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

John Russell Stephens

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This is the first book to examine the world of the playwright in nineteenth-century Britain. In a fascinating account of the frustrations and the rewards of dramatic authorship, Stephens offers a new perspective on the playwright's growing professional status, and uncovers fresh information on earnings, relationships with actors, managers, and publishers, and the struggle for copyright reform. Among the authors discussed are Planché, Fitzball, Boucicault, Pinero, Grundy, Gilbert, Tennyson, Jones and Shaw.

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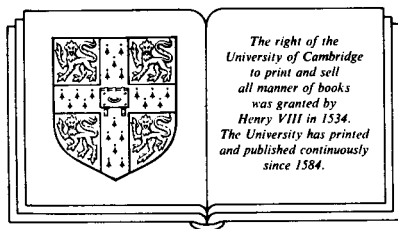
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THE PROFESSION OF THE PLAYWRIGHT

British theatre 1800–1900

JOHN RUSSELL STEPHENS

Lecturer in English, University College of Swansea



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Preface

Dr Johnson's characteristically blunt assertion that 'No man but a blockhead ever wrote, except for money' is a convenient departure-point for a book on the profession of the playwright, since a large part of it is about money. Money is at the root of the idea of professionalism. The dramatist's sense of himself as a professional and of his chosen career as a profession is largely dependent upon the respect which he feels for his work and the respect which his work inspires in others, especially the actor and the manager. None of that makes any realistic sense if he is not paid the rate for the job.

It will be apparent that the earnings' levels of dramatic authors are very closely linked to the economic health of the theatre, and I have tried throughout to give due weight to the varying economic condition of the theatre; but that is a topic in its own right and the present work does not pretend to be a detailed economic history of that kind. On the whole, authors' salaries run in parallel with, but at a lower level than, actors', though the top end of the latter's was distorted by competition amongst managements who were forced into offering absurdly high fees. This was not a feature of the remuneration of authors. At 50 guineas a performance during his first season at Drury Lane in 1804–5 a runaway (though short-lived) sensation like the 'Young Roscius', Master William Betty, was making as much in ten days as a dramatist like Frederick Reynolds made in total (including copyright) from a reasonably successful comedy. A somewhat less exceptional comparison might be made with John Philip Kemble's combined salary of £56 14s a week as actor and manager at Drury Lane in 1801–2, where the earnings

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for most of the actors at the same time fell into the range of between £10 and £20 a week. Near the bottom of the scale the gap between actor and author was much greater. Hack writers who grubbed away for 30 shillings a time (such as George Dibdin Pitt in the 1840s) made no more than the equivalent of one week's wages for a minor player. The most depressed period of authorial remuneration coincides with the low point of the theatre in the 1840s and early 1850s, when actors' salaries were also much reduced.

The low level of dramatic earnings in general until the last few decades of the century is one of the main reasons for the furious productivity of so many nineteenth-century dramatists, especially the hacks who wrote for the minor theatres or for East End venues. The dramatic market was insatiable; and, in the attempt to achieve a decent income from their playwriting, authors were at the same time satisfying the constant demand from managers for new pieces at very short notice, perhaps as little as twenty-four hours. Although the long run later in the century reduced the demand for plays, its secondary consequence was that dramatists had more leisure to write their plays. And the money was so much better because not only was the theatre economically more healthy, but entrepreneurial dramatists like Boucicault and his successors exploited their ability to produce highly successful plays by insisting on sharing in the profits, thus opening the way for the playwright to compete on the same level as the novelist.

Important though money was to the professional playwright, the working conditions of the nineteenth-century theatre involved several other considerations. Many of them are hinted at in Frederick Reynolds's mild caricature of the frustrations and hardships of the dramatic profession in the person of Vivid the playwright (quoted in the epigraph to the present work). To the list must be added the issues of copyright and publishing. Dramatic property had little formal protection from piracy and its relative security in terms of proper copyright protection was achieved only slowly, through a series of copyright law reforms over a period of more than fifty years. Just as vital to the profession was the incentive to publish, which was itself closely

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dependent on adequate copyright protection, and furthermore to publish in durable as opposed to ephemeral form. Most of the dramatic texts of the century are available only in the flimsiest of acting editions and only towards the end of our period does dramatic publishing gain a degree of respectability through the interest of major publishing houses. Such improvements in the working life of the professional dramatist were essential for the respect for the playwright as an artist and as a professional in the theatre. The emergence of the author-director by the end of the century is the climax of a long struggle for recognition, a search for his own identity which is not imposed from above by the manager or imprinted upon him by the actor. It is when the playwright ceases to be a servant and becomes master of his own play that his true professionalism emerges.

Professional dramatists have inhabited the theatre since Shakespeare's time. What is different about the nineteenth-century stage is that more than any other it has come to be known as the actors' theatre – in the sense that audiences tended to be attracted to the theatre by a particular actor's name on the playbill rather than that of the playwright. In some ways it is the strength of the Victorian theatre. Some dramatists found that they liked the security attached to writing for a particular player whose talents and characteristics were well known and whose acceptance of his play was one of the surest guarantees of success. Indeed many wrote only to order, and were at a loss to do anything different. Equally, others considered the practice to be a humiliation of the artist and an unacceptable restriction on his freedom as a writer.

