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## Introduction

One could say that a good book of essays will have a fundamental coherence and yet will draw strength from the diversity, the contradictoriness even, of its parts. If that is so, then Sheridan makes a particularly apt subject for such a volume. At the end of his life it can only have been by the most strenuous act of the imagination that he was able to see himself whole. For over thirty years he had been a failed and scheming politician of the reforming party, and for a similar length of time the only intermittently enthusiastic but ultimately accountable manager of Drury Lane theatre, the destruction of which by fire in 1809 finally ruined him financially. Before his career in politics effectually began, he had been the author of the three most famous comedies of the age. That success, however, was long past when he died in 1816, and it appears that Sheridan took this as a comment on the failure of the latter part of his life when he moved among great men in reality and not only on the stage, to the extent that he was reluctant to recall it and wished to be buried next to Fox in Westminster Abbey and not, as happened, between Handel and Johnson and close to Garrick – and the despised Cumberland – in Poets' Corner.<sup>1</sup> He died in wretched poverty: the bailiffs at the door now that he was no longer protected by immunity as a Member of Parliament from arrest for debt, his desperately ill wife doing what she could for her dying husband in a house without food or warmth or anything much in the way of furniture. And yet a few days later dukes walked in his funeral procession to his literary resting place. So much greater is literature, as he might always have uneasily suspected, than the play of what seems like real power in human affairs.<sup>2</sup>

The evidence indicates that Sheridan did not often see himself whole in the way that this volume of essays suggests is possible. One might almost say that in the end he valued least what he did best, the writing of plays. As a

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playwright he is at the centre of a large world which extends back in time to Shakespeare and the Restoration theatre and forward to Wilde and the present day. As Peter Wood suggests in the last chapter, it is some index of the health of the modern theatre that it can or cannot tolerate a fully elaborated production of a Sheridan comedy. As a politician Sheridan was – and the change of tense seems appropriate – part of what appeared to be a large world, but that world is now past and its battles are over. Even at the time Sheridan was hardly centre stage, since in a political career lasting more than thirty years he held minor office for a total of barely two.

The portraits of Sheridan in this volume vary greatly from chapter to chapter, but we hope that the organic quality of a life which moved from the theatrical stage to the stage of politics and which extended from the minutiae of political intrigue to the larger shapes and movements of literary tradition, will become apparent. In the compass of a single volume we have tried to present Sheridan so that nothing important of him is lost, even though we have had to omit extended treatment of those *chefs-d'oeuvre* of dramatic opportunism, *The Duenna* and *Pizarro*. If the whole can seem to make significant sense, then we shall feel, editors and contributors alike, that the volume has been worth compiling.

The essays begin with the theatre, and with Mark Auburn's account of the theatrical scene in the age of Garrick and Sheridan. We hope that the reader will gain a vivid sense of what it was like to go to the London theatre in the 1770s, in the decade when Sheridan replaced Garrick as manager of Drury Lane and produced his three great plays. The theatre was then at the centre of popular culture in a way that television rather than theatre is now; as Peter Wood says, it was not 'Art', and the response it received was enthusiastic rather than decorous. As Auburn also suggests, Sheridan's own attitude to it was not decorous either: he became manager of Drury Lane because he saw it as a way of making money. His attitude towards Drury Lane as a speculative investment went hand in hand with, and no doubt partly fuelled, his theatrical enthusiasm: both as a playwright and later as a reforming politician, Sheridan was human in his desire for money and fame.

The dream of money failed him, but Sheridan's early sense that the theatre was a good investment in fame led him, as Eric Rump notes, to revive three of Congreve's comedies in the opening months of his first season at Drury Lane. It is as though he saw a major part of the comic tradition lying dormant in the late eighteenth century, and it was a tradition to

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which he was aware he could contribute greatly. Partly as an act of theatrical piety but partly also to establish an arena for himself, he took the bold step of reviving the licentious comedy of the last age, altered with rather less boldness to suit the less licentious taste of his own time. In some way then, as Rump argues, Sheridan's Congreve revivals, coming between his first major success with *The Rivals* and the fortifying and establishing of that success with *The School for Scandal*, link him explicitly with that earlier and still evidently vigorous tradition. Rump's essay joins with the pieces by Morwood and Crane in offering an alternative or supplement to Auburn's view that as a playwright Sheridan owes far more to his contemporaries and his actors than to his long-dead precursors.

