FRANK BACON ARRIVES

ALTHOUGH the technical skill of Winchell Smith is an admittedly large factor in the success of "Lightnin'," the night of the opening of that piece on Broadway probably brought the greater triumph to Frank Bacon. Smith, in the past eight or ten years, has put his hand to half a dozen plays and made successes of nearly all of them; Bacon, on the other hand, had struggled for years as an actor without emerging far out of the rank and file, and had even dabbled in playwriting with no marked results. His simultaneous triumph as actor and playwright, accordingly, made him easily the figure of the evening.

"Lightnin'" was originally Bacon's play. He called it "The House Divided," and as such he brought it to Winchell Smith some three years ago—prior to the formation of that author's partnership with John L. Golden, and, of course, prior to their success with "Turn to the Right!" Bacon, although he did not know it at the time, had been responsible for the original idea of a producing partnership between the two. The origin of the notion dates back some eight years, when Bacon succeeded Forrest Robinson in the rôle of the old druggist in Smith's play, "The Fortune Hunter," in Chicago. Smith, in the course of events, witnessed his performance, and upon his return to Chicago he sought out Golden. Bacon, at the time, was utterly unknown in New York.

"Come out with me to Chicago and take a look at an actor," said Smith to Golden. "He's the gol-darndest actor you ever saw in your life, and I think you and I ought to band together and make a star out of him."

Golden journeyed to Chicago, saw Bacon, and agreed. But plays with star parts for men of Bacon's age are rare, and one year slipped into another without anything of value coming along. In the meantime Bacon came to New York in other plays, but Smith and Golden never mentioned their plan to him lest they be permitted no peace from that day forth. Finally, however, Bacon came to Smith.

"I've written a play," was the way he began.

Smith's reply was characteristic.

"Are there any parts in it for anybody else?" he inquired.

But he read the play, and, as Bacon modestly said in his Monday night curtain speech, "decided that it was a good play if somebody would write it." He was in favor of taking hold of it immediately, but Golden dissuaded him, urging him instead to finish a play of his own on which he was working. Smith, however, insisted that he could rewrite "The House Divided" in two weeks—not a day more—and Golden, whose advice Smith strangely but invariably follows, told him to go ahead and do it. Instead of two weeks it took two years. In the meantime Smith and Golden joined hands as partners and produced "Turn to the Right!"

The first performances of "Lightnin'" were given in Washington last February. The play was not then quite in the shape in which it was revealed at the Gaiety on Monday, but it was sufficiently promising to cause the President and Mrs. Wilson to call Golden to their box to tell him that it was the most entertaining play they had ever seen. More tinkering followed, and the piece was then laid aside for the new season.

Probably only a small percentage of local theatregoers knew Frank Bacon by name on Monday afternoon, although 99 per cent. of them knew him Tuesday morning. Yet he has probably played more rôles than any other actor now living. He has made, however, only two or three appearances in New York. At the Alcazar Theatre, in San Francisco, Bacon played more than 700 parts in seventeen years of stock. In the thirteen years since then he has probably increased the number by several hundred more.

Bacon is a native Californian, and made several unsuccessful attempts to be a politician before he turned to the stage. For several years he appeared with traveling stock and repertory companies—those terrors of the old-time theatrical days—and then came his long term of service at the Alcazar. He might be there yet had it not been for the San Francisco earthquake. He came to New York and secured the rôle in "The Fortune Hunter," only to go again on the road with it. Then followed New York engagements in "Stop, Thief," "The Miracle Man," and "The Cinderella Man." In the last-named he made his first real success here.

Bacon wrote at least one play prior to "Lightnin'"—a piece called "Me and Lincoln." It was tried out in Newark a couple of years ago, but fell by the wayside.

The New York Times
Published: September 1, 1918
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