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Edited by Joseph Donohue

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PART I

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1660 TO 1800

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I

Introduction
The theatre from 1660 to 1800

JOSEPH DONOHUE

Approaching the Restoration theatre

Paradoxically, the theatre of the English post-Restoration seems more remote to us than the theatre of Shakespeare, Jonson and Webster. The Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre has been fully assimilated by modern and post-modern stagecraft, but the theatre of the Restoration, Georgian and Victorian years – from Dryden, Wycherley and Aphra Behn through Goldsmith and Sheridan to the dawn of the modern day – largely remains encapsulated in its historical and theatrical milieu. *The Importance of Being Earnest* scintillates in 1930s finery, but *The Beaux' Stratagem* is almost never mounted in late Victorian lounge suits or Congreve as if contemporary to Coward. In recent times *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* has been set in a romantic *faux* Regency surround and *The Merchant of Venice* in a fascist, anti-Semitic Italy; by the same token, the Elizabethan-Jacobean repertory has been cloaked in the modernist panoply of Gordon Craig or Granville Barker. But Boucicault's comedies and Pinero's farces still walk unmediated in the costume of their day. We simply do not treat post-Restoration plays metaphorically, whether historically or stylistically. True classics of the theatre are timeless, we think, and may be redressed in the habits of any amenable time, but plays from the days of Charles II to the near end of the nineteenth century have yet to become classics *in the theatre*, though some have done as literary art. A greater leap of historical imagination is therefore required to understand the post-Restoration theatre for what it is and to measure its considerable aesthetic and cultural distance back from our own time.

An additional issue emerges. The essentially bare Elizabethan stage holds a remarkable likeness to the metonymous unitary set of the post-realist modern theatre; but the long tradition of changeable representational scenery, established in the public theatre in 1660 and continued for over two centuries, constituted a wholesale departure from the early seventeenth-century theatre's

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non-representational scene. That departure, in the direction of ever greater 'realism', reached its apogee in the mid-nineteenth century on the picture-perfect stage of Charles Kean's Princess's Theatre. It was against this impulse to mount a three-dimensional illusion of actual life, historical or contemporary, that modernist English and European producers and designers rebelled. Their radical new aesthetic effectively mothballed the long history of the British theatre from Dryden to Shaw and the history of performance from Betterton and Bracegirdle to Irving and Terry. Only recently, as the second theatres of the Royal Shakespeare Company, the Stratford, Ontario Shakespeare Festival and numerous other multi-stage companies began adapting Wycherley's *The Country Wife* (1675), Gay, Pope and Arbuthnot's *Three Hours after Marriage* (1717) and other 'lost' plays to the modest reaches of the Swan, the Young Vic and other small-scale venues, has the gulf separating audiences of our day from the pleasures of *Marriage à la Mode* (1672), *The Clandestine Marriage* (1766) and hundreds of other neglected but still stageworthy works begun to be bridged.

This development promises significant new insights into an entire theatrical and dramatic culture, along with deeper understanding of its connection to its own day and to ours. Meanwhile, these are the present circumstances in which the history of the British theatre from 1660 to 1895 must necessarily be written.

Renewed beginnings, 1660 to 1700

In less than three months after King Charles II had landed triumphantly at Dover, on 29 May 1660, restoring the monarchy to Britain, his courtiers William Davenant and Thomas Killigrew came into possession of a joint warrant granted by the King for the exclusive representation of plays – a remarkable triumph of their own. For eighteen years, since the closing of the theatres in 1642 by agents of the Commonwealth, no theatrical performance had been officially tolerated. Perhaps with the Puritans' bias against stage plays in mind, Charles enjoined Killigrew and Davenant to avoid works containing 'profanation and scurrility', choosing instead entertainments which 'might serve as moral instructions in human life' and provide 'innocent and harmless divertissement'. Banning all others from performing plays in the cities of London and Westminster, Charles entitled Davenant and Killigrew to form two companies and build two theatres 'for the representation of tragedies, comedies, plays, operas, and all other entertainments of that nature'. Left unmentioned, but