Richard Taylor, in his account of the way in which contemporary reviewers struggled to make sense of *The Rivals*, stresses Sheridan's originality in the way in which he challenged the received ideas of contemporary critics, rather than stressing his debt to either the living or the dead. Great originality and a profound response both to the contemporary theatre and the theatrical tradition seem to characterize Sheridan's work as a comic playwright; for as James Morwood suggests in examining Molière's influence on *The School for Scandal*, the root system which fed Sheridan's own comic energies was broader than Congreve, drawing on a tradition which goes back to the great French master of comedy; and David Crane shows, with a detailed look at the relationship between *The Critic* and one specific Restoration play, both how Sheridan focussed upon and how he transformed a still living tradition of performance of Buckingham's *The Rehearsal*.

*The Critic*, with its intense involvement in contemporary political events, opens also in a different direction, and is a point of meeting between Sheridan's theatrical and political energies, a place too where the seriousness and the unseriousness of Sheridan's whole understanding of life tricksily and subtly hold hands. It is perhaps somewhere near the heart of the matter with Sheridan to understand how closely grave concerns and play went together: he was satirist and showman, reformer and politician, a serious friend or enemy and a contemptible cartoon figure. The patriotic finale of *The Critic* is both ludicrously successful bombast and love of country, and (as Peter Wood suggests) it cannot be well played except both as farce and magic.

The mixture of farce and magic reminds one of Shakespeare, and it does not seem too much to say that Sheridan is at a pivotal point in a comic tradi-

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tion which links Shakespeare and Wilde. But again, as Richard Taylor reminds us, he is also his own man, not to be explained simply as a meeting point of influences. Both Taylor and Rump deal with Sheridan's attitude to the sentimental theatre of his day. The latter is eager to disassociate him from it altogether, while the former discusses his not altogether unfriendly exploitation of it.

And slippery he is indeed, giving more than one account of himself to the world, as is evident from the essays by Jack Durant and Christopher Reid. These two pieces hold together the literary and political parts of this volume, concentrating on Sheridan's fundamental ability, both as playwright and political activist, in his command of language. Differing pictures, however, emerge from the two essays.

Jack Durant concentrates on Sheridan's claim that language should honestly, accurately and simply convey the honest truth, and uses his political speeches, especially against Warren Hastings, to enforce the point that Sheridan wished fundamentally to endorse 'language as a vehicle of truth'. Looking back upon the plays from this angle, we see the various corruptions of language displayed there as intended satirically. There is a stark contrast between this and Morwood's view of the playwright's moral relativism, and also Christopher Reid's sense that the House of Commons which Sheridan entered in 1780 was 'a theatre of great personal confrontations', and that as a consequence it drew forth from him a rhetorical ability to improvise, a ready ingenuity of mind, so that, as Fox said, 'he could contrive to give an argument what turn he pleased'. This is Sheridan more as Mr Puff than the plain honest dealer; and indeed, even the honest dealer could be a rhetorical persuader by his honesty, and the more effective no doubt the more he believed in the honesty of his position. We enter upon the accounts of Sheridan's political life towards the end of this volume with a sense of the simplicity behind the art and the art behind the simplicity, which drove him as a political reformer upon such a complex and finally unsuccessful course.

In his political life, by contrast with his playwriting life, other people were of course contriving the plot, much as Sheridan would have liked himself to be the master plotter. And if the plot is written by another hand, then the sense one has of playing a leading role may in the end be subverted by events, leaving one's great gifts stranded amid small successes and trivial manoeuvres. It is with a feeling that although in *The Critic* Puff achieved a cunningly unexpected success with his play, *The Spanish Armada*, no such

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glittering finale awaited Mr Puff in real life, that we pass in Sheridan's political career from the early triumphs in the speeches against Warren Hastings to the sorry record of his later years.

