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Allardyce Nicoll

Excerpt

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## CHAPTER I

# THE THEATRE

### I. *Introductory*

IN the year 1801 there was billed to appear at one of the "minor" theatres a certain precocious child named as "Master Carey, the Pupil of Nature." While never rivalling the attraction later exercised by "the infant Roscius" (young Betty), Master Carey seems to have caused a little sensation among the novelty-loving audience of the period, and that sensation was no doubt stimulated when it was noised abroad that the clever child was a great-grandson of no less a person than the facetious Harry Carey, author of *Chrononhotonthologos* and of the still more famous *Sally in our Alley*, both still played or sung in those years. The sensation, however, would have been yet greater had the spectators of the period possessed a divining insight to display to them the future glory of the dark-eyed child-actor. Many of those who saw the boy Carey acting in 1801 at a minor theatre no doubt flocked to the patent houses in 1814 to witness the same boy, now grown into a man, seize with the powerful hand of a master upon the emotions of the playhouse and interpret Shakespeare in a manner all his own. The Master Carey of 1801 had returned to gain mature triumph under the name of Edmund Kean.

This concrete example serves to indicate how close, in time and generation, were the ties between the early nineteenth century and the days when first the sprightly rimes and dainty tunes of *The Beggar's Opera* charmed the fashionable society of London. It serves, moreover, to show how much closer even are the ties which bind the age of Coleridge with the twentieth century. Edmund Kean himself to modern youth lives in an antiquity not nearly so far removed as that in which Garrick shone. His son, Charles Kean, was acting till 1868, and with Charles Kean we are at least stepping on to the threshold of the theatre of today. In a

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word, linked as the early nineteenth century may be with the life of the preceding Georgian era, there is something which tells us that a passage over the year 1800 will carry us at once into the midst of an epoch which seems to be, or at least gives the definite foundation for, that which we call modern. The connections are everywhere apparent. The gayer costumes, wrought in brocade and delicate with silk, give way to sober pantaloons and dress-coats. Victoria ascends the throne in 1837 and carries her reign on to 1901. Ellen Terry first appeared as Mamilus in *The Winter's Tale* on April 28, 1856; Dame Madge Kendal preceded her by playing the Blind Child in *The Seven Poor Travellers* in 1852; both were born in the same year, 1848. Definite links, some literary, some historic, some by personal relations, easily carry the mind back to this half-century, and the mental picture has a certain nearness and precision lacking in the more artificial revisualisations of Augustan or Caroline times<sup>1</sup>. This fact gives a peculiar charm to a study of the age, and as a result the drama and theatre of the period have for us an interest greater than, and distinct from, that which we feel for the efforts of previous eras.

On the other hand, to counter this impression of modernity and this apparent interest, there confronts us the almost total ignorance displayed by theatre-lovers of today concerning the fortunes of the theatres during those fifty years. There are numbers who have read the poetic plays written by the romanticists; a few have penetrated as far as Sheridan Knowles or Douglas Jerrold; one or two dramas of this time, such as *Money* and *Box and Cox*, have come down to us in living form<sup>2</sup>; some of the older generation may remember

<sup>1</sup> One instance of the material bonds connecting the present period with the earlier illustrates this clearly. About 1928, a friend of mine informed me that his father had a play performed in 1820 at Drury Lane. He had been born in the same year as Shelley.

<sup>2</sup> Occasionally stock companies in minor theatres, or those touring the lesser circuits, make use of the early nineteenth century repertoire. Some old melodramas have lately been revived at the Elephant and Castle, while one or two of Colman's comedies are still performed in the provinces. Amateurs, too, ransacking French's and Dicks' old stock sometimes find here treasure-trove.

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their fathers' accounts of the days of Phelps and Macready; but of deeper knowledge concerning the progress or retrogression of the theatres there is practically nothing save among a few enthusiasts. The age seems nearer, yet theatrically it is in some ways further off, than the period when the elder Colman and Foote produced their now seldom remembered comedies. It is the object of the present book to outline at least the main features of the playhouse and dramatic development during those years, and to provide a general background for the possible study, along more specialised lines, of particular plays or of particular movements in the world of the theatre.

