
 CHAPTER I

Breaking through the darkness

The time has come when a change may be produced in the destinies of the stage as complete as that in a nation bursting from slavery to freedom. The patronage of the drama by HER MAJESTY at Court was the first streak of welcome light breaking through the darkness of the dramatic horizon. The bright dawn is already advancing; and if the profession be but true to itself, we may live to see the sun of prosperity shedding its noon-tide glories on the British Stage.
The Court Theatre and Royal Dramatic Record of Performances at Windsor (1849)

The attempt to rescue British Drama from the theatre's rowdy spectacle began a few months before Princess Victoria became Queen. By the time the Empress died, the theatre itself had grown respectable and a drama of ideas, adapted (more or less) to middle-class taste, had its place in that respectability. For without the approbation of the box-office, no dramatist, however independent and open-minded, could make his mark. Until theatre buildings and actor-managers became fashionable enough to attract the sort of audience which might, for whatever reason, support a serious drama, 'the worst and deadliest enemy of the English drama [was] – the English theatre'.¹ Even by the mid nineties, when theatres had become safely domestic and actors were gentlemen and ladies, a mind like Shaw's was prisoner to a manager's idea of popular taste. Richard Mansfield, who had won success with *Arms and the Man* and would make Shaw's reputation in America with *The Devil's Disciple*, rejected *Candida* because it was all talk and anti-heroics. Mansfield wanted an ideal:

The stage is for romance and love and truth and honor. To make men better and nobler. To cheer them on the way –
 Life is real. Life is earnest. And the grave is not its goal.

...
 Be a hero in the fight! . . . *Candida* is beautiful . . .

There are fine things here – but – we are paid – alas – Shaw – we are paid to *act*.²

The Victorian theatre was rich in romance. Ideas which possessed an entire century, like the status of women, a hero's idea of chivalric

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service, money's allure (which gaudy billboards might have alliterated as WOMEN, WAR, and WEALTH), could not be examined seriously until the theatre learned to be serious about itself. So, to understand the playwright's struggle, this account of Victorian Drama begins with that theatrical context and with the monarch whose conventional taste, like that of her son, mirrored the romantic sentiments of the audience at large. Royal patronage did nothing to 'improve' serious drama nor did it directly affect the dramatists' prestige: Gilbert and Pinero received their knighthoods after 1901. But the Queen's fascination with the theatre, her affection for particular actors, and the political decision she and Prince Albert came to in the revolutionary year of 1848 affected 'the destinies' of actors, playhouses, and playgoers. Then, governed by their own personalities, certain playwrights tried, at Matthew Arnold's urging, to 'organize' the drama within the limits of that hard-won dignity.

At Victoria's accession, fashionable society favoured the Opera, though, as the Queen's own theatregoing proves, not as exclusively as is sometimes suggested. Drury Lane and Covent Garden, the two patent theatres, had been remodelled at the turn of the century into huge caverns that could each seat over 3,500 people. The 'town' still came. At Mrs Siddons's farewell performance in June 1812 as Lady Macbeth, Covent Garden 'was crowded in an extraordinary manner in every part. Persons of high distinction were in the uppermost Boxes – Ladies as well as gentlemen',³ and two years later they flocked to see Edmund Kean at Drury Lane. But in order to fill those vast spaces on more ordinary occasions, managers were pushed ever closer to the spectacular entertainments offered by the non-patent theatres. Stunning processions, acrobats and clowns, performing animals were added to the bills; as the proprietor of Astley's Amphitheatre protested, 'Why do they take my horses? I never tried to engage Mrs Siddons.'⁴ An evening of Shakespeare followed by a ballet and a pantomime might last from seven till after midnight and, since admission was at half-price after eight-thirty, spectators not uncommonly came for part of a play and its afterpiece, though without the distraction which attended the Queen's arrival 'just after the beginning of the last act' of *The Lady of Lyons* (Covent Garden, March 1838). However, she dispatched an equerry to assure Macready she 'would come to see the whole play on Tuesday'.⁵

Though they tried to be all things to all people, the two 'major' houses could not ward off the challenge from the 'minor' establish-

