

1 Introduction

GEORGE ROWELL AND ANTHONY JACKSON

IT IS SURPRISING that until now there has been no sustained account published of the British repertory movement. It is surprising because that movement, beginning to all intents and purposes in 1907 with Miss Horniman's company in Manchester, but with roots in ideas and experiments stretching back into the previous century, has played a vital – often a dominant – role in the British twentieth-century theatre. In the two most recent decades indeed it has come to provide both the basic energy of the nation's theatre and much of its very life-blood too. Its history has hitherto been recorded by or been about participants in the movement, or has focussed on individual theatres and particular periods. To such as J.C. Trewin on Birmingham, Rex Pogson on Manchester, Grace Wyndham Goldie on Liverpool, and the books of influential figures such as Basil Dean, Iden Payne, Tyrone Guthrie and Norman Marshall, and of more recent commentators such as John Elsom, the student of the subject is deeply indebted. But a survey of the movement as a whole has until now been lacking. Some seventy-five years on, it seems appropriate to take stock of its development, its achievements, its contribution to the British theatre's sense of itself – and this the present study strives to do.

The term 'repertory' is a much used and abused one and, at the risk of stating the obvious, we should perhaps make clear at the outset the sense in which we are using it. Strictly, a repertory theatre is one that stages its plays in rotation, building over a period of a year or more a store of productions that are offered to the public on a regularly changing basis, each play being performed no more than a week at a time but brought back at frequent intervals according to public demand. This, essentially, is the pattern adopted at the National Theatre in London and the norm at most of the large state and civic theatres in the rest of Europe. But the term in Britain has come to be used far more loosely, and it is the looser and more common usage that we employ here. What characterises the average British repertory theatre now – and indeed what has done for most of the movement's history – is that its season of plays, while conceived as a whole, is yet presented in a single linear sequence: each production runs for three or four weeks at a time (much less before the advent of subsidy), with no rotation, no return of plays once done, no 'repertoire' as such. Excep-

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tions to the rule, as might be expected, abound. And there are, and have been, repertory theatres organised on strictly repertory lines. Indeed, symptomatic of the general practice has been the coining of the term 'true repertory' to indicate a theatre system based on the Continental model. It is a term, too, that, for the sake of clarity, we shall employ here when appropriate.

Repertory in this looser, broader sense does, however, contain a whole cluster of other important meanings and associations that need to be pinpointed and recognised before the historical account can begin. Broadly, repertory theatres in Britain have seen themselves as determinedly non-commercial in approach, based in and serving a specific community or region and providing a wide range of plays, new and classic, challenging and popular. Emphases and practice have undergone considerable shifts over the decades. But behind the shifts, the twists, turns and contradictions in the development of repertory has been the sense of a cause to be fought. Repertory, in fact, from the very beginning has been an *idea* in the minds of its advocates as much as it has been a practical method of presenting plays. Already at the turn of the century, the idea of repertory – as a form of theatre opposed in every way to the dominant commercial theatre of the time – had become an integral part of the developing concern with the future of the theatre in Britain. It had become inseparably linked to such other central issues as the need to establish a state-subsidised national theatre organised on repertory principles, the need to encourage new British playwrights, and the need to raise the general standards of production. At the same time, awareness was growing of the theatre's potency as an educative as well as artistic or entertainment medium, and therefore of its importance in the cultural life of the country as a whole – in the regions at least as much as in London. In all such areas the 'repertory idea' was seen to be crucial, and hence came to embrace before long the general concern for renewing the vitality of the theatre and for re-establishing theatre's links with its community. From this general concern it was only a short step to the assertion of the theatre's necessary role as a cultural service, to be supported by public funds just as were libraries, museums and art galleries. Without doubt the inspirational value of the repertory idea together with the movement to translate it into reality – involving failure as much as success – have been at the centre of the subsequent development of theatre in Britain.

Theory and practice have often diverged, of course, and still do – often because of unbending economic realities or the personal whims of artistic directors, but most of all because the theory has never been hard and fast. The repertory movement was not imposed from without, was not part of any national plan, but evolved from a whole gamut of complex factors, not least being the personal visions and driving energies of particular personalities. Similarly the repertory idea itself was never seen as one static

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goal to be reached but has been subject to constant expansion and redefinition as decades have passed. There are, none the less, larger, underlying patterns in the history of the movement that do present themselves and which this study will attempt to describe. One such pattern demands attention now, for it will help to place the detailed chronological account to follow in clearer perspective and explain, for example, the space given to the nineteenth-century background and likewise our emphasis upon the regional dimension.