As the publication of many volumes of anecdotal character show, the theatre of this time exercises an undoubted fascination, even when exacter knowledge be lacking. Little space, of course, can be devoted here to the careers of the famous actors and actresses who thronged the boards, but, even when we leave the Macreadys, the Keans and the Ellen Trees aside, we find in the playhouse itself ample materials for our careful and interested consideration<sup>1</sup>. The

<sup>1</sup> The lives of the more famous actors of this time have been often told, and naturally many of these biographies contain matter of considerable general value. Among the more important volumes the following may be specially noted as contributing towards the history of the theatre: James Boaden, *Memoirs of the Life of John Philip Kemble* (2 vols. 1825); James Boaden, *Memoirs of Mrs Siddons* (2 vols. 1827); Barry Cornwall, *The Life of Edmund Kean* (2 vols. 1835); F. W. Hawkins, *The Life of Edmund Kean* (2 vols. 1869); J. W. Cole, *The Life and Theatrical Times of Charles Kean, F.S.A. Including a Summary of the English Stage for the last Fifty Years* (2 vols. 1859); *Macready's Reminiscences... edited by Sir Frederick Pollock* (2 vols. 1875); W. Archer, *W. C. Macready* (1890); *The Life of Charles James Mathews... With Selections from his Correspondence... Edited by Charles Dickens* (2 vols. 1879); *Memoirs of Joseph Grimaldi. Edited by "Boz"* (2 vols. 1838); and C. E. Pearce, *Madame Vestris and her Times* (1923). Details concerning other works are included in R. W. Lowe, *A Bibliographical Account of English Theatrical Literature* (1888). The newspapers of the age contain very full accounts of production and of acting. Hazlitt's reviews were collected together in one volume as *A View of the English Stage; or, A Series of Dramatic Criticisms* (1818; reprinted 1821, 1851, and, with an important introduction by W. Archer and edited by R. W. Lowe, in 1895 as *Dramatic Essays*). The reviews of Leigh Hunt likewise appeared as *Critical Essays on the Performers of the London Theatres, including general Observations on the Practise and Genius of the Stage* (1807). Some valuable *obiter dicta* occur in *Oxberry's*

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age, it is true, but carries on traditions started towards the end of the eighteenth century, but pioneer work is always of less permanent interest than the full development of that which before has been but vaguely prophesied. The greatest event of the time was, of course, the Act "for regulating theatres<sup>1</sup>," by which the monopoly held since 1660 by Drury Lane and Covent Garden was definitely ended. This, like all the innovations of the fifty years, was not unheralded in earlier times. In the eighteenth century, apart from the opera-house licences, the Haymarket had secured a limited warrant, the minor houses at Sadler's Wells and elsewhere were producing their musical and spectacular shows, and an ill-fated attempt had been made at the Royalty to break down the patent monopoly<sup>2</sup>. The final victory of the "minors" was secured by following up the lines of the earlier attack. The "burlettas"<sup>3</sup> permitted to them were widened as far as the laws allowed, and persistent efforts were made to raise at least a third patent playhouse in London. In 1808 a Bill was for this purpose introduced in the House of Commons, but was defeated<sup>4</sup>. Two years later a fresh effort was

*Dramatic Biography, and Histrionic Anecdotes* (1825-7), and in *Oxberry's Dramatic Biography, or The Green-Room Spy* (1827).

It may be advisable here to mention also some books and articles which are of special value for the study of the drama during this period. The survey of E. B. Watson, *Sheridan to Robertson* (1926), contains much matter of interest both on players and playwrights. Harold Child has an important, though short, study on *Nineteenth-Century Drama* in the *C.H.E.L.* vol. xiii. Important for its critical judgments is A. Filon, *The English Stage* (1897; translation of *Le théâtre anglais*, 1893). Genest, of course, carries his account down to 1830. On the poetic drama see E. Gosse, *The Revival of Poetic Drama* (*Atlantic Monthly*, xc), and U. C. Nag, *The English Theatre of the Romantic Revival* (*Nineteenth Century*, Sept. 1928). There are, also, several important Memoirs or Autobiographies by dramatists of the time, such as Blanchard, Fitzball, Dibdin and Reynolds. These are cited later. Fuller bibliographies are to be found in E. B. Watson, *op. cit.*, and the *C.H.E.L.*

<sup>1</sup> Statutes 6 and 7 of Victoria c. 68. Comment on this Act appears in nearly all the later memoirs of the period. Among other recent works Ernest Bradlee Watson's *Sheridan to Robertson* (1926) and Watson Nicholson's *The Struggle for a Free Stage* (1906) should be consulted.

<sup>2</sup> See *A History of English Drama*, iii. 230.

