

Introduction

Although this project began as a study of the ‘illegitimate’ theatres in the labouring-class communities of London between the advent of the French Revolution and the short-lived success of the Chartist Movement, it did not take me long to recognize that the more momentous and volatile developments involved the theatres in the provinces, in such industrial centres as Birmingham, Leeds, Manchester, Nottingham, and the port city of Liverpool. An extensive foundation for this study existed in the insightful and well-documented histories of the labouring-class movement (E. P. Thompson 1968; G. D. H. Cole). The challenge came in discovering that, beyond accounts of individual playhouses in Bath, Ipswich, Liverpool, and elsewhere (Lowndes; Lingwood; Broadbent), there were no comprehensive histories of the provincial theatres for the years 1798–1838. British theatre during subsequent decades of the nineteenth century, beginning with the Chartist era of 1838 to 1848, has been explored elsewhere, and the records are more readily available because the labouring class had at last been able to establish official trade unions and to conduct openly their struggle for adequate wages and humane working hours. The drama of the latter sixty years of the century poignantly stages those struggles.

No such study of the labouring-class drama of the earlier decades has been written. Nor is there for these years any inclusive examination of the playhouses of the provinces. In his biography of Edmund Kean, Harold Newcomb Hillebrand lamented

that no history of the provincial companies of the 18th and 19th centuries has ever been written. In some cases we have town chronicles of a sort, as for example those of Bath, Exeter, Liverpool and Norwich. But even for the major circuits, such as York, Norwich, Canterbury, and Swansea, information is rare and scattered, and of the minor circuits we know practically nothing at all. (Hillebrand, 26)

Many years after Hillebrand expressed his regret, there is still no history of the provincial companies. I may be able to fill in fragments of that history, especially in my opening chapter, but my primary purpose is to examine the labouring-class plays and audiences in the provinces. Although I am not the first to study theatre performance in relationship to theatre spectatorship, I am for this period the first to analyse spectatorship in terms of labouring-class demographics. This endeavour is especially important because these years were crucial in the covert gatherings of workers who dared to meet in spite of the strict laws against public assembly and explicitly against any effort to establish trade unions. Offering more than a sympathetic understanding of the workers' plight, British playwrights and players were prepared, for the first time in theatre history, to represent on stage the abject conditions of the labouring class.

The Industrial Revolution contributed to the rapid expansion of a vast new population of labourers employed by the mills and factories. Steam-powered machinery increased production but lowered the value of individual labour, leaving many, especially in the weaving trade, without employment. As wages dropped below adequate subsistence level, workers accepted longer hours. In spite of mutual allegiance, families were starving. Within the crowded metropolitan enclaves of the labouring class, suffering gave rise to malcontent and anger, which were easily ignited into rage and riot. The food riots, recurring in towns throughout Britain, were acts of desperation. Of the 617 riots reported for 1790–1810, food disturbances accounted for almost half, and together food and military riots constituted three-fifths of the incidents (Bohstedt). The wealthy industrialists had reason to be frightened by the consequences of their own greed.

In 1799 the manufacturing constituencies won the support under the government of William Pitt the Younger to pass *An Act to prevent Unlawful Combinations of Workmen* (39 Geo. III, c. 81). The Combination Act prohibited trade unions and any other attempt by the workers to establish collective bargaining. Further restrictions were imposed by an additional Act passed in 1800 (39 & 40 Geo. III, c. 106). The laws, as finally amended, sentenced to three months in jail or to two months' hard labour any workingman who combined with another to gain an increase in wages or a decrease in hours or who solicited anyone else to leave work or objected to working with any other workman. Further, anyone contributing to the expenses of a person convicted under the act was subject to a fine.

With the prevailing fear that the lower classes would support a French invasion, Pitt interpreted all unrest among the workers as radicalism and anti-monarchical Jacobinism. The argument that such uprisings could

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jeopardize national security was conveniently strengthened by the example of the mutiny at the Nore in 1797 (to be discussed in Chapter 3). As steam-driven machines replaced large numbers of the workforce, unemployment and poverty-level wages forced workers to form underground alliances. In the metropolitan areas the laws forbidding public assembly were brutally enforced, as was evident in the notorious Peterloo Massacre at St Peter's Field, Manchester, on 16 August 1819. The militia charged into an unarmed crowd, killing 15 people and injuring over 400 more (Bamford; M. L. Bush; McKeiver).