The repertory movement was propelled by a double revolt against the Edwardian theatrical establishment: a revolt against the dramatic fare offered by London managers and actors, and against the exploitation of the provincial theatre as the market for metropolitan products. Often the two rebellions coincided, as in the fostering of Irish nationalist drama at the Abbey Theatre, Dublin, or the Lancashire school of playwrights based on the Gaiety, Manchester. Both took sustenance from local pride and local disillusion with London hallmarks. But they were also only the more dramatic signs of the gradual but total transformation of the provincial scene which the repertory movement was to bring about.

Most of the early champions of that movement selected the touring company as their chief target. 'A smudged carbon-copy of last year's West End success' was the standard accusation hurled at the latest attraction in their local Theatre Royal. While one cannot defend *in toto* the touring system established in the last quarter of the Victorian era, it may be salutary to recall that the system was itself hailed as a renaissance of dramatic standards during the 1870s and 1880s. Before that provincial playgoers might see London stars, but they would be supported by an uneven and under-rehearsed stock company and mostly stock (or improvised) sets and costumes. Of course the touring system invited abuse; an organisation as widely spread as the Victorian and Edwardian theatre encouraged managements to undertake mass production, and it was against the second-, third- and fourth-rate companies that the pioneers of repertory mainly made their stand. In the cyclic fashion of human endeavour they looked back longingly to the days of the resident manager, local favourites and even local plays. When one of these pioneers, Alfred Wareing, tried to persuade Miss Horniman, that patroness of early repertory, to finance his Glasgow project, he proposed 'the re-establishment of a stock company with a repertory of modern plays', while some years earlier Granville Barker had planned his venture at the Royal Court in terms of 'a stock season of the uncommercial Drama'.

Although the first wave of repertory subsided as a result of the First World War, there was a steady renaissance of the movement in the 1920s and 30s, much encouraged by the shrinking during this period of the provincial touring circuit at the challenge of first the 'movies' and then the

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'talkies'. Again local pride, sometimes sustained by amateur effort in the best sense of labouring for love, contributed greatly. In the 1930s too a species of 'commercial' repertory grew up to challenge the local strain: circuits of 'chain store' companies financed by London impresarios which to some extent took the place of the old touring companies, now decimated by the all-conquering cinema. The ground gained by the repertory movement in this period is graphically summarised in Cecil Chisholm's informative mid thirties survey, *Repertory: an outline of the modern theatre movement*. In 1934 the coexistence of thirty-seven repertory and thirty-seven touring companies was noted, whereas twenty years earlier, at the outbreak of the War, there had been 'twelve stock companies and 170 touring companies'. The cinema had taken its toll but not at the expense of the local rep.

This diarchy in the provincial theatre survived and even flourished in the austere siege conditions of the Second World War, expanding in the decade 1945–55, only to fall victim to the television set and home entertainment provided first by the BBC and, from 1955, by commercial television. 'Commercial' repertory sustained a mortal blow but the local brand was saved by increasing blood-transfusions from Arts Council and local government sources. At the same time the label 'rep', now devalued by its identification with the commercial product of the late thirties and forties, was largely discarded in favour of 'regional', a term accurate as far as the appeal and support of the companies in question were concerned but less precise when applied to their personnel and repertoire.

The distinction between 'local' and 'commercial' rep might have disappeared, but another quickly replaced it. In 1971 John Elsom, writing in his *Theatre Outside London* and drawing on his experience with the Arts Council, awarded merit marks for the ambitious programme, which he termed *haute couture* and identified in such salons as Nottingham, Birmingham, Bristol and Oxford, as opposed to 'something for everybody' (termed *prête-à-porter* – 'ready to wear'). Of course this distinction could hardly have arisen without the steady flow of funds into existing companies from the Arts Council and local authorities which characterised the 1950s and 1960s, and more particularly the building of regional theatres by a number of enlightened councils. The welcome assistance from public funds which many reps now received opened up the possibility not merely of new purpose-built homes but also of higher production standards in general.

Today too the repertory company performs a very different function from that envisaged by Miss Horniman in 1907, or by the Arts Council when it established the Bristol Old Vic in 1946. It is even faced with a different task from that for which John Elsom awarded merit and de-merit marks in 1971. It has had to assume the responsibilities of both the commercial repertories and the touring circuit, except for highly specialised

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offerings such as opera and ballet. Thus Elsom's *prête-à-porter* has become not so much 'off the peg' as 'your only repertory wear'. There is no other shop for the bulk of the provincial playgoing public to buy from.