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ments. The King's Theatre (Her Majesty's after 1837) in the Haymarket had been the sanctioned home of opera and ballet since Queen Anne's day. Across the road, the Little Theatre had been licensed since 1766 to perform legitimate plays during the summer, a privilege which was later extended to the Lyceum after having housed the Drury Lane company whose theatre burnt down in 1809. The Olympic and the Sans Pareil (Adelphi) were built in 1806, the Strand in 1832, and the St James's three years later. On the South bank, Astley's was joined by the Royal Circus (1782) which, in 1810, became the Surrey Theatre. The Coburg (later to be the Royal Victoria and later still the Old Vic) opened in 1816. These 'minor' theatres were forbidden legitimate drama but were able to circumvent that restriction by interpolating songs into a play and calling it a burletta, though what that term exactly meant not even the Lord Chamberlain's Office knew. 'In the 1830s the inclusion of five songs per act was held to redeem any amount of spoken dialogue, and by the early 1840s an occasional chord on the piano seems to have been all that was required.'⁶ Under this convenient vagary, Madame Vestris at the Olympic could present tastefully translated French comedies and fairy-tale extravaganzas. By 1842, the prestige of the Haymarket's ever expanding 'summer' season earned a year-round patent. The twin-citadel had been breached and, in 1843, parliament at last repealed the Patent Acts and so gave way to the scramble for entertainment in a metropolis whose population had doubled since the turn of the century. In 1850 Leigh Hunt looked back in his *Autobiography* to a time before drama had succumbed to diversions of all sorts:

forty or fifty years ago people of all times of life were much greater playgoers than they are now. They dined earlier, they had not so many newspapers, clubs, and pianofortes; the French Revolution . . . had not yet opened a thousand new channels of thought and interest, nor had railroads conspired to carry people, bodily as well as mentally, into as many analogous directions. Everything was more concentrated, and the various classes of society felt a greater concern in the same amusements. Nobility, gentry, citizens, princes – all were frequenters of theatres, and even more or less acquainted personally with the performers. Nobility intermarried with them; gentry, and citizens too, wrote for them; princes conversed and lived with them.⁷

Troubled by his bustling times, Hunt exaggerates the performers' fall from society. Helen Faucit, Macready's leading lady, was to become Lady Martin and the Queen's friend. Macready, upon his retirement, received a personal message from Prince Albert commending 'the

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efforts made by him for the purification and elevation of the stage'.⁸ The Prince could not accept the invitation to chair that testimonial dinner, but he and the Queen certainly conversed with actors, if they did not actually mix with them socially, and their patronage became immensely important.

From her earliest visit to Drury Lane (1828), the young Victoria was fascinated by performers as individuals. To mark the Princess's sixteenth birthday, a concert was arranged at Kensington Palace; afterwards she was able to meet Giulia Grisi, the soprano she idolized: 'Grisi is *quite beautiful* off the stage . . . She is very quiet, ladylike and unaffected in her manners. I spoke to her, and she answered in a very pleasing manner.'⁹ But though she loved opera with a passion – for twenty years she studied singing with the bass-baritone, Luigi Lablache – and thrilled to the ballet, a visit to the Olympic in 1836 drew her attention to Charles Mathews: 'not good-looking, but very clever and pleasing; he has a very slight, pretty figure, with very small feet, and is very graceful and immensely active'.¹⁰ Here she writes as a connoisseur of the dance. After seeing him and his vibrant partner, Madame Vestris, again in the following April, she made pen-and-ink sketches of both, and they remained favourites over the years. As an expert in voice production, she reacted to other performers in a decisive if changeable way: 'Miss Faucit is plain and thin, and her voice is much against her . . . she rants and screams too much also, but as she is very young, they say she may become a good actress.'¹¹ In *The Lady of Lyons* 'she was *quite detestable* and *ranting, screamed*, and I may say ROARED to disgust every one',¹² but in *Richelieu* 'Miss Faucit . . . surprised me agreeably'.¹³ Charles Kemble earned a severe critique on all counts: 'his voice is not pleasant to me; he makes terrible faces also which spoils his countenance and he looks old and does not carry himself well'.¹⁴ Nevertheless, the Princess and her mother were amongst the throng at Covent Garden to witness Kemble's farewell a few months later. She was so impressed by his Benedick that, immediately after her marriage, she requested the actor to return to the stage for a few nights so that her consort might share in her pleasurable memories. So the 64-year-old Kemble returned for four performances – Don Felix in *The Wonder*, Mercutio, Benedick, Hamlet. On the first night (24 March 1840) it seemed, said a writer in *John Bull*, 'as if by a vigorous effect of the will he had shaken forty years off his back, and bounded before us in all the vigour, elasticity, and fervid enthusiasm

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of youth. Oh! when will our young men learn to be and move the lover like him!' The Queen echoed that praise; as Hamlet he 'acted most beautifully and looked very well and quite young'.¹⁵ Four years later, Kemble was asked to read *Cymbeline* at Buckingham Palace; he had to decline a second invitation in 1848 because of his deafness.