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articulated in subsequent patents, was Charles's instruction that all women's parts be 'performed by women'.¹

Anticipating the King's return, more than one group of actors had re-emerged or been freshly constituted. A group of older players, survivors of pre-Commonwealth theatre companies, offered plays by Fletcher and Shakespeare at the Red Bull and Gibbons's Tennis Court. A younger troupe including Thomas Betterton and other actors destined for distinction were performing at the old Cockpit in Drury Lane. William Beeston had evidently taken over Salisbury Court on a licence from Sir Henry Herbert, Master of the Revels, who still insisted on regulating theatrical entertainments.² During the closing years of the Interregnum the canny Davenant circumvented the official ban by producing 'opera'. First at his residence, Rutland House, and then at the Cockpit, Davenant mounted *The Siege of Rhodes* (1656) and *The Cruelty of the Spaniards in Peru* (1658), entertainments whose extensive musical content legitimized a fictional action presented on stage, before an audience.³ These and other events combined to establish the framework within which legally countenanced theatrical performance would occur for the better part of the next two centuries.

Although Charles's patent permitted the erection of two theatres, a combination of renovation, adaptation and new construction ensued. After functioning briefly as the home of Davenant and Killigrew's temporarily united company, the old Phoenix, or Cockpit, in Drury Lane disappeared from view. Still another old theatre, the Salisbury Court, similar in design to the Cockpit and Blackfriars and renovated by Beeston in 1659, was occupied briefly by Davenant over the winter of 1660–61 before moving to his new playhouse, the former Lisle's Tennis Court, the following summer. Like so many other buildings, it perished in the Great Fire of 1666. The renovated Gibbons's Tennis Court, in Lincoln's Inn Fields, served Killigrew and his company, under Charles's patronage, as the first theatre royal until May 1663, when a permanent theatre opened in Bridges Street, Drury Lane. And, even while performances of Davenant's company, styled 'the Duke's Men' after their patron, the Duke of York, continued at Salisbury Court, he converted and enlarged Lisle's to accommodate both a goodly audience and the changeable scenery introduced at Rutland House. Davenant's troupe remained at Lisle's, even after Davenant's death in

¹ Thomas and Hare, eds., *Restoration and Georgian England*, 11–12, 18.

² Nicoll, *History of English Drama*, 1: 287–92.

³ The title of Davenant's opera as first published is instructive: *The Siege of Rhodes: Made a representation by the art of perspective in scenes and the story sung in recitative music*. See Thomas and Hare, eds., *Restoration and Georgian England*, 86–91.

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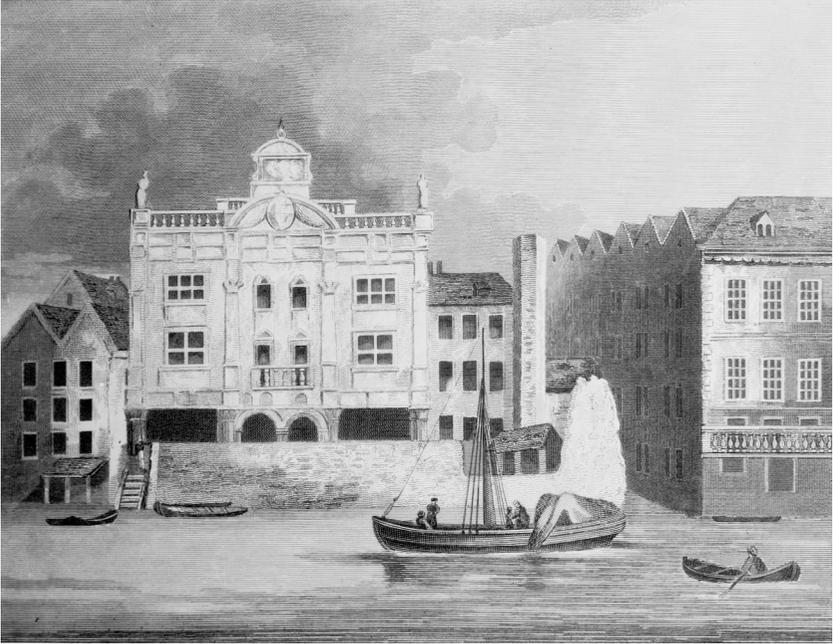