There remains the sphere of *haute couture*, but it is surely a totally transformed branch of tailoring. In particular the establishment of the National Theatre and the diversification of the Royal Shakespeare Company have taken over some of the tasks once assumed by leading reps as a challenge to the commercial managements. If the repertory company entrusted with a substantial sum of public money has to cater for the playgoing public on the same lines as the librarian caters for the reader, there arises a need for an 'alternative' theatre: avant-garde, experimental, committed, élitist, educational – each adjective and school has its merits and de-merits. But the cyclic movement noted in connection with the Victorian stock company is no less apparent in the history of the repertory company, seen as an alternative to some theatrical 'establishment'. It is now the establishment.

The scope of our study, then, is first and foremost the history of the movement in Britain from its origins in the nineteenth century up to the present day, concentrating upon the general underlying patterns and achievements. Inevitably our approach has had to be selective and theatres have been chosen for discussion because they illustrate those patterns and achievements particularly well, not because they are the only theatres worth discussing. We have not dealt in any great detail with repertory developments in London (such as those at the Old Vic, the Royal Court, the National Theatre or the Royal Shakespeare Company's various London homes) except insofar as they represent a pivotal stage in the development of repertory or illuminate especially effectively an important aspect of it. We see repertory as primarily a regional phenomenon. Similarly – for the sake of maintaining the sharpest possible focus – we do not discuss in detail those parallel and influential developments that took place across the seas, in Dublin and in the great theatrical centres of Paris, Berlin and elsewhere in Europe. Those developments were important in their own right and often exerted considerable influence upon British practice and ideas. But repertory in Britain was not an offspring of nor modelled slavishly upon theatre systems elsewhere. Its development was unique (not necessarily better or worse), and it is the study of its growth within and the contribution it has made to British theatre in general that we have felt to be our primary task here.

The chapters we have written separately, though not in isolation. While responsibility for the judgements made in each are the author's own, we have each benefitted from the critical scrutiny and constructive comment of the other. Our emphases and interpretations may be different from chapter to chapter, but a shared belief in the importance of the subject and in the significance of its many achievements underpins our collaboration.

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IN THE COURSE of the nineteenth century the British theatre evolved from a minority interest to a national industry. The impact of the Industrial Revolution was no less extensive on the country's recreation than on its growth and distribution of population. In the Georgian period the scope of the theatre had been severely restricted, as much by legal as by physical limits. London was permitted its two 'patent' theatres – Drury Lane and Covent Garden; its opera house, the King's Theatre; and a 'summer' playhouse, the Haymarket, providing entertainment when the patents were shut. Any competition was liable to infringe the Licensing Act of 1737, a statute designed by Walpole to silence the playwright with political intent, but exploited to muzzle the drama in general. Outside London all stage performances were suspect and subject to the authority of the local magistrates and the greed or spite of the common informer. Some sort of theatrical activity continued, but it was inevitably fugitive and often clandestine. The strolling player was despised as a rogue and vagabond, and his audience forced to play the conspirator and accomplice.

Nevertheless in the latter part of the Georgian era official recognition of the provincial theatre slowly progressed. Patents granted to companies in the more important centres protected their endeavours and earned their playhouses the title of Theatres Royal. Bath, Norwich, York and Hull were so recognised in the 1760s; Liverpool, Manchester and Bristol in the 1770s; Newcastle in the 1780s. This relaxation of the embargo on provincial playmaking also encouraged those companies who moved from town to town, setting up their stage in hall or inn, planning their visits to coincide with a fair, a race meeting or the assizes, and building up a 'circuit' which grew in reputation and respectability. A substantial step forward in this growth was the passing in 1788 of a statute allowing magistrates to license performances for sixty days at any one time, since a two-month season was as much as most communities could sustain.

The way was thus cleared at the turn of the century for a large-scale expansion of theatrical activity for which the country evinced a rapidly increasing appetite. By 1827 Leman T. Rede in his *Road to the Stage* records details of forty-nine companies, several of them based on well-

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established Theatres Royal, such as Manchester (from which the players travelled as far afield as Shrewsbury and Lichfield), York and Newcastle, but others covering less populated areas. By 1833 the proliferation of playhouses was such that John Miller ('Agent to the Dramatic Authors' Society') could compile *An Alphabetical List of Theatres in the United Kingdom* running to over 200 entries.¹ By no means all of these dared call themselves Theatres Royal or claim to be purpose-built, and many functioned for only a few weeks of the year. Nevertheless their identity and location were well-enough established to figure on the Dramatic Authors' list, and in the majority of cases the inclusion of a manager's name indicated professional continuity and commercial stability. Equally notable is the provision in the bigger industrial centres of a number of halls offering a diversity of entertainment, including music, song, dance and circus, as well as the drama. Liverpool, for example, is listed as providing six, and by the 1840s Glasgow could cap this with seven.

