Introduction

Writing for the Dramatic Review in the winter of 1885 William Archer predicted that “the fashion-play” would become “the art-form of the late nineteenth century.” Replying to dramatist Dion Boucicault, who had condemned works in which leading ladies wore “six or seven new dresses” the same night, Archer insisted, tongue-in-cheek, that comedy and melodrama, the principal genres of the previous century, were spent forces. What was wanted, in a new age, was rather “the courage to do openly what many have surreptitiously attempted, namely, to dramatize a fashion plate.” The benefits of such a drama were readily apparent, from the befuddlement of the Lord Chamberlain’s Office, which did not generally “meddle with … dress,” to the prospect of a large, paying public on both sides of the Atlantic. Indeed, so timely was the venture that, if approached in the proper spirit, it promised to “become a national solemnity, uniting all classes and parties, like the trilogies of Athens or the circus sports of Rome” (8 February 1885, 20–21). In the event, Archer spoke more prophetically than he knew. Over the next quarter-century the vexed relationship between fashion and the stage would intrude itself into the center of late Victorian and Edwardian social life, helping to shape phenomena as seemingly disparate as the emergence of the society playhouse, the coming of Ibsen, the rise of the modern fashion show, and the adoption of “dress codes” by militant suffragettes. It would also affect, more specifically, the production and reception of dramatic texts by writers both canonical and now marginalized, from Oscar Wilde, Arthur Pinero, Bernard Shaw, and Harley Granville Barker, to Cicely Hamilton, Elizabeth Baker, Emily Symonds, and Edward Knoeblock. The broad interplay between theatre and community in which these events participated included, besides playscripts and their presenters, a privileged audience unsure of its own boundaries, and an enterprising group of West End modistes
Theatre and fashion

eager to exploit theatre connections to compete with established rivals. Both the stage traffic that resulted, in women’s bodies as well as gowns, and the uses to which such traffic was put by playwrights intent upon anatomizing fashion products and gender roles, offer a unique opportunity to reassess a self-conscious employment of stage dress Roland Barthes, in “The Diseases of Costume,” has condemned as “pathological” (pp. 41–50). If couture house clothes are, in Barthes’s terminology, too “hypertrophied” to assist in the arduous tasks of argument or signification, what happens when fashion itself becomes the subject as well as a means of dramatic discourse?

The five chapters that make up the present volume explore from a range of complementary viewpoints the shifting relationship between theatre, fashion, and society, in the period that separates Lady Windermere’s Fan from the outbreak of the Great War. In attempting to bring to bear upon some quarter-century of theatre history recent work in fashion studies, social history, and dramatic literature, we have drawn freely (and eclectically) upon a variety of approaches, from performance phenomenology and reception theory to feminist historiography and theatre semiotics. We have, in the process, tried to listen to voices speaking from the period itself, consulting a wide range of published and unpublished materials, including theatre prompt books, rehearsal notes, costumes and costume renderings, fashion house and department store records, personal correspondence, and, above all, some sixty periodicals addressing, for diverse publics, contemporary issues of dress, theatre, and fashion politics. An initial chapter attempts to reclaim a cultural matrix for the society comedies of the fin de siècle. Its starting-point is the convergence in the early 1890s of an aggressive fashion press, innovative merchandising by a new breed of independent dressmakers, and the transformation of a select group of West End theatres into an essential part of the London Season. Upon stages like the Haymarket, the Criterion, and the St. James’s, we argue, leading ladies not only served as living mannequins, displaying for their more affluent patrons a selection of couture house goods, but in so doing completed within the playhouses themselves a voyeuristic triangle between stage, stalls, and gallery that echoed the arrangement of semi-public society events like Ascot, Henley, and the Derby. It was a dynamic exploited by Oscar Wilde and Henry Arthur Jones, who in a series of comedies that replicated the minutiae of fashionable life enabled the
stage to gaze back at its viewers. Wilde’s complaint in 1891 that Victorian sobriety had turned men’s formal wear into a “frame” or dark border used “to isolate and separate women’s dresses” articulated a tactical problem. How to create precise but expansive visual texts out of the male restraint and female display that had come to characterize late Victorian fashion? Wilde’s response was to challenge his dandies with the task of expressing themselves through a dwindling vocabulary of visual forms. Hence the importance attached to the well-made tie and carefully thought-out buttonhole. Women’s costume offered, in contrast, a broad field for sartorial play, enabling icons of mid-century melodrama to be turned, through the efforts of firms like Lewis and Allenby, Mary Elizabeth Humble, and Mesdames Savage and Purdue, into fashion “statements” that challenged moral and aesthetic orthodoxies. Jones’s more frontal assault upon the objects of good society is best seen in The Liars (Criterion 1897). The bleakest of the decade’s comedies of modern life, the rot beneath its glittering surface was signaled by the engagement of the couturière Lucile, whose risqué ensembles enabled Jones to argue, through the language of dress, a moral bankruptcy his producer had been loath to let him put into words.

