, and practical, and he dressed his set with numerous details, Belasco's goal was to make each and every scene of his productions as believable or naturalistic as possible; hence atmosphere was of primary importance. All of his production techniques and naturalistic effects were used to create this all-important believable atmosphere. He reasoned that if what his audience saw appeared to be completely real and believable, the play itself would, therefore, be believable.

The believable atmosphere, which Belasco created through the use of naturalistic scenery, was enhanced and complemented by his skillful and inventive use of light. It remains, then, in Chapter Three to investigate this important aspect of Belascoism.

CHAPTER III

BELASCO'S NATURALISTIC LIGHTING

If David Belasco deserves more recognition in one area of production than in others, that area would undoubtedly be stage lighting. His passion for scenic detail was perhaps surpassed by his fascination for color and light. With completely naturalistic stage lighting as a goal, Belasco spent years experimenting, developing, and improving stage lighting. The fruits of these experiments were shared with the entire profession and it is probably here that Belasco made his greatest contributions to the theatre of his day. Writers who were critical of Belasco's scenery, generally praised his lighting efforts; indeed one such critic, Jane Dransfield, wrote: "From candle light, through gas, locomotor reflectors, the oxyhydrogen lime-light, up to the present electric system, Mr. Belasco has pursued the advance of his art, until to-day none can rival him in the wizardry of stage lighting."¹

For the purpose of intensified study, Belasco's naturalistic stagecraft and naturalistic lighting are being discussed in separate chapters; it should be noted, however, that in practice Belasco's naturalistic scenery and lighting were

¹Jane Dransfield, "Behind the Scenes with Belasco," Theatre Magazine, XXXV (April, 1922), 228, 230, 260.

very closely related, and worked together to create an overall effect. For simplification and discussion, Belasco's naturalistic lighting has been divided into six categories: Early Interest and Experiments, Philosophy and Theories, Specific Techniques, Procedure, Illustrative Effects, and Technical Aspects.

Early Interest and Experience

Belasco's interest in theatre lighting developed almost simultaneously with his interest in acting and directing; and even as a young boy he played with toy theatres lighted with oil lamps.² Although vague about when, Belasco was specific about where he got his first ideas about lighting:

I gained my first ideas of lighting from the wonderful skies of southern California. I went direct to nature for my inspiration. There, on the brightest days, I would sit among the hills and watch the lights and shadows as they came and went. After a time I began trying to reproduce those lights and shadows.³

When he began his acting career, candles and gaslights were still in use; nevertheless, even with the gas lamp, Belasco was able to get some startling effects. The earliest record of a Belasco lighting effect seems to be the ghost illusion he and a friend, Frank Gardner, created at the Egyptian Hall in San Francisco in 1877. Belasco described the effect:

²David Belasco, The Theatre Through Its Stage Door (New York, 1919), p. 165.

³Ibid., p. 236.

There was a stage, covered with black velvet, and a sheet of glass, placed obliquely over a space beneath the stage,--which was called the 'oven.' Gas lamps were ingeniously concealed so as to give the impression of a phosphorescent light from ghostlike bodies. The characters in the play were obliged to enter the 'oven' under the black velvet, and to lie on their backs, while their misty shadows were thrown like watery impressions upon the glass plate.⁴

This is the first record of a Belasco lighting effect; however, he had been experimenting with stage lighting before this time. When asked if the ghost illusion was his first experiment in the area of lighting, he replied:

It was not. Some time before I had been working with locomotive headlights, and I had discovered the ease with which I could get certain effects by placing tin pans before oil lamps. Then it occurred to me that by means of colored silks,--my own forerunner of gelatin slides,--I could add further variations to colored lights, and it was after this experience that I began to pay particular attention to the charm of stage lighting. . . .⁵

From the information available, it seems likely that in the beginning Belasco's primary interest in stage lighting was purely for "effects." Although he later became interested in developing controlled naturalistic light, his earlier efforts came at a time when theatre lighting was little more than general illumination. With the advent of electric lighting, the potential for bright, controlled light was greatly increased. In America, the first attempt to use

⁴William Winter, The Life of David Belasco, Vol. I (New York, 1918), p. 97.

⁵Ibid., pp. 99-100.

electric lights in the theatre "was at the California Theatre, San Francisco, February 21 to 28, 1879."⁶ Belasco was there, and the experiment served to increase his interest in stage lighting. His interest in lighting continued through the 1880's and 1890's, and in 1902, when he built his first theatre, he installed a completely electrical system. It should be noted, however, that the system would be considered very crude and inadequate in comparison to modern equipment. General illumination came from footlights and borders which were nothing more than several rows of sixteen candle power lamps. The only other available equipment was the "arc" spotlight and the "arc" olivette--the "arcs" were later replaced by incandescent lamps. Because of the large size of the early "arc" lights and the fact that they required an operator, it was difficult to place and use more than a few at a time. Belasco found room for two in each wing, but was never satisfied with the results because the light could not be adequately diffused, colored, or controlled. Nevertheless, with the aid of silk coloring and mica slides for dimming and spotting, Belasco was able to achieve amazing results with the crude equipment. In an effort to improve the existing equipment and develop new equipment which would give him the results he wanted, Belasco included an electrical workshop in the basement of his new theatre. It was in this workshop

⁶William Winter, The Life of David Belasco, Vol. II (New York, 1918), p. 245.

that he and Hartmann, his chief electrician, conducted their lighting experiments. With an unusual interest in lighting, and as he became financially able, it was only natural that Belasco should spend much time and money developing this important aspect of production. Although he gained considerable recognition, his greatest reward was probably the satisfaction he received from entertaining his audiences.

Philosophy and Theories

Any play worth producing at all is entitled to the most perfect interpretation that can be secured for it. Any means that aids the audience's grasp and understanding of it, or that appeals to the esthetic sense, is useful and legitimate in the theatre . . .⁷

In this statement by Belasco, one can see the underlying philosophy behind his use of lights, and indeed all aspects of his stagecraft. Any means that aided the audience's understanding was legitimate--this same philosophy can be found in many of Belasco's essays on the theatre; however, when Belasco made the above statement, and each time he made a similar statement, he was quick to qualify it by adding that the director, nevertheless, must always remember that "the play itself is the main thing."⁸

A second important tenet of Belasco's lighting philosophy can be found in his belief "that it is much easier to appeal

⁷David Belasco, "Aids to the Actor's Art," Munsey's Magazine, LXIII (March, 1918), 265-279.

⁸Ibid.

to the hearts of audiences through their senses than through their intellects."⁹ From this statement it is possible to determine two things. First, when he said, "appeal to the hearts of audiences," he confirmed, as was stated in Chapter I, that his primary goal was to interest and entertain an audience. In fact he once said people go to the theatre mainly "to have their emotions stirred."¹⁰ Secondly, by stating that a stronger appeal can be made through the senses, Belasco indicated one major reason why he gave so much attention to scenery and lighting.

In appealing to his audiences' senses, Belasco had some definite theories as to their likes and dislikes. Critics, even the ones who disliked Belasco's productions, all agreed that he had an unusual ability to determine or sense what audiences wanted--"he had an eye for effective plays and effective moments and scenes."¹¹ In this regard, Arthur Hobson Quinn wrote that he had "a keen sense of the instinctive motor and emotional reactions of an audience."¹² Belasco's analysis of what audiences wanted, however, was not all guess work--he studied his audiences. Often he stood back stage in the wings and observed the reactions of his

⁹David Belasco, The Theatre Through Its Stage Door (New York, 1919), pp. 74-75.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 75.

¹¹Stark Young, "Belasco," The New Republic, LXVII (June 17, 1931), 123-124.

¹²Arthur Hobson Quinn, A History of the American Drama (New York, 1936), p. 199.

audiences, and one conclusion that Belasco reached was that audiences constantly demand new and better things: "I realized that the audience must be my principal study. Then I soon realized that the audience has not only a willingness, but a real desire for better things."¹³ It was perhaps, indeed, this very realization which kept Belasco continually working to improve his lighting and other scenic effects. Belasco's analysis of his audience would seem to indicate that his effects were primarily efforts to give his audiences good theatre. However, when one reads the following statement by Louis Hartmann, it appears that Belasco's effects may have been purely for the sake of novelty:

Theatre audiences demand novelty. New methods must be devised constantly. David Belasco always has realized this; and when the old methods began to lose their effectiveness he discarded them with an uncanny foresight that sensed the danger before it arrived.¹⁴

A reasonable explanation of this apparent contradiction is that Belasco was so production-minded that he actually could never truly make the distinction between an effect that was just an effect and an effect which genuinely aided interpretation or understanding of the play.

It was also Belasco's theory that in their demand for change and better things, audiences were "always moving toward

¹³Archie Bell, "David Belasco Attacks Stage Tradition," The Theatre Magazine, XIII (May, 1911), 164, 166, 168.

¹⁴Louis Hartmann, Theatre Lighting (New York, 1930), p. 5.

naturalism."¹⁵ He said it is natural and right for the "audiences to demand better effects than their grandfathers witnessed . . . American audiences are through with all of these things on the stage that are false, when compared to the realities of life."¹⁶

Much has already been said in Chapter II about the atmosphere in a Belasco production; however, it should be noted here that his naturalistic lighting was, perhaps, the most important single factor in creating this atmosphere. Belasco used his lights to create mood and atmosphere much as other producers used music--"lights are to drama what music is to the lyrics of a song."¹⁷ Belasco, himself, stated that lighting was the most important element of production: "No other factor that enters into the production of a play is so effective in conveying its moods and feeling."¹⁸

Belasco was, also, one of the first to recognize the psychological effects of light on both his actors and audiences:

. . . the spell produced by light is an incalculable aid to the art of the actor. Light has a psychological effect which perhaps he is not able to understand or explain, but he feels it instantly and responds to it, and then the audience just as quickly responds to him. I have sometimes doubled the

¹⁵Bell, op. cit., pp. 164, 166, 168.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷David Belasco, The Theatre Through Its Stage Door (New York, 1919), p. 56.

