DRAMA BY THE THAMES

LONDON.

THE Torch Theatre is a small, experimental playhouse, smaller even than Norman Marshall's Gate—in effect no more than a long room with a tiny stage at the end of it. Here H. E. Bates's first piece, "Carrie and Cleopatra," has made its first appearance. Mr. Bates's reputation, as a novelist and a writer of short stories, stands very high among us. Whether his work enjoys a great sale, I do not know, but his reputation is one of substance as well as honor; he is no coterie writer. It is the more remarkable that his play should see the light so far from Shaftesbury Avenue. The commercial managers are not to be blamed, in the existing circumstances, for having presumably been shy of it, but they and the public and the critics are to be blamed for the existing circumstances.

Here is a play which, if nursed, ought to run in a moderately expensive theatre to a moderate profit, but could not be what is called a "smash hit." The existing circumstances of our theatre are such that what managers, with rare exceptions, are driven to look for is precisely a smash hit. A play must appeal instantly to a wide public or be taken off at a loss. That is why so terrible a sameness has settled upon us like a cloud; every one is looking for the same thing, and the work of a distinctive writer like Bates, who has something new to say and a new and subtle way of saying it, has in the theatre no normal market.

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This is again remarkable because "Carrie and Cleopatra" is in no sense a highbrow or esoteric play. It is neither darkly symbolical nor aridly expressionistic. It employs the accepted convention of naturalism and it tells a story. What sets it apart from the ordinary commercial play is that it is honestly, not sensationally, written, and aims rather at carrying its audience with it than at stunning criticism by a knockout blow.

It is a tale of two sisters, Carrie and Ursula, whose father has recently died. Hitherto they have led a sheltered life and have had no fears for its continuity. Now, with moderate incomes inherited from their father, they find themselves responsible for their own lives in a new and fast-changing society. Mr. Bates is concerned with their attempted adjustments. Carrie, the younger, seizes her liberty, falls in love, travels, is deserted by her man, gambles away her money and is hardened by her change of fortune. Ursula, at the outset apparently a harder and less vulnerable woman, sees her income shrinking, is afraid for her security, marries a seemingly prosperous business man and comes to bankruptcy by another route than her sister's.

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Mr. Bates offers no moral comment. His implication is, simply, that, in default of exceptional powers of adjustment, gentlewomen reliant on inherited incomes have no secure place in the contemporary world. For this he blames neither the world nor the women. He is content to observe facts, to reveal character, and not to dictate opinion. The defect of his work is in certain weaknesses of structure. As long as the two sisters' lives run together in their old home, he is in no difficulty, but when those lives divide his action

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becomes too dispersed and his story is damaged, as a piece for the theatre, by the encumbrance of retrospect.

But this is a defect of theatrical inexperience and the play stands in spite of it, for these sisters are not theatrical types, they are carefully drawn women who grow, and grow naturally, before our eyes. They are continuously and increasingly interesting and are seen with the freshness and compassion of an artist's eye. CHARLES MORGAN.