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978-0-521-03443-2 - The Profession of the Playwright: British Theatre 1800-1900

John Russell Stephens

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

The smell of lamps and orange peel

Our image of the early nineteenth-century playwright is coloured by Dickens's 'Mr Johnson' (alias Nicholas Nickleby), who in the space of twenty-four hours is expected to write a play designed 'to bring out the whole strength of the company', while contriving simultaneously 'to introduce a real pump and two washing-tubs' which the manager happens to have bought cheap at a sale the other day. Just the same as they do in London, says Mr Crummles, where '[t]hey look up some dresses and have a piece written to fit 'em'.

While it is by no means the whole truth about a profession as diverse as that of the nineteenth-century dramatist, Dickens's fictional account had a secure basis in reality at the middle and lower reaches of the market in mid-century. Sam Wild, proprietor of one of the best-known portable theatres in the north of England, reckoned that 'there were always to be found authors prepared at short notice to write a new piece, or to adapt an old one to meet the capabilities of an establishment'. No more was necessary than 'to state what talent you had, your scenic resources, and the extent of your wardrobe, and they would get you a new piece out in a couple of days'.¹ Few performers perhaps could have been quite as difficult to fit up with a part as Mr Crummles's daughter, 'the infant phenomenon'; but Nicholas Nickleby's task was rivalled if not exceeded in absurdity by Tom Dibdin's commission from David Morris of the Haymarket Theatre in the early 1820s to write a piece to suit a herd of reindeer and a diminutive family trio of singers, dancers, and fiddlers – the man shaped 'like an oil barrel', his wife with the dimensions of 'a half anker', and a son 'about the height of a Dutch cheese'.²

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Dramatic authorship was never an easy profession and for much of the century provided neither security nor status. Yet one of the extraordinary features of the theatre is that, at the same time that it was execrated by those who thought it either sinful or had simply disgraced its heritage through being swamped by foreign adaptations and adulterated by performing animals, so many wanted desperately to write plays: 'to persevere' (as a contemporary says of Frederick Reynolds, one of the first professionals of the period) 'through all obstruction and discouragement, and be a dramatic author, or NOTHING'.³

Epitomised for James Planché by 'the smell of the lamps and the orange peel',⁴ the living theatre had a special magnetism. For all sorts of reasons it attracted a vast range of writers: most of the century's best-known poets from Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, Browning, and Tennyson down through lesser-known ones such as Felicia Hemans; major and minor novelists like Charlotte Smith, Bulwer Lytton, Charles Dickens, Wilkie Collins, Charles Reade, Robert Buchanan, Henry James, R. L. Stevenson, and Hall Caine; essayists like Charles Lamb and Mary Russell Mitford; periodical writers, journalists, dramatic critics, lawyers, surgeons, military men, clergymen, teachers, clerks, shopkeepers, printers, actors, stage managers and scene painters – and in unprecedented numbers. Nicoll's *Handlist* records more than 700 dramatists for the period from 1800 to 1850 and that is by no means exhaustive. On that basis alone the drama was not dead, not even dying, but actually full of vibrant (if not literary) life even at its darkest period towards the middle of the century, when in response to the debilitated economic state of the theatre authors' fees fell to their lowest point. In the increasingly more optimistic climate of the second half of the century the number of dramatists more than quadrupled to around 3,200, though a high proportion, larger than in the earlier period, comprised single-play authors and the number was also inflated by an expanding body of writers active only in the provincial theatres, which had taken on new life. A more realistic picture of general dramatic activity would suggest that overall through the century the number of authors who wrote fairly regularly for the metropolitan and provincial theatres was not much above 10

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per cent of the total, while those with outputs of more than fifteen to twenty plays apiece is much smaller again at somewhere between 3 and 4 per cent.

The social origins of nineteenth-century playwrights tend to be reflected in the status of the theatres for which they wrote. On balance most East End dramatists came from lower down the social scale than did patent theatre writers or, later in the century, those who wrote for the major theatres within, say, a half-mile radius or so of Charing Cross. Yet the profession was a broad church, which afforded opportunities for writers from many walks of life. Some wrote merely for amusement or for publication rather than stage performance – the number of closet tragedies is remarkable, especially before 1850 – but there was room for the leisured gentleman-amateur, the poet or novelist testing his way, the strolling player turned hack writer, as much as for the dedicated professional playwright. The widest band was occupied by a great multitude of writers for whom dramatic authorship, dependent on individuals' circumstances, provided a greater or lesser proportion of their income, and who also followed other paid employment, often within the theatre itself or perhaps in one of the professions.

