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*Theatre and society*


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The last time Queen Victoria went to the play before she was crowned in June 1838, was to Covent Garden Theatre, where she saw Edward Bulwer's popular new drama *The Lady of Lyons*, James Kenney's farce *The Irish Ambassador*, and another farce with a comic Irish character, *The Omnibus*, by Isaac Pocock. When she returned to the play some months after her coronation, after a long spell of opera-going, she saw at Drury Lane the pantomime *Harlequin and Jack Frost* and Van Amburgh's menagerie of lions, the first of seven royal visits to that monarch of beasts and its enterprising trainer. A week later at Covent Garden she saw Pocock's melodrama *Rob Roy McGregor* and another pantomime.<sup>1</sup> Thus in a few excursions to the theatre the Queen nicely spanned almost the whole spectrum of the Victorian popular theatre: farce, pantomime, melodrama and animals on stage. Add to this a penchant for opera, Shakespeare and comedy, and it can be seen that in her own person Victoria was the true embodiment of the theatrical taste of her subjects; the theatre was Victorian in this as well as in its name.

Victoria was, then, as representative an audience of one as she could be, and she stood at the apex of that vaster audience, her people. It is easy enough, since we know so much about her, to define Victoria's taste and assign causes for it, but harder to reconstruct that larger audience and its taste and to show how it changed over several generations of theatregoing. Yet without some understanding of that ever-shifting audience we shall understand neither the theatre itself nor the plays, actors, managers and spectacles that pleased or disappointed it. The theatre and the audience of any age is

<sup>1</sup> George Rowell, *Queen Victoria Goes to the Theatre* (London, 1978), p. 129.

a part of the society and culture of that age, indeed a creation of it, and it is not possible to comprehend that theatre and audience without some comprehension of what was happening economically, socially and culturally outside the theatre. The way through the Victorian and pre-Victorian audience to the theatre itself is as good an initial approach as any.

#### AUDIENCES AND SOCIAL CLASS

The hierarchical division of the Restoration and eighteenth-century auditorium into boxes, pit and gallery continued into the nineteenth century, and the theatre's solicitude for the better class of patron extended also to the provision of separate entrances for each section of the house, so that box holders would not have to rub shoulders at a common entrance with those headed for pit benches or gallery. Such divisions were class division rather than mere considerations of the pocketbook.

One of the most striking things about the Victorian theatre is its faithful reflection of social class, not only in the architectural disposition of its audiences but also in the content of its drama. It is interesting to see how theatre managers and others tended to look at theatre problems especially the problem of the box office, in class terms. Among the managers and proprietors giving evidence to the parliamentary Select Committee on Dramatic Literature in 1832 was Charles Kemble of Covent Garden, who complained that the late dinner hour took away the upper classes from the theatre. David Morris of the Haymarket believed that receipts for his boxes had been affected by the popularity of opera, which drew away 'persons in a higher class of society'.<sup>2</sup> When asked if nobility attended his theatre, George Davidge of the Coburg replied in the affirmative, and of the usual pattern of attendance said, 'On Monday nights I conceive we have the working classes generally, and in the middle of the week we have the better classes.' *His* profits came largely from the pit, unlike Kemble's, which should have – but did not – come from his boxes. Davidge regretted the fact that the drama had ceased to be 'a fashionable amusement' (1832 *Report*, pp. 79–85). The Keeper of the Crown Jewels, Edmund Lenthall Swift, remarked that in his opinion the audience of the minor theatres was composed of 'the lower part of the middle classes' (1832 *Report*, p. 163).

Such concerns persisted throughout the Victorian period. The Examiner of Plays, William Bodham Donne, testifying to the 1866

<sup>2</sup> *Report from the Select Committee on Dramatic Literature* (London, 1832), p. 43.

Select Committee on Theatrical Licences and Regulations, agreed with the Committee member who asked him, 'Have you found that pieces are particularly popular among the lower classes which are founded on burglaries and robberies?'<sup>3</sup> The Lord Chamberlain, Spencer Ponsonby, told this Committee that pit and gallery audiences at theatres probably attended music halls as well – 'they are the same class of people' – where those who frequented boxes and stalls did not (1866 *Report*, p. 7). The great popularity of music halls and their competition with theatres led in 1892 to another Select Committee, this one on Theatres and Places of Entertainment, which heard much conflicting evidence on the question of which social class or classes attended the theatre and which the music hall and whether there was any overlap.