¹⁸Ibid.

persuasiveness of a speech, not by changing a word written by the author, or an intonation or gesture by the actor, but by increasing the value of the light in which the character stands.¹⁹

The theory of "changing light" was important to Belasco. To be natural, light must not be fixed, but must be constantly changing--in color, intensity, and direction--just as in life the sun's rays are constantly changing in color, intensity, and direction. Of the almost undetectable little subtleties and changes of light that were a part of all his plays, he explained that the audience can feel or sense the difference, "just as one is conscious of heat, yet does not see it, on entering a warm room."²⁰ He believed that in any production the opportunities for subtle changes were numerous:

. . . there are also thousands of chances for delicate strokes of illumination in a well-managed modern play which neither audience nor critic is likely to notice, yet which works unconsciously upon the feelings and imagination.²¹

By way of praising and explaining Belasco's ever-changing light, Montrose J. Moses described some scenes from The Rose of the Rancho:

The significant part of psychology as applied to stage lighting is that, in the highest perfection of its handling, it is never fixed, particularly in plays dependent upon special atmosphere.

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¹⁹Ibid., p. 74.

²⁰Ibid., p. 57.

²¹David Belasco, "Aids to the Actor's Art," Munsey's Magazine, IXIII (March, 1918), 265-279.

In "The Rose of the Rancho," during the course of the first scene, with the sun beating down on the Mission garden, with the Padre asleep on his vine-covered porch, the electrician is busy at the switch. Some lenses are focused for light, others for shadow, amber is thrown upon the gate, straw medium paints the orange tree. A rose bush must have a special ray upon it, while the arbor, and certain roses, must catch the glint of sunlight. One lens strikes the fountain, centered on the stage, coloring the stone seat upon which Juanita flirts with Kearney. All the while the baby lens is kept busy spotting the chief actors on the stage.²²

Light, to Belasco, meant colored light, and basic to an understanding of his use of light is an awareness of his sensitivity to color. It was colored, not white light, that he used to create mood and atmosphere; accordingly it was his use of color that made his light natural. Belasco attributed much of his success to his feeling for color:

The greatest part of my success in the theatre I attribute to my feeling for colors, translated into effects of light. Sometimes these effects have been imitated by other producers with considerable success, but I do not fear such encroachments. It may be possible for others to copy my colors, but no one can get my feeling for them.²³

The delicate way in which Belasco manipulated light and color on stage was often compared with the way a painter manipulates paint on canvas. James Huneker wrote: "Primarily David Belasco is a painter. He wields a big brush and paints broadly, but he can produce miniature effects; effects that

²²Montrose J. Moses, The American Dramatist (Boston, Mass., 1925), pp. 250-251.

²³David Belasco, The Theatre Through Its Stage Door (New York, 1919), p. 50.

charm, atmospheric effects."²⁴ In like manner, Montrose J.

Moses makes the analogy:

In his studio, Mr. Belasco first imagines his canvas; he then places his "light plots" in the hands of his electrician for fulfillment. At rehearsal he adds to, modifies, rejects, fusing the whole as a painter does with his brush.²⁵

Indeed, Belasco himself compared his work with lights to that of a painter. In an article for Harper's Weekly he wrote:

. . . the lighting of each new scene that I produce is a new and original picture which retains its identity once I have painted it. My process of producing light bears the same relation to the stage that the painter does to his canvas. . . . I have directed the distribution of light on canvas as a painter manipulates colors, shading here, brightening there, till the effect was complete. It was all done at that one sitting . . . I could never repaint that picture once complete.²⁶

The extreme importance Belasco placed on color and shading can, perhaps, best be illustrated by the fact that he had colored lights installed in the dressing rooms and insisted that actors make themselves up in light similar to that used on stage.²⁷ To emphasize the importance of the colored lights in the dressing room, Belasco told of the difficulty he had when he produced The Heart of Wetona, in

²⁴James Gibbons Huneker, "David Belasco," Outlook, CXXVII (March 16, 1921), 418-422.

²⁵Moses, op. cit., p. 247.

²⁶David Belasco, "Dramatizing the Present," Harper's Weekly, LVII (April 12, 1913), 26.

²⁷David Belasco, The Theatre Through Its Stage Door (New York, 1919), p. 81.

which William Courtleigh played an Indian. After many tries Courtleigh was still unable to make himself appear the color of an Indian. It was finally discovered that the problem was caused by white lights in the dressing room. Courtleigh, using white lights, "had been trying to contrive an effect which the audience was to see in a scene that was amber in the tone of its illuminations."²⁸ The problem was then easily solved--amber lights were placed around the mirror in the dressing room.²⁹

It can be noted from the above incident, which seems naïve today, just how little consideration had been given to the effects and use of colored light. What now seems to be a simple problem was at that time a serious one. Without the present-day knowledge of the effects of colored light on pigments, Belasco's placing of colored lights in the dressing rooms was, perhaps, the simplest and most logical solution.

Belasco's primary purpose for using color was to convey meaning and mood to his audiences: "To use color, not for mere adornment, but to convey a message to the hearts of my audiences, has become my creed."³⁰ Belasco wanted not just scenery, but natural, real, believable scenery; accordingly he wanted not just light, but natural, real, believable light.

²⁸Ibid., p. 82.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Ibid., p. 165.

To this end, the same type of detailed creative preparation went into his achievements in naturalistic lighting as went into the execution of his scenery. Every detail had to be considered--the intensity of each lamp, the color of each frame, the direction of light rays, the location of shadows and highlights, light cues, and timing.

Now that the philosophy and theory behind Belasco's naturalistic lighting have been outlined, a more meaningful study of his specific techniques can now be conducted.

Techniques

In 1902, when Belasco built his first theatre, he included an electrical workshop in which various types of lighting equipment were invented--equipment which greatly increased the potential of Belasco's lighting effects. Before this time, however, Belasco had been achieving unusual and praiseworthy results with the equipment which was then available. Hartmann wrote: "The same apparatus was in general use in all theatres. David Belasco achieved better results because he gave more time and attention to the way it was handled."³¹ One can see then that in his lighting, as in every other phase of production, it was Belasco's diligence and perseverance which was the underlying force behind all he achieved. His genius and wizardry were in many cases nothing more than just plain hard work, planning, and money.

³¹Hartmann, op. cit., p. 2.

In general, Belasco's lighting techniques were characterized by three distinctive features: (1) his unique use of the baby spot, (2) his limited use of footlights, and (3) his border system of controlled reflected light. Other than what could be considered "special effects," it was these three features which made Belasco lighting as effective and naturalistic as it was.

Perhaps the outstanding feature of Belasco's techniques was his unique use of baby spots. With the exception of brief appearances of very minor characters, an individual baby spot followed every player about the stage. Before Belasco began this practice, other producers had used larger spots, located in the balconies, to follow the star. The effect that Belasco achieved, however, was quite different; whereas larger spots were noticeable and called attention to the star, Belasco's baby spots were not noticeable and all principal players were spotted. Belasco's main purpose in using the individual spots was, as it was with every element of production, to increase the naturalness of the production. At first thought, the use of individual spots does not seem naturalistic: indeed in life one does not walk around in his own individual light. Nevertheless, a close look at Belasco's method and purpose will show that his aims and results were naturalistic. First, Belasco began to use individual spots in an effort to solve a major problem in stage lighting--to light the stage creating the appropriate naturalistic atmosphere, and at the same time

to have enough light on the actors' faces that they could be seen clearly from the auditorium. Hartmann was very critical of other producer's methods in this regard:

The procedure of most directors in such cases was to raise the foots until the actors' eyeballs could be seen from the last row of the orchestra seats. Thus they had strong high lights on everything in the foreground. This form of lighting could not even be called a compromise; from an efficiency standpoint it was just a makeshift.³²

In contrast, Belasco developed and used individual baby spots. In order to use the individual spots effectively and without drawing attention to their presence, several additional problems had to be solved; the most obvious of these was the movement of the actors. Actors could not remain in one place throughout a play; therefore, if the spots were to be effective, they must follow the actors, and this meant an individual operator for each spot used, which ran the cost of lighting far beyond the price most producers were willing to spend. Other producers tried a modification of the system: "They would set the babies for a scene, generally using an insufficient number of them, so that it became necessary to fix the actor's position to the relation to the light."³³ On the other hand:

David Belasco would not move an actor an inch to adjust him to a mechanical effect, maintaining that the mechanics should be used to aid the actor, not to hamper him--which they certainly do if he has to be continually conscious of them.³⁴

³²Hartmann, op. cit., p. 19.

³³Ibid., p. 28.

³⁴Ibid.

A second problem in making the use of individual spots naturalistic was how to light the actor and yet not draw attention to it by a hard circle of light. This problem was solved by the use of special mica slides. The construction of the slides will be discussed later in this chapter; for now it is enough to say that they were designed to let through bright light, just the size of the actor's face with the remainder of the light being quickly diffused and blended.

A third problem involving the individual spots had to do with the intensity of the light. When the actor was far away from the spot, the light had to be more intense; hence, as the actor approached the light, the brightness had to be reduced. Changes in intensity also had to be made if an actor came close to some supposedly natural light source on stage, such as a lamp or window. This problem was solved by equipping each individual spot with a dimmer; thus the operator of the light could also adjust the intensity of the light.

Finding a workable place to locate the spotlights was another difficulty to be solved. In this case, Belasco stationed lights and operators in small compartments on each side of the proscenium, and also on a light bridge running across the top of the stage just behind the main curtain (See pp. 105 and 106).

