

The Catholic Actors' Guild of America

By BRO. ARTHUR KELLY, O. P.



ON March 31, 1914, a new society made its appearance on Broadway, the home of the theatrical world. Its name, The Catholic Actors' Guild of America. Catholic, because the members were to be taken from the ranks of the Catholic religion; Actors', because the guild was organized for their benefit; Guild, to recall the ancient guilds that were so powerful in the Middle Ages.

The Guild was to be for Catholics, this was the first shock the public received. Were there Catholic actors? Was not the Church opposed to the stage? Were there enough Catholic actors to form a society? These are but a few of the questions hurled at the new undertaking and the answers received were quite startling. The number of Catholics on the stage is far from small. From the beginning of the stage in America the majority of actors and actresses who have left a name worthy of memory have been Catholics. Mary Anderson, for many years the darling of the American stage, was a Catholic; Julia Arthur, she of the golden voice, is a Catholic; Madame Modjeska, who left such a record in New York, was a Catholic; the great family of Cohans, father and son, the now famous George, are Catholics. We might go on indefinitely; but suffice it to say, that there are and were plenty of actors of the Faith to form a Catholic actors' society.

Despite the great number of Catholics on the American stage many people doubted the possibilities of a Catholic actors' society, the majority of the Thomases being those of the profession. But their dismal forebodings were soon overcome. The Guild was no new adventure. England had a Catholic actors' society, had had one for five years or more; and it was not only successful but was accomplishing marvelous deeds in the way of bringing the stage under religious influence, improving conditions for the theatrical folk and making the drama healthier.

This information was a spur to the American actors, gave

them something to encourage their embryotic society and men and women like George M. Cohan, Frank McIntyre, Donald Brian, Petro DeCordoba, Eddie Dowling, Leo Kelly, Stuart Fox, Elisabeth Marbury, Wilton Lackaye, Blanche Ring and Marie Wainwright lent their support. They were soon followed by others and today the society after many trials and difficulties is well established and growing rapidly. The Actors' Guild has the approval of the Archbishop of New York, has its chaplains and club-rooms, its social functions and tends to be one of the greatest factors in the improvement of the modern stage. At present the Guild has over three thousand five hundred members, most of whom are of the profession, and some of the biggest names in the theatrical world grace the list. Ethel Barrymore and Margaret Anglin, considered by critics of the stage and those who know, as the foremost actresses of America today, are both Catholics and prominent members of the Guild. Grace George, Laurette Taylor, Chauncey Olcott, John McCormack, Hal Skelly, Andrew Mack, Ada May Weeks, Leo Corrallo, Ada Lewis, Marie Groody, these names perhaps the most brilliant on Broadway today are to be found on the file of the Catholic Actors' Guild.

The object of the Guild is to establish the best interests of the stage by bringing the members of the profession and clergy together; to discuss ways and means of bettering the drama; to root out abuses; and above all to keep an ever watchful eye on this nomadic people.

By achieving the first objective, the uniting of the profession and clergy, a chasm will have been crossed that will mean much for both parties. The unity of the actors with the clergy will



His Eminence The Late Cardinal Farley who approved and authorized the Catholic Actors' Guild of America

strengthen the actors in their faith, a greater interest will be taken in religion because religion is taking an interest in them. Like all other interests one must, very literally, get behind the scenes to really understand the workings of the theatrical interests. Just what it means to see a priest behind the scenes of a theater may be gleaned from the following story of one, who knowing a prominent actor in "Lightnin'," went to the theater to visit him. The actor invited him behind the scenes to finish their conversation while he dressed for the afternoon performance. To the priest's great surprise, three of the company, although Protestants, immediately presented themselves for an introduction, and one remarked that "you would not get their minister to go behind the scenes of a show." The actors appreciate such considerations for themselves and their work, it gives them all a better and more accurate valuation of their work and lives; it helps them to see the right side of things and in many cases leads back to the true fold those who have idly wandered away: for this people is religious at heart.

When the World War had ended the Guild found that its objective of bettering the drama was to be put to a severe test. The manner in which the Catholic actors rose to the demands of the time is an inspiring example of the possibilities for good in the society. After the war the American theater became congested with the French play; sex questions and divorce having the main roles in the drama and the extravagant revues in the musical line. Such plays necessarily had an unwholesome effect upon the people, and the late Cardinal Farley felt that measures should be taken to stem this flow of shady plays. The "White List" was put into effect, expressly telling the people what plays might be attended with moral safety and silently suggesting that those not found on the list were to be avoided. This indeed was a help to the play-goer, but how reach the actor?

