

[The Poetry Theatre]

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The love of action which made a glorified tramp of Harry Kemp the poet, found other avenues of expression in the writing and acting of poetic drama. He spent a year as a member of the Provincetown Players in the company of Eugene O'Neil, Clifford Odets and other soon-famous young playwrights who had their first tryouts in Provincetown, before returning to Greenwich Village where he established a one-act theater of his own in 1921.

The idea was to produce only poetic plays, for, as Harry says, “the most vital expression through drama is attained when the visual or material action is coupled with imagistic or mental interplay— the mind and the emotions bein simultaneously stimulated”— and this demands a wedding of poetry with drama.

Looking for a suitable home for his high-flung venture, Kemp decided the “Minettas”, then an undeveloped neighborhood and shunned as 'the badlands of the Village', was the ideal location for his poetry Theater. “The Minettas in those days were given over to rag-pickers and petty gangsters”, Harry tells us. “Vincent Poppy owned the whole thing and was having bad luck with it because he couldn't rent any of his tumble-down houses to respectable people. I persuaded him to let me have a whole house rent-free, and promised to make the district as popular as Washington Square with my poetry theater. That's more or less how it turned out, too.

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“After we moved in and fixed up the place with a stage, dressing rooms, and living quarters for myself on the top floor, it became clear that I'd have to join the 'gang' of cut-throats and coke-eaters and make friends of them, to keep them from breaking windows, running away with the box office, or abducting the actresses. So I used to invite the guys in for a drink

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once in a while, and to keep them in good humor, we'd let them watch the plays from the back of the hall free— on condition that they'd control their urge to boo and cat-call during the love-scenes...”

That year, Kemp produced several of his own one-act poetic dramas, including “The White Hawk”, “Don Juan the Gardner”, “The Game Called Kiss” and “Solomon's Song.” He also did some very successful adaptations of famous poems, which lent themselves to dramatic portrayal. One of the earliest adaptations was of Robert Frost's poem “Home Burial.” At that time the famous Pantano Murder Scandal in Brooklyn filled the New York papers. Among other sympathizers with the young Pantano who had been condemned to the chair, was Theodore Dreiser. Kemp used a newspaper transcript of Drainer's interview with the murderer as the basis for a realistic poetic-drama, and himself became instrumental in protesting the execution of Pantano.

...‘One day’, Harry tells us, ‘Jack Gould, the son of old Jay Gould, walked in during a dress rehearsal of “Calypso”, a new play of mine, and he brought with him a very lovely young girl, with a great heap of corn-colored hair, piled high on her head. She was about nineteen but looked even younger. Jack wanted me to give her a tryout as my next leading lady. She was not tall, but slender, and had beautiful hands, except that the thumbs were a pair of unjointed stubs— she has to build them out, you know, for the movies.... well, I had her read for me, and she was perfect... had excellent stage presence although she'd had no experience. I asked her what her name was. She said, 50 Ann Harding. I told Jack to take her up to Provincetown, and they billed her there immediately as the lead in Susan Glaspel's 'The Inheritors'. Ann didn't stay there long, I'm told. David Belasco saw her, and shipped her off to Hollywood.....’

‘Well, I'll tell you what finally made me leave the Minettas... it was getting mixed up with those toughs there... they were good guys, never harmed any of us, but turned out to be a nuisance. As I said, I became a member of their gang— ‘The 606 Outfit’ named after a drink they brewed themselves. Around Christmas time, the Downing Street Gang,

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with which the 606 had regular feuds, sent word they were going to raid my place— burn the stage and furnishings, and confiscate the actresses... I took the occasion to plan a Christmas party for my friends, and jokingly advised them to bring their guns. Everyone of them came with a pistol and a pint of liquor on either hip, and I was the only one who didn't take the situation seriously. So I was considerably surprised and frightened when about midnight there was a heavy pounding on the door, and voices yelling 'open up!' The boys got to their feet, and reached for their belts, but I struck a Ceasarian pose and commanded them to let me handle the intruders, I figured I'd talk turkey to the marauders, offer them a drink, and maybe coax them out of a killing mood, I flung the door open, yelling Merry Christmas! There stood two men from the precinct station! 'Well, Kemp! What're you doing here? We had a report there's some rough stuff goin' on here. Whose place is this?' Mine', I said, in a small voice....