Christopher Clayton gives an overall view of Sheridan's political career, suggesting that behind all the manoeuvres there remained a fundamental integrity and consistency of purpose. The Sheridan portrayed here resembles the image of the man as he appears in Durant's essay. Sheridan's failure as a politician is, in this estimation, not the result of any sense of unreliability or dishonesty but is rather the consequence of his unaristocratic birth. Mark Baer, by contrast with Clayton, focuses tightly upon the borough of Westminster and the Westminster Association, in order to give, both in parliamentary and extraparliamentary terms, an account of Sheridan's rise and fall as a political reformer. Baer also suggests that one of the key reasons for Sheridan's failure was his 'innate theatricality', his ability to play a role, to invent himself. Politics may have a complicated plot, but it works with simpler ideas of character, whether good or bad, than a playwright would. This is not to say, of course, that politicians are in fact simple people, only that their trade requires them to appear so; Sheridan perhaps passed too joyously and evidently from such a simple account to more complex delineations of himself, more subtle presentations of possibilities, as the circumstances of the moment engaged his energies. Baer emphasizes the frequency with which he was caricatured in political cartoons in the late Georgian era and how often and (in political terms) damagingly he was seen as a theatrical figure. Clearly his theatricality made him a public presence, and also a political failure. You couldn't easily credit the performance, but arguably his failure was no failure of basic integrity; it revealed him as a more fully accounted for human being than he would have been as the great reformer.

The volume ends with Sheridan's survival. Peter Wood gives an account of the two productions he staged at the National Theatre, *The Rivals* (1983) and *The School for Scandal* (1990). We have a sense from this of the breadth and variety of the response Sheridan asks of players, of audience, and, last and not least, of critics. It is as important for the theatre of our day to keep a good hold on Sheridan as it was for him to hold fast to the living theatrical tradition that fed his own genius and was in turn revitalized by his individual contribution to it. Peter Wood suggests that the present-day theatre is in a state of crisis and that for its health it should try again to accommodate Sheridan's comedies in all their original largeness of life. The same may

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surely be said of present-day politics: arguably what the House of Commons needs today is what it had in abundance with Sheridan: great speakers and failed politicians, not successful politicians unable to utter a single living word. In the end the acid test is whether the words one speaks and writes confer life; and in the desert land of bureaucratic machine-speak that we inhabit, it is time to look to Sheridan again.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> *Memoirs, Journal, and Correspondence of Thomas Moore*, ed. Lord J. Russell (London, 1853), iii, p. 233.
- <sup>2</sup> Charles Butler, *Reminiscences* (London, 1827), ii, p. 80.

References are to Sheridan, *Plays*, ed. C. Price (Oxford, 1975).

## I

## Theatre in the age of Garrick and Sheridan

MARK S. AUBURN

This chapter presents a broad, general overview of London theatre in the age of David Garrick and Richard Brinsley Sheridan, spanning slightly more than six decades. Some memories of the English literary critic Charles Lamb provide a context to sections on what it was like to go to the theatre; how the major theatres contrasted with other theatrical entertainment; what plays would be seen; and what characterized the acting, the careers of six representative actors who created roles for Sheridan, Sheridan's creative debts, and Sheridan's management. Two general assumptions undergird the essay. First, theatre in this era shaped and was shaped by human consciousness in roughly the way that television functions in the late twentieth century; it was an aspect of popular culture which opens a society to our understanding in the same ways that the rise of professional sports teams or municipal bands and orchestras or great museums and libraries might do for other ages and places. Second, the written plays which have come down to us two centuries later can best be understood in the contexts not just of the social mores and literary conventions of the time but also of the raw materials, human and physical, with which the playwrights had to work and which shaped their artistic choices perhaps more than the dramatic traditions to which they were heirs. Knowledge of the London theatre in the second half of the eighteenth century helps to illuminate Sheridan's achievement.