Father John Talbot Smith, the organizer of the Actors' Guild offered his personal service and the Guild's united action to the Cardinal in order to find a solution of the difficult problem of purifying the stage. The Guild offered to undertake the task; yet, by doing so the members of the Guild and the Catholic actor in general were placed in a difficult position. The actors were confronted with the alternative either of accepting parts in these objectional plays or unemployment. This, of

course, threw many players out of work and many of them retired for a time rather than accept roles in this objectionable type of drama. This stand against unclean plays was not only for the sake of those behind the footlights but for the public at large. No one can estimate the amount of good that has been done by members of the Guild who sacrificed themselves for this cause.

Elisabeth Marbury, a woman who for many years took an active part in the production of some of New York's greatest stage successes, says in "My Crystal Ball":

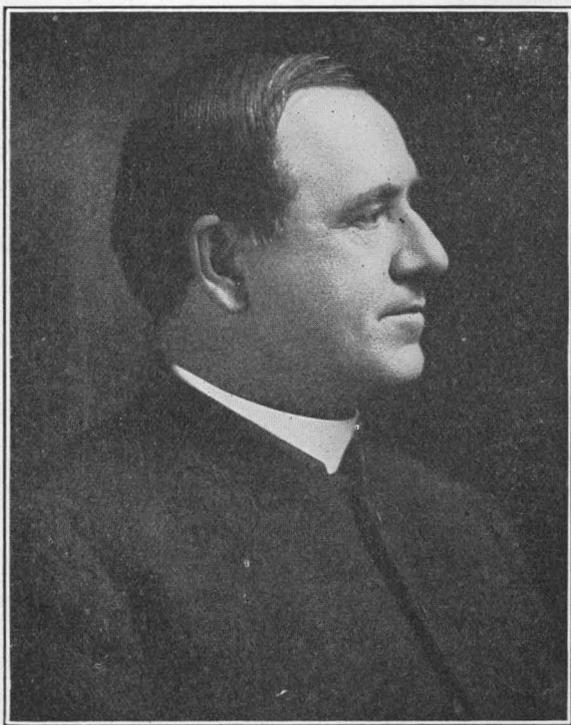
"A great deal of misapprehension has been formulated against the morality of the stage. This popular conception is exaggerated and absurd, for the average of respectability and decency in the ranks of the profession is high and I do not hesitate to state would compare more than favorably with the lack of ethics condoned by modern society. There is much less license within the theater than within the drawing room and the manners and deportment of the average show girl would often put to shame the conduct of the debutant."

These are strong words, but if one understands how and why the public has been given such stories of the immorality of the stage he will feel that such a statement as Miss Marbury makes can be true.

Of course some newspaper stories on actors and actresses are really news items, events that really happened. Such stories are told because of the sensation caused and the persons connected with them, but these true stories are few and far between. Most of the stories found in our Sunday papers expressing views and giving an actor or actress' opinion on the current topics of the day are simply publicity articles written for the paper by the actor's press agent. The whole purpose, of course, is box office bait. For strange as it may appear the public will rush to see the person they have read about even if he or she is labeled as a wrecker of homes or the cause of a divorce suit. Nine cases out of ten the story foisted on the public is nothing more than mere fiction.

To give a concrete example, we shall tell of Mme. Jeritza, the present prima donna of the Metropolitan Opera Company. Jeritza was a person of ordinary means living in Austria. She had had a small career in opera but it was not a financial success. Some Americans hearing her sing and knowing her as a person of good standing offered to finance her way to America. After her debut in New York Jeritza was acclaimed an artistic suc-

cess. But as yet she was little known. To bridge this gulf the publicity agent of the Metropolitan started work,—unknown however to Jeritza—and the papers told a story of Mme. Jeritza, now singing at the Metropolitan Opera House, being a former paramour of the late Franz Joseph, Emperor of Austria. This



**The late Rev. John Talbot Smith, Organizer and First
Chaplain of the Guild**

of course was false, but it brought the name of Jeritza before the public, crowds flocked to the opera and money poured into the coffers; the story had effected its purpose.

However the tale was short-lived. One of the men who had helped Jeritza to this country knowing her as a good Catholic and a faithful wife informed her of the story. The singer was stunned; she knew no English and thus the story had

appeared unknown to her. She immediately took the matter up with the manager, the story was denied and incidentally an umbrella broken over the press agent's head. This will give an idea of how some of the stories we read are invented and circulated and just how much truth is in most of them. To be well known means money at the box office and therefore unemployed actors often make the sacrifice of their private name to get the coveted gold—and thus actors in general must pay the price of ignominy because of the guilty or guiltless notoriety of some of their number. These few teach the public to believe in the necessary immorality of an actor.