Plate 1. Duke's Theatre, Dorset Garden. Opened in 1671 as the permanent home of the Duke's Company and built to designs supposedly by Christopher Wren, the theatre fronted on the Thames at Dorset Stairs. Thomas Betterton, acting manager and 'keeper' of the playhouse, occupied an upper apartment (Leacroft, *Development of the English Playhouse*, 86).

1668, until November 1671, when an entirely new and sizable theatre finally opened in Dorset Garden, under Davenant family control.

Meanwhile, Killigrew's new theatre in Drury Lane had begun performances as early as May 1663. Surviving receipts suggest that a £100 house represented about 1,000 persons, while a greater crowd could generate as much as £140.⁴ The nearly circular auditorium and steeply sloped pit, surrounded by tiers of boxes and augmented by a higher, undivided gallery, defined the physical circumstances. Provision had been made, following Davenant's precedent, for scenes and machines, now the *sine qua non* for spectacle. Unfortunately short-lived, the theatre burned on 25 January 1672 – the first in a long series of conflagrations punctuating the history of theatre building in Britain over the next two centuries and beyond. Temporarily based in the old Lincoln's Inn Fields tennis court, Killigrew set about constructing the second Drury Lane, of

⁴ Avery and Scouten, *London Stage 1660–1700*, xlii–xliii.

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a size with its predecessor and so smaller than Dorset Garden, but augmented by a 28-foot scene house, reaffirming the irresistible trend towards spectacle. By March 1674 the theatre had opened. The King's Company remained there until 1682, when it came to be occupied by the United Company, formed from both troupes under the pressure of hard times. The company continued to offer dramatic works there, using Dorset Garden principally for spectacle, until the 1694–95 season, when Betterton, along with Elizabeth Barry, Anne Bracegirdle and others, complaining of oppressive treatment by the patentees, withdrew from the United Company and, forming their own shareholding enterprise, undertook a hasty remodelling of Lisle's Tennis Court. Supported by a sympathetic Lord Chamberlain, the Earl of Dorset, the New Theatre in Lincoln's Inn Fields opened with Congreve's *Love for Love* in April 1695, an auspicious beginning for them and for a play which became a mainstay of the comic repertoire.

And so, encouraged by a powerful, pleasure-loving monarch, the theatre had again asserted its perennial vitality. Not content with regulating theatres and companies, Charles had caused lists to be drawn up of plays allotted exclusively to Davenant or to Killigrew. Documents dating from 1660 and 1668 identify scores of plays from the Elizabethan, Jacobean and Caroline repertory awarded to one or the other (mostly to Killigrew).⁵ Davenant proposed to reform 'some of the most ancient Playes . . . playd at Blackfriers',⁶ and the idea of adaptation caught on. Charles, as *de facto* Master of the Revels, ended up replicating the conditions of the Elizabethan repertory system, in which companies jealously guarded the plays written for them, exhibiting them by turn and interspersing a smaller number of new plays which, if successful, joined the rotation. Evolving over the years, this system would enhance the strengths and minimize the limitations of the acting company, creating the conditions under which companies could flourish simultaneously.

The chasm opened during the Interregnum in the previously unbroken continuity of performance was, however, not easy to bridge. A new, smaller audience required cultivation; only gradually did daily performance become the norm, as a wider range of the public began to attend. In 1668 the indefatigable diarist Samuel Pepys, attending a play at the Duke of York's and noticing 'a mighty company of citizens, prentices and others', realized he could not remember seeing so many 'ordinary prentices and mean people in the pit', where the admission price was 2s 6d. Pepys and his wife were more likely to

⁵ Nicoll, *History of English Drama*, 1: 352–54.