The baby spots which Belasco used to spot his actors were often referred to as "Du Barry Lights" because they were first used in his 1901 production of Du Barry, and they were

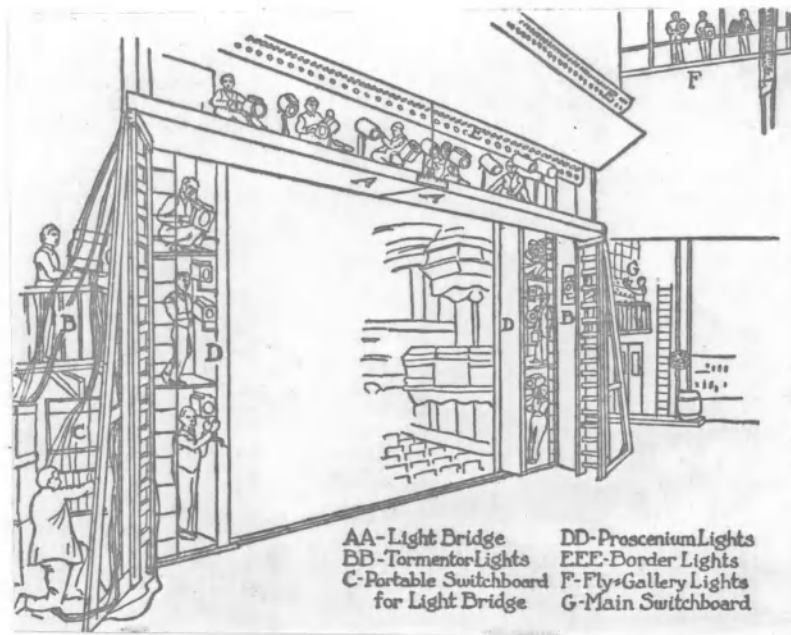


Plate 18--Scheme of Belasco's lighting



Plate 19--Light bridge

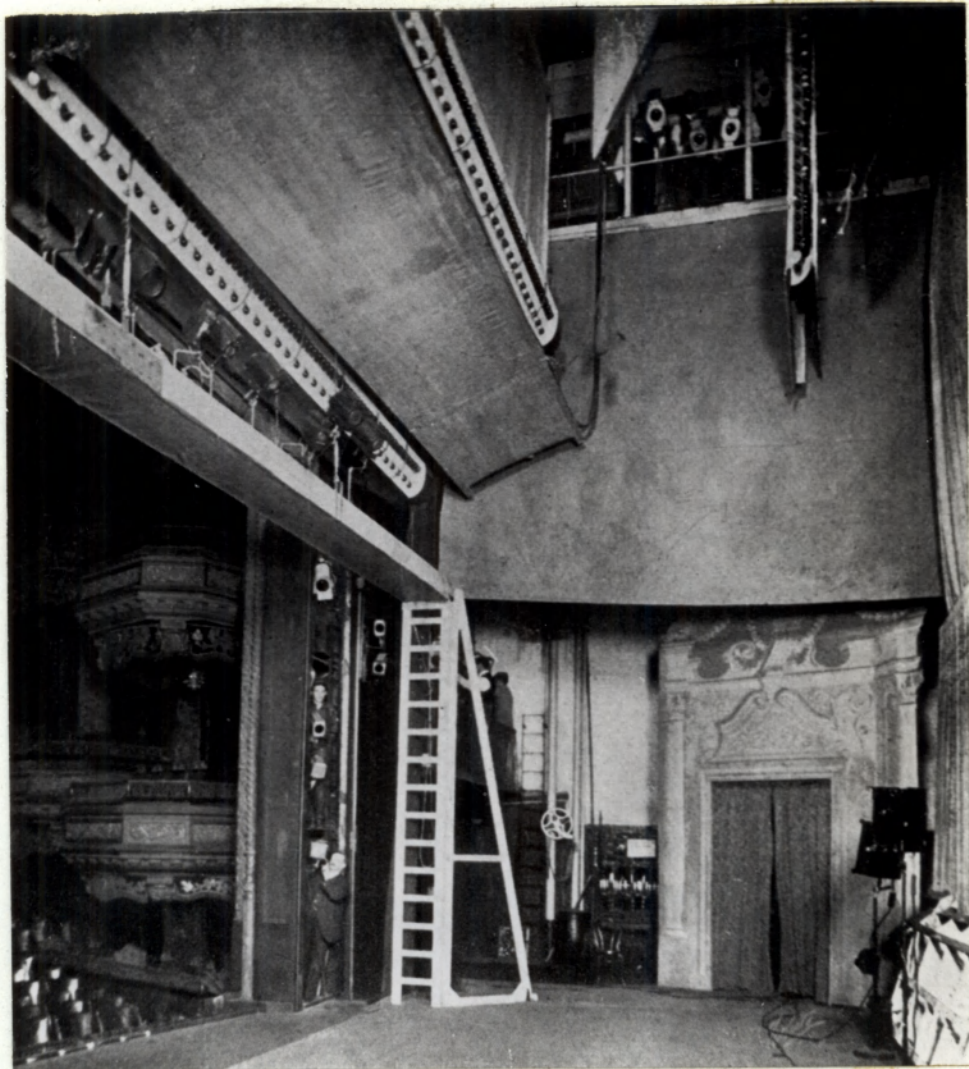


Plate 20--Belasco's lighting

also called "chasers." Belasco's masterful use of these ever-changing spots--both in direction and intensity--won for him great praise and recognition.

Two other techniques used by Belasco to create naturalistic lighting should be noted here, for they were, at the time, innovations. First, he did away with footlights. Second, he developed the use of reflected light. In the former case, he first eliminated footlights in 1879 at "The Passion Play in San Francisco, using old locomotive bull's-eyes from the balcony to light the distant stage."³⁵ He dispensed with footlights off and on depending upon the lighting equipment available in the theatre he was using and requirements of the play until 1915, when he did away with them completely. In his first theatre, he had "reversible footlights that could be turned out of sight at will."³⁶ In 1915 he covered over his footlights and extended the apron of his stage and had all of his lighting coming from above. The New York Times praised this method of lighting when it reviewed the production of Marie-Odile. The review first commented on the lights which came from the light bridge and then added:

In the back of the convent, high above the actors' heads, is a stained glass window, and behind this window Mr. Belasco has hung more lamps, and

³⁵Arthur Edwin Krows, Play Production in America (New York, 1916), p. 202.

³⁶Ibid.

altogether the effect is just as it would be in real life--sunlight or moonlight coming from just where it should come, above.³⁷

The development and use of reflected light gave Belasco still further flexibility and more natural light. A description of the system Belasco used can be found on page 130. The system of reflected light made it possible for Belasco to diffuse light evenly across the stage, using a bright light source placed comparatively near to the subject. "The method is comparable with that by which a person five feet from a mirror is to all intents and purposes ten feet from his image"³⁸

For reflected light to be of any real value to Belasco, it had to be colored. It was discovered that very natural colors could be obtained by painting the reflectors with a thin coat of French colored lacquer. Theodore Fuchs indicates that the colors which were achieved were very realistic, and the colored lacquer did not fade as quickly as gelatin media.³⁹

Belasco believed at the time that the new system of reflected light would completely replace existing borderlight systems; however, with the development of the fresnel lens, Belasco's system was no longer needed. It was described in

³⁷New York Times, January 31, 1915.

³⁸Hartmann, op. cit., p. 77.

³⁹Theodore Fuchs, Stage Lighting (New York, 1957), p. 175.

the New York Times: "The new equipment abolishes what are known in the theatre as 'gelatin mediums.' Silver reflectors treated with dyes are used to get the color values."⁴⁰

Procedure

In planning the lights for a production, Belasco began in much the same way as he began planning the scenery. Just as he very carefully acted out the play for his scenic artist, he explained to his electrician, scene by scene, the lighting he had in mind. Belasco and Hartmann then took the models, which had been constructed by the scenic artist, and lit them with colored lights, experimenting until the right effects were achieved. Of these experiments with the models, Belasco said: "Night after night we experimented together to obtain color or atmospheric effects, aiming always to make them aid the interpretation of the scenes."⁴¹ While it is true that other producers sometimes made models of their scenery, Belasco's use of the models to experiment with lighting was indeed unique.

After the scenery had been assembled on stage, Belasco began to try to duplicate the effects he had obtained with the models. "The lights were graduated and balanced so the setting had the proper effect for the time of the action."⁴²

⁴⁰New York Times, July 23, 1923.

⁴¹David Belasco, The Theatre Through Its Stage Door (New York, 1919), p. 56.

⁴²Hartmann, op. cit., p. 19.

This was not, however, the final setting of lights, but only the beginning. Once the actors were brought on stage many changes usually had to be made. When Belasco had decided exactly what he wanted he gave his actors a day off, and devoted that time to the final adjustments of lights:

I utilize this time making the final adjustment of my lights, for I have now decided upon the exact effects I require. It may take hours or, perhaps, a whole day and a night, in a darkened theatre, for the timing of the movements of the players. For instance, the transition from afternoon to sunset must create a perfect illusion, or else, in its abruptness, it will become ridiculous.⁴³

Once the lights were set for the effects Belasco wanted, it was then time to begin light rehearsals which would sometimes be conducted with actors and sometimes without, depending upon how complicated the lighting was for a particular show. Hartmann contrasted the number of lighting rehearsals Belasco conducted with those of other producers of his day.

David Belasco always devoted a great deal of time to light rehearsals, although most producers still consider one or two such rehearsals sufficient during the production of a new play. Light rehearsals at the old Belasco Theatre generally lasted a week, with two weeks on the road; then two dress rehearsals with full lighting before they opened in New York.⁴⁴

When Theodore Fuchs was a young boy, he worked for Belasco as an operator of baby spots;⁴⁵ therefore, his comments

⁴³David Belasco, The Theatre Through Its Stage Door (New York, 1919), p. 80.

⁴⁴Hartmann, op. cit., p. 14.

⁴⁵Discussion with Dr. Robert Black, North Texas State University, March, 1967.

about Belasco's lighting are of particular value. In his book Stage Lighting he had this to say about Belasco's light rehearsals:

He comprehends perhaps more than any other producer the value of stage lighting in strict coordination with the other elements of play production. For this reason he has always been very painstaking with the lighting of his productions. Weeks are sometimes spent by him in tedious and expensive--but result-producing--light rehearsals.⁴⁶

In addition to the unusual number of light rehearsals, Belasco's naturalistic lighting required an unusually large number of electricians--the number varied from show to show but it was rarely less than fifteen and sometimes as high as thirty.