One of the first objects undertaken by the Guild was to inform the public, to set public opinion right with regard to the stage and drama. Before the Guild undertook this work there was too great a gulf between the people and the stage. People forgot that the actor and actress were human beings—into just what type they were placed in unknown. To a few they appeared as real artists, but to the majority the stage was looked upon simply as a public entertainment and the performers merely puppets set up to please and amuse; without feelings, race, distinction or position, simply actors and actresses. Human nature is a queer thing! How readily the doors of our so-called "four hundred" are thrown open to receive a Cowl, a Barrymore or a Duse, but how different to the "mere actor." The public would not open its doors to them so the Guild opened its doors to the public by membership in an associated form. These associate members receive cards which they return to the Guild expressing their opinion on plays running in New York. They are vital factors in the workings of the society and play an important part in ridding the stage of such performances as are found undesirable. The Guild has brought home the true state of things and the public is beginning to look for bigger and better things from the stage and they are getting it. If for no other reason than this the Catholic Actor's Guild deserves the thanks of the entire nation, for it has lifted the American drama from a pit into which it was fast falling after the war and placed it high, so high in fact that to the astonishment of all the stage is taking its place as a national institution.

The stage needs such an enterprise as the Actors' Guild to guard against abuses that so easily creep in. Perhaps no other

people have temptations that make themselves so felt as those of the theater. The life of the actor is a hard one. When nature calls for sleep, he must work; when the sun floods the heavens he finds his night; in fact, his entire life is filled with snags and snares against which he must be ever on his guard. Here



Rev. Martin E. Fahy
Present Chaplain and Treasurer of the Guild

the care of the Guild will be felt more and more. By its watchfulness over its Catholic children, by the spreading of Catholic truths, the actor will learn both by word and example the safer course to follow and thus many a fall will be avoided. In order to further these reforms and advantages, branches of the Guild are being established in every large city in the country;

placards, giving hours of church service, club locations, etc., are being placed in every theatrical town and hotel throughout the land and the Catholic actor finds himself taken care of no matter where he is at work.

The boy or girl feeling the call of the stage, and there are many, must and should have a guide, someone or something to cling to in their struggle for success. The Guild has made this one of its main objectives. By its bureau of information, a boy or girl can secure assistance, counsel and sympathetic understanding. They are directed, not to the cheapest of theatrical boarding houses but to refined Catholic homes; a chance is given them to meet the best producers and managers and every effort made to assist them to secure a position best suited to their talents. All means are used to advise them regarding unbecoming productions and to keep their thoughts, ambitions and standards high.

The Guild in no way dictates to its members the show or the type of show they are to play in. It respects its members and leaves it to their honor as children of the Catholic Church to choose a desirable type of performance, realizing that this trust will be faithfully kept. Again, the society endeavors to create a spirit of friendship and homeliness by holding regular monthly meetings and an annual banquet. This gives the members a chance to get together and to meet their Catholic brethren, discuss Catholic undertakings, renew their acquaintances with their chaplains and report the success of their branch of the organization, for, every company leaving New York in which there are Catholic members has a deputy, appointed by the Guild to see that the members attend to their religious duties and obey the rules. Of course the neglect of these obligations means dismissal from the society.

Every theater town of any considerable size has its duly appointed chaplain, whose duty it is to care for the actors appearing in his city. In New York the Guild has its own church, set aside for the use of the stage and called the Actors' Chapel, or St. Malachy's, on West Forty-ninth Street. A special Mass is offered in this church every Sunday morning at eleven-thirty for actors and all others connected with the stage. Such spiritual solicitude for the actor is indeed noble; the actor being a human being needs the consolations of religion like the rest of

us and when religion such as the Catholic Church possesses stretches out her hand to aid him we need not be surprised that the stage is undergoing a vast change for the better, for it is the actor who makes the stage. A peculiar and noteworthy phase of this work is that Father Smith prepared a book of prayers known as the "Wayfarer's Prayer Book," probably the first of its kind. Like all good Catholic organizations the society does not forget its dead. Each year a Solemn Mass is sung in their chapel for the repose of the souls of those who have gone to meet the Great Critic. They also possess their own plot in Calvary Cemetery, the gift of the Archbishop, Cardinal Hayes.

Such in brief is the Catholic Actors' Guild of America. Real reformation comes from within in every human institution, though exterior stimuli may be needed to urge it. The stage has needed reform, and at last that reform is coming from within, and the credit can in a large measure go to the Catholic Actors' Guild. The stage never can be destroyed except by those who have its destinies in their hands; it can be a most powerful instrument for the betterment of mankind and we hope, with the Catholic Actors' Guild, that the stage both here and abroad will be brought back to its pristine beauty and teach man once again those beautiful truths that are to be found only within the Catholic Church.