⁶ Lord Chamberlain's document, quoted *ibid.*, 1: 352.

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sit in the gallery, for a more modest 1s 6d. Once, when a crowded house drove them into an upper box 'at 4s a piece', it was a novelty dearly bought.⁷

The character of this new audience derived partly from the unprecedented connection with the court; never had a monarch been associated so closely with the public theatre. Surviving warrants for expenses of performing plays before royalty, at the two public theatres and in private at Whitehall, contain lengthy lists of titles.⁸ Charles and his entourage attended the Duke of York's Theatre some twenty-three times between November 1668 and June 1670.⁹ Numerous courtiers, including George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham, John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester, and the Duke and Duchess of York were to be seen, along with the dramatist Sir George Etherege, the poet Edmund Waller and the pre-eminent poet, satirist and dramatist, John Dryden. Pepys identifies a broad range of persons in attendance, including royalty, aristocracy, the socially prominent and the well-to-do.¹⁰ Charles invested heavily in private theatricals, notwithstanding his meagre purse. By 1665 he had built a house in Whitehall for ballets, masques and plays. The construction, supervised by John Webb (pupil of the great Inigo Jones), articulated the King's expansive interest in scenic display.¹¹ Other court venues for plays emerged at St James's Palace and Windsor Castle. A measure of Charles's fascination with things theatrical, nurtured during a long continental exile, appears in the warrant awarded to Davenant and Killigrew allowing for entrance prices reflecting 'the great expences of scenes'.¹² In *A Short Discourse of the English Stage* (1664), Richard Flecknoe contrasted the 'plain and simple' theatres of former times, having 'no other scenes nor decorations of the stage,' with 'ours', which 'for cost and ornament are arrived to the height of magnificence'.¹³

The reconfiguration of Restoration performance space resulted in the situating of the action predominantly on a forestage thrust well out in front of scenes standing symmetrically on the stage proper, behind the proscenium arch. The actor would enter the 'scene' (literally, the stage) through a door in the proscenium arch and proceed down the forestage, quickly becoming the focal point of attention. Once the prologue was spoken and the curtain drawn, the audience would experience the action of the play by means of

⁷ Thomas and Hare, eds., *Restoration and Georgian England*, 176–7.

⁸ Lord Chamberlain's documents transcribed in Nicoll, *History of English Drama*, 1: 345–50.

⁹ Schedule of plays in the Harvard Theatre Collection, illustrated in Avery and Scouten, *London Stage 1660–1700*, after lxxviii.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, clxiv–clv.

¹¹ Boswell, *Restoration Court Stage*, 22ff.

¹² Thomas and Hare, eds., *Restoration and Georgian England*, 12.

¹³ (London: R. Wood, 1664), excerpted *ibid.*, 93.

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changes of scene. Sets of flats running in parallel grooves in the stage floor, left and right, were arranged on diagonal lines receding upstage towards a vanishing point. The scene would be changed in full view of the audience by a stage hand stationed at each set of flats who, on signal, would pull one flat off and push another on. By closing flats completely the scene could be made as shallow or as deep as required. Frequent stage directions at the ends and beginnings of scenes – ‘*the scene closes*’, ‘*the scene opens*’ – attest to the rhythmic movement of changeable scenery. ‘Discovery’ scenes were accomplished by pulling a pair of flats open to reveal characters already in place. Selective use of proscenium doors could convey a change of location as well.¹⁴ Although the represented locations – a chamber, a hall, a park, a grove, a marketplace, a coffee house, a throne room, a prison cell – were necessarily generalized, the dramatic action was conducted by moving from one locale to some other, contrasting one. Through these means the dramatic art of the Restoration emulated the Elizabethan dramaturgical convention of movement from one location to another, taking the audience on a repetitive, metonymic tour of the world, until the scene changed to a place where the action could resolve. It may be said that a Restoration play is over when it is no longer dramatically necessary to change the scene again, so closely are the settings linked with the development and resolution of the intrigue.