Sympathy for the plight of the workers brought repeal of the Acts in 1824. To the surprise of many reformers, the workers were quick to organize and strike. In a desperate attempt to reverse the situation, the Combination Act of 1825 was passed. Labour unions were nominally allowed but their activities were monitored and severely restricted. The Reform Act of 1832 increased the number of individuals entitled to vote, but workers were still excluded from the one-in-six who were franchised. Worse, many lost freedom altogether under the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, which sent those in need of relief to workhouses which separated families and kept the inmates in virtual prisons. Because the middle-class radicals, who had formerly supported labouring-class agitation, now seemed appeased, the workers were left without broader support. Among the many attempts to establish a ground for collective bargaining, Robert Owen and his followers, Owenites, seemed close to success with their Grand National Consolidated Trades Union in 1834, but their efforts were soon undermined by further abolition of trade unions (E. P. Thompson 1968, 857–78).

Attending a public theatre was tolerated; the plays performed, however, were carefully reviewed. Under the Licensing Act of 1737 (10 Geo. II), London theatres could perform only those plays approved by the Lord Chamberlain's Examiner of Plays. The unlicensed or illegitimate theatres were not only subject to the close scrutiny and censorship by the Examiner of Plays, they were forbidden to perform the standard repertory of five-act comedy and tragedy. Singing performances and pantomime with limited dialogue were deemed less likely to serve the purposes of subversion. Melodrama and burletta were among the new genres developed to comply with the legal restrictions and appeal to the new labouring-class audiences.

The nature of the scrutiny expected of the Examiner of Plays changed with the times. From the outset, primary attention was given to excising any seditious assault on church and state, any opposition to clergy, aristocracy, or monarchy. But the rapid progress of the Industrial Revolution created a new labouring class under the governance of a new privileged

class of factory owners and entrepreneurs. Any effort among the workers to organize against management was, correspondingly, the new arena of sedition. Although subjected to control by the Stamp Act, pamphlets, newspapers, and journals often evaded the attempts to suppress the liberal call for reform. A play, however, was subjected to more rigorous control. Even though a play-script had been approved by the Examiner of Plays, radical or subversive content could be easily introduced into the performance. To prevent the propaganda of reform from infiltrating the theatres, local authorities employed spies and informers to report on activities presented under the guise of popular entertainment (E. P. Thompson 1968, 529–40, 648–55). For the simple reason that the conservative factions had the wealth and means at their disposal, they could dictate an evening's entire programme. Even so, the controls under the Licensing Act of 1737 required frequent reinterpretation to accommodate the increasing number of unlicensed theatres in London, and they remained inadequate for governing performances in the provinces.

As reported in the *Journal of the House of Lords* (May 1788: 179–82), the Act of 1737 was itself an amendment of the 1712 'Act for reducing the Laws relating to Rogues, Vagabonds, Sturdy Beggars, and Vagrants'. That vagabond heritage was deemed applicable to the current wandering players at county fairs and inns. The Theatrical Representations Act was introduced as relevant 'to common Players of Interludes'. Probably not authored by James Silk Buckingham himself, but certainly by a critic who shared his reformist agenda, the author of the essay 'On the Licensing System' in Buckingham's *Oriental Herald* (1827) opened with the observation that 'Players have, by many statutes, been classed as rogues and vagabonds', a prejudice that 'was tamely endured from the year 1737 to the year 1788, when its provisions were extended by 28 Geo. III c. 30'. This Act gave local justices at sessions the authority to grant 'one license within their jurisdiction, to continue in force for 60 days, &c. &c.'

