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Introduction

Richard Foulkes

Why the 1890s should have produced an upsurge of dramatic activity across much of Europe will remain a subject of speculation and ultimately a mystery. No doubt, as Holbrook Jackson observed in his seminal work *The Eighteen Nineties*, the conclusion of a century does produce 'a quickening of life' – a heightened consciousness of 'our standing towards time' (1913, p. 18), but whilst this may create a context conducive to artistic activity it cannot explain the concurrence of multiple individual talents.

From Scandinavia the reputations of Björnson, Ibsen and Strindberg spread far afield. In France Antoine founded the Théâtre Libre and stages resounded to the diverse offerings of Sardou, Feydeau, Rostand and Jarry. Belgium produced its only dramatist of stature – Maurice Maeterlinck. German-speaking nations witnessed the plays of Wedekind, Schnitzler, Sudermann and Hauptmann. In Russia the partnership between Chekhov and Stanislavski was making history at the Moscow Arts Theatre. W. B. Yeats, Lady Gregory and other pioneers were preparing the ground for what was to become Ireland's Abbey Theatre.

In Britain Shaw established himself alongside Pinero, H. A. Jones, Oscar Wilde and J. M. Barrie – all of them dramatists whose works would speak not only to their contemporaries, but also to successive generations of theatregoers. Henry Irving reigned at the Lyceum with Ellen Terry as his glittering consort. Herbert Beerbohm Tree's ascendancy was consolidated at his new theatre, Her Majesty's. Frank Benson, Johnston Forbes-Robertson, Martin Harvey, Charles Wyndham and George Alexander practised the profession of the actor-manager. A new generation of actresses (Mrs Patrick Campbell, Elizabeth Robins and Janet Achurch) gave expression to the 'New Woman'. At the beginning of the decade J. T. Grein created the Independent Theatre and at the end of it the Stage Society was born.

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The principal landmarks on the theatrical map of the 1890s are familiar, but they are only part of a complex network covering the whole of Britain. During the closing decade of the nineteenth century theatregoers, whether they were in London, a major provincial city or a relatively remote community, had a tremendously rich and diverse theatrical fare from which to choose. The contributions to this volume shed new light on some of the recognised peaks of achievement: Pinero, H. A. Jones, Beerbohm Tree and Mrs Patrick Campbell, and perceive others (Shaw and Wilde) obliquely from different perspectives. The work of Charles Wyndham, Frank Benson and Martin Harvey is measured on the scale which it merits. Scrutiny is directed at such neglected terrain as J. L. Toole, Wilson Barrett, Louis Calvert, theatrical paintings, theatre architecture and portable theatres.

The 1890s have been dubbed the 'Naughty Nineties', an alliterative evocation of *fin de siècle* decadence in no small measure based on the reputation of the theatre, the music hall and other forms of entertainment during the period. The subject of morality is a recurring theme in the contributions to this book. The principal official guardian of decency was the Lord Chamberlain who, from 1737, was empowered to license (or censor) all plays for public performance – private play-producing societies such as the Stage Society were a means of circumventing his authority. As George Rowell recounts, the adaptations from the French undertaken for Charles Wyndham by F. C. Burnand (*Betsy*) and James Albery (*Pink Dominoes*) were thoroughly 'deodorised' to avoid incurring the strictures of the Lord Chamberlain. Translators of Ibsen had to steer a careful course between faithfulness to the original and official acceptability. All contemporary dramatists were obliged to observe the formalities of obtaining a licence for performances. Shaw revised *Mrs Warren's Profession*, his social drama about prostitution, omitting the second act and turning Mrs Warren into 'a female Fagin', in order to stage a copyright performance in March 1898. Even the ruse of a private performance was inhibited by the reluctance of theatre managers to risk official displeasure by making their theatres available for such occasions.

The Lord Chamberlain's function with regard to music hall was exercised more ambivalently, as Tracy C. Davis reveals. This was due to several factors – often it was the suggestive delivery of supposedly innocent sketches and songs which occasioned offence,

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but this was difficult to monitor since performances could be toned down if an official was in attendance.