<sup>3</sup> On this term see *infra*, pp. 137-40.

<sup>4</sup> See Frederick Howard, Earl of Carlisle, *Thoughts upon the present Condition of the Stage, and upon the Construction of a new Theatre* (1808).

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made<sup>1</sup>, and was again unsuccessful. In 1813 another Third Theatre Bill was defeated in the Commons<sup>2</sup>. Legal defeat, however, simply urged the lesser managers to renewed efforts; burlettas were produced not far different from the ordinary dramatic fare in the major houses, and persistent attempts were made to question the validity of the old patents. The consequences were a formal decision on the part of the Solicitor-General that the vaunted strength of the original grants made to Killigrew and D'Avenant in 1660 was purely a fiction<sup>3</sup>, and a series of meetings designed to bring the matter once more before Parliament. T. J. Thackeray had stirred men to review the whole subject<sup>4</sup>, and as a result at the Albion Tavern on Dec. 4 and 31, 1831, and at the City of London Tavern on Feb. 24, 1832, there gathered together groups of dramatists and others interested in the theatre for the purpose of drafting a fresh petition. Lord Lytton brought in a Bill the same year, and the *Report* of a Select Committee<sup>5</sup>, produced on Aug. 2, 1832, gave it approval. The Bill, however, after passing the Commons, was defeated in the Lords (1833). The failure, on the other hand, was by no means so complete as had been that of earlier endeavours of a similar kind, so that the adoption of the later Act of 1843 need affect us with no surprise. Here was no sudden decision, but the triumph of long effort, the reward of the hard and devoted labour of years. It may seem that, while the new Act marks a great turning-point so far as theatrical legislation is concerned, there is little change in the drama after that date; we may draw attention to the fact that, while many new

<sup>1</sup> See the *Account of the Proceedings before His Majesty's most Hon. Privy Council, upon a Petition for a Third Theatre in the Metropolis* (unpublished, 1810). A petition was sent by the trustees of Drury Lane protesting against the proposed erection of the third playhouse. See also *The London Chronicle*, March 17 and 20, 1810.

<sup>2</sup> See James Lawrence, *Dramatic Emancipation* (1813).

<sup>3</sup> For the granting of the original patents see *A History of English Drama*, i. 293-4. The value of the patents had been destroyed (1) by the Union of the Companies in 1682 (*id.* pp. 296-7), (2) by the granting of a licence to Betterton in 1695 (*id.* p. 301), and (3) by the formal surrender of one of the patents in the eighteenth century in return for a licence.

<sup>4</sup> See his *Theatrical Emancipation* (1832).

<sup>5</sup> Moved by Lytton on May 31, 1832.

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theatres were erected in the early years of the century, none was built from 1845 to 1866; but, if there was no immediate change, there was unquestionably laid the foundation of that theatrical liberty which permitted the production later of our modern dramatic literature. The earlier efforts are a heritage of eighteenth century striving; the Theatre Regulation Act belongs to the period which carries us on to our own days.

Besides this truly epoch-making change, there were many movements in the half-century which proved to be the origins of later tendencies. The eighteenth century had inaugurated the correct costuming and setting of historical plays, but Macklin's Scots attire for *Macbeth* was only a tentative experiment; archæology did not take full possession of the theatre until the days of Macready and of Kean. These actor-managers, although they worked in gas-light and in ignorance, had the ideals which resulted in the better-known efforts of Irving and of Tree. Dramatically, the age produced, out of the welter of melodrama, the origins of that form which, adopted and perfected by Tom Robertson, marked the beginnings of the modern realistic movement. Technically, it gave scene painters and machinists who proved to be the masters of those of later years. In regard to material arrangements, it introduced stalls and reserved seats and a dozen other little theatrical conveniences which are familiar in the playhouses of today.

This period is, above all others, the period of change in the theatre. The eighteenth century, in spite of its numerous innovations, clung to traditions which had their original being in the Elizabethan age. In acting, in dramatic workmanship, and in management Garrick and his companions joined hands with Alleyn and Shakespeare. About the year 1800 the new age was born, and, while in many ways the lyric poets of the Romantic era seem nearer to Sidney and Spenser than to Pope and Prior, the theatre and all connected with the theatre broke the bonds of the past and established that playhouse which exists among us today. For evil or for good, the old had given way to the new. We may easily trace the stages by

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which the journey was made, for this, like all changes in the world of art, was not the affair of a moment. We may even go back and see in Lillo the father of realistic drama, in the innovations of 1770-90 the genesis of Kemble's and Macready's efforts; but fundamentally the fifty years after 1800 are modern, the fifty years before are ancient.