As has already been stated, much of the naturalism of Belasco's lighting came from the fact that the lights for any one scene were rarely fixed, but constantly changing; however, most of the changes were so subtle that the audience was not aware of them. Changes in intensity could be made from the switchboard by use of dimmers; whereas changes in the direction of light had to be made by an individual operator for each light that required moving, and in a Belasco production that meant almost every spotlight. In his production of The Grand Army Man, "Belasco used thirty-two separate lights, each with its own attendant."⁴⁷

⁴⁶Theodore Fuchs, Stage Lighting (New York, 1957), p. 51.

⁴⁷Arthur Edwin Krows, Play Production in America (New York, 1916), p. 206.

To have constantly changing light that was effective required a well-trained lighting crew. Belasco believed that to work effectively, his crews must "become as familiar with the play as the actors themselves."⁴⁸ In praise of his electricians, Belasco said: "They do not work mechanically, but with their hearts and souls, for, once having comprehended the spirit of the play, they are as dexterous with the appliances for regulating the lights as musicians with their instruments."⁴⁹ Montrose J. Moses made a similar observation about a Belasco electrician: "He is no machine, no mere feeder of the stage with light. The human tempo of the situation pulses in his veins. . . ."⁵⁰

The lighting required for The Return of Peter Grimm is a good example of the points just made in regard to Belasco's rehearsals and electricians. Two weeks were spent rehearsing the lights, which were an intricate part of the production. At the time of the rehearsals, another play was running at the theatre, and in order to rehearse the lighting for Grimm, it was necessary to wait until eleven P.M. after the other show had ended. Starting at eleven, it took the crew approximately six hours to strike the lights used in the current play and set up the lights for Grimm. The crew would then

⁴⁸David Belasco, The Theatre Through Its Stage Door (New York, 1919), p. 80.

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰Montrose J. Moses, "Psychology of the Switchboard," Theatre Magazine, X (August, 1909), 64-66.

leave the theatre, and return at nine A.M. for the rehearsal that lasted until five in the afternoon, at which time the lights for Grimm had to be struck and the theatre prepared for the performance that night. Of these grueling two weeks, Hartmann wrote: "I know of no other business where men could be induced to work over such a prolonged period, with little or no sleep, getting meals at irregular hours, and still doing their stint without grumbling."⁵¹

To make the show more effective, Peter Grimm, when he returned as a ghost, was seen in a different light from the other characters. To accomplish this, each character was followed with an individual spot, amber in color, while Peter was spotted with a greenish-brown light. To get just the right effect and not destroy the illusion:

Each operator had to be drilled so that he remembered his cues and the various light gradations. Peter Grimm at times would stand close to the living characters; but the amber light must never be permitted to show on him. To accomplish such precision required time and care. If the lamps had worked jerkily, the illusion would have been destroyed. But when the illumination was steady and accurately followed the characters the trailing lights were not apparent as such to the audience. This was exacting work and called for perseverance from every one, director, actors and electricians.⁵²

Many times Belasco would spend hours perfecting some minor detail "on which other producers would not waste five minutes."⁵³ He "did not really believe that an effect could

⁵¹Hartmann, op. cit., p. 36.

⁵²Ibid., p. 36-37.

⁵³Ibid., p. 21.

make or break a play; but he knew the value of small details."⁵⁴
 A good illustration of one small effect occurred in The Music Master. The effect involved bringing up the intensity of a baby spot to match the movement of a lantern on stage.

One of the scenes where this was especially effective was where Von Barwig holds up the lighted lamp to see Helen's face. I'll never forget the many times Mr. Warfield lifted up the lamp during rehearsals while we struggled to bring up the babies at the right time.⁵⁵

In some respects, Belasco procedures were similar to those of other producers. The distinguishing characters of his methods were his experiments with models, numerous lighting rehearsals, and a well-trained lighting crew.

Lighting Effects

One can gain, perhaps, the greatest insight into the delicate subtleties of Belasco's naturalistic lighting by examining some of the effects he created. The effects selected represent different aspects of his lighting: the importance he attached to each naturalistic effect, his use of light to designate the passing of time, changing light to hold the audiences' attention, and his expert lighting of exterior settings.

In the story of Belasco's efforts to create a believable California sunset for his production of The Girl of the Golden

⁵⁴Ibid., p. 31.

⁵⁵Fuchs, op. cit., p. 462.

West, one can see the importance Belasco attached to the naturalness of each effect. For this scene Belasco spent \$5,000 and an entire summer trying "to reproduce the hazy, shifting hues of the sun as it sinks below the Sierra Nevada Mountains in California."⁵⁶ When he was unable to get the effect he wanted, he sold the created effect to another producer and began over again. Of the effect, Belasco said: "It was a very beautiful sunset that we contrived, but it was not even remotely Californian."⁵⁷

Belasco sometimes used lights to designate the passing of time. In his production of Madame Butterfly, he took fourteen minutes to represent the passing of a night. Craig Timberlake's description of that scene is the most detailed available:

In the fading twilight, Butterfly, her child and servant, Suzuki, took their station at the window to await the imminent return of Pinkerton whose warship had been seen steaming into the harbor below. Night fell, stars appeared and the lanterns of celebration, lit by Butterfly, flickered out one by one until finally the scene was enveloped in darkness. Gradually, in the gray light of dawn the audience could make out the lonely figure of the faithful Butterfly still at the window and, finally, the prostrate forms of Suzuki and Little Trouble, huddled in sleep at her feet. The rosy glow of sunrise filled the room and birds trilled their morning song from the cherry trees blooming outside in the garden. Belasco's simulated night lasted fourteen minutes, and so adroit was this technical tour de force that an awe-struck

⁵⁶David Belasco, "Aids to the Actor's Art," Munsey's Magazine, LXIII (March, 1918), 265-279.

⁵⁷Ibid.

audience scarcely dared move or breath during the transition.⁵⁸

When scenes were long and did not involve much action, Belasco used changes in light to hold his audience's attention. Indeed, as has been mentioned several times, holding the audience's attention was always his goal. The way in which he handled the lights in the second act of The Boomerang illustrates the point. At the beginning of the act there is a long twenty minute scene in which there is no action; however, the undramatic dialogue of the scene is very important to the rest of the play. Belasco tried acting the scene with the lights up but found that it had no impact. He explained:

Then I decided to vary the lights and have them enforce the moods of the characters. So the curtain was lifted upon a room dimly lit, save for a log burning in the fireplace and a lamp casting its rays upon a card table . . . as the story progressed . . . I found a pretext for changing the lights and varying the illumination on the faces of the characters. To examine her chart and show the boy some pictures, the nurse touched a button and turned on a chandelier, permitting what followed to be played under altered illumination, with a corresponding altered effect upon the audience. At last the stand-lamps in the room were put out altogether and the lights at the back were turned up, again varying the appearance of the scene and unconsciously introducing another mood. In this manner I kept the attention of the audience always in control while acquainting them with the undramatic details of the story which were needed for the play's later development.⁵⁹

⁵⁸Craig Timberlake, The Bishop of Broadway (New York, 1954), p. 199.

⁵⁹David Belasco, The Theatre Through Its Stage Door (New York, 1919), p. 188.

It is interesting to note that, here once again, we see Belasco's complete preoccupation with production. Most producers' solution to the problem would probably have been to have the scene rewritten; however, this was not Belasco's way; instead he solved the problem with lighting.

The lighting for Belasco's The Rose of the Rancho was among his most beautiful and naturalistic. One can find in this show an excellent example of creating naturalistic light for an exterior setting which is, perhaps, the most difficult type of scene to light. The Boston Evening Post described the scenery and lighting as follows:

A hundred scenes on our modern picture stage have swam [sic] in semi-tropical sunshine, yet not one of them has seemed so to glow and quiver with soft, cloud-flecked light as did that of the mission garden last night. There have been many similar gardens on the stage; but his climbing white roses and his flaming geraniums had freshness, luster, life. The blue softness of the semi-tropical night hung over the court of his Spanish house, and the moonlight was silvery from heaven and not metallic from the electric lamp. The wan dawn mounted and brightened the sky, and it was as the coming of the day over the purple boskiness of the California hills and not a 'stage effect' in the theatre.⁶⁰

One can get a clear picture of the placement of lights and the purpose for each light by looking at the following lighting design and key.

⁶⁰"Rose of the Rancho," Current Literature, XLIII (January, 1907), 62-63.

LIGHT KEY - ACT ONE

ROSE OF THE RANCHO

On Fly Gallery Right - 2 light bridges--

(1) 22 feet from stage.

(2) 30 feet from stage.

Upper Bridge--10 25 amp. lenses.

Lower Bridge--11 25 amp. lenses.

Stage Left--light bridge--25 feet from stage--

11 25 amp. lenses.

Under Back of fountain--2 250 watt baby spotlights.

On platform right--2 25 amp. lenses.

Back of wall right--2 olivettes--to light drop.

Back of wall left--2 olivettes--to light drop.

Back of 2nd. foliage border--2 flaming arcs in special housing with color slide. Slide is worked from 2nd light bridge right with endless line.

2 babies on stands in 1st entrances right and left for chasers.

4 border lights--three circuits--amber, orange, blue.

Right Bridges

1 - 2: fountain.

3 - 4: area back of fountain.

5 - 6: orange tree--full spread.

7 : rose bush.

8 - 9: floor back of gate.

10-11: thickness of wall at gate, throwing shadow of gate.

12-13-14: Front of arbor, sharp focus, to throw shadow of leaves.

15 : Flowers on center of fountain.