Our second chapter, a study in performance phenomenology, focuses upon the body and wardrobes of a single actress, suggesting how both were used to create, and ultimately dismantle a peculiarly English form of drama. Through the 1890s, Mrs. Patrick Campbell was virtually synonymous with what contemporaries called the “sex problem play,” a dark counterpart to that decade’s increasingly troubled society comedies. An attempt to dress Ibsen to Mayfair standards, the form, whose most considerable practitioner was Arthur Wing Pinero, substituted for intellectual debate a sensuous materiality Shaw dubbed “Pineroticism.” We take as our initial text Harley Granville Barker’s observation that through the late eighties and early nineties the suburbaniy of Ibsen’s worlds created real barriers for West End audiences weaned on a diet of Scribe, Sardou, Dumas, and Augier. Elizabeth Robins’s 1891 production of Hedda Gabler became for such playgoers the acceptable face of “progressive” theatre. The most up-market of Ibsen’s works, it suggested ways in which problem playmaking might be reconciled with smart gowns and chic accessories. The production of Pinero’s Second Mrs. Tanqueray at the St. James’s in 1893 was an attempt to move such drama from the fringes to the center of smart society. In so doing both Pinero and
his producer, George Alexander, relied upon the anorexic eroticism of the young “Mrs. Pat” to steer a perilous middle course between melodrama and modernity. Outfitted by Mesdames Savage and Purdue in a sequence of gowns meant to chart her progress from demi-mondaine to the legal chattel of a West End gentleman, the actress helped to create a disturbing image of a bony lady in fashionable wraps, a death’s head in the drawing room that folded the play (and genre) in a spectral morbidity. Two years later, in The Notorious Mrs. Ebbsmith, Pinero used his performer’s disconcerting slenderness to mediate between the like somatotypes of the shabbily dressed spinner and tight-laced provocatrix. Shifted mid-play into a décolleté evening gown of Italian cut, Mrs. Pat took issue with both the scope and nature of Pinero’s text. Her response was to make her own body a site of rebellion, inviting viewers to rewrite the play’s conclusion. In Pygmalion, some two decades after, Shaw sought to deliver a death-blow to a “wicked” but remarkably resilient “Pinerotic theatre,” re-dressing that drama’s most redoubtable icon as sham duchess and Covent Garden flower-girl. Yet if, through a tangle of conflicting motives, we can discern an attempt to bring Mrs. Pat within the orbit of disquisitory playwriting, Shaw’s attacks upon the actress as a “dressmaker-made woman of fashion” were countered by Mrs. Pat’s own determination to reconcile free-thinking with couture house gowns. Operating through ensembles built by her personal dressmaker, Madame Handley Seymour, and, as it turned out, at some cost to her professional career, she conducted a counter-argument that resisted Shaw’s text as effectively as she had resisted Pinero’s some twenty years earlier.