The function of licensing metropolitan music halls passed from the local magistrates to the London County Council's Subcommittee on Theatres and Music Halls in 1889, but the Council was generally reluctant to confront the powerful managers of the more fashionable halls and clearly felt little concern for those principally patronised by the lower orders. Instead the role of guardian of public respectability was taken up by a number of voluntary agencies – Methodist, Wesleyan and Baptist congregations, the YMCA, total abstinence federations, Women's Rescue Missions and so on – to the extent that the East London Mission took over Wilton's Music Hall, the Salvation Army bought the notorious Grecian Theatre and Emma Cons converted what is now known as the Old Vic into a temperance hall.

Whilst the lower range of entertainment escaped the full weight of official surveillance, managers of theatres patronised by 'Society' not only observed the legal formalities but also felt obliged to embrace the role of semi-official spokesmen for the social conventions of the day. Thus Charles Wyndham, whose performances as Sir Richard Kato in H. A. Jones's *The Case of Rebellious Susan* and as Colonel Sir Christopher Deering in the same author's *The Liars* embodied the *raisonneur* of 'Society's' values (as does Cayley Drummle in Pinero's *The Second Mrs Tanqueray*), extended his brief to requiring Jones to expunge a line of Lady Susan Harabin's in the former play on the grounds that it would offend the sensitivities of his audiences. When Wyndham dined with the Prince of Wales at Marlborough House he was concerned about his host's condemnation of H. A. Jones's *The Bauble Shop* and subsequently sought clarification from the Duchess of Teck. The elevated social sphere in which leading actor-managers of the 1890s moved illustrates how far the profession had progressed from its lowly status at the beginning of Queen Victoria's reign. Actors now came from respectable middle-class families and were rewarded with knighthoods, Wyndham sharing the honours with Squire Bancroft in 1897, in the wake of Henry Irving, who was dubbed the first theatrical knight in 1895.

1897 was, of course, the year of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee and the occasion for a resurgence of patriotism, but what Holbrook Jackson termed the 'new patriotism' (1913, p. 289) can be traced back to early 1896 when the public imagination was seized by events

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in southern Africa, in particular the defeat of Jameson's raid. Jackson saw the trial of Oscar Wilde in 1895 as the moment of change in the decade, the first half being characterised by 'a literary and artistic renaissance, degenerating into decadence', the second by 'a new sense of patriotism degenerating into jingoism' (1913, p. 62). It is notable that William Archer and George Bernard Shaw both used the word jingo/jingoism (first recorded only in the 1880s) in their reviews of Shakespeare's *1 Henry IV* in the early months of 1896. Manifestly that long-neglected play struck a chord with the public mood of the time, giving theatrical expression to the 'new patriotism' of the day.

The identification of the British Empire with its Roman precursor is apparent in contemporary toga plays and productions of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. Herbert Beerbohm Tree's celebrated 1897 revival of *Julius Caesar* observed parallels between 'a luxurious Rome *fin de siècle*, over civilized and decadent' and contemporary society in the Empire's capital city. The toga plays, of which Wilson Barrett's *The Sign of the Cross* was pre-eminent, had, as David Mayer expounds, many often antithetical meanings, but the over-riding message was that 'An Empire that cannot accommodate Christianity will fail... [it] can only be redeemed and invigorated' by a new infusion of Christian values and morality. With such precepts toga plays enjoyed the endorsement of churchmen of the day. Martin Harvey's staging of *The Only Way* (adapted from Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities*) only achieved popular success when Sydney Carton's self-sacrifice was perceived in relation to events in the Boer War. The proceeds of the opening night of Tree's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in January 1900 were donated to the Mansion House Fund in aid of Transvaal Refugees.

It is, of course, common practice for each age to rediscover the classics of the past and to recreate them in its own image. This is true for artists who return to great literary, mythological and historical subjects. In the 1890s the kindred arts of painting and the stage were particularly closely entwined, as Shearer West outlines. The academician Lawrence Alma-Tadema lent his talents to many theatrical managers, including Henry Irving, Frank Benson and Beerbohm Tree. The pictorialism of Tree's staging of the Forum Scene in *Julius Caesar* was widely commended, creating a stage picture of meticulous detail and historical authenticity in the tradition of the Saxe-Meiningen Company's production, which had been seen in London

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in 1881. One of Tree's large corps of extras 'reproduced with excellent effect a well-known figure in Mr Tadema's picture "The Search for a Roman Emperor"'. In *Trilby*, Tree realised the illustrations from George Du Maurier's novel, and Martin Harvey's staging of the scaffold scene at the end of *The Only Way* was based on Fred Barnard's well-known illustration for Dickens's novel, and subsequently adapted by John Hassell as a striking poster to advertise the play.