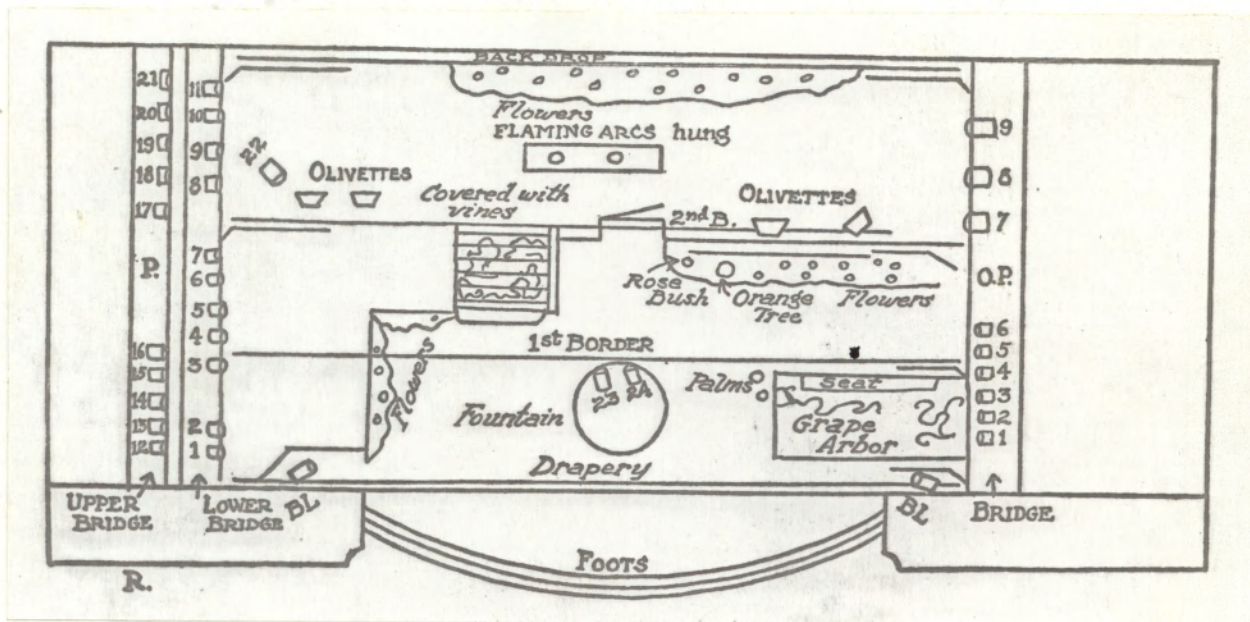


Plate 21--Light design for The Rose of the Rancho

- 16 : Vines in front of porch--sharp focus.
- 17-18: Roses at gate--sharp, to cover a single rose.
- 19-20: Vines over porch.
- 21 : Vines on top of wall left--sharp focus.
- 22 : Shoots through back of trellis, on porch, throw shadow of leaves on Padre's face as he sleeps in chair.
- 23-24: Baby lenses set under fountain to strike gate to kill shadow of roots on faces.

Left Bridge

(All lenses - frosted gelatines).

- 1 - 2: On flowers and wall of house - d.r.
- 3 - 4: Area front of fountain.
- 5 : Area in front of porch.
- 6 : Orange tree.

7 : Wall and flowers left.

8 - 9: Area back of gate.

Chaser babies in right and left 1st entrances follow Miss Starr throughout act.⁶¹

Technical Aspects

Workshop

The material in this section is technical in nature, and its purpose is to give a detailed description of some of the more unusual lighting devices used in Belasco's productions. Since Belasco's career as a producer began at a time when electric lighting was just coming into general use, most of the lighting equipment and apparatus he needed had to be constructed, if not invented, in his own workshop. At this time, the manufacturers of lighting instruments were more concerned with developing equipment for the larger markets of home and industry than for the more limited theatre market. Most of the equipment that was in general use in the theatre was equipment that had been designed for another purpose and simply converted to theatre use. In an effort to improve theatre lighting equipment, Belasco had an electrical workshop built in the basement of his Republic Theatre (See plate 22, page 121). The experiments conducted in this workshop

⁶¹Stuart W. Allen, "An Analysis of the Theatrical Art of David Belasco," unpublished master's thesis, Department of Speech and Drama, Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio, 1938, pp. 72-74.

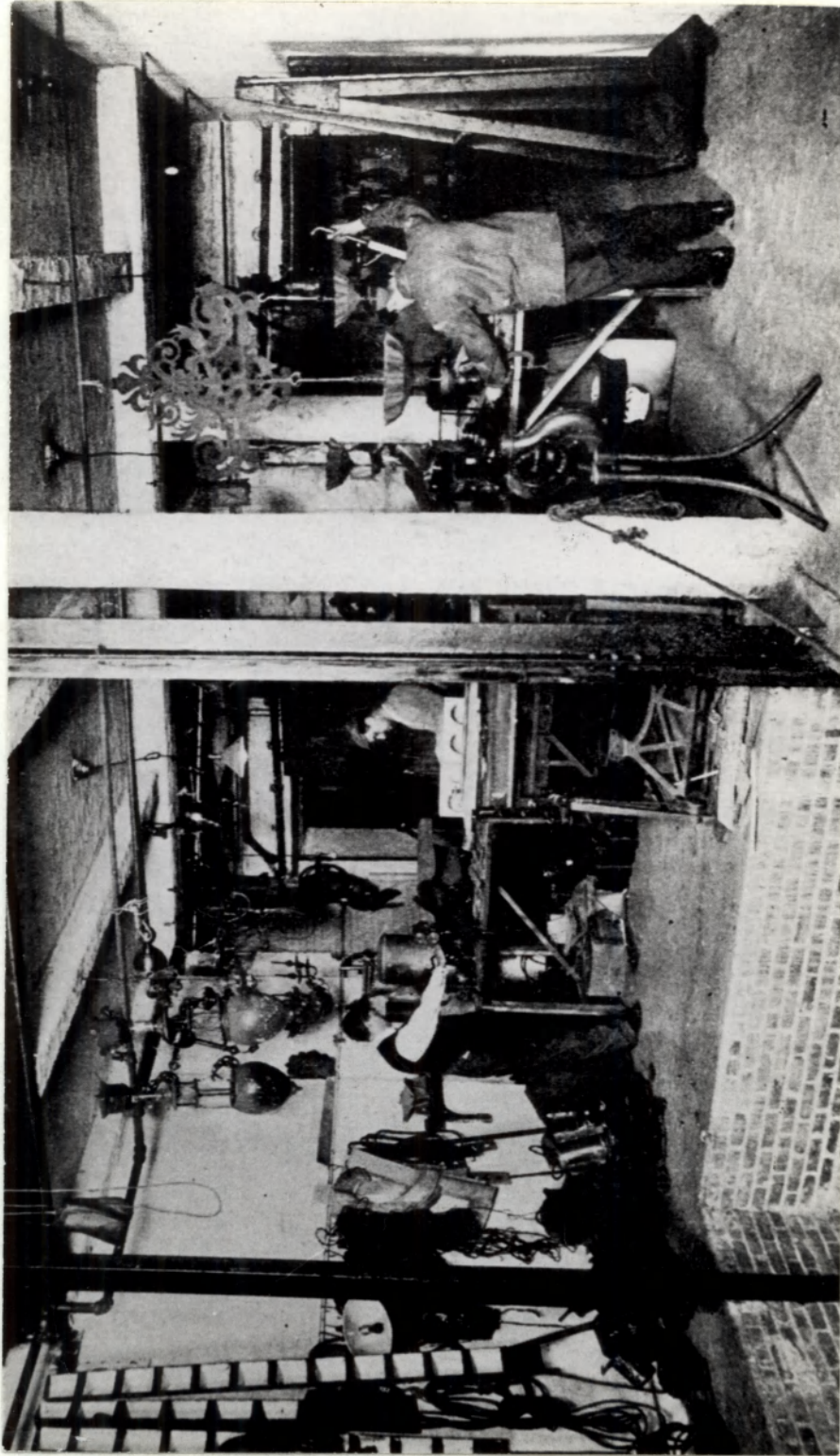


Plate 22--Belasco's electric workshop

and the resultant inventions were conducted under the leadership of Belasco and Louis Hartmann. Most of the experiments with light, color, shading, and special effects were actually done by Belasco; whereas the construction, modification, and inventing of the lighting devices was done by Hartmann. The purpose of the work in this electrical shop was not only to improve theatre lighting equipment in general, but mainly to find ways and means of creating artificial light which would closely approximate natural light. Belasco gave this description of his workshop:

At any hour in the day, and often far into the night, experts are busy with me or under my direction in this unique little workshop, experimenting with my light and color devices, trying by every means that ingenuity can suggest to bring my stage into still closer harmony with the secrets of nature.⁶²

The inventions to come out of this workshop were shared with the profession--of course after Belasco had first used them himself. Although there seems to be no evidence to support the claim, Belasco stated on several occasions that lighting experts came from all over the world to study his methods. It is known, however, that some of the lighting devices, invented in the workshop were indeed adopted by other producers--notably the baby spot.

The expense of operating the workshop was no small matter. The Scientific American reported the cost to be \$18,000 to

⁶²David Belasco, "Aids to the Actor's Art," Munsey's Magazine, LXIII (March, 1918), 265-279.

\$25,000 annually.⁶³ Most producers, particularly of Belasco's day, would seriously question the returns on this type of lighting investment. The mere fact that Belasco did make the investment, and in doing so did much to refine and improve stage light, deserves recognition whether one agrees with his use of lights artistically or not.

Descriptions of the more unusual devices and systems which were used by Belasco are included to show the nature and quality of this early electrical equipment. Most of the apparatus has long since been replaced by more modern lighting equipment.

General Equipment

The general lighting equipment in both Belasco theatres was very similar; therefore, this description will make no distinctions between the two, but rather describe them jointly. The light in Belasco's theatres came from five different sources: the apron, the balcony, overhead, the wings and light bridges--front, left and right. It should be noted here, however, that it was not the locations of the lights but the equipment he used which was unique and warrants description. The theatres were equipped with footlights which could be turned out of sight at will. It was impossible to determine whether Belasco's system of overturning footlights

⁶³John J. Wallace, "The Impossible in Stage Lighting Is Achieved," Scientific American, CXXXIII (September, 1925), 154-155.

was the first such system in America; nevertheless, it is safe to say that if not the first it was certainly among the very first. Arthur Krows states that when Belasco had "his overturning foots he had an added row of 'linolites,' long incadescent finger-bulbs, placed end to end in a thin line, particularly for use when the foots were inverted."⁶⁴ There was no further information in regard to this added row of light, either as to exact location, design, or purpose.