The Theatrical Representations Act of 1788 would thus promote the establishment of proper theatres under the control of local jurisdiction. Since the proclaimed purpose was to impose upon the theatre a 'rigorous decorum', the critic of the *Oriental Herald* observed that the decorum was financial rather than moral. Prostitution was condoned, or even supported, by the theatres:

A portion of each of our London theatres is set apart for the reception of prostitutes: it is called the Saloon, and is expressly built as an Exchange or market for adultery and fornication. Not a word by the way of this in the police report, although some house at Shadwell containing rooms for

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dancing, which appeared to have been abused to the purposes of a theatrical saloon, furnished the matter for strong and perhaps just reprobation. The publicans of Shadwell, however, had the decorum to give the sailors and their girls a decent pretext of entering the room, which is not thought necessary by those who pander to the irregularities of the higher classes. ('On the Licensing System', *Oriental Herald*, 283–4)

Citing the example of the Shadwell Theatre, where 'the irregularities of the higher classes' are accommodated rather differently than the 'rooms for dancing' provided to 'sailors and their girls', the critic's indictment is not against the saloon clients, but against the complicity of government and management in maintaining a lucrative monopoly:

we refer to 'the O.P. row', as it was called; *i.e.* Riot versus Monopoly. In this instance, the public feeling of injustice bore down the restraints of law, and properly so in our opinion. But what became of order and decorum? It is evident that this, the greatest tumult recorded in theatrical history, arose altogether out of the licensing system. If there had been no monopoly, competition would quickly and silently have resolved the question of prices. A conspiracy to force them down would have been so contrary to most obvious principles of justice, that it could not have had the support of public opinion, and must, therefore, have quickly failed. ('On the Licensing System', *Oriental Herald*, 284)

The critic of the *Oriental Herald* was quite right in arguing that moral supervision was the rationale behind the Theatrical Representations Act of 1788, drawing support from William Wilberforce's Proclamation Society in 1787, forerunner to the Society for the Suppression of Vice established in 1802 (J. N. Baker 2003, 347–63). Although it is difficult to determine its consequences in controlling the supposed licentiousness of theatre performances, the Theatrical Representations Act was directly responsible for the construction of hundreds of new theatres throughout Britain at the end of the eighteenth century.

With the opening of theatres in industrial communities and market towns, dramatic performance began to claim a part in the education and entertainment of the labouring classes, and gave to entrepreneurs an opportunity to acquire legal authority and financial protection for their subscribers' investments, not to mention the social cachet of the title, Theatre Royal. To be sure, the investors and managers wanted to see their theatres, as Tate Wilkinson wrote of the theatre in York, 'regularly and fashionably attended' (Wilkinson, 1:80). Wealthy spectators subscribed for the season and would often 'bespeak' performances. The old custom of a player's benefit night persisted, but actors were also held by contract and

salary. Theatre companies were increasingly composed of local performers, and local authors gained a new venue by writing for provincial performance. A local performer and a local playwright were often one and the same. Members of provincial companies had been writing plays for decades (Rusbamen).

Members of a theatre troupe themselves constituted a labouring 'shop' consisting largely of artisans who were actors, singers, set and costume designers. In many troupes the husbands, wives, sons, and daughters of one or two families were the principal players. While a leading actor from Covent Garden or Drury Lane might command £100 each night for an engagement in Birmingham or Manchester, the regular performers at those theatres received £2 or £3 per week plus the proceeds of one benefit night each season. These wages were comparable, if we consult the *Book of English Trades* (1818), to that of a body-maker in the carriage trade. Members of a theatre troupe were dependent for their livelihood not only on the theatre owners but on the wealthy patrons who might reserve boxes for the season. At the same time, for the same performances, they must also attract spectators from the community at large. The seating within the theatre – boxes (3s), pit (2s), and gallery (1s) – was constructed and priced to serve the class division, with half-price tickets for pit and gallery following the first play, allowing even the lower classes access to the cheapest seats in the gallery. The playbills typically offered a variety of entertainment intended to appeal to the different tastes of these very different constituencies. The precarious stability of this effort is evident in the recurrent theatre riots and closures. Bankruptcies were experienced even by astute theatre managers.

The attention to the labouring class as the subject of dramatic representation began with George Lillo's *The London Merchant, or The History of George Barnwell* (Drury Lane, 22 June 1731). Reflecting an awareness of the growing number of apprentices, clerks, and factory workers that made up the audience, the advent of domestic tragedy signalled an attempt to depict the conflicts and struggles that were part of their lives. Although still frequently performed on the stage in the early nineteenth century, Lillo's tragedy was too much a product of the earlier period in which it was written, too moralizing, too patronizing for individuals experiencing current factory conditions. To attract audiences among the larger labouring-class population, theatre managers brought to the stage more and more plays celebrating the bravery and heroic valour of bricklayers and stonemasons, watermen and stevedores, the labourers who were building and maintaining the metropolis (J. D. Chambers).