All this fuss and worry about categorising theatre and music-hall audiences by class is peculiarly Victorian (and immediately pre-Victorian), a theatrical manifestation of great social changes in the nineteenth century that as a matter of course produced significant changes in the composition of audiences. During the first half of the century society was being rapidly urbanised, a process whose speed is indicated by the fact that in 1850 about half the population still lived in the country but by 1900 only a fifth. But it was the generation after Waterloo that saw the major transition between a predominantly rural and agricultural society to a predominantly urban and industrial society. This meant not only the growth of the great industrial cities in the Midlands and the North – Birmingham, Sheffield, Leeds, Manchester, Glasgow – but also a vast increase in the population of London, from 900,000 in 1801 to 3,000,000 in 1851 to 6,000,000 in 1901. London itself was not primarily a heavy manufacturing city, but functioned as the service centre of the nation and the heart of the expanding import–export business. In 1801 London was the only city in the land with a population of over 100,000; by 1841 there were six, and by 1901 thirty. Such huge increases in urban population were a consequence of rural emigration, better health and diet, and a rising birthrate. The death rate also rose from 1810 to 1840 but declined for the rest of the century. By 1850 about 40 per cent of Londoners had been born elsewhere.

#### POPULATION GROWTH AND NEW THEATRES

The obvious social consequence of the population increase in London and other cities was an increase in the potential audience for theatre, an increase especially in the new industrial and working

<sup>3</sup> *Report from the Select Committee on Theatrical Licences and Regulations* (London, 1866), p. 88.

class. The 1851 Census states that 79 per cent of the population of London, including 2 per cent clerks, is working-class. The old eighteenth-century system of putting all classes under the roof of two or three central playhouses, harmoniously ordered within the traditional divisions of box, pit and gallery, was no longer possible. Not only did the pressure of numbers force the building of many more theatres (in the periods when the theatre business prospered) but also the location of the working-class population eventually dictated the building of neighbourhood playhouses far from the West End and from middle-class patronage: theatres in the East End, across the Thames on the Surrey side of the river, and on the northern fringes of the West End – theatres that catered primarily to their local populations, which were very largely working and lower middle-class.

Population growth of this magnitude was the consequence of changes in the shape of London that affected the theatre as much as did the sheer pressure of numbers. The East End of London began developing after the building of the London docks: the West India Dock in 1799, the London Dock in 1802, the Surrey Dock in 1804, and the East India Dock in 1805. This initial phase of London dock-building was completed by 1828 with the St Katharine Dock, and enabled London to serve as the nation's principal trade centre. Naturally, the docks and the river attracted a wide variety of businesses related to exports and imports, factories, and workshops, all clustered east of the City of London. In the Victorian period a growing population, almost entirely working-class, settled densely in the proliferating mean streets of the East End to man the workplaces, load and unload the ships and do the dirty jobs of the sprawling and filthy metropolis. By 1901 the East End was the largest working-class conglomeration in the world, a great city in its own right, with its own network of entertainment, unvisited and virtually unrecognised by the rest of London.<sup>4</sup>

The building of theatres in the East End properly began in 1828 with the reopening of the East London (formerly the Royalty) as the ill-fated Brunswick Theatre.<sup>5</sup> The City Theatre in Cripplegate and the Garrick in Lemn Street followed in 1831, the Standard in Shore-ditch in 1835, and the City of London in Norton Folgate in 1837. The Grecian and the Britannia in Hoxton and the Effingham in

<sup>4</sup> Charles Booth says in 1889 that the population of the East End is 909,000, but he does not include West Ham, East Ham, Stratford, Clapton, Stoke Newington, etc., which, if included and allowing for a population increase in a decade, was nearly 2,000,000 in 1900, according to Walter Besant. See Charles Booth, *Life and Labour of the People in London: First Series* (London, 1902), p. 32, and Walter Besant, *East London* (New York, 1901), p. 8.

<sup>5</sup> It collapsed during a rehearsal three days after it opened, killing fifteen.