As Princess, Victoria was able to pursue her enthusiasm, in a way which as Queen and then as wife and mother she could not. In 1833, she had crossed the river to the Royal Victoria and had also seen the horseback heroics of Ducrow at Astley's in *St George and the Dragon*; but as Queen she upheld the dignity of the two patent theatres and, on occasions, the Haymarket under Webster's enterprising management. But once the opera season opened in the Spring, she would go nowhere else. Her theatregoing in 1838 was typical of those early years: three visits to Drury Lane to see Charles Kean as Hamlet and (twice) as Richard III; two to Covent Garden where she caught the last Act of *The Lady of Lyons* and two afterpieces, then returned three days later to see the whole of Bulwer's play; three to the Lyceum's winter season of opera; twenty-eight visits to opera at Her Majesty's between the end of March and the middle of August. However, ardour and duty coincided when, in the following year, she attended the pantomime at Drury Lane and saw that 'miracle of a performance', Van Amburgh's lions: '[he] makes them roar, and lies upon them after enraging them. It's quite beautiful to see, and makes me wish I could do the same!'¹⁶ The Queen saw them six more times in as many weeks. Macready, then manager of the rival house, was not happy. He would have been still less so had he read his sovereign's diary once she again graced Covent Garden: 'I was much more amused at Drury Lane . . . those Lions knock Rob Roy and everything else of that sort to the ground.'¹⁷ After her marriage, Victoria visited the circus only once (Astley's 1846) but, even before the repeal of the Patent Acts, she and the Prince found mutual pleasure at the St James's which, for six months or so each year, became the 'Théâtre Français à Londres'.

In 1848, a year of revolution throughout Europe, Alexander Dumas brought his Théâtre Historique from embattled Paris to Drury Lane. This French invasion of a theatre still regarded as a British institution touched off a furious protest. On the opening night (12 June), the boos and shouts of demonstrators waving placards and umbrellas disrupted the entire performance. In the press, letters of dismay over that mob scene jostled others which complained about

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this foreign intrusion and the parlous state of British drama as a whole, since so many plays on the London stage were ‘adapted from the French’. Dumas’s actors struggled on through a second riotous night and then retreated to the St James’s. A fortnight later, their majesties interrupted their opera-going for a command performance by the Keans in *Money* and *The Wonder* at the Haymarket and, a week later, for the sake of English Drama, they gave a similar accolade to Macready whose *Henry VIII* had hurriedly replaced the French at Drury Lane. Ben Webster, proprietor of the Haymarket, writing to a friend, complained of the monarch’s favour to one whose vanity would only draw distinction upon himself instead of the whole profession:

Is it not too bad that Her Majesty should have been humbugged into a Command [performance of *Henry VIII*] at Drury Lane for Macready’s *exclusive* benefit and under the idea that by such patronage she is serving the English Drama? You know as well as I do that the exorbitant terms of this lump of egotism and his only condescending to act in plays when *he* only has a chance – written by his *particular* friends, has been the bane of the profession.¹⁸

Then, in a conscious effort to raise the theatre in society’s eyes, the Prince instructed his private secretary to ask Charles Kean to organize ‘English performances once a week at Windsor Castle, commencing after Christmas – for six weeks’. Kean realized at once that this ‘grand business . . . will be of the utmost service to me’,¹⁹ but the royal intent was to shed ‘welcome light’ on the entire profession and to educate the nation:

From time immemorial mankind has delegated to the affluent, the educated and the powerful the province of directing taste and opinion on all subjects connected with happiness and mental improvement . . . in the SOVEREIGN LADY of these realms the people of England happily possess an example which their own approval . . . must ever incline them to follow . . . By all ranks it was esteemed a graceful and becoming act in the Ruler of a civilised and intellectual people to set the example of patronising a class of entertainments that, when directed to the improvement of the heart and mind, becomes a valuable adjunct to education in its highest aims, and only when neglected sinks into a coarse and demoralising amusement.²⁰

To those same ends, Macready was honoured by the royal presence, when as *King Lear* (February 1851) he retired from the Haymarket, and by the Prince’s approbation of a career which had so ‘elevated’ the British stage.