In the first half of the century it is probably true to say that the number of female dramatists about matches their proportional involvement in the literary profession as a whole. The tradition established in the Restoration period by Aphra Behn – the first professional woman dramatist – and taken up by Susanna Centlivre and Hannah Cowley continues into the early nineteenth century with Elizabeth Inchbald and Joanna Baillie, though the latter's reputation was mainly literary rather than theatrical. While Mrs Inchbald is the only one at this period who could properly be considered a full-time professional writer for the stage, there were a number of other women playwrights who, having gained some reputation in literature, also wrote for the theatre and were granted honorary membership of the Dramatic Authors' Society.⁵ After 1850 there was no shortage of female dramatic authors, but the majority were amateurs and few achieved any special distinction. Many wrote only one play, or were known only in the provinces, and those who made it to

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London usually advanced no further than the afternoon matinee, which by the 1880s became established as one of the routes whereby a new dramatic author might have a trial before being accepted for the evening bills. Among the exceptions was Sarah Lane (widow of the former manager Samuel Lane), who energetically ran the Britannia and wrote a cluster of melodramas for her theatre in the 1870s and early 1880s. Invariably, those who made any sort of name for themselves (like Frances Hodgson Burnett, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, and the Anglo-American Pearl Craigie) were predominantly novelists; and except for the last-named's *The Ambassador* (St J 1898), which ran for a whole season, their occasional excursions into the drama were little regarded in comparison to the dramatised versions of their novels. These were usually independently worked up for the stage by other hands, such as Colin Hazlewood, who produced one of the many versions of Miss Braddon's enormously successful *Lady Audley's Secret* (Brit 1862).

One feature of the world of the playwright stands out above all else: that the broadest avenue into dramatic authorship was through the theatre itself— as actor or stage manager, separately or in combination. It was the great leveller. The eponymous hero of Dickens's *Nicholas Nickleby* effects a rather swifter translation from raw, untried actor to house dramatist and leading player in Vincent Crummles's travelling company than would have been typical, but nevertheless the principle holds true. A lowly strolling player might indeed one day find himself writing plays not just for booths and fairs or minor provincial venues but for the London theatres. Acting or stage management were useful preparatory work as well as stimuli for writing, and it is no coincidence that many of the best-known and most successful dramatic authors served their apprenticeship in either or both of those arts. To know the theatre has always been the dramatist's first responsibility, and the majority of nineteenth-century playwrights acquired their intimate knowledge of it from the inside.

For many dramatists the theatre was a kind of self-perpetuating institution.⁶ George Colman junior emulated his father in

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combining the art of playwriting with management of the Haymarket. Brothers Charles (junior) and Thomas Dibdin came from a theatrical family and the latter's son George Dibdin Pitt became a prolific writer, mainly for the East End theatres. Both Thomas Morton's sons (Thomas junior and John Maddison) elected to follow their father into the dramatic profession, as did Douglas Jerrold, whose own son William Blanchard continued the connexion. Joseph Ebsworth's wife Mary was also a playwright and his father-in-law was the pantomimist Robert Fairbrother. Likewise Fanny Kemble helped to sustain her family's strong theatrical tradition as actress (albeit reluctantly) and subsequently as playwright. In Tom Robertson's case, both parents were busy professional actors and provincial managers, while Edward Leman Blanchard, though he never acted himself, was the son of William Blanchard the comedian. Actor-dramatist-managers such as Charles James Mathews (who married Madame Vestris), and Edmund Yates were also sons of actors. In the East End, where the Conquest family had strong theatrical ties as actors and managers during the second half of the century, George Conquest wrote for the Grecian under the management of his father Benjamin and later on for the same theatre and the Surrey under his own.

Throughout the century many of the best-known dramatists as well as the humblest followed the traditional route from acting into authorship. A number started out as actors with amateur companies. Although James Kenney began his working life in a London bank his real interest was acting with local amateurs, for whom he wrote his first piece, the farce *Raising the Wind*, the success of which led to its adoption by Covent Garden for performance in 1803. Thereafter Kenney wrote regularly for the two main patent theatres. James Robinson Planché had a similar kind of initiation. At first articled to a bookseller, he began his long theatrical career as an amateur, acting in private theatres. Like Kenney he wrote his own play, the burlesque *Amoroso, King of Little Britain* (1818), which, unexpectedly announced for the professional stage at Drury Lane without his prior knowledge, 'at once determined [his] future'.⁷ It proved to

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be his entry point into regular writing, first for the Adelphi, then for Covent Garden, Drury Lane, the Olympic, and the Haymarket, in a varied and distinguished career embracing the theatre, antiquarianism, and heraldic office that lasted for more than fifty years. Such direct movement into the glories of writing for the patent theatres was not usually quite so easy, and a provincial starting-point was more common. Edward Stirling actually paid to act his first parts with an amateur group in London before becoming a strolling player and then, at the age of twenty-two tested out his abilities as a dramatic author on an 'easily pleased' audience of sailors and their girl-friends at Gravesend with an 'artfully rechristened' melodrama *Tilbury Fort* (1829), founded on Scott's *Kenilworth*.⁸