Many of these incidents were staged as tableaux – a moment frozen in time in the form of a motionless stage picture. Tableaux were a recurrent feature of Tree's Shakespearian productions, often used to encapsulate battle scenes – Shrewsbury in *1 Henry IV*, Philippi in *Julius Caesar* and Angiers in *King John*, into which he also introduced a tableau depicting the Signing of Magna Carta. The tableau was, therefore, a perfectly respectable theatrical convention, deemed especially suitable for historical episodes.

The use of tableaux in the music hall shows how an art form can be subverted to more dubious ends. Subjects which were acceptable when hung on the walls of the Royal Academy were altogether more questionable when realised by human figures on the stage. Tracy C. Davis catalogues many examples: F. M. Bredt's *The Moorish Bath*, Johann Heinrich von Dannecker's *Ariane*, Henrietta Rae's *Naiad* and so on. The wordless tableaux were not susceptible to the Lord Chamberlain's strictures and attempts to impose the force of the law through magistrates' courts were generally fruitless.

The nakedness of the posing figures was veiled by body-stockings, tights, scarves, gauze and films of lace, but these did little to conceal, and indeed possibly heightened, the eroticism of the subjects. The eroticism of the music hall, even when based on the spurious respectability of artistic compositions, was blatant, but the legitimate theatre did not eschew titillation. In *Trilby*, as George Taylor points out, Dorothea Baird in her military greatcoat 'suggested winsome sexuality with her provocative bare feet – something never seen on the Victorian stage' as the artist's model Trilby O'Ferrall, who poses nude, albeit only offstage. Joel H. Kaplan describes Shaw's term 'Pineroticism' as 'a compulsive whirl of furs, fans, and female flesh'. Mrs Patrick Campbell's fragile, almost painfully thin features comprised 'a peculiar blend of Pre-Raphaelite sexuality and *memento mori*' which appealed to Aubrey Beardsley, whose *Yellow Book* portrait of her as Mrs Tanqueray is reproduced as plate 3. As Agnes Ebbsmith

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in Pinero's *The Notorious Mrs Ebbsmith* Mrs Patrick Campbell's appearance in the first two acts, wearing a plain brown dress, evoked the 'New Woman' of Ibsenite drama, but in the second half of the play, decked in a gown from 'Madame Bardini' of Florence 'cut rather lower in the pectoral regions than I [G. B. Shaw] had imagined' revealed alluringly bare arms and neck. The fact that whilst so dressed she burns a Bible allowed audiences 'to indulge in the same kind of fleshy religiosity that had made toga drama so popular in the period'. Certainly for all their moral propriety and antiquarianism toga dramas derived some of their appeal from 'the brief-but-exotically-jewelled costumes that were to be Barrett's trademark'.

Mrs Patrick Campbell and Dorothea Baird were 'discovered' for their respective roles of Mrs Tanqueray and Trilby O'Ferrall. As Joel H. Kaplan recounts, Pinero and George Alexander had considered many established actresses (Olga Nethersole, Marion Terry, Janet Achurch, Evelyn Millard and Elizabeth Robins) for the part before Graham Robertson and Florence Alexander spotted Mrs Patrick Campbell in *The Black Domino* and recognised her ability to play against type. Joel H. Kaplan demonstrates how she significantly moderated Pinero's characterisation of Paula Tanqueray, eschewing melodrama in favour of 'an inbred, almost casual, refinement, gaining her points by working against Pinero's dialogue and proverbially explicit stage directions'.

At any moment in the history of the theatre a range of acting styles is likely to be in evidence, as veteran performers trained in the old school perform alongside ingenues and beginners. This was particularly true in the 1890s, when the social composition of the acting profession was undergoing a transformation with the influx of well-educated recruits from non-theatrical families. In contrast J. L. Toole, sixty in 1890, had begun his career in 1852 in a stock company, where actors received a thorough apprenticeship in a large repertoire of plays. Michael Read describes Toole as 'the most flamboyant of Dickensian actor-managers, wrapping himself in the mantle of Elijah that he believed had lighted on his shoulders from the actor-managers who had employed him back in the fifties'. Toole's company included 'old-stagers' such as John Billington, George Shelton and Eliza Johnstone, who specialised in stereotypical lines of business derived from the 1850s and beyond. Side by side with these survivors from a bygone age were youngsters such as Mary

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Brough, whose career extended to Ben Travers's *A Cuckoo in the Nest* at the Aldwych Theatre.