The balcony lights were located in an apparently ornamental panel on the front edge of the main balcony. The panel was equipped with small doors which could be opened and closed very slowly by controls on the switchboard, thereby changing the intensity of light.⁶⁵

The overhead lighting was composed of different types of borderlights--some like those found in other theatres of the time while others were of special design. Notably of the latter type was the installation of a large iron hood which extended out into the auditorium over the apron. The iron hood was developed when Belasco did away with his footlights permanently and extended the apron of his stage. The iron hood was joined to the front of the proscenium at the top and extended out over the apron in a covered fashion which matched the curve of the apron. The outside of the hood was masked

⁶⁴Krows, op. cit., p. 202.

⁶⁵Quinn, op. cit., p. 193.

with a beautiful French curtain. (See plates 23 and 24 on page 126). Inside the hood and also following the curve of the apron, the first row of borders was installed. There was an additional row of lights just inside the proscenium and still another row about midway to the back of the stage. Each border consisted of four iron boxes, each containing four large, ribbed reflectors for a total of sixteen. Each set of four could be controlled separately from the switchboard, and each reflector had a slide for gelatin color frames.⁶⁶

The lighting equipment used from the wings and light bridges consisted mainly of baby and larger spotlights. Although the larger spots were in general use by all producers, the development of the baby spot can be attributed to Belasco and Hartmann. When Hartmann developed the spot, or as it was first called--"baby lens," he used "a concentrated filament lamp put on the market for use in small stereopticons for the home."⁶⁷ The fifty candle power lamp was placed in a small metal housing and fitted with a five-inch by nine-inch lens. Later, as more and more uses were found for the baby spot, the candle power and lens size were varied to fit different needs.⁶⁸

In addition to the lights in the theatre, Belasco's general equipment included one large switchboard plus several

⁶⁶Krows, op. cit., p. 207.

⁶⁷Fuchs, op. cit., p. 462.

⁶⁸Ibid., pp. 462-463.

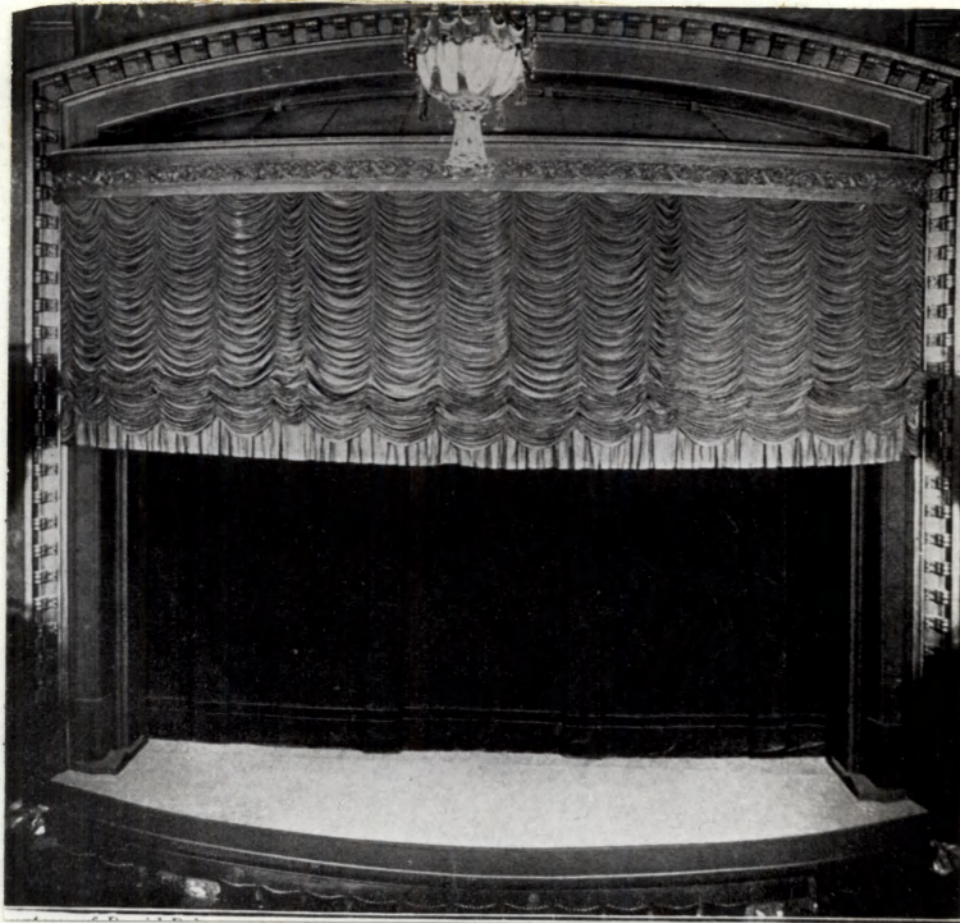


Plate 23--Belasco's curved lighting hood which extended out over the apron of the stage.

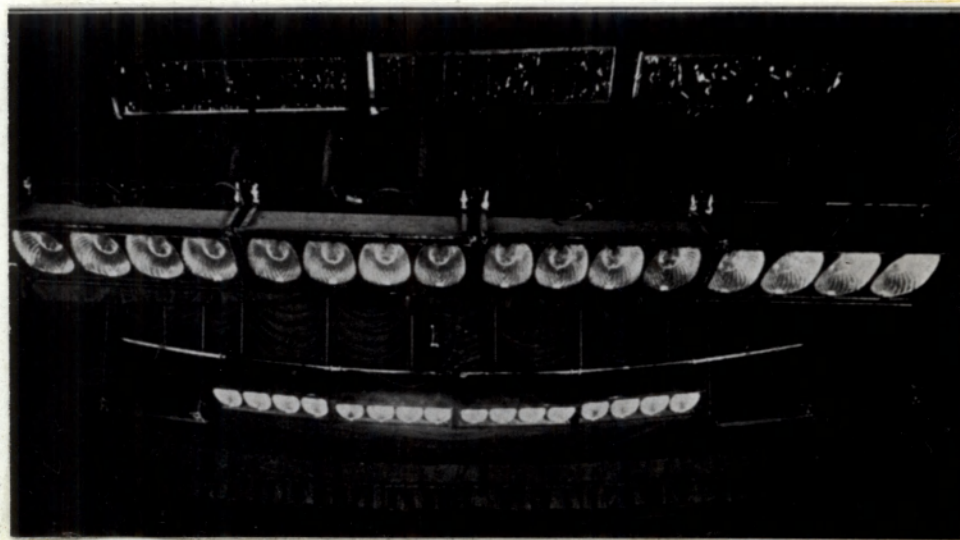


Plate 24--The lighting hood as viewed from the back.

portable dimmers. The switchboard that was installed at the new Belasco Theatre in 1914 was at the time the largest in America⁶⁹ (See plate 25 on page 128).

It should be noted once again that the general equipment in the Belasco theatres would not seem spectacular or even adequate in a modern New York theatre. It was, nevertheless, unique and very advanced at the time. As was pointed out earlier, the inventions and innovations which came from the Belasco theatre and workshop were shared with the profession. The baby spots, light bridges, and horizontal lighting were some of the things which were quickly adopted by other producers.⁷⁰ The descriptions which follow are some of the more unusual equipment which was not in general use.

Special Equipment

Silk Color Media.--Belasco often used colored silk placed in front of his lighting instruments to color the light. Silk was later replaced by colored gelatin and the gelatin by colored reflectors. The use of silk to color lights was not unique in itself; however, Belasco made more use of colored light in the first years of electric lighting than other American producers of the day. For his production of Madame

⁶⁹David Belasco, The Theatre Through Its Stage Door (New York, 1919), p. 162.

⁷⁰Wallace, op. cit., p. 154-155.

