

Columbia Dramatist, Poet Has Written Since a Child

30th In a Series of Interviews

Blate
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Person interviewed: Mrs. Frances Guignard Gibbes Keith, 832 Pickens street, poet and playwright.

Q. Have you ever had any plays on Broadway, Mrs. Keith?

A. No. When "Hilda" came out, the first long play I wrote, I hoped that it might be produced. I went to New York to see a play broker. Later he came to see me. I asked him if he thought the public would like it and he said that he thought they would. I asked if the play should not be given to a play producer. He answered that if he showed the play to a play producer and the producer saw that it was poetical that he would be shown the door. That was about 1924. Poetic plays were not very popular then.

Q. Do you think they are more popular today?

A. The pseudo-poetic plays have become popular since then. They are no more than a rhythmic prose. I sent two plays, "The Strange Woman" and "Dawn in Carolina," to the annual Stanford university play contest. I didn't win the prize but the play producer expressed her liking for them. Belford Forrest was going to open the season with one of them but gave it up because he could not find a man that suited him for the leading role. I attended a conference on poetic drama at Stanford last summer.

Q. Did many attend the conference?

A. Quite a few considering how few people write poetic plays. They say the writing of these poetic plays is in cadences. You see the word used in reviews and other references.

Q. Have you entered a play in the Stanford contest this summer?

A. I sent this year a play called "Weapons." I told them it had no claim to distinction but that somebody might find some 'cadences' in them. I profess to be entirely ignorant of what cadences are. I haven't heard any report from the play yet. The contest is in August.

Q. How do you write a play, Mrs. Keith?

A. The idea takes possession of me and I have to express it in a dramatic way. For instance, I was reading in the Apocrypha, "Separate yourselves from the heathen of the land and from the women." I got the idea for "The Strange Woman" from it.

Q. I have read some of your sonnets and other poetry, Mrs. Keith. Have you written anything recently in this medium?

A. I have a book of poems coming out before Christmas. The book is to be called "The Mockingbird and Other Poems." I used this title because of the selection of the mockingbird as the state bird of South Carolina. I didn't know I had enough poems to make a volume but I collected some older ones, revised some of them and have managed to make a slim volume.

Q. How do you write a poem?

A. You feel something very much. It expresses itself, more or less, although you have to work awfully hard over it sometimes. Then you have to get your rhymes. The poetic medium can be as pliable as any prose if you work it over enough. It must be pliable so that the reader will not feel the mechanics of composition.

Q. Which of your poems do you like best?

A. "Articulate," which I wrote last year. It is the last I have written. I think it is pliable.

Q. Do you mind if we use this sonnet in the interview?

A. No, I have it here in this anthology.

ARTICULATE.

Words? Where may I find them to lay bare

The joy the morning floods into my heart?

Words adequate for singing? I would share

With some bright spirit my delight; a part

Of all this ecstasy now mine alone

I'd give away, but words seem shy of me;

When I would capture them, lo they have flown!

And yet they keep on calling tauntingly.

Though mute this red rose is articulate

Through beauty; that wood thrush gives his rapture in

A song; those scattered sunbeams scintillate

A golden eloquence and now within My spirit comes this call of words.

When all The earth sings I must hasten to my call.

Q. When did you first start writing poetry?

A. I started when I was a very little girl. They would set me up on the piano and I would spout original verse. I always wanted to write poetical plays but didn't think I could do it. After my illness I felt that I had to have something to forget pain and took up the poetical drama.

Q. Have you had any plays produced at the Town theater?

A. I've had five plays produced at the Town theater. One I had produced there was a perfect production. It couldn't have been produced any better at the Comedie Francaise. That play has been produced four other times, once at Palm Beach by professionals, but it couldn't compare with the production at the Town theater. I went to the Town theater production expecting to compromise, but I was carried away. I couldn't believe it was my own play.

Q. Which of your plays do you like best, Mrs. Keith?

A. I think "Hilda" is the best I have done. It is better than "The Face" as a poetical play. "The Face" has been more popular, however.

Q. How did you happen to write "The Face"?

A. Since a child I have always wanted to write a play about Leonardo da Vinci. I studied everything I could about Leonardo before I wrote it. I had an interesting experience as a result of this play. I saw where Caitani, the Italian ambassador to the United States (1915) had written a scientific essay on Leonardo and I thought I would send him my play on that subject. Upon receipt of the play he wrote a conventional note of thanks. I had almost forgotten about it when a second letter arrived about a year later, just before he left the United States to return to Italy, in which he expressed appreciation for the light which the play had thrown on the painting of "The Last Supper" for him.

Q. Do you like the historical theme best?

A. No, just anything that appeals to me.

Q. What are you reading at present, Mrs. Keith?

A. The newspapers.