Mrs. Patrick Campbell’s 1904 production of Edith Lyttelton’s Warp and Woof is our point of departure for two chapters that examine an Edwardian preoccupation with the processes as well as the products of haute couture. In the first we consider the work of three feminist playwrights who sought to place upon West End stages the abuses of an exploitative dress trade. In Warp and Woof, Lyttelton, wife of Colonial Secretary Alfred Lyttelton and a member of the exclusive Souls, confronted an audience of society peers with damning images of their own making. Drawing upon a rich tradition of seamstress iconography, as well as a literary heritage that reached back to Thomas Hood’s “Song of the Shirt” (1843), she dramatized, in concert with Mrs. Pat, not only the ills of a West End dressmaking emporium, but the ways in which its products oppressed both their
makers and purchasers. The point was underscored by the metamorphosis, over an evening, by society costumier Otto Viola, of three fashionable ladies into emblems of unleashed and predatory sexuality. Mrs. Pat, casting herself against type as Lyttelton’s seamstress, Theodosia Hemming, concluded the play with a thundering j’accuse, denouncing, before an audience of smart admirers, the “cannibalism” of haute couture. What Lyttelton did for the sweating seamstress, Cicely Hamilton and Elizabeth Baker attempted to do for the related figure of the drapery shop assistant. Building upon union organizer Margaret Bondfield’s accounts of the hard lot of retail workers, including their victimization by a much despised “living in” system, both playwrights offered corrective to the escapism of “shop-girl” musicals like The Shop Girl (Gaiety 1894) and The Girl Behind the Counter (Wyndham’s 1906). Responding to the fancy-dress transformations characteristic of that genre, each playwright introduced to her work dressing or undressing episodes, designed to demonstrate what Hamilton, in Marriage as a Trade (1909), called a woman’s “professional” interest in adornment. In Baker’s Miss Tasse (Royal Court 1910), the harlequin outfitting of a young shop assistant is juxtaposed with the suicide of a middle-aged co-worker no longer able to sell herself behind a counter. The much discussed dormitory undressing scene that opens Hamilton’s Diana of Dobson’s (Kingsway 1908) was, likewise, calculated to replace “romance” with a gritty matter-of-factness. Indeed, critics were surprised at the way in which the disrobing of five shop girls making ready for bed could be made so mechanically unarousing. Each author, in lobbying for legislative relief, while insisting upon the need for new myths by which to live, appealed to both society and working-class spectators, taking as her provenance not merely trade abuse, but the spectacle and meaning of women dressed.

In or about 1900 the couturière Lucile theatricalized fashion marketing by building a ramp and curtained recess at one end of her shop in Hanover Square. Here, to the accompaniment of music and flashes of limelight played from the wings, a succession of “glorious, goddess-like girls” paraded gowns to coteries of invited guests. Our fourth chapter begins with such attempts to carry stage experience back to the world of commercial dressmaking, and the consequent replacement of the seamstress and shop assistant by the mannequin or couture house model as the millinery trade’s most conspicuous object of male desire. Lucile, together with her Parisian counterpart
Paul Poiret, encouraged male attendance at what she termed her mannequin parades, using techniques of theatrical display to both arouse and contain her viewers. The complex eroticism that resulted – working-class women dressed as society ladies promenading silently for middle- and upper-class men – was augmented by a decision to substitute for the numbers by which gowns had hitherto been identified names that flirted with open prurience. The full hothouse effect of the Edwardian fashion show is preserved in a column by novelist Marie Corelli, who complained in 1904 of the “remarkably offensive” way in which male viewers were “invited to stare and smile.” Such occasions provided, in turn, a resonant language for those who wished to explore, on commercial and repertory stages, the fraught relationship between clothes, consumption, and the objectification of women. In The Madras House, presented to avant-garde playgoers as part of Charles Frohman’s 1910 repertory season, Granville Barker offered a Lucile-style mannequin parade as the culmination of a comprehensive indictment of a trade and ideology that had consigned women to lives of buying and being bought. Dressed by Madame Hayward, a rival of Lucile’s who used the occasion to mock the house styles of her competitors, the episode commented upon the human costs of erotic advertising, as well as attempts by department store moguls like Gordon Selfridge and Richard Burbidge to seek new markets in an emerging women’s movement. While applauded through its brief run by the labor and suffrage press, The Madras House must be set alongside the commercial success of West End musicals like The Girl Behind the Counter and Our Miss Gibbs (Gaiety 1909) which openly celebrated both Edwardian consumerism and what they called the independence of “the shopping woman.” On the legitimate stage, the fashion industry found its most adept apologist in popular playwright Edward Knoblock, whose 1914 success My Lady’s Dress used former Gaiety Girl Gladys Cooper, Bond Street milliners Ospovat and Zac, and a parodic view of a Poiret “private show,” to argue in melodramatic terms the innocence of couture house art.