'Well, I had some explaining to do at night court... and the upshot was I took the law's advice and decided to move my Poetry Theater to a more placid neighborhood...."

Kemp got in tough with an old friend, Dr. Guthrie, who owned the abandoned St. Marks Chapel then standing on 10th Street at Avenue A. Dr. Guthrie gave soirees for old women which he dignified by calling 'poetry recitals'.

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He had long been after Kemp to recite at one of these. Now Kemp got Guthrie to promise him the use of the church basement for his Theater, in exchange for appearing regularly at Guthrie's soirees.

The place was large, but rather dark, and badly heated. Moreover there was no furniture. The actors rented a set of funeral chairs for the audience, and built a stage out of the minister's rostrum. Kemp conceived the idea of producing a series of authentic Indian mimes— religious and tribal rituals of the North American Indian. He inserted an advertisement in the world: 'Real Indians Wanted!' The church basement became the

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mecca of a caravan of feathered and painted Indians, real and otherwise. The Broadway redskins were willing to act the mimes, but knew nothing about tribal ritual; while the real Indians, belonging to The Five Nations, who came down from upstate, were well grounded in their own lore, but refused to display, what to them were sacred tribal rituals, before the white men. The Indian mimes, Kemp tells us, were finally acted by some college boys from the Bronx, in the borrowed costumes of The Five Nations, and Clifford Odets took the lead in the one-act drama. Broadway producers arrived the third night to sit uncomfortably on the funeral chairs, but to applaud heartily when the curtain came down. Heywood Brown, Alexander Woolcott, David Belasco, and William Brady appeared in the audience, and thereafter the critics began to watch the progress of Kemp's Poetry Theater with interest.

Asked what it was that finally broke up the movement, Kemp admits that despite the growing success of his Poetry Theater, he could not give it his undivided attention. Why?.... 'Well, while I lived in Minetta Lane, I had the top attic fixed up as a rendezvous... At that time I was in love with a young married woman, who had a wealthy pig of a husband... She used to come to me there... would drive down in a taxi. The 606 boys, who hung around the place, would fight among themselves as to who should open the door and assist her ladyship from the cab. They'd stand around like peasant boys with their 52 caps off, grinning and chewing on their quids. She was a lovely thing, and the gang was in awe of her.

'Later when I moved to Avenue A, we got an apartment together. Well, what started all the rumpus and finally resulted in the breakdown of the Poetry theater, was that her husband started a story in a Boston paper to the effect that I, Harry Kemp, had left a wife and four brats somewhere in the west and was now living in the village with another man's wife. The thing was absurd, and my lawyer uncovered that fact that there was a man by the name of 'Harry Kemp' — a laborer who was reported for desertion by his wife down in Arkansas or somewhere— and I was supposed to be him. My lawyer's name was Crooker. I had him file a suit for \$5000 for libel against the 'Boston American'. Nothing seemed to come of it, and that as I soon found out, was because Crooker was

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as crooked as his name. He accepted my fees and just let the thing ride. So I decided to take it on myself. I took a train down to Boston, and called on the editor of the 'American' A Hearst sheet. I told him it was my turn to give him some publicity. I said, I'm invited to a pressbanquet at which Willy Hearst is the guest of honor, and if I don't see \$5000 hit me through the mail before then, I'm going to pull Willy's pants down, lay him over a table and give him the spanking of his life... and I'll see that every paper in America carries the story and full particulars as to the grudge I bear the Boston American. I would have done it too. But next day I got a check for the \$5000. Somehow the affair left a bad taste in both our mouths... I split the money with my girl, and we shook hands, auf wiedereshen... She sailed for Paris with her pig of a husband....

'The theater began to pull on me... I guess I was getting old. I decided to settle down and do some writing... My cape and sword days were over.'