Important as the annual Windsor performances were as a social symbol, they also deepened that loyalty to individual performers

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which had always coloured Victoria's attitude to the stage. It was evident even before the Windsor venture, for when Charles Mathews and Madame Vestris assumed the management of the Lyceum that theatre became immediately acceptable. After the first Windsor season, although the St James's French plays retained their undiminished attraction until their quality fell away in the mid fifties, those theatres which were associated with actors who played at Windsor began to appear on the royal calendar. When Webster moved to the Adelphi the royals went too, and John Buckstone, the next manager at the Haymarket and a particular favourite of the whole royal family, received their increasing patronage as did Alfred Wigan when he took over at the Olympic. But it was Charles Kean and his wife, Ellen Tree, who received especial favour, first under Webster's management in Shakespeare at the Haymarket and then at their own theatre in Oxford Street, the Princess's.

Royal patronage brought social cachet to an expanding circle of actors and theatres but it did not provoke new plays which might add to the 'mental improvement . . . of a civilised and intellectual people'. The plays selected for Windsor were either those of Shakespeare, scaled down to the particularities of the Rubens room or St George's Hall, or farces and sentimental comedies. In town, the royal family found pleasure in the same fare presented more spectacularly. At the Haymarket, Webster moved and delighted them with *Masks and Faces* – Tom Taylor and Charles Reade's play about Peg Woffington and other actors of a former age – or Buckstone sent them into fits of laughter as his quirky self in burlesques like *Mr Buckstone's Ascent of Mount Parnassus*. At the Lyceum there were such magical extravaganzas as *The King of the Peacocks* and at the Olympic they saw Frederick Robson as *The Yellow Dwarf*.

The Queen loved strong emotional contrasts and spectacular effects, and in Kean's grand-opera productions of Shakespeare she could indulge that appetite in the assurance that Mr Kean's researches at the British Museum, as pointed out in his programme notes, meant that each gorgeous tableau was scrupulously faithful to historical TRUTH. If the soul of Catherine of Aragon was not in fact transported by angels to heaven then it surely ought to have been. Also at the Princess's were genteel comedies like *Love in a Maze* which the Queen saw twice and pronounced 'full of wit – and with an excellent moral, particularly for young ladies'.²¹ There, too – oh, shades of Van Amburgh's lions – were gentlemanly melodramas such

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as *Pauline* ('one quite held one's breath, and was quite trembling when the Play came to an end'²²) and the sensational *Corsican Brothers* which ran for sixty-six nights in 1852 and which the Queen saw five times, sketching a scene from it in her journal. Yet she was not uncritical. That same season she attended a benefit for the Keans and saw, as an afterpiece, *The Vampire*, a 'phantasm' in three 'dramas' which carried the tale across the centuries from 1660 to 1860. Dion Boucicault who had concocted this story (and those other successes) from French sources impressed the Queen so much in the title role that she commissioned a watercolour of him as Sir Alan Raby: 'I can never forget his livid face and fixed look, in the two first Dramas. It quite haunts me.'²³ But the play itself, when she returned the following week, did 'not bear seeing a second time, and is, in fact, very trashy'.²⁴

It was Boucicault who evoked her very last tears, smiles, and tingles of excitement in a public theatre. Nine years later, this time at the Adelphi, she saw *The Colleen Bawn*: 'went with Albert and the two girls . . . to see the celebrated melodrama . . . D. Boucicault and his wife (former Miss Robertson, whom I remember some years ago at the Princess's) acted admirably as the ragged Irish peasant and the Colleen Bawn. The scenery was very pretty, and the whole piece very characteristic and thrilling.'²⁵ Two days after a third visit, her mother, the Duchess of Kent, died and Victoria plunged into unconsolable grief. In December, the Prince Consort succumbed to typhoid and the Queen commenced her own long-running drama as widow to Albert the Good.

Within two years of that cataclysm, the Prince of Wales married Princess Alexandra and the young couple entered upon a whirl of amusements, much to the Queen's displeasure. Yet their gaiety had at first a certain innocence. Private visits to the Haymarket retained something of the domestic jollity that characterized those of former times when the Queen and her consort struggled to keep straight faces as Buckstone, 'lighting' them to their box, tripped over the stairs as he backed before them or when she and the Princess Royal rode away in tears of laughter because the deaf old manager, his eyes watering after quickly removing his makeup, had thought the Queen, in complimenting him, had asked if he had a cold: 'No, Ma'am, no. It's soap.'²⁶ When the Prince brought his bride to see *Mr Buckstone at Home*, Mrs Keeley (a favourite since the early days at the Princess's) sang a song about fairy-tale princes and princesses. Pointing to the Royal Box,

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she improvised a reference to the royal pair who sat invisibly behind their attendants. The audience caught the allusion and stopped the show until the couple came forward to acknowledge the cheers.