The larger questions raised by such works, especially as they affected the production and consumption of images of women, are the subject of our final chapter, which turns from the theatre proper to the reactions of Edwardian feminists to theatricality, fashion-ability, and gender stereotypes. Taking as our starting-point an emblematic meeting between Lucile and militant suffragette Emme-
introduction

line Pankhurst, we begin by looking at the ways in which suffrage supporters embraced haute couture as a means of combating anti-suffrage propaganda. Dressing well, as a retort to caricatures of the dowdy spinster or “would-be man,” became, under the circumstances, a political act, as women fought for their rights as women to occupy space previously occupied by men alone. Public response to the appearance of fashionable feminists is approached through an examination of attitudes towards suffrage street theatre and Elizabeth Robins’s 1907 “dramatic tract” Votes for Women! (Royal Court). As one contemporary complained, with some justification, suffrage sympathizers faced the prospect of either being dismissed as failed women or patronized as pretty ones. The formation of the Actresses’ Franchise League in 1908, with a playwriting division under the directorship of Inez Bensusan, is seen as part of a larger attempt to grapple with such issues. So too are the commercially successful “sartorial” dramas of Emily Morse Symonds, a suffrage supporter who, in pieces like Clothes and the Woman (Imperial 1907) and Tilda’s New Hat (Royal Court 1908), sought to identify women’s finery with independence and female camaraderie. Such works are considered within the context of a volatile alliance between suffrage consumers and fashion producers, a troubled but mutually profitable arrangement that allowed fashion advertising in prohibited publications and the marketing of suffrage gowns in West End department stores. The fruits of this rapprochement are apparent in stage plays and street processions in which suffrage feminists were able to turn the tables upon their opponents, presenting anti-suffrage supporters as unmodish or overdressed. A final section considers the special case of entrepreneur Gordon Selfridge, whose attempts to appropriate the women’s movement for commercial ends had been pilloried in Granville Barker’s 1910 Madras House. We focus upon both Selfridge’s support for the suffrage cause, as well as the dangers inherent in his self-serving boosterism. The chapter, and study, concludes with a brief examination of Selfridge’s (sic) Annual Sale (Savoy 1910) and The Suffrage Girl (Royal Court 1911), two plays presented under Selfridge’s own auspices, in which Selfridge, conflating modern consumerism and female emancipation, attempted to return the stage, after two decades of dress debate, to the uncritical merchandising that had characterized it in the pre-Wilde nineties.
CHAPTER 1

The glass of fashion

On 25 February 1892, the Lady, a gentlewoman’s magazine that had begun publication some seven years earlier, introduced a column dealing with “Dress on the London Stage.” In a brief preamble, Thespis, the column’s pseudonymous author, set out its rationale. Hitherto, we are told, London fashion was fed by the couture houses of Paris, especially the great Maison Worth. Now, however, even the most casual observer might note “another source from which costumiers and others interested in dress draw largely – namely, the London stage.” In a handful of West End theatres, especially in plays of modern life, audiences regularly encountered novelties of cut, color, and silhouette that offered alternatives to the formalism of the Parisian Houses. Playgoers, moreover, were beginning to incorporate such items into their own wardrobes, initiating, in the process, a pragmatic if sobering form of theatre criticism. Can any play really be bad, Thespis asks, if we gain from it “a new idea for a bonnet, hat, or other feminine trifles?” Recording debts of gratitude to actresses Marion Terry, Maude Millet, and Mary Moore, all identified with particular fads or fashions, Thespis concludes by promising, in future issues, parallel coverage of French couturiers and English stage gowns (225–227). In the end, the Lady’s theatre column proved short-lived. Its promise, however, was fulfilled in a variety of sister publications. Florence in the Sketch, Virginia in Black and White, Miss Aria in the Queen, Thalia in the Players, Player Queen in the Lady’s Pictorial, and Diana and Flower-o’-the-May in the Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News offered readers, through the nineties, elaborately detailed accounts of women’s stage dress, supplementing their texts with lavishly executed fashion plates. In focusing upon the London stage as a platform for marketable commodities such writers not only identified dressmakers unnamed in theatre programs, but supplied trade information and street addresses. Virginia, catering to the
The glass of fashion

widest public, sold paper patterns for costumes described in her column. From the far side of the footlights the phenomenon is best summed up by Florence Alexander, who, as wife to actor-manager George Alexander, oversaw women's costumes at the exclusive St. James's Theatre: "I was rather 'extreme' [i.e. meticulous] with clothes on stage, for in those days people went to see the St. James's plays before ordering a new gown" (Mason, p. 233). The suggestion, once again, is of a stage not merely reflecting but anticipating and creating fashion.