The disparity in acting styles was evident in Shakespearian productions, as my account of Louis Calvert's career illustrates. Fred Everill (an actor from the 1850s) and J. S. Haydon upheld the traditions of mid-nineteenth-century acting with an emphatic, declamatory even, delivery. Some younger actors (William Mollison) perpetuated these conventions, whereas others, notably Lewis Waller as Hotspur, were hailed for their more natural speaking of blank verse. Janet Achurch, an actress much associated with Ibsen's plays, brought emotional intensity to the role of Cleopatra, but was 'inclined to chant her words', encouraged by an intrusive musical score. Shaw described her as a 'Brynhild-cum-Nora Helmer'. Janet Achurch, like so many of her contemporaries, had gained experience with Frank Benson, whose companies virtually became a training ground for the profession.

The major Shakespearian roles attracted actors from all backgrounds. J. L. Toole retained standard pieces from the mid-century in his repertoire, but also gave the young J. M. Barrie the opportunity for his first success, *Walker, London*, and staged his *Ibsen's Ghost, or Toole Up To Date*, though the latter was in the tradition of theatrical travesties. Charles Wyndham, although closely associated with H. A. Jones, also performed the plays of Dion Boucicault (*London Assurance*), Tom Robertson (*David Garrick*) and Tom Taylor (*Still Waters Run Deep*). Tree was the only established actor-manager to have any truck with Ibsen (*An Enemy of the People* in 1893), but his greatest success was as the mysterious and sinister mesmerist Svengali (in *Trilby*), which suited his own distinctive Bohemian personality.

The greatest blessing that could befall an actor-manager was a personal vehicle which ensured him remunerative employment for as long as public interest could be sustained. *Trilby* served this function for Tree, *The Sign of the Cross* for Wilson Barrett and *The Only Way* for Martin Harvey. The sustaining of a personal success had implications for managerial policy. All three of the above-mentioned plays were recurrently popular outside London, and at one time Wilson Barrett had three touring companies of *The Sign of the Cross* on the road. Frank Benson, who functioned almost exclusively in the provinces, save for rare seasons in the capital, also extended his operations to three companies, though Stratford-upon-Avon effectively became his base. J. L. Toole made the profits to renovate his London theatre

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from touring and, although he maintained a stock company, he was the first to exploit the long run by ingeniously combining concurrently a provincial tour and a continuous West End run of J. M. Barrie's *Walker, London*, totalling a thousand performances in all. The exploitation of successes not only made sound economic sense (better payment for actors and authors), but it also made for an easier professional life, more congenial to newcomers to the profession. The expansion of the railway network and the construction of new theatres in provincial towns and cities facilitated this development.

The principle of an extended repertoire of plays was upheld by the travelling theatres, such as Jennings's theatre which, in a two-month season in 1895, offered forty-six plays over forty-eight performances. Interestingly, as Josephine Harrop notes, Jennings's repertoire in March 1896 included *Trilby*, just five months after Tree's production had opened in London. On the face of it no two theatres could be more dissimilar than the humble travelling structure, with its modest budget of a few shillings for a painted set, and Tree's West End opulence. Yet the travelling theatres were not altogether spartan: 'There was a good deal of gilding and other decoration.'

Such theatres did not require the services of an architect, but those who specialised in theatre design were not short of work in the 1890s. The most prolific, as Hugh Maguire states, were C. J. Phipps, Frank Matcham and Walter Emden. Theatres in the provinces were often circumscribed by cramped sites, limited budgets and the need to accommodate a variety of fare, but surviving examples have proved their charm and serviceability. In London, architects had the opportunity to create playhouses which were suited to a particular form of entertainment. Thus 'the pocket-sized Criterion Theatre [in fact built in 1874]...cried out for the delicacy and understatement of sophisticated comedy and resisted the demands of broad farce or spectacular melodrama'. The grandest new theatre of the decade was Her Majesty's in London's Haymarket, which was designed by C. J. Phipps for Beerbohm Tree, costing £60,000, but with a compensating capacity of £370. Its French chateau style of exterior was sustained in its dignified interior, which provided a suitable context for the grandeur of productions such as *Julius Caesar*.