## GOING TO THE THEATRE

About forty years afterwards, Charles Lamb recalls his first trip to the theatre. In an essay called 'My First Play' (*London Magazine*, December 1821), 'Elia' tells us of a rainy day on which his law-clerk father promised a

Mark S. Auburn

chance to go to Drury Lane, if the rain abated; the family had ‘orders’, or free tickets, obtained by his godfather Fielde, an oil dealer who supplied the Theatre Royal in Drury Lane, and the precocious child watched ‘from the window the puddles, from the stillness of which I was taught to prognosticate the desired cessation’. Lamb was five years old when his mother carried him into the pit at Drury Lane on 1 December 1780, and four decades later he writes with excited clarity about seeing that night Thomas Arne’s dramatic opera *Artaxerxes* followed by David Garrick’s farce *Harlequin’s Invasion*. ‘The orchestra lights at length arose, those “fair Auroras”! Once the bell sounded. It was to ring out yet once again – and incapable of the anticipation, I reposed my shut eyes in a sort of resignation upon the maternal lap. It rang a second time. The curtain drew up – and I was not past six years old, and the play was *Artaxerxes*!’

Drury Lane was the theatre which Richard Brinsley Sheridan owned and managed for thirty-five years from 1776, most of his adult lifetime. He had written and helped to produce two enormously popular plays, *The Rivals* (January 1775) and *The Duenna* (November 1775), at the Theatre Royal in Covent Garden, close by Drury Lane. When Sheridan bought through a complicated financial arrangement part of the royal patent for Drury Lane in 1776, he confirmed his place as the theatrical manager who would succeed David Garrick (1717–79), since 1747 the most powerful shaping force in theatre throughout the English-speaking world. Sheridan gave two great plays to Drury Lane, *The School for Scandal* (May 1777) and *The Critic* (October 1779), several entertainments, and one political spectacle, *Pizarro* in 1799; but there was no lasting theatrical literature after he became a Member of Parliament in 1780.

As one of the three-quarter-of-a-million residents of London in the 1760s and 1770s (the era of Garrick’s influence and Sheridan’s playwriting), you might have joined the 12,000 or so who went to the theatre or the opera in any given week, or the 2,300 or so who could have crowded into the Theatre Royal in Drury Lane on that clear-skied evening, although in fact only about a thousand were in attendance on 1 December 1780. Like most Londoners, at four p.m. you had your dinner, and earlier that day you had read in the *Public Advertiser* details concerning the performances to be available tonight at Covent Garden and Drury Lane; or perhaps you had seen stuck up somewhere in London one of the more than 150 ‘large’ playbills distributed six mornings a week. (The advertising posters are to be distinguished from the smaller but otherwise identical handbills available at