Dion Boucicault's long theatrical career began simultaneously and pseudonymously as actor and playwright in 1838. But it was his writing that first brought him to prominence with *London Assurance* (CG 1841) and *Old Heads and Young Hearts* (Hay 1844). He continued to act, often in his own plays, though it was eight years before he had another successful piece on his hands with *The Corsican Brothers* (P'cess 1852) and a further eight before he became properly established in Britain. His younger contemporary Tom Robertson was steeped in the theatre from the beginning, having started as a child actor, stage-hand and prompter in his parents' provincial companies. For more than a decade until 1860, when he retired as an actor, Robertson's writing for the stage ran in parallel with his acting, prompting, and stage-managing career in London and the provinces. In contrast, Arthur Wing Pinero was expected to join his father in the legal profession, but threw it up to become a provincial player, while his contemporary R. C. Carton trained as an architect before succumbing to the same temptation. Both were sometime members of Irving's company during the mid- to late 1870s, but Pinero was the first to abandon acting once he became established as a professional playwright in the mid-1880s; Carton (who was a better actor) continued performing until he began writing in earnest for George Alexander at the St James's in the early 1890s.

Against the usual trend, Henry J. Byron established himself

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first as a dramatist and then as a manager (at the Prince of Wales with Marie Wilton) before trying a successful experiment as actor. He already had more than ten years' experience of writing burlesques and extravaganzas before making an unscheduled debut as Sir Simon Simple – Edward Sothorn had refused the part – in his own drama *Not Such a Fool as He Looks* (Glo 1869). Thereafter Byron, like so many of his colleagues, combined the two professions by continuing to act in his own pieces.

Acting at whatever level, from 'walking gentleman' upwards, was a natural and useful accompaniment to or catalyst for dramatic writing. A large number remained in the acting profession, even very prolific authors like John Beer Johnstone, who is said to have written upwards of 200 dramas for the minor theatres. He was in middle-age before he wrote his first play and went on writing until he was nearly eighty, but spent his whole working life as a small-time actor. William Travers, who wrote for the East End theatres and was resident dramatist at the City of London in the 1860s, was also that theatre's leading player. Those like Edward Stirling, who continued to act even in a small way at the same time as being writers for the stage, found the continuing practice of actors' benefits useful supplements to their dramatic income.⁹ More unusually, Brandon Thomas came to dramatic authorship by way of journalism and part-time composition and performance of music-hall songs before joining the acting company of John Hare and the Kendals at the St James's in 1879. While continuing to perform – Pinero considered him for casting in *The Second Mrs Tanqueray* – he wrote more than a dozen plays, including *Charley's Aunt* (Roy 1892), the farce which made him famous and brought him a considerable fortune.

Yet although most actors-turned-dramatists were competent players, few of them could be said to have truly excelled in the acting profession. Sheridan Knowles, Robertson, and Pinero were useful, but never in any way outstanding, as actors. Indeed, it was suggested that Knowles's surprising popularity with audiences as an actor actually rested on the strength of his reputation as a dramatist.¹⁰ Ben Webster and John Baldwin Buckstone were admittedly held in some regard in comic and

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character parts, but the playwright who came closest to excellence in acting was undoubtedly Dion Boucicault, whom Joseph Knight, writing of his performance as Conn in *The Shaughraun* (DL 1875), described as ‘probably the best stage Irishman that has been seen’.¹¹ As a general rule no great actor made even a mediocre playwright; but mediocre and middle-ranking actors sometimes made highly successful careers in dramatic authorship.

The acting label was difficult to shed for those of humbler status who had come up through the ranks, such as Andrew Cherry. Having made his acting debut at the age of fourteen, he became a strolling player and eventually rose to provincial theatre management in charge of companies on the South Wales and western circuits. By degrees he achieved reasonable success as a patent theatre playwright, but Genest insisted on his origins by describing his best-known play *The Soldier’s Daughter* (DL 1804) as ‘written by Cherry the actor’.¹² Nevertheless the metamorphosis of actors into prompters, stage managers or theatre managers and then into authors was common. Among them were John Fawcett, James Cross, Joseph Ebsworth, William Emden, William Oxberry, Thomas Longdon Greenwood, John Brougham, Thomas Hailes Lacy (who gave up writing when he went into business as theatrical publisher), and Robert Soutar, the comedian and sometime stage manager at the Gaiety under John Hollingshead. George Dibdin Pitt made his acting debut at the Surrey in 1827 and went on to stage management at other minor theatres, including the Coburg and Pavilion. His extraordinarily fecund career as dramatic author – he is said to have written more than 700 pieces, coupled with duties as acting manager – was spent almost exclusively at the Britannia Theatre in Hoxton writing melodramas for the Lane family. His successor was Colin Henry Hazlewood, formerly (in the theatrical jargon of the period) a ‘low comedian’ on the provincial circuits, who came to London in 1850 and joined the Surrey and City of London companies, all the while producing dramas, farces, and burlesques in rapid succession.