The Queen kept that box till Buckstone retired, although she would not see his management's big successes, *Our American Cousin* (with E.A. Sothorn as Lord Dundreary) and its sequels (*Lord Dundreary Married and Done For* and *Brother Sam*), which maintained the style and tone of the comedies she had delighted in. Nor would the 'revolution' worked by Marie Wilton at the newly named Prince of Wales's in 1865 have bewildered the Queen: the company's acting was as subtle as that of any troupe at the old Théâtre Français à Londres, the meticulous sets and costumes carried on the traditions of Madame Vestris, and the success of their repertoire, particularly Tom Robertson's *School*, a transparently simple Cinderella story, can be explained by one of Victoria's most frequent words of praise – it was 'charming'. Robertson's plays continued to be the company's staple money-makers when Marie and her husband, Squire Bancroft, moved to the Haymarket in 1880 though they began their tenancy with *Money*, a perennial since 1840.

Melodrama also continued to maintain its hold over a public whose desire for sensational effects grew ever more voracious. Boucicault's *Formosa* at Drury Lane (1869) culminated in a realistic staging of the Oxford and Cambridge boat race; it also included a different sort of sensationalism by presenting several women of ill repute. They aroused fierce protest as did the thought that an Oxford stroke could approach his big day in 'the very vortex of dissipation',²⁷ but the play ran for over one hundred nights. And when Henry Irving, who had played the villain in *Formosa*, assumed control at the Lyceum, that temple of English Drama offered spectacular Shakespeare and melodrama with all the sumptuous theatricality, if not the pomposity, of a Charles Kean. Appropriately, the two actors who were knighted by the end of the century, Irving and Bancroft, represented a continuity which lasted, especially in the provinces, until the First World War.

Yet within that continuing tradition there occurred a distinctive change. By the late eighties women began to rebel against man's stifling patronage. Onto the stage came ladies whose pasts were decidedly shady, and even respectable women were seen to be capable of untruths; officers and gentlemen might be rotters; money could perhaps buy a person out of awkward situations. Yet although Paula

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Tanqueray and her saintly step-daughter are worlds away from the heroines of the forties, *The Second Mrs Tanqueray* might well appear concurrently with an old favourite like *The Lady of Lyons*. Both were acceptable and, like Marlborough House and Windsor Castle, both typified the values of the century's final decade.

This had not been so before the eighties. As stories began to circulate about the Prince's habits, his gambling, his eye for the ladies, his rich and raffish friends, life at Marlborough House became a symbol to the sixties of disintegrating social standards and raised fears of a return to the extravagances of George III's feckless sons. Allowed no official authority by his mother, 'poor foolish Bertie' hurtled from theatre to club, yacht to spa, race-course to baccarat table; and certain elements of society followed his lead. A public outcry followed the disclosure that Sir Charles Mordaunt had cited the Prince among others in his impending divorce case. The Prince maintained his innocence but was brought into court in February 1870 as a witness for Lady Mordaunt. The Princess of Wales was pitied but had to endure the boos that greeted their appearance at the Olympic a week after the Prince's day in court. 'To speak in rude and general terms,' said Gladstone to the Foreign Secretary, 'the Queen is invisible and the Prince of Wales is not respected.'²⁸ Republican feeling grew in many quarters and then, exactly a decade after his father's death, the Prince also fell victim to typhoid and all England trembled. Slowly he recovered, and by February 1872 London was alive with bunting and shouts of 'God bless the Prince of Wales' as he and the Queen, in public again at last, rode in an open carriage to a service of national thanksgiving at St Paul's. Love and loyalty returned, and there began a period of adjustment as continuing disapproval of the Prince's lifestyle gave way to a growing appreciation of his charm and the value of his energetic sociability to the nation.

An episode from the Prince's tour of India in 1875–6 exemplifies those conflicting attitudes. Even at its outset, the tour raised doubts from the more radical members of parliament, but reports of the Prince's triumphant reception allayed this criticism. Yet under that enthusiasm were ripples of displeasure. In Calcutta, where the white Raj were more English than the English, society had fought for a place at Lady Clarke's dinner party to honour HRH. The Prince did not consider this an official function and, learning that Charles Mathews was appearing at the city's theatre, asked that he and his second wife