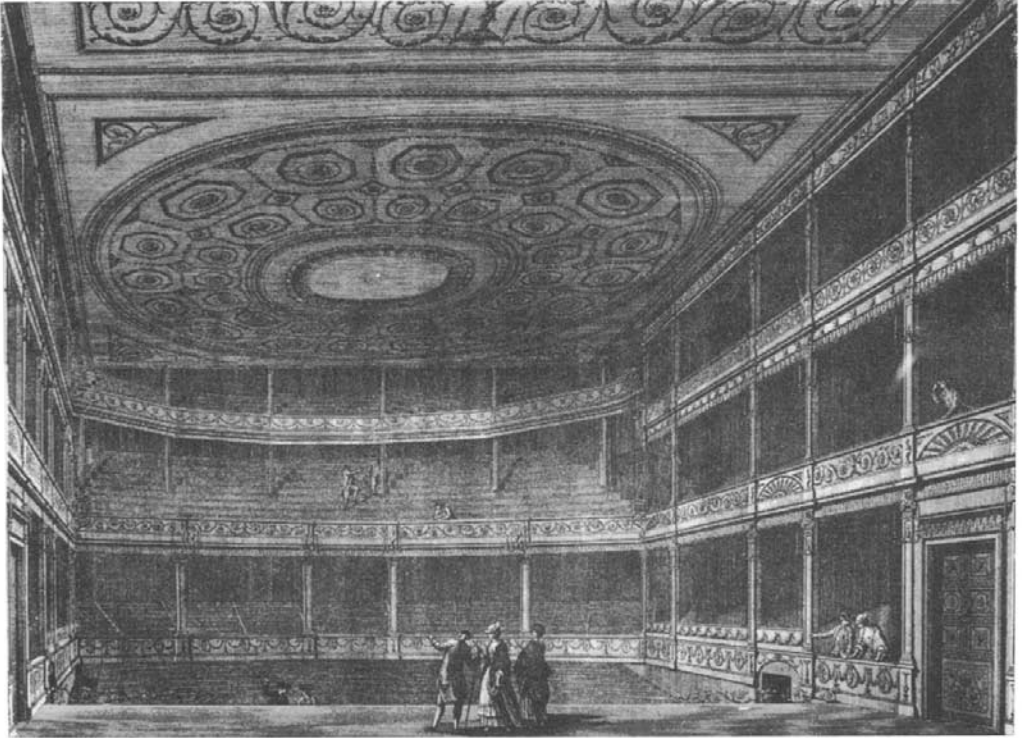
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the theatres themselves.) Particulars about tonight's presentation, one of about 180 available every year between September and May at the two 'patent houses', legally chartered theatres, may have influenced your decision to go tonight; or perhaps you just wanted to be seen at the theatre. Whatever your reasons for going, you would make your way to Drury Lane an hour or forty-five minutes before the 6.15 p.m. starting time (depending upon the length of daylight, the play might begin at 5.30, 6.00, 6.15 or 6.30). There you would find yourself in a large crowd of people pushing their way past a small entry door through the narrow five- or six-foot-wide corridors which led to the auditorium.

Only a few people would possess, like the Lamb family this night, 'orders' or free admissions provided by the management of the theatre. Most would be seeking to buy places in one of four seating areas: the pit (three shillings), the boxes (five shillings), the first gallery (two shillings), or the second gallery (one shilling). This was an era when Dr Johnson related that thirty pounds a year would be sufficient for a single gentleman to survive in London and when a skilled craftsman might earn about twenty shillings a week, so attendance at the London theatres was a treat, as a percentage of income just about what it costs to go to the West End or Broadway theatre today – that is, it was expensive. Generally, social class as much as buying power determined where you sat. The nobility and the gentry occupied the boxes which were ranged in a double horseshoe just above the level of the stage proper; people of some means in trade or business sat on the nine or ten rows of backless benches in the pit. These benches rose slightly beyond the sunken orchestra pit from a few feet below the apron of the stage directly before it to nearly even with the boxes in the back of the house, where those sitting in the last row of the boxes would be about fifty-one feet from the apron of the stage. Tradesmen and others would pay two shillings for a bench seat in the first gallery, above at the rear of the horseshoe formed by the two tiers of boxes, and labourers and servants would spend a shilling to occupy the second gallery at the top of the auditorium above the first gallery. (These galleries did not project above and beyond the pit and the boxes, in the manner of most modern balconies, but were flush above the boxes at the rear of the horseshoe.) Unless you had arranged for a box seat by paying in advance half the five-shilling fee, you would pay your entire price as you entered the corridor, be given a ticket which was in fact a metal token, and surrender that token to a doorkeeper as you reached the doorway entrance to your seating area.

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Mark S. Auburn



1 The auditorium of the Theatre Royal in Drury Lane, following the refurbishment by Robert Adam in 1775–6.

Upon giving up that token in a poorly lit, crowded corridor, you would rush through a door into your seating area and jostle for one of the unreserved seats. There you would encounter much more light than you, the average eighteenth-century Londoner, saw in the night. In this era of candlelight and oil lamps, no place would be more brightly illuminated than this auditorium, except perhaps masquerades at the great pleasure gardens. Crowded together on your backless bench, you might focus upon the green stage curtain (and it was always green by custom) at the proscenium arch, whose rising would signal the start of the evening's entertainment; or you might look around at the smartly dressed people in the boxes, who had begun to arrive to take the places on the benches which their servants had been holding for them – even in the boxes, there were no reserved seats and no backs to the benches. Certainly you would hear and see women selling