THE STOCK COMPANY

The basis of all this activity was the stock company, a semi-permanent group managed by a leading actor and fulfilling the function of players and family circle simultaneously. Dickens' affectionate portrait in *Nicholas Nickleby* of the Crummles Company (apparently inspired by a Hampshire manager, T.D. Davenport, with a daughter able or at least required to play Shylock, Richard III and Sir Peter Teazle)² should not be credited as a just account of the entire theatrical profession outside London in his youth. Not only were many of the Theatres Royal capably managed but some at least of the circuits achieved consistently high standards: Sarah Baker made the Canterbury circuit a recognised training-ground at the start of the century.

Certainly membership of a stock company equipped a young actor for all emergencies, and the demands made on him were daunting. The evening's bill might include four or five items and extend from seven to midnight to appease the 'half price' public, precluded by their working hours from the early portion. The majority of the company would be expected to take part in most of these items, some of which were changed nightly and many of which were changed weekly. A succession of farces, melodramas, pantomimes, interspersed with dancing, singing and acrobatics, stretched them mentally and physically beyond modern comprehension. During his first three years as an actor Irving, for example, undertook 428 characters before making a (dismally unsuccessful) London debut.³ His contemporary, Squire Bancroft, claimed to have played 346 parts in numerous provincial companies between 1860 and 1865, and was positive that 'the repetition of many of those in standard plays, and some of them often, not

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only in different theatres but with different actors, was alone of the greatest service'.⁴

As an apprenticeship to acting the stock company was rich in experience if poor in pecuniary reward, but such an output was made possible only by a species of conveyor-belt manufacture on the part of both actor and author. The plays themselves, when original (a flattering term since the majority were adapted from some other source), were products of ready-made theatrical tailoring. The characters proclaimed their cut, being labelled 'Comedy Lead'; 'Character Comedy'; '1st Old Man' (usually fat); '2nd Old Man' (usually thin); '1st Old Woman' (proportions unspecified); 'Singing Chambermaid' (brilliance more important than bed-making); down to the humble 'Utility' and 'Walking Gentleman' (so called because he seldom talked). Actors knew their 'line' if not their lines, and borrowed dialogue from one play for another without the audience's knowing or their colleagues suffering, provided they 'came to cues'.

Indeed these colleagues rarely noticed the loan, since they were supplied only with 'sides' (long sheets of manuscript) which revealed their own lines and the preceding cue. The importance of a part was measured in 'sides', and the actor could only guess at the development of the drama until the first reading or rehearsal. Margaret Webster, descendant of two theatrical houses, the Websters and the Whittys, reprints in her family history a splendidly perplexing extract from such a 'side':

HERO: I love you, my darling, and shall love you till I die.

HEROINE: [*cue*] . . . very much.

HERO: Ah! (*Shoots himself*)⁵

Sometimes the unfortunate actor was not even supplied with a 'side' but required to write out his lines from the manuscript prompt-copy.

Inevitably rehearsals were cut to the bone. As a very young man in the late 1840s John Coleman, an actor who was to preserve the traditions of the stock company into the next century, joined the Lincoln circuit when its troupe were playing at Leicester. The company was then run by Mr and Mrs Robertson, a fertile couple who produced at least seventeen children, including a famous playwright, Tom, and a famous actress, Madge, later Dame Madge Kendal. The matriarchal Mrs Robertson was too pre-occupied to attend rehearsal:

'Mrs Robertson!' called the Prompter.

'Mrs Robertson is looking out the checks. Read for her', grimly remarked Mr Robertson.

'Gabble-gabble,' commenced the Prompter – 'gabble! Now, sir, that's your cue. On you come from behind the centre arch.'

'Where will the arch be?'

'Where will the arch be, Casson?' inquired the Prompter.

'Second grooves', replied the master-carpenter.

'It will be a drawing-room. Here is a chair; there a table', continued the Prompter.

'But I don't see either the one or the other', I replied.