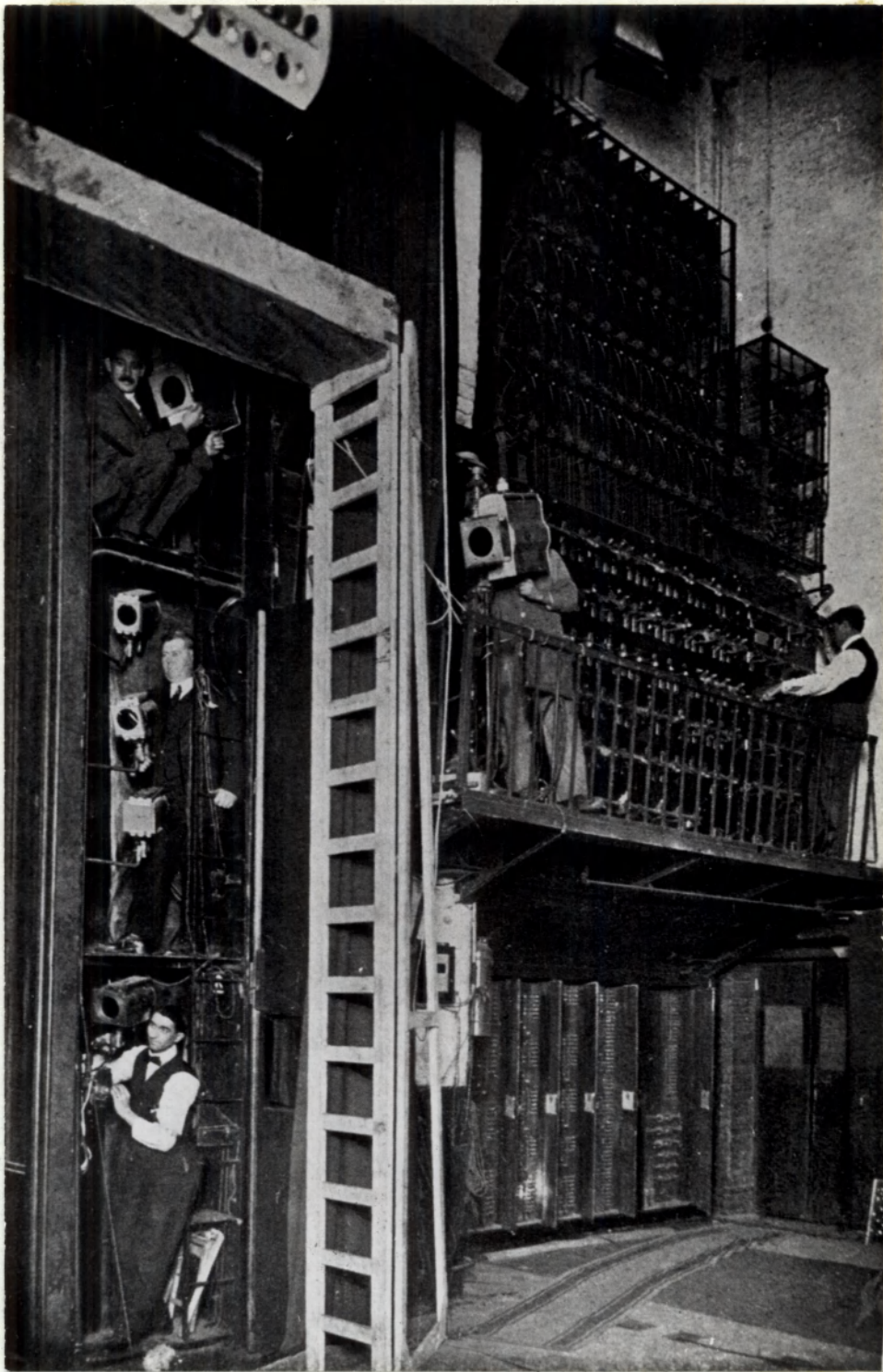


Plate 25--The Belasco switchboard

Butterfly, Belasco used bands of colored silk on rollers which were mounted on the front of the lights. The bands of silk were made up of different colors, and the color of the light could be changed by rolling the bands upward or downward. To make the color change more gradual, the dividing lines between two colors was in the shape of a triangle, thus blending the colors slowly.⁷¹ Belasco also used colored silk for effects in The Darling of the Gods; however, one critic of this production felt that Belasco used too much color: "Real Japanese scenery is not bathed in such strenuous light, such as colored electric contrivances of Mr. Belasco's machinery fairly pours upon his scenes."⁷²

"Mima" Light.--What was referred to as the "Mima" light was simply a spotlight which had an automatic color changer. The New York Times described it in this way: "the 'Mima' light . . . is placed in the metal covered proscenium arch and by automatic control changes the gelatin frames."⁷³

Mica Slides.--When using spots to light the actors' faces, the spots were equipped with special mica slides. The slides were made by placing six pieces of frosted mica together. Each piece of mica had a clear space in the center which varied in size from about the size of a dime on the

⁷¹Hartmann, op. cit., p. 17.

⁷²"The Darling of the Gods," The Critic, XLII (January, 1903), 70-72.

⁷³New York Times, December 23, 1928.

first to that of a quarter on the sixth. The six pieces were then bound together on the edges with a metal strip. "The several sheets of frosting left the outer surface practically opaque with a graduated, irislike opening in the center."⁷⁴

Reflected Light.--In trying to bring artificial light closer to natural light, Belasco was constantly plagued with four recurring problems: poorly diffused light, brightness in the center of the illumination, harsh edges, and not enough control of color. These were, of course, not just Belasco's problems, but were rather the major problems in all theatre lighting at that time. Although most other producers accepted the problems as being inherent to electric lighting, Belasco never gave up his efforts to discover solutions. When he and Hartmann developed a system of controlled reflected light, he solved all four problems: "Nowhere in the light was there visible shadow; center of illumination was down to the irreducible minimum and the area of the light was equal throughout. Best of all, the light was practically "edgeless," melting into its surroundings by absorption."⁷⁵ To achieve controlled reflected light, spotlights were directed downward and focused upon bowed circular discs (See plates 26 and 27 on p. 131). The discs were bowed to give control, and by turning the discs, light could be directed in any

⁷⁴Hartmann, op. cit., p. 20.

⁷⁵Wallace, op. cit., 154-155.

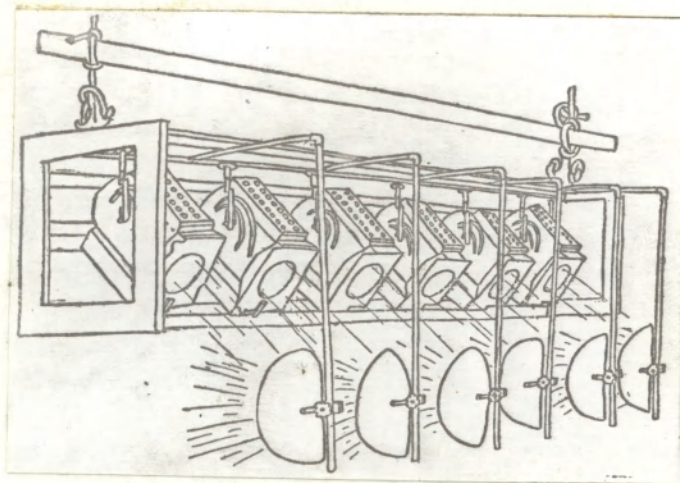


Plate 26--Scheme of Belasco's system of reflected light.

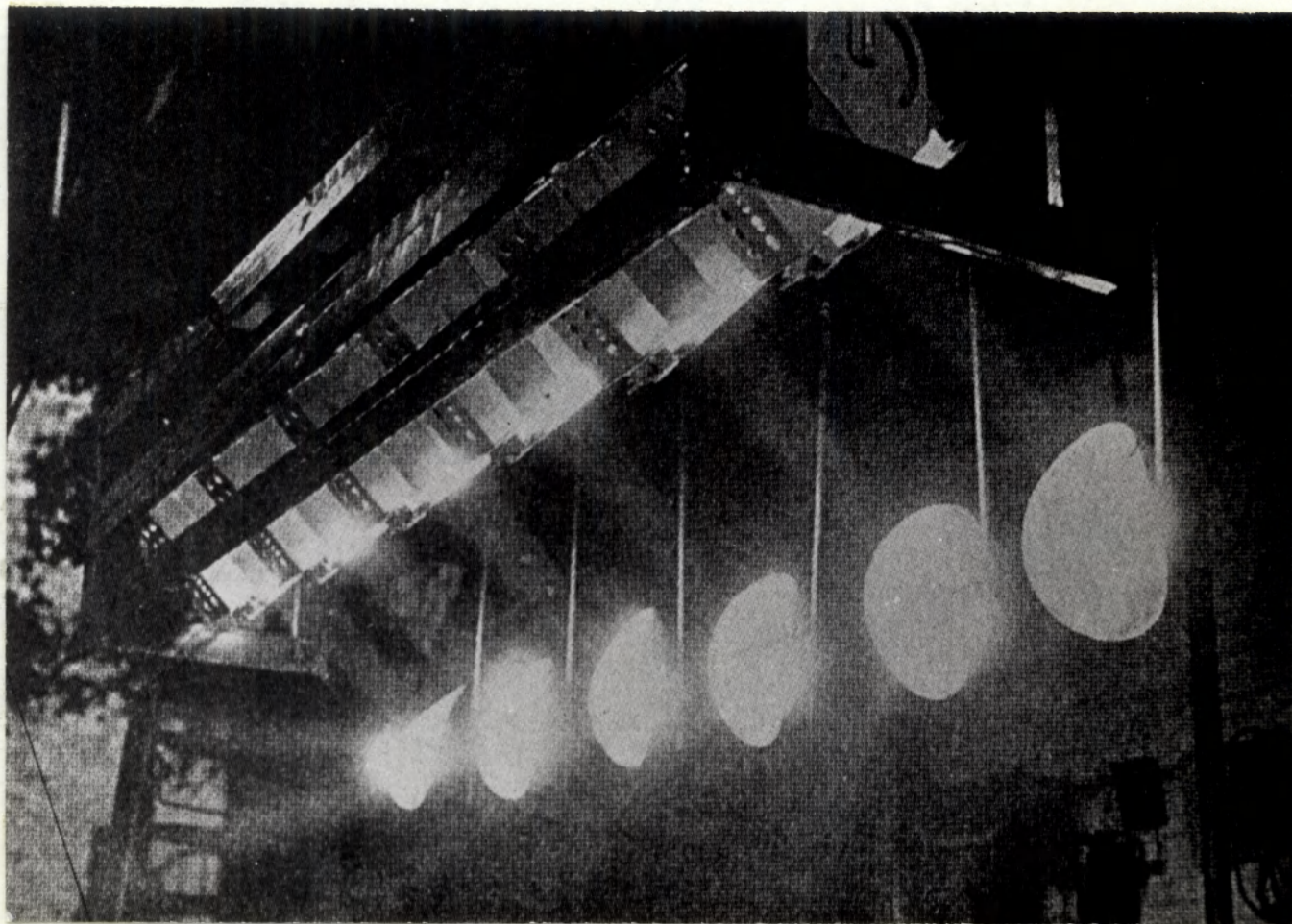


Plate 27--Belasco's reflected light

direction. By first coating the discs with silver leaf and then using colored lacquer, the reflected light was tinted.⁷⁶ Considering the equipment then available, this system of reflected light was a superior system. However, with improvements in lamps and with the invention of the Fresnel lens, better results could be obtained with less complicated equipment.

Summary

After examining Belasco's theories, techniques, and developments, what conclusions or generalizations can be drawn? First, from Belasco's philosophy and methods, it would appear that much of his success was due to his ability to sense what audiences wanted. If audiences demanded "better things" and novelty, as Belasco believed they did, that is what he gave them.