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Recurring frequently enough to constitute a thematic subgenre were the melodramas featuring virtues rewarded and vices punished among factory workers. A model for many of these plays was William Hogarth's engraved series, *Industry and Idleness* (1741), adapted for the stage by Dennis Lawler and directed by Thomas Dibdin (Surrey, 15 April 1811). The 'grasshopper and ant' moral lesson, however, soon shifted to depiction of the factory worker exploited by a greedy employer in spite of his loyalty and industry. Factory melodrama, such as Douglas William Jerrold's *The Factory Girl* (Drury Lane, 6 October 1832) and John Thomas Haines's *The Factory Boy* (Surrey, 8 June 1840), typically takes the side of labour against management. Sometimes, however, the villain is the vindictive worker. In his account of domestic and factory melodrama, Michael Booth observed that the playwrights 'were not purists of form but seekers after effect', ready to adapt any current crisis as 'grist to their mill' (Booth 1965, 118). The endeavour to foster a theatre to serve a labouring-class audience turned fairly early to productions that would exhibit on stage characters drawn from their very own class and station, and struggling with issues of employment that immediately affected them. A prevailing theme, no doubt felt by many of the labouring-class audience, was the dehumanizing conditions of factory labour. Other directly related themes derived from the crowded living conditions, tenement housing, and slum-like neighbourhoods that were rife with crime and prostitution.

In 1700 the population of London was 700,000. In 1801 it had grown to 958,863 and increased by 20 per cent each decade after, reaching 13,789,47 by 1821. Not all were native born. With recent immigrants or first generation Londoners composing at least 80 per cent of the population, they also comprised the majority in theatre audiences (B. R. Mitchell, 25, 77, 89, 102). Many had arrived from the provinces, others from Scotland (Lobban, 452), Ireland (Smith, 78–85), and Wales (Jones, 465–6, 476), and still others from the Continent (Flinn, 154–63). The theatre managers learned what plays would attract these local audiences. The number of theatres also grew during this period. In 1780, there were six London theatres: Drury Lane opened in 1663, the Italian Opera in 1705, the Haymarket in 1720, Covent Garden in 1732, Sadler's Wells in 1765, and Astley's 1780. By 1830, not only were there twenty-five new theatres but also the size of several theatres had doubled as well (Burwick 2011, 1–2).

The music-halls for which London became famous later in the nineteenth century were unknown by that name in 1800, but the musical entertainment was already evolving into the forms that were to define London night life and entertainment. Not only were there more theatres, more

forms of entertainment, but also they were more individually diverse. The managers of the new theatres, attentive to audience interests, imposed a personal imprint on the plays performed. The Peckham Theatre, for example, was situated in a Southbank suburb occupied by stockyard workers, brickyard labourers, brick- and stonemasons. The Surrey and the Coburg were in Thameside locations occupied by watermen and dock workers. Previous studies of the illegitimate theatres of this period have focused on the theatres of London and have emphasized the contrasts with the three licensed theatres: Drury Lane, Covent Garden, Haymarket (Moody, 164–77).

In comparing the theatre of the provinces, the major differences are defined by the local industry and economy. The foundational studies by G. D. H. Cole (1948) and E. P. Thompson (1968) address the growth and redistribution of population that accompanied the emergence of the labouring class. In addition to identifying the theatres of the provinces, the ensuing chapters also investigate the kind of plays that were performed to attract their interest. Both of these tasks will be developed in the context of legal efforts (censorship, injunctions) to limit or close down performances. In spite of the efforts of the workers, employers had strong governmental support in the prosecution of the illegal formation of trade unions (*Martyrs of Tolpuddle*). Resorting to violence to halt attempts to form unions, factory managers hired ruffians to attack workers who met in private gatherings (Rice; Kapp). Some of these plays, like John Walker's *The Factory Lad* (Surrey, 15 October 1832) and G. F. Taylor's *The Factory Strike; or, Want, Crime and Retribution* (Victoria, 7 June 1838) expose the exploitation of the workers, their poverty-level wages, and the efforts to develop trade unions and to resist abusive factory owners. I document and elaborate the argument that the non-licensed theatres located in industrial areas were not alike, but were shaped and defined by their local communities.