Considering this modernity of the period and also the wealth of critical matter contained in books of anecdotes, in biographies, in playbills and in newspapers<sup>1</sup>, it will be understood that only a comparatively small proportion of the evidence available for the student can be presented here. Descriptions abound of the performances and productions of the major actor-managers, but in this survey we must be content to review certain selected and typical notices. The same is true of the drama. Texts of melodramas and farces are included in the many invaluable but often eye-straining collections of Cumberland, Lacy, French and Dicks, but to discuss even one-tenth of the plays produced during these years would be far beyond the scope of this volume. The Hand-list given as an appendix preserves the titles; the text must present only the chosen few which seem most symbolic of tendencies in the age. What we want is not a confused conglomeration of unassimilated facts, but a broader survey of the period as a whole, into which we may fit those individual facts observed in the course of our researches.

II. *The Audience*

The nineteenth century theatre opened badly. Conflagrations which destroyed the two patent theatres within

<sup>1</sup> This period saw the appearance of the definitely theatrical newspaper. There are a number of earlier periodicals of the first decades, mention of which will be made later. Here may be noted the establishment of *The Era* in 1838, and of *The Theatrical Times* in 1847. Among other similar publications *The Dramatic Magazine* (1829-31), *The Dramatic Gazette* (1830-1), *The Dramatic and Musical Review* (1842-4), *The Theatrical Inquisitor* (1812-21), *The Theatrical Observer* (1821-76), *The Theatrical Examiner* (1823-8), and *The Theatrical Journal* (1839-73) will be found of special value.

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a space of twelve months were serious enough<sup>1</sup>, but worse for the drama was the audience which playwright and player alike had to appeal to and please. All contemporaries are agreed on one thing; the spectators in the larger theatres during the first decades of the century were often licentious and debased, while those in the minor playhouses were vulgar, unruly and physically obnoxious. The tumult in a nineteenth century theatre was one of those things which bound it to the theatres of the past. *The Theatrical Repertory; or, Weekly Rosciad* for Monday, Dec. 28, 1801, describes, without too much horror, a disturbance which took place at a Covent Garden performance of *Richard III*:

A ruffian in the Two Shilling Gallery threw a quart bottle upon the Stage, which fell so near Mr Betterton as to strike the hat which he held in his hand, but fortunately did no injury either to that gentleman or any of the other performers.

There was a "Tailors' Riot" at a benefit of the actor Downton at Haymarket on Aug. 15, 1805<sup>2</sup>. "There was much fighting," says a critic of a performance of *The Pirate's Doom* at the Adelphi on Feb. 12, 1827<sup>3</sup>, "which probably would have been more effective, but for a real battle in the pit, to which the screams of the women imparted a truth and reality, that quite spoilt the effect of the stage combats." A riot during a performance of a French play at Drury Lane in 1848 recalls the earlier "Chinese Festival" disturbances<sup>4</sup>. These riots and disturbances, which thus remind us of the theatres of Dryden and of Cibber, were set in a constant noise and confusion. Here is Hazlitt's picture:

Everything...has its draw-backs; and the Little Theatre in the Haymarket is not without them. If, for example, a party of

<sup>1</sup> On the theatres see Appendix A. R. W. Lowe in his *Bibliographical Account*, p. 98, mentions a pamphlet entitled *An authentic account of the fire which destroyed Drury Lane Theatre*; this apparently he had not seen and I have failed to discover an extant copy. A similar *Account* (1808) of the burning of Covent Garden (*op. cit.* p. 72) seems also to have disappeared. A description of the old and new theatres there will be found in the interesting *Covent Garden Journal* of 1810.

<sup>2</sup> See Thomas Gilliland, *The Dramatic Mirror* (1808), I. 154-5, and R. B. Peake, *Memoirs of the Colman Family* (1841), II. 309.

<sup>3</sup> *The Theatrical Observer*, T. 13/2/1827.

<sup>4</sup> See *A History of English Drama*, III. 5-6.



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elderly gentlewomen should come into a box close at your elbow, and immediately begin to talk loud... your only chance is either to quit the house altogether, or... to remove to the very opposite side of it... At the great Theatres, it is sometimes very difficult to hear, for the noise and quarrelling in the gallery; here the only interruption to the performance is from the overflowing garrulity and friendly tittle-tattle of the boxes. The gods... at Drury-lane and Covent-garden, we suspect, "keep such a dreadful pudder o'er our heads," from their impatience at not being able to hear what is passing below; and, at the minor theatres, are the most quiet and attentive of the audience<sup>1</sup>.