The most contentious form of theatre architecture was the music hall, where prostitutes promenaded the lobbies, which were not separated from the auditorium. The contiguity of prostitution and sexually provocative entertainment was a major issue for reformers, who targeted their campaign on the Empire Theatre of Varieties.

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The London County Council's ruling that barriers must be installed at the back of the dress and upper circles so that men could not consort with prostitutes in the promenades and watch the stage performance at the same time was a major achievement for the moralists.

It is fitting and probably inevitable that any attempt to distil the nature of the theatre in the 1890s should conclude with the issue of morality. The decade was, not uniquely, but pronouncedly, two-faced. Official restraints were unevenly imposed. The legitimate theatre was hemmed in by the Lord Chamberlain's powers which inhibited, though did not suppress, the avant-garde – and more serious – developments of the day. On the other hand, the authorities were reluctant to enforce their powers in the music hall, leaving the initiative to private reformers. The music hall cloaked (or at least veiled) its more salacious fare under the guise of academic respectability in the realisation of classical subjects based on fine art. Mrs Patrick Campbell's performances prompted Shaw to coin the word 'Pineroticism' and the glimpse of Dorothea Baird's bare feet added to the allure of *Trilby* at Tree's temple of drama, Her Majesty's. Even the churchmen who commended Wilson Barrett's toga plays were probably not immune to the delights of the exotically scanty costumes on display in them.

As well as being two-faced the 1890s were Janus-faced. In repertoire and acting styles the decade looked back to the mid-nineteenth century and forward well into the twentieth. In terms of its legacy to the future it can stand comparison with any decade in theatre history.

Leaving aside the far-reaching impact of Ibsen and Chekhov/Stanislavski from overseas, the British theatre gave us plays by Shaw, Wilde, Pinero, Jones and Barrie. Acting is an ephemeral art, but the performances of Irving, Terry, Tree, Mrs Patrick Campbell, Martin Harvey and many others can still be invoked through the reviews of the notable corps of drama critics which included Shaw, Archer, Max Beerbohm and Clement Scott. Paintings, photographs and that quintessentially nineties medium the caricature (as practised by Beardsley and Max Beerbohm) provide an enduring record. More substantially the theatres of C. J. Phipps, Frank Matcham and others survive to house the work of subsequent generations of dramatists, actors and scene-designers, who will never be able to disregard, and may well be indebted to, the achievements of their predecessors in the final decade of the nineteenth century.

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CHAPTER I

J. L. Toole's theatre of farce: ancient and modern

Michael Read

A visitor arriving at the stage door of Toole's Theatre in the early 1890s would have been in for a shock if by mistake he had entered the door next to it, for he would have found himself in the mortuary of Charing Cross Hospital. The actors could not ignore the presence of their cadaveric neighbours. There were times when they were scarcely able to enter into the light-hearted spirit of the plays they had come to perform, having seen, shortly before, some of the bodies being removed for dissection.

Grisly scenes such as this were fortunately kept from their audiences. The stage door and the morgue were tucked away in Chandos Place out of sight of the public entrances, all of which were in William IV Street. It was, none the less, an inauspicious approach. In the 1890s, when it was known as King William Street, the road that brought the public to the late-Victorian home of farce was a quiet, ill-lit cut between St Martin's Lane and the Strand, and was dominated by the hospital, which all but enclosed the theatre from above and on either side. Not far away, but in settings that were notably busier and brighter, there stood the Adelphi and Savoy theatres, the homes respectively of English melodrama and comic opera. The Savoy was incorporated into the luxury hotel of the same name. Toole's, in contrast, had for its neighbours the patients, staff and pickled corpses of Charing Cross Hospital.

And difficult neighbours they proved to be. On at least one occasion the dressing-rooms were flooded by a pinkish, clean-smelling liquid from the tanks in which the bodies were kept for dissection. The cast, half-dressed before the play, waded up to their knees through the morbid solution, retrieving straw hats and boating collars as they floated by. As the theatre was owned by the hospital, there was little redress (Hicks, 1930, pp. 19–20; Hicks, 1939, p. 104).

For much of the nineteenth century the hospital's governors had

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