If such merchandising represented, as novelist Marie Corelli would later charge, a cynical collusion of stage, shop, and society press (Bystander, 27 July 1904, 436-439), it was facilitated in the nineties by a new wave of independent designers determined to break the monopoly of established houses. Through the previous decade male modistes such as Worth and Redfern had dressed female actors for a variety of West End roles. The pattern had been set in Paris some thirty years earlier, when Charles Frederick Worth, a transplanted Englishman, overwhelmed the French fashion world with the products of a single couture firm organized upon modern industrial lines.1 Between 1860 and 1890, Europe's first "man-miller" reshaped the look as well as the methods of luxury dressmaking, abolishing the bonnet and cage-crinoline, while championing, in rapid succession, the shoulder train, walking skirt, tunic dress, and cuirass bodice.2 On Parisian stages Worth's passion for dress reform made possible a rapprochement between classical detail and contemporary cut. For period drama he drew upon an encyclopedic knowledge of fashion history to create modish variations upon seventeenth- and eighteenth-century styles. In plays of modern life – which inevitably meant society life – Worth brought to theatre costumes the same fabrics, embellishments, and precision tailoring that had come to distinguish his off-stage work. It was a practice that received royal assent when the Empress Eugénie commanded Worth to copy for her personal use a stage gown he had made for actress Marie Delaporte. Such methods established a two-way traffic between stage and salon that prepared the way for the marketing strategies noted by Thespis and Corelli. They also enabled Worth to achieve a control over theatre fashion so absolute he was able to dictate to dramatists like Scribe and Sardou what his clients would wear in their plays.3 By the mid-eighties Londoners could read about Worth's theatre gowns in the fashion pages of the Queen or Oscar Wilde's Woman's World.
could also see them at first hand in the stage wardrobes of Lillie Langtry, and the melodramas of “sporting life” presented at Drury Lane by impresario Augustus Harris (Booth, p. 71).

Dresses by Worth continued to be worn in West End plays through the nineties. The decade also saw, however, the first real challenge to Worth’s monopoly of on- and off-stage fashion. In Paris the attack was led by Madame Paquin, who sought to replace the “dignity” for which Worth was most often noted with a more openly theatrical glamor. She was seconded in this by Mmes. Gerber and Vertran, whose House of Callot Soeurs offered clients more heavily decorated alternatives to Worth’s drawing-room gowns. In London, where Worth’s influence had been felt at one remove, the stage became the principal marketplace in which his authority was tested by rivals who had neither the prestige nor resources of their Parisian counterparts. Mmes. Savage and Purduc, Mary Elizabeth Humble, Madame Eroom, and Mrs. James Wallace, later known as Lucile and, later still, Lady Duff Gordon, all made their first appearances in Trades and Commercial Directories between 1891 and 1895, identifying themselves as “Dressmakers” rather than “Costume Makers” or “Theatrical Costumiers.” When they worked for the stage, as each in turn did, they attempted to form exclusive alliances. Mmes. Savage and Purduc became, in effect, house dressmakers to the St. James’s, where their chiffons, silks, and leg-of-mutton sleeves helped to establish the look and feel of George Alexander’s society drama. Between 1892 and 1897 they built costumes for thirteen productions, including Lady Windermere’s Fan, The Second Mrs. Tanqueray, The Masqueraders, and Liberty Hall. Madame Eroom performed a like service for Charles Wyndham at the Criterion, where over a two-year period, between 1894 and 1895, she dressed actresses in some half-dozen pieces, including The Home Secretary and The Case of Rebellious Susan. Neither seems to have worked for other managements, each regarding herself not as a theatre professional but a society dressmaker using the stage for promotional purposes. With the exception of Lucile each of these figures curtailed stage work after receiving the Drawing Room commissions that enabled her to call herself “Court Dressmaker.” In the interim, playhouses became second showrooms, with London’s leading ladies serving as living mannequins. Indeed, if we note that the fashion model was herself a relatively recent invention, the widespread use of actors for advertising ends may be seen as a calculated response to the wood and