Whitechapel opened as saloon theatres between 1834 and 1843, and by the fifties were operating in conventional theatre buildings. All these theatres except the City remained open, frequently renovated and rebuilt, until the late 1860s, when one by one they began to close. However, in 1866, the year of the *Report from the Select Committee on Theatrical Licences and Regulations*, the East End entertainment industry was considerable. The *Report* states that the capacity of six East End theatres amounted to 17,600 places nightly or 34.3 per cent of the total audience capacity of London theatres excluding Covent Garden and Her Majesty's, which were opera houses. Indeed, 63.7 per cent of that total capacity is taken up by theatres outside the West End (1866 *Report*, p. 295). Not listed in this report are the audience capacities of music halls and the numerous penny gaffs in the East End, or of the large saloon theatres like the Albion in Whitechapel. From the evidence of these figures it is quite wrong to think of the audience experience of London theatre and drama solely as a West End experience. If the Queen were the apex of the English audience, the working class was its broad, strong base.

Although East Enders still travelled West to sit in the galleries of middle-class theatres, and although some East End theatres made a great effort, especially when they opened or reopened, to attract a clientele from outside the immediate neighbourhood, the East End community essentially attended its own theatres, which did not draw an outside audience. It was the exceptional middle-class critic or writer who made the journey to an East End theatre, usually in search of a colour story, and usually to patronise what he saw. The lack of attention East End theatres received was not merely a matter of geographical remoteness; as an urban entity the whole of the East End was beyond the social and cultural pale for the middle-class Londoner from the West, and his ignorance of it was profound. In 1882 the eminent drama critic of the *Daily Telegraph*, Clement Scott, complained of a dearth of amusement in the East End. At the time he wrote there were still four major theatres open and at least eight music halls. Testimony to the 1892 Select Committee indicates that witnesses passionately concerned with the relationship between theatres and music halls knew nothing of theatres and music halls in East London. Their lack of interest in, if not contempt for, the forms of popular theatre appealing to a lower class made performances of this kind of theatre of no consequence to the state of the theatre as comprehended by a West End vision, and it is the West End, middle-class point of view that we find in the few extant accounts of working-class theatre and drama on which modern theatre historians rely. They are mostly to be taken with a grain of salt,

especially when given to moralising. The life of the Victorian urban theatre in poorer districts, carried on though it was in critical darkness, was extraordinarily vigorous and not the less interesting and significant for being a manifestation of popular taste and working-class culture.

#### AUDIENCE COMPOSITION

The map of London theatres and the audience was then, even by the early Victorian period, nothing like what it was at the end of the eighteenth century, when the first manifestations of radical social change began to appear in the theatre. Eighteenth-century theatrical culture had been essentially dominated by the aristocrats of the business in London, Drury Lane and Covent Garden, and, in the second half of the century in the provinces, by a small network of Theatres Royal and leading circuits. By 1843 this traditional and stable theatre structure had fragmented. In that year the Theatre Regulation Act, finally passed after years of agitation from the 'minor' theatres and the anti-monopoly interests, abolished the privileged position of the 'majors', the theatres holding letters patent from the crown (Drury Lane and Covent Garden again) and threw open to all theatres the opportunity of performing the so-called 'legitimate' drama: farce, tragedy, and comedy. Previously a handful of minor theatres, some licensed by the Lord Chamberlain and some by local magistrates, distributed around the West End and on the Surrey side of the Thames, had challenged the majors by playing the 'illegitimate' drama (these terms were contentious in definition) – light comedies with songs, burlesques, melodramas – and sometimes poaching the dramatic fare of their alleged oppressors. These minor theatres attracted audiences supposedly a cut below the audiences of Drury Lane, Covent Garden, and the summer operation of the Theatre Royal in the Haymarket, but the precise composition of the audience at any one of them was a matter of the particular neighbourhood and particular dramatic attraction. If the latter were especially novel and interesting it drew, as one witness told the 1832 Select Committee, 'people from all parts of the town, and even from the country, to witness it' (1832 *Report*, p. 122). If not, the audience tended to be mostly local and reflected the social makeup of its area, if outside the narrow limits of the West End, such as at the Pavilion in Whitechapel or the Coburg on Waterloo Road on the Surrey side. Minor theatres in the West End drew more miscellaneous audiences, or even a fashionable one, as in the case of Madame Vestris's up-market Olympic Theatre of the 1830s.