That the appetite for dramatic writing amongst actors and managers was sometimes better resisted than indulged is illustrated in the case of Wilson Barrett. Although as an actor he

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never rose to the first rank, he stands as an example of a dramatist who was actually better as an actor and certainly as a theatre manager and adviser to dramatists (notably Henry Arthur Jones) than he was at authorship. While he achieved some success in collaboration with Hall Caine, whose novels he dramatised, his own greatest triumphs at the box-office were cheap and sentimental religious melodramas like *The Sign of the Cross* (Leeds 1895, Lyr 1896) and *The Daughters of Babylon* (Lyr 1896), in which he also acted the lead roles.

Despite Sir Fretful Plagiary's horror (in Sheridan's burlesque *The Critic*) of the breed of manager who '[w]rites himself', some theatres, like the Haymarket, Adelphi, Grecian, and Surrey, all with longish periods of management continuity, benefited from managers who did exactly that and acted into the bargain. Ben Webster, who ran away from school to try his fortune on the stage as a dancer like his father, eventually rose to management of the Haymarket and Adelphi theatres, where most of his own plays were produced and in which he continued to act the character parts. In like fashion, his successor at the Haymarket, John Baldwin Buckstone, started out with a travelling company, graduated to low comedian in the minor theatre, and then went on to appear in his own and others' plays for the next fifty years. He began by appearing in his domestic melodrama *Luke the Labourer* (1826), the acceptance of which on terms of a guinea a night for thirty nights at the Adelphi Theatre (which Ben Webster eventually went on to own) occasioned his transfer from the Coburg acting company, where he had played comic parts for 30 shillings a week. Lower down the dramatic scale was George Conquest, who became perhaps the most stunning actor-acrobat of his time. With the help of collaborators – mainly Henry Pettitt, Paul Merritt, and Henry Spry – while manager of the Grecian (1872–8) and Surrey (1881–1901), he kept his theatres supplied with a constant stream of pantomimes and nerve-tingling melodramas, many of which were graced with suitably athletic roles for their author.

The theatre, Henry James observed in 1879, was 'just now the fashion' and 'perpetually talked about' in fashionable circles, where 'members of the dramatic profession are "received"'

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without restriction'.¹³ But things had not always been so. Playwrights sometimes suffered almost as much as actors from the rather snobbish, evangelically inspired, prejudice which tended to colour attitudes to theatre-going amongst sections of so-called respectable society. When Douglas Jerrold was not invited to the first performance of his penultimate play, the comedy *St Cupid; or, Dorothy's Fortune*, before the Queen at Windsor Castle in 1853, he commented that 'English authors have not yet, it would appear, proved themselves worthy of an obscure corner, on any occasion, in any ante-room, of Buckingham Palace or Windsor'.¹⁴ In fact, however, the reason was probably more political than social and it was his punishment for satirising the monarch and other sacred institutions of the period in the columns of *Punch*. The Queen herself, especially in her early years, was a lover of the theatre – indeed, did much actively to support it – and she was sufficiently appreciative, for example, of Bulwer Lytton's *Lady of Lyons* (CG 1838) to send backstage a message of congratulations ('full of courteous expressions') to author and leading actor. Yet, in general, contemporary dramatists seem to have been held in low esteem by the Queen's early advisers at Court. Lord Melbourne said of Thomas Noon Talfourd (unaware of, or choosing to ignore, his profession as a lawyer): 'He writes plays and I don't think a man who writes plays is ever good for much else.'¹⁵

Dramatic authorship had more than a touch of bohemianism about it. It was an engaging world, a strange mixture of tawdriness and grandeur, raffishness and respectability. Most of the more prominent dramatic authors tended to be members, not just of the Garrick, which was formed under aristocratic patronage specifically for the theatrical fraternity and their supporters, but of a whole range of smaller, less formal clubs. The Savage, the Re-Union, the Cosmopolitan, and the Arundel all had a strongly non-conventional flavour, and were complemented by a profusion of lesser-known groups and coterie of theatrical and literary men who would meet for a smoke, a drink, and a meal at regular intervals, much along the lines of the group known as the 'Owl's Roost', affectionately portrayed in T. W. Robertson's play *Society* (PoW 1865).