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'No, but you will at night . . . Gabble-gabble – squeak. Cross to right, then to left and up centre. Mind you give Mrs Robertson the stage: she wants plenty of elbow-room.'⁶

Other stock companies managed matters better. Madge Robertson herself joined the company at the Theatre Royal, Bristol, for fifty years ruled by the Macready family and at this period (the 1860s) under W.C. Macready's step-brother-in-law, James Henry Chute:

Our governor is a fine-looking man, deep in the chest, broad in the shoulders – well set up, twinkling eyes – that can be severe – broad massive forehead and a large moustache. His hands are Frenchy in their action, and he is never seen without a pair of gloves – which I am told by old hands he has never been known to put on . . .

wrote another aspirant, William Rignold,⁷ when joining the Bristol band, where at various times the two eldest Terry sisters, Kate and Ellen, and Marie Wilton (later Mrs Bancroft) also learnt their craft. In this decade another manager, Charles Calvert, raised the prestige of his Manchester stock company, first at the Theatre Royal, later at the newly built Prince's, to gain national recognition. His productions of Shakespeare in particular continued and refined on the traditions of Samuel Phelps (under whom he had served) and inspired those of Irving, who played his first Hamlet at Manchester.

SPECIAL ENGAGEMENTS

What undermined the authority and standards of the stock company was the increasing popularity of visiting performers with a London reputation. Theatrical expansion in the capital matched that in the provinces. By 1850 there were some thirty-five theatres or halls offering theatrical entertainment, and in 1843 the privileges of the 'patent' theatres were recognised as outdated, the distinction between them and the newer 'minors' abolished by the Theatre Regulation Act, and the restrictions on the latter's bill of fare lifted. Until their emancipation the 'minors' had been limited to the 'burletta', an ill-defined term interpreted as any dramatic work with a musical content, often referred to as 'illegitimate drama' as opposed to the 'legitimate' sphere reluctantly upheld by the 'patents'.

One consequence of this greatly increased theatrical activity and the attention paid to it in the expanding popular press was the creation of 'star' actors who could command leading parts and lavish payment by touring. A handful of Georgian favourites had tided over the summer recess in London by accepting engagements in a few provincial theatres, but the early-nineteenth-century stars – Edmund Kean, W.C. Macready, Charles Kemble and his daughter, Fanny, Charles Kean and his wife, Ellen – could arrange to tour for months, if not years, and with North America and Australia offering increasing opportunities, it often paid them better to travel than to remain in London and take the risks.

Until the 1860s they travelled alone, or at most with a supporting

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player, undertaking a round of parts in a round of plays. The quality and character of the resulting performance may be imagined. There was little time (and with some stars little inclination) for rehearsal. Samuel Phelps, later to make Sadler's Wells the home of Shakespeare for twenty years, was a minor member of the York company in the late 1820s when Edmund Kean joined them to exhibit the remains of his once staggering powers, and found himself cast as Tubal to the star's Shylock:

He didn't come to rehearsal, and although Lee, his secretary, rehearsed carefully enough, I did not know where to find Kean at night, for he crossed here, there, and everywhere, and prowled about like a caged tiger. I never took my eyes off him. I dodged him up and down, crossed when he crossed, took up my cues, and got on pretty fairly, till he thoroughly flabbergasted me by hissing, 'Get out of my focus! Blast you! – get out of my focus!'

Phelps loyally adds: 'With the exception of this trifling hitch the scene went like a whirlwind.'⁸

Yet even with stars prepared to rehearse, the effect of their annexing the leading roles and the public's adulation of the visitor were demoralising to the resident company. In his *Diaries* Macready, a star of a very different stamp from Kean, catalogued a dismal series of supporting actors, incompetent, intemperate or perhaps just terrified of the Great Man. In the performance of *Virginius* at Bath in 1836

The Icilius (a Mr Savile) was either half-stupidly drunk, or is, as is very probable, a born ass. Virginia would have made an excellent representation of Appius' cook, as far as appearance went, added to which she seemed to think that she was playing Virginius, not Virginia, and fortified herself for some extraordinary efforts by a stimulant which was too easily detected on a near approach to her.⁹

Nevertheless Bath was one of the leading provincial theatres and its stock company a nursery for London favourites.

INTRODUCTION OF THE TOURING COMPANY

Even more damaging to the smaller stock companies was the transformation of the repertoire. Until the turn of the century a handful of tragedies (Shakespeare interspersed with the occasional Otway or Addison's *Cato*) and a modest selection of comedies, including afterpieces, had served the strollers season after season. But the nineteenth-century taste was for spectacular scenes and melodramatic plots, depending heavily on the new stage technology of the Industrial Age: gas-light, 'flown' scenery, 'cut-cloths', gauzes, trap-work of various kinds, a full complement of supernumeraries and a squad of technicians to stage-manage miracles. Only the better-equipped houses in the bigger centres could accomplish all this, and even those found themselves hard pressed to do so within the constantly changing bill by which the stock company survived. Visiting stars were an effective if expensive attraction, but provincial audiences became increasingly critical of a Macready supported by