Second, one can conclude that Belasco's techniques were major factors in his getting good results even from crude equipment. As Hartmann said, Belasco got better results because he worked harder. The unique use of baby spots, the elimination of footlights, and the use of controlled reflected light were the distinguishing features of Belasco's technique.

From Belasco's procedures, it is possible to draw a third conclusion--his lighting methods followed the same pattern of tireless effort that characterized all his work.

⁷⁶Ibid.

Fourth, Belasco's efforts in the beginning seemed to be mainly for effect. Later, however, his maintenance of an electrical workshop and his years of experimentation seem to indicate a genuine desire to improve theatre lighting.

Last, it should be remembered that whether it was a "special effect," general illumination, or light to create atmosphere, it was always as natural and believable as possible.

Belasco's life was examined in Chapter One and his scenery and lighting in Chapters Two and Three. The final chapter will be a summary and evaluation of Belasco's contributions to American theatre in the areas of naturalistic scenery and lighting.

CHAPTER IV

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

It was the objective of this study to make a general study of Belasco's use of naturalism in American theatre, and more specifically, to determine Belasco's methods of achieving naturalism in his stage settings and lighting. Information was collected in an effort to determine, as nearly as possible, his step by step procedures. In addition, it was necessary to make certain references to Belasco's philosophy and theories concerning scenery and lighting in order to clarify the reasoning behind his methods. It remains now to summarize the findings and draw some conclusions.

A study of Belasco's early years reveals two sets of evidences which seem to be outstanding in shaping his theatrical life and work. The first of these was his training in elocution. It was surmised from the strong evidence of the melodramatic selections which were popular at the time and from the fact that one of Belasco's most successful plays was patterned directly after one such melodramatic selection, that this training was, in fact, an influencing factor in the type of plays he later wrote and/or produced. His training in elocution was not only a factor in developing his preference in drama but was also the first real outlet

for his dramatic inclinations. From the evidence it would appear that Belasco's elocutionary recitations were, in fact, a one man performance.

The second evidence of early influence was established from the knowledge that, while Belasco had very limited success as a young actor, he was critically commended in the areas of stage managing, scenery and special effects, and playwriting. It seems apparent that through these early years of struggling to become an actor, Belasco himself came to the realization that his true talent was in production. By 1890, roughly fifteen years after his beginning as an actor, Belasco the producer-director had emerged.

If one had to choose a word to characterize Belasco's ultimate goal in the theatre, that word would probably be "entertainment." Belasco could not resist trying to thrill an audience, and as a young director he apparently concluded that the audiences of the day were most thrilled, impressed, and entertained by scenery and effects which closely duplicated real places and phenomena. Following this conclusion to a logical end, the more "real things" and believable effects he could include in a production, the more entertained his audiences would be; thus emerged not just Belasco the producer, but Belasco the expert of naturalistic stagecraft.

With Belasco's natural, solid, believable scenery and effects setting the example, other American producers soon began to imitate this type of production. Again, it should

be noted that the social, political, and didactic aspects, which characterized naturalism in Europe, were not present in Belasco's productions. His primary goal was not so much the enlightenment as the entertainment of the American audiences. In his genuine efforts to please his audiences, he designed his productions not as didactic drama but rather as romanticized, melodramatic plays with believable, and often lavish, scenery and lighting.

Belasco often made statements to the effect that the play is the thing, that nothing must detract from it or the actors, and that all elements of production must aid, but remain subordinate to the play. It is difficult to accept these statements since they are in apparent contradiction to other Belasco statements and, indeed, with what he practiced; for example, consider his advice to directors:

Above all, he must think in pictures, so that each second of the play from the rise of the curtain to its fall, may provide ceaseless occupation for the eye as well as the ear. If possible, he must not let the interest lag for a moment; when once the audience has room for a thought outside the thoughts of the play, everything is lost.¹

With statements like these which more closely match what he did, and with the knowledge of the type of melodramatic play he produced, one can only conclude that in reality production, not good drama, was Belasco's major interest, and entertainment his goal.

¹David Belasco, "How I Stage My Plays," The Theatre Magazine, II (November, 1902), 31-32.

In establishing Belasco's specific techniques, one should keep in mind the personal traits which directly influenced his work: (1) his deep love for and dedication to the theatre, (2) his energy and perseverance in preplanning and rehearsals, and (3) his willingness to allocate lavish funds on a production.

The flexibility which Belasco's well-equipped theatres gave him was another important factor in his naturalistic stagecraft. Elevator platforms, trap doors, counter weight systems, and a complete electrical system were the more outstanding features of his theatres. When it is remembered that his multiple-set shows were usually staged with heavy solid scenery, one readily appreciates the flexibility of this theatre plant.

From this study of Belasco's stagecraft, certain characteristic patterns emerge as his methods in achieving naturalistic sets. First, Belasco began by acting out the entire play for his scenic artist. The artist made sketches until Belasco got what he wanted. Second, small models were made from the sketches, and were built and rebuilt until they were satisfactory. Third, with the models as guides, the full size scenery was built in Belasco's own workshop and assembled on stage two weeks before the opening. Fourth, all sets were solid and three-dimensional. Fifth, in multiple-set shows, scenery was built on platforms and brought up from the basement on elevators as needed. Sixth, all properties were real

and Belasco made many of the selections himself. Seventh, costumes for period plays were reproduced with accuracy and detail. Costumes for modern plays were made in local tailor shops or purchased in ready-to-wear stores.

Belasco's sets were so detailed and naturalistic that the term photographic was often applied to them. There is some dispute as to whether Belasco influenced the motion picture industry or the motion pictures influenced him. The stronger evidence tends to support Gorclik's opinion: Belasco's naturalism was taken over by the movies.

In the area of lighting, Belasco made a substantial contribution to the theatre of his day. While his methods, inventions, and innovations have since been replaced by modern lighting technology, he set a standard of excellence when electric stage lighting was still new and undeveloped. For a quarter of a century, he maintained an electrical workshop in which the equipment he needed was invented. Over the years his inventions and innovations were shared with and adopted by other producers. The more notable of these contributions were (1) the elimination of footlights, (2) the invention and use of the baby spotlight, (3) the development of reflected light, (4) experiments with colored light, and (5) refinements in the tungsten lamp (for numbers 2, 3, and 5 Louis Hartmann must be given the technical credit).

When Belasco's lighting methods and procedures are reviewed, three characteristics emerge which significantly

distinguish Belasco's work from that of other producers of the day. The first of these characterized all of Belasco's work--a pattern of tireless effort and analytical preplanning. The second was his unique practice of following actors with individual baby spotlights. Last was the fact that his lighting was constantly changing--in color, intensity, and direction--often so subtly that the audience was not aware of the change.

Writers have coined the term "Belascoism" to describe Belasco's romanticized brand of naturalism. From the present study, it now seems possible to give additional insight into "Belascoism" by applying the label "believable" to Belasco's scenery and lighting. While it is true that naturalistic scenery in the usual sense is believable, it is also true that Belasco's scenery and effects did not always conform to accepted definitions of naturalism. As it developed in Europe, naturalism, in terms of production, meant environment, and the plays depicted characters which closely resembled real people in settings which could easily be recognized as accurate, true-to-life presentations. In Chekhov's The Cherry Orchard, the decline of the aristocracy is clearly outlined by characters who seem genuine. The setting--a country estate--appears real, thereby adding credence to the play. Other examples can be cited: the stark picture of the slums in The Lower Depths, the portrayal of inter-torment and self-sacrifice in Ibsen's A Doll's House

and Ghosts, and uncontrolled passion and class distinction in Strindberg's Miss Julie. Each of these, along with other naturalistic plays of this period in Europe, dealt with people and places like those found in the life of the time. On the other hand, many of Belasco's plays were partially or wholly fanciful, and the others were highly romanticized. A fanciful or romanticized setting cannot be naturalistic if one adheres to a strict representation of true-to-life characters and true-to-life settings. Despite this apparent contradiction there seems to be one strong connecting link between "Belascoism" and strict naturalism--both wanted audiences to believe. The European naturalist wanted audiences to believe for purposes of enlightenment; Belasco wanted audiences to believe for purposes of entertainment. Belasco's principle of making every set and effect as believable as possible can be seen in such fanciful and romanticized scenes as the sand storm in Under Two Flags, the blizzard in The Girl of the Golden West, the use of panorama and picture drops, the entire settings for Mima, the romanticized sets and the "River of Souls" scene in The Darling of the Gods, etc. Therefore, if one examines Belasco's work as a whole and not isolated scenes like the now famous Child's Restaurant set, the term "believable" comes close to actually describing Belasco's stagecraft.

It is also important to clarify what is apparently a present day misunderstanding of Belasco's methods. At two

points in Belasco's career he probably came as near to completely naturalistic scenery as possible: the boarding house set in The Easiest Way and the Child's Restaurant scene in The Governor's Lady. These two scenes are often used by writers as examples of Belasco naturalism, thereby implying that he created his naturalistic scenery by transporting real rooms to his stage. This, of course, is not true; because these two sets were exceptions to Belasco's customary methods of creating scenic locale.

Whether or not one agrees with his style of production, it should be concluded that Belasco brought a new scenic standard to the American theatre. It should be remembered, before Belasco began to use quality scenery with new sets for each production, it had been the practice in America to use the same standard sets for all shows. The quality of his scenery and lighting was seldom matched in America. In a recent article in Western Speech it was concluded:

It is doubtful whether the intellectual revolt and consequent practical reform in theatre would have been possible without a Belasco to change the theatre from flimsy canvas and unbelievable scenic illusions to at least a kind of pictorial reality suffused with sentiment. Belasco's contributions to the theatre cannot be dismissed easily.²

Most of the techniques used by Belasco ended with his death. His long career covered the period which saw the rise and fall of naturalism. His sets were usually lavish

²Janet Loring, "Belasco: Preface to a Re-Evaluation," Western Speech, XXIII (Fall, 1959), 207-211.

and beautiful, occasionally fanciful, but always believable,
and most important, entertaining.

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