After 1843 the new theatrical freedoms did not translate into another wave of theatre building. Apart from renovations and refurbishments, the construction of theatre in London stopped entirely between 1843 and 1866. The reasons for this cessation are to be found outside the theatre, in the depressed economy and the preponderance of slumps over booms. The period from 1815 to the 1860s was financially difficult for theatres, with many closures and bankruptcies, and with desperate attempts to find new revenue by a general lowering of seat prices. The lower prices, notably at Drury Lane and at Covent Garden (which went over to opera in 1847), were designed not only to keep present audiences but also to attract new ones at a lower level of class and income. This undoubtedly had effects upon the repertory, moving several theatres firmly in the direction of gratifying popular taste in melodrama, farce and spectacle entertainment. The gradual accumulation of public wealth and the new national prosperity led to a building boom in the West End theatre that started in 1866 and lasted till the end of the century. This would not have happened without the promise, or at least the well-grounded hope, of profits from the box office; the greater prosperity meant that people had more money in their pockets for entertainment. This was especially true of the middle class, which reaped most of the benefits of national affluence and bestowed their favours upon the West End theatres.

As late as the 1880s and 1890s, nevertheless, certain West End theatres, like the Adelphi, the Princess's and Drury Lane had a strong element of lower middle-class and working-class patronage, confined to the pit and gallery perhaps but still an influence on the choice of repertory. To some extent the benefits of prosperity spread socially downwards, for real wages generally rose during the second half of the century and the cost of living declined, largely due to the availability from about 1870 to 1900 of cheap imported food.

Even before the 1860s thoroughly respectable middle-class audiences were attending Charles Kean's seasons of Shakespeare, gentlemanly melodrama and refined comedy at the Princess's Theatre in the 1850s, stimulated in part by the Queen's patronage of Kean at court theatricals in Windsor Castle and her regular attendance at the Princess's. And before that again there had been the Olympic audience in the 1830s – elegantly turned out patrons in an elegantly decorated auditorium – and firm intellectual and middle-class support for William Charles Macready's two ventures into management at Covent Garden 1837–39 and at Drury Lane 1841–43, not to mention the audiences for Samuel Phelps's Shake-



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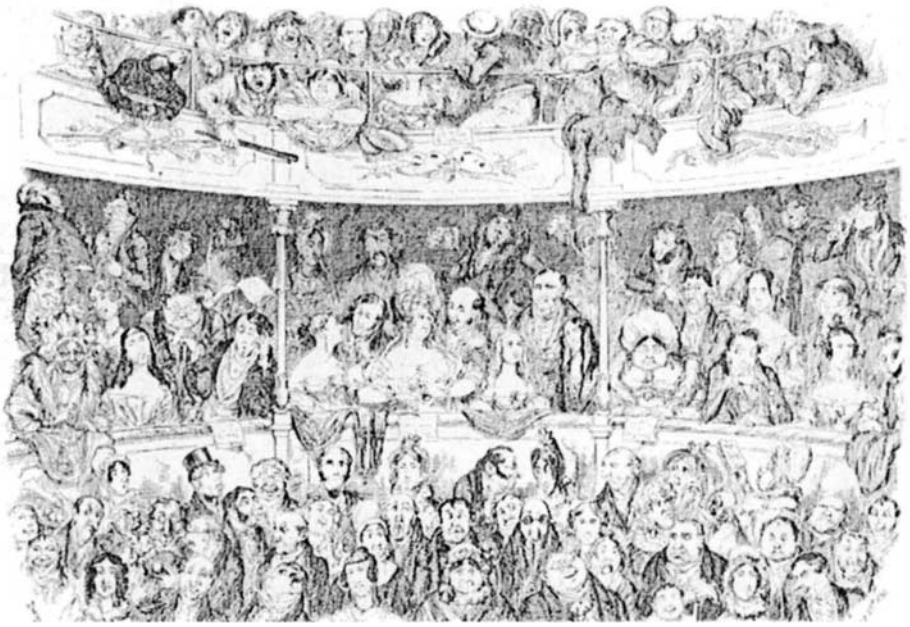


Plate 1 'Pit, Boxes, and Gallery': the Surrey Theatre, 1836. Print by George Cruikshank. By courtesy of the Trustees of the Victoria and Albert Museum.



Plate 2 'The Pit, Sadler's Wells,' 1850. Drawing by Charles Green. By courtesy of the Trustees of the Victoria and Albert Museum.



speare at Sadler's Wells in the forties and fifties and Alfred Wigan's well-bred management of the Olympic from 1853 to 1857.