The impact of this ingenious new system of changeable scenery on the theatre and drama of post-Restoration Britain cannot be overestimated.¹⁵ Two plays produced within two years of one another in the 1670s exemplify the new way. In William Wycherley’s *The Country Wife*, first performed by the King’s Company at Drury Lane in 1675, five different locations are represented, two of them public, three private; and two – Horner’s lodging and the jealous husband Pinchwife’s house – become the double lodestones for an action pitting Horner’s ingenuity as a cuckold against the vain efforts of Pinchwife to protect his wife.¹⁶ Clearly, Wycherley is manipulating a well-established convention to his own comic and satiric ends. In a more sombre vein, Elkanah Settle’s drama *The Empress of Morocco* (1673), the only Restoration play whose published text illustrates the scenic particulars of its mounting on the Dorset Garden stage, features five deep, elaborate scenes: a dungeon, a seascape, a scene of state, a masque scene and a discovered tableau of figures impaled on spikes against a wall, graphically demonstrating ‘the reward of treason’.¹⁷

¹⁴ Southern, *Changeable Scenery*, 126.

¹⁵ Holland, *Ornament of Action*, chap. 2.

¹⁶ Shepherd and Womack, *English Drama*, 130.

¹⁷ Thomas and Hare, eds., *Restoration and Georgian England*, 95–9.

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Whereas the tragedies and heroic dramas of the age occur in exotic climes, comedy represented the world inhabited by play-goers. A contemporary English locale proved the exception, not the rule, in earlier comedy, but after the Restoration a different norm prevailed: the streets, parks, marketplaces, drawing-rooms and coffee houses of London remain the almost invariable settings, and the action of the play moves back and forth among them. Sometimes actual coffee houses are set. As in the Exchange and St James's Park, the hustle and bustle of the city itself become part of the interest. In contrast, interiors are usually domestic establishments where only those who live, serve or are invited may appear. Of course, interlopers abound, like the worried suitor Mirabell in Lady Wishfort's house, in Congreve's *The Way of the World*. Decades would pass before a play like George Farquhar's *The Beaux' Stratagem* (1707), whose action abandons the city for the country, could succeed, so intensely preoccupied with London life was the comedy of the age – and its audience.

It would be some years before the scenes and scenic effects which drew so many to the theatre would be memorialized in the bill of the play. For a century and more after play-going recommenced, in 1660, the playbill remained mostly a listing of titles, actors' names and roles, preceded by the name of the theatre, the date, and the play's status as new or revived. The repertory system, with its constant changes, required the publication of bills for each performance, made available to audiences and posted outside the theatre and elsewhere, this information augmented by the 'giving out' of the next day's play at the close of each performance. Repetition of an unusually successful mainpiece or farce might occur, and once pantomimes, introduced around 1717 by John Rich at Lincoln's Inn Fields, became popular and audiences were substantial enough to support longer runs, extended repetition might ensue. The fact would appear in the daily bills. As a result, no single source provides more information about the Restoration theatre or frames its character more perspicuously. Rare indeed was a bill supplying the name of the dramatist; dramatic authorship was considered a literary, not a theatrical, phenomenon, and the Restoration theatre was an actor's, not a playwright's, theatre. In the early years only principal actors might be named, in order of the prominence of their role or the size of their reputations, male actors' names always preceding female names. At the bottom of the bill, given sufficient space, offerings on the next night might be advertised. Overall, the size of the bill and the amount of information it provided resulted in a document that implied as much about its intended audience as it stated about the fare it promised. Ultimately, it was playbills, as much as actors and actresses themselves, which proved to be the abstract and brief chronicles of the time.