At both the major and the minor theatres, companies of "*would-be* young men of fashion" would indulge in

the witty explosion of six-penny crackers. This is now an old joke as well as a bad one,—but it still affords amusement to some courageous and gallant Gentlemen, for it never fails to frighten the women; and, from the difficulty of detection, they feel perfectly secure from the angry indignation of those who could resent it<sup>2</sup>.

Colman the younger, who had experienced the difficulties involved by such behaviour, has his comment upon it:

Whence arise the deafening vociferations, when there is a full house, of "turn him out!" and "throw him over?" Why is a vocal performer so often kept on a see-saw, called back, sent off, called back again, about the *encore* of a song, and at last, after ten minutes, perhaps, of confusion, obliged to sing it in the midst of the "tumult and disorder" of a divided audience?

Again, why is a play, on the first exhibition of a Christmas Pantomime, acted almost in dumb-show, like the mummerly that is to follow it, in consequence of the "tumult and disorder" of the spectators?... Why, during the intervals, is the stage strewed with apples, and orange-peels, accompanied in their descent thither, by the shouts, groans, whistles, catcalls, yells, and screeches of the turbulent assemblage which has so elegantly impelled its vegetable projectiles from the upper regions?... Why are disturbances in the upper boxes, and lobbies, among blackguards and women of the town, by no means rare?<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> W. Hazlitt, *op. cit.* ed. 1821, p. 133.

<sup>2</sup> Newspaper cutting in Shaw Collection, Harvard, dated 25/9/1814. I have failed to identify the original paper.

<sup>3</sup> R. B. Peake, *Memoirs of the Colman Family* (1841), ii. 364-5.

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The notorious "O.P. Riots" were thus in no ways exceptional<sup>1</sup>, and probably Thomas Dibdin was right when he declared in his *Harlequin Hoax* (Lyc. 1814) that only at a pantomime were the spectators "very silent and attentive" while "tragedies, comedies, operas, and farces are doom'd to suffer all the complicated combinations of 'Pray ask that gentleman to sit down,' 'Box Keeper, where's my fourth row on the second circle?' 'Take off your hat,' and 'Keep quiet in the lobby.'... In a Pantomime... the moment the curtain goes up, if any unfortunate gentleman speak a word, they make no reply but throw him over directly<sup>2</sup>." Various actor-managers attempted to make improvements, but not always with success; even in 1841 Macready found opponents in the press when he tried to stem the "improper intrusion" associated with certain parts of Drury Lane<sup>3</sup>. "The feelings of performers," says a writer in *Oxberry's Theatrical Inquisitor*<sup>4</sup>, speaking of Easter pieces, "are martyred by playing to a noisy, drunken set of auditors, who are impatient throughout the play, from an anticipation of the 'glorious pageantry' that a specious program-matical play-bill has prepared them for," while Sir Walter Scott reflects grimly that the theatres in general are "destined to company so scandalous, that persons not very nice in their taste of society, must yet exclaim against the abuse as a national nuisance"—"prostitutes and their admirers usually" forming "the principal part of the audience<sup>5</sup>." Even the ordinary

<sup>1</sup> The history of this long and clamorous warfare between indignant spectators and the managers of the new theatre at Covent Garden has often been told. The pamphlets and books issued in connection therewith are detailed in R. W. Lowe's bibliography, occupying no less than four pages (pp. 72-6). In addition to the works cited there see *The Theatrical Journal* for 1846 and 1862, William Dunlap's *Memoirs of George Fred. Cooke* (1813), ii. 101-17, and *The Life and Times of Frederick Reynolds* (1827), ii. 380-6.

<sup>2</sup> The speaker is Miss Kelly in the opening scene. One may note the references to the hat trouble and the implication that there were reserved rows, if not reserved seats.

<sup>3</sup> William Archer, *William Charles Macready* (1890), p. 111, and *The Theatrical Observer*, Oct. 6, 1841. *The Theatrical Journal* for July 27, 1844, styled the theatres "great public brothels."<sup>4</sup> 1828, p. 109.

<sup>5</sup> *Essay on Drama* (originally published in 1819), *Prose Works* (Edinburgh, 1834), vi. 392.