While the West End theatre was undoubtedly moving inexorably towards greater and greater respectability of management and patronage, it is a serious over-simplification to picture the nineteenth-century theatre, as some still do, as climbing slowly out of a swamp of mob rule and working-class domination in the earlier part of the century to reach an eminence of profound Victorian decorum and middle-class and fashionable patronage of the theatre. After 1815, however, the latter was not substantial enough to fill the boxes of the patent theatres, and the former contained unruly elements that created disturbances in the auditorium, such as the Old Price riots at the reopened Covent Garden in 1809. Audience behaviour in the major theatres, possibly because of their great size and poor acoustics, tended to restlessness and boisterousness in the Regency period. Such behaviour was mostly, but not entirely, confined to the galleries, whose occupants were badly placed. A German visitor to England in 1826, Prince Pückler-Muskau, recorded his disgust at the behaviour of gallery spectators at the opera in the King's Theatre, who interrupted the singers with shouts and tossed orange peel and other food substances onto the heads of the pit.<sup>6</sup> Seeing Macready as Macbeth at Drury Lane, the Prince noted, despite his fine acting, that 'the interest was generally so slight, the noise and mischief so incessant' that it puzzles him to understand how artists could form themselves before 'so brutal, indifferent, and ignorant an audience'.<sup>7</sup> This sort of behaviour improved in the London theatres in the early Victorian period, although there were signal exceptions like the patriotic riots against the French actors playing *Monte Cristo* at Drury Lane in 1848. Inevitably, as manners and society changed, so did conduct in the audience.

Drury Lane, Covent Garden, and the Haymarket had never been theatres where the urban working class obtained any sort of control; in any case they could not have afforded to sit anywhere but in the gallery, which had always been the territory of the journeyman, the apprentice, the domestic servant, the sailor and the soldier. Later in the century, even when the theatre was more soberly attended in conformity with general social trends, and certainly more lavishly patronised by the middle class, the working class by no means disappeared from the theatre, even from the West End. There was also still a basic core of East End and transpontine theatres largely patronised by the working and lower middle class. In the provinces

<sup>6</sup> *A Regency Visitor*, ed. E. M. Butler (London, 1957), p. 83.      <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 275.

the industrial manufacturing class still went to the theatre in large numbers. After all, even in central London in the 1890s, 80 per cent of the resident population was working-class. It would have been surprising if none of them went to the theatre.

The theatre must also have benefited from the shortening of working hours among all classes of the theatregoing public in employment. Work hours fell in the 1870s, and this shortening – a fifty-four hour week was typical of the last quarter of the century – made it theoretically possible for an employee to attend a whole evening's entertainment. The disappearance of 'half-price' admission at 9 p.m. and the truncation of the playbill from two, three, or four pieces to only one must have had a direct relationship to the length of the working day. It was no longer necessary to prolong the evening to midnight or 1 a.m. to ensure that those who stopped work at 8 or 9 p.m. could get their money's worth, and perhaps it was no longer crucial to the box office.

Generalising about nineteenth-century audiences is, in the absence of a great deal more evidence than is presently available, a risky business, especially when it also leads to possibly unwarranted conclusions about the drama and public taste. It is also difficult to generalise about the conventional divisions between the audience in box, pit and gallery, because at different prices and in different locations the social composition of the audience could differ widely. Nevertheless, the social and cultural implications of a play performed at a Victorian theatre, and therefore the play itself, cannot be completely comprehended unless one is aware of the audience for which it was performed, and that audience will change, theatre by theatre, district by district, decade by decade. This is so in the West End as in the East, or in any theatre district. The Victorian audience lived in its own culture and its own network of economic and social relationships; it did not exist only in auditoriums for the benefit of the scholar. It lived in a wider society of which the theatre was a small part; fully to understand it means knowing something of its social and cultural habits, jobs, wages, cost of living, places of residence, class status, means of transportation, patterns of migration and settlement, moral and political outlook – anything that goes to make up complete human beings living at a chosen moment in history who came together for the collective but usually incidental purpose of seeing a play.

The social range of the Victorian audience extended from the Queen to the meanest of her subjects who possessed the price of admission to a theatre gallery or penny gaff. By the end of the century the range of theatrical entertainment available to all classes,