Compared with the actor's, whose profession a star performer like Macready continued to regard as a poor and degrading art, the dramatist's status was, until late in the century, still lower. Analogies with the trade of the carpenter or shoemaker were common. Even W. S. Gilbert, who was partly responsible for its improved reputation in the second half of the century, denigrated playwriting as an intellectual activity, regarding it as requiring merely 'shrewdness of observation, a nimble brain, a faculty for expressing oneself concisely, [and] a sense of balance both in the construction of plots and sentences'. Nonetheless, in a

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theatre which embraces so much diversity of talent in so many genres – from Reynolds and Tom Dibdin, through Fitzball, Moncrieff and Stirling to Boucicault, Robertson, Burnand and Albery, and eventually to Pinero, Jones, Wilde, and Shaw – it is proper to recognise the ever-growing professionalism with which many dramatists approached the writing of a play and sometimes also its staging. A hack writer (the vast majority of nineteenth-century dramatists) would always be a hack writer, but that didn't necessarily prevent him from having a sense of belonging to a writing community. At the top of the profession, especially at the end of the century, the playwright tended to be highly conscious of his role as an artist. External pressures on dramatists of all classes were enormous, by virtue of the often conflicting demands of managers, actors, actor-managers, stage-crew, box-office, audience, critics, and the sometimes suffocating limitations imposed by official censorship. Yet for the professional playwright it was expedient as well as pragmatic to acquire a respected, independent, functional identity, or as much of one as was possible in whatever theatrical niche he found himself placed. This book is an outline of that process.

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It is a great pleasure to thank those individuals and institutions who have helped me in the writing of this book. This task is tinged with sadness, however, because Emeritus Professor Cecil Price, who shared with me information on his extensive collection of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century dramatic texts, died while this book was at the copy-editing stage. It is many years now since he first introduced me to Victorian theatre research, but he continued to take a keen interest in my work and for that, as well as for his model scholarship, and his friendship, I shall always be grateful.

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My small daughter Sarah deserves a special word of thanks for her continual reminders that there is life beyond the word-processor; but most of all I want to thank Ann, my wife, to whom this book is dedicated, for her generous support and encouragement.

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In addition to standard forms for periodical literature and *DNB* (for *Dictionary of National Biography*), the following abbreviations have been employed throughout. Full details may be found in the bibliography.

Burnand	Francis C. Burnand, <i>Records and Reminiscences</i> . 4th edn. 1905.
Dibdin	<i>Reminiscences of Thomas Dibdin</i> . 2 vols. 1827.
Fitzball	Edward Fitzball, <i>Thirty-Five Years of a Dramatic Author's Life</i> . 2 vols. 1859.
Genest	[John Genest], <i>Some Account of the English Stage from the Restoration in 1660 to 1830</i> . 10 vols. 1832.
Jones	<i>The Life and Letters of Henry Arthur Jones</i> , ed. Doris A. Jones. 1930.
Macready	<i>The Diaries of William Charles Macready, 1833–1851</i> , ed. William Toynbee. 2 vols. 1912.
Nicoll	Allardyce Nicoll, <i>A History of English Drama, 1660–1900</i> . 6 vols. 1965–7.
Pinero	<i>The Collected Letters of Sir Arthur Pinero</i> , ed. J. P. Wearing. 1974.
Planché	<i>Recollections and Reflections by James Robinson Planché</i> . [19]01.
Reynolds	<i>The Life and Times of Frederick Reynolds</i> . 2 vols. 1827.
Shaw, I	<i>Bernard Shaw. Collected Letters 1874–1897</i> , ed. Dan H. Laurence. 1965.
Shaw, II	<i>Bernard Shaw. Collected Letters 1898–1910</i> , ed. Dan H. Laurence. 1972.

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1832 Report	<i>Report from the Select Committee on Dramatic Literature</i>
1866 Report	<i>Report from the Select Committee on Theatrical Licenses and Regulations</i>
1878 Report	<i>Report of Commission on Home and Colonial Copyright</i>

In the text, references to plays are normally accompanied by a note of theatre and year of first performance. Names of theatres have been abbreviated as follows:

Adel	Adelphi
Ave	Avenue
Brit	Britannia
CG	Theatre Royal, Covent Garden
Cob	Coburg (= Victoria)
Com	Comedy
Crit	Criterion
Crt	Court
Dal	Daly's
DL	Theatre Royal, Drury Lane
EOH	English Opera House (= Lyceum)
Gai	Gaiety
Gar	Garrick
Glo	Globe
Grec	Grecian
Hay	Theatre Royal, Haymarket
Lyc	Lyceum (= English Opera House)
Lyr	Lyric
Olym	Olympic
OC	Opera Comique
Pav	Pavilion
PoW	Prince of Wales (Tottenham St)
P'cess	Princess's
Roy	Royalty
SW	Sadler's Wells
St J	St James's
Sav	Savoy
Shaft	Shaftesbury

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Stan	Standard
Str	Strand
Sur	Surrey
Ter	Terry's
Vaud	Vaudeville
Vic	Royal Victoria (= Coburg) (Old Vic)
Wynd	Wyndham's

All references to money are to the pre-decimal system of pounds, shillings, and pence (£ s d), in which 12 (old) pence made one shilling (modern equivalent five pence), and twenty shillings one pound. A guinea was twenty-one shillings (or £1 1s) (modern equivalent £1.05).

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... his *first* difficulty consist[s] in pleasing *Himself* – his *second* difficulty in pleasing the *Manager* – his *third*, in pleasing the *Actors* – his *fourth*, in pleasing the Licenser – his *fifth*, in pleasing the *Audience* – his *sixth*, in pleasing the *Newspapers*; and, in addition to all these, the actors must *please* not to be taken ill, the weather must *please* not to be unfavourable, the opposing theatre must *please* not to put up strong bills; and then! – what then? – why then – ‘*Please* to pay the bearer the small sum of * * *;’ and, N. B. which sum is sometimes, *par accident*, not paid at all.

Frederick Reynolds, *A Playwright's Adventures*,
London [1831]