The provinces were the training grounds for players striving to move to London and succeed on a metropolitan stage. Many players had their roots in the labouring class, some fled in their early teens from the gruelling chores of apprenticeship in fields or factories. A substantial number of players were born to families of players, not seldom as second- or third-generation members of a travelling company. Their wages were no better than those accorded to clerks or servants. Just as the players emerged from the labouring class, so too did many playwrights. One thinks of Ann Yearsley, born of a poor family in the village of Honington, Suffolk, and attaining recognition for *Earl Godwin: An Historical Play* (Bristol, 1789; Bath, 3 November 1789). There was good reason for players, playwrights,

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and playhouse managers to feel, not just sympathy, but a close affinity with their labouring-class audiences. Their success, however, depended on pleasing their wealthier patrons, who often wielded considerable control over performances.

In *Culture and Power in Cultural Studies* (2010), John Storey analyses *My Poll and My Partner Joe* in terms of the changes in meaning that occur first with a shift in genre, and then with a shift in venue (Storey, 33–48). The story is first told by Charles Dibdin as a comic song. All of the melodramatic ingredients are in place but Dibdin refrains from indulging emotional duress. The happy waterman sings of comfort and contentment:

None could of fortune's favours brag
 More than could lucky I,
 My cot was snug, well fill'd my cag,
 My grunter in the sty.
 With wherry tight
 And bosom light
 I cheerfully did row,
 And, to complete this princely life,
 Sure never man had friend and wife
 Like my Poll and my partner Joe.

A press gang snatches him away to hard service at sea, but he is sustained by the thought of one day returning to his Poll and his partner Joe. When the Napoleonic Wars are ended, he makes it home again:

Now safe from all alarms –
 I rush'd, and found my friend and wife
 Lock'd in each other's arms!
 Yet fancy not
 I bore my lot
 Tame, like a lubber: – No,
 For seeing I was finely trick'd,
 Plump to the devil I fairly kick'd
 My Poll and my partner Joe.

(C. Dibdin, *Songs*, 226–8)

Precisely at that point when the plot of a domestic tragedy would conjure jealousy, rage, and murder, the hero of Dibdin's comic song, recognizing that he had been 'finely tricked', kicked out the adulterous lovers with a sense of just resolution rather than remorse. A radical change of meaning occurred when the plot of Dibdin's comic song was translated by John Thomas Haines into the medium of melodrama, *My Poll and My Partner Joe* (Surrey, 31 August 1835). As Storey noted, Haines changed two major

elements of the plot: Harry is not married to Poll, and he does not kick out the lovers when he returns. Even at the outset Harry is by no means 'the happy waterman'. The three live on the brink of poverty, and Harry was under threat of being thrown into debtor's prison when he is taken instead by a press gang. The action unfolds within the squalid conditions of the lower class. Yet for his denouement, the playwright abandoned the stark realism and resorted to the happy ending of melodramatic romance. Harry received a £300 reward for his brave rescue, his rival Joe died, and his Poll confessed that she married Joe for the sake of survival, and that she never ceased to love Harry.

Storey does not examine the reception of Haines's melodrama as performed at the Surrey in 1835, but he is attentive to the political and social circumstances that affected the reception at the Queen's Theatre in Manchester, 26, 27, and 28 April 1841. The performance in 1841, Storey points out, reveals the influence of the Chartist movement on the critical response. Even though that production comes too late for the period of my investigation, it nevertheless reveals the same sort of change in meaning that I find recurrent in the record of a play performed in different times and places throughout the provinces.

Rather than attempt the much needed, doubtlessly unwieldy, history of the theatres in Bristol, Birmingham, Liverpool, Manchester, and elsewhere in the provinces, my first chapter addresses the anti-theatrical prejudice, corrects misconceptions of the prevalence of illiteracy, and argues that the meaning of a play was significantly altered from theatre to theatre. Examining the conditions and characteristics of a few representative provincial theatres, I argue that the meaning of a play changes with every change in the performance location. As contributing factors in that change, I attend to local political and cultural circumstances as well as to theatrical activities and developments elsewhere. To understand the play lists of a theatre, it is crucial to examine the community which that theatre serves. Who were the players? Who the audience? These questions must be answered in terms of time and place. Literacy was rising throughout Britain, but not uniformly. In some communities theatre managers encountered an anti-theatrical prejudice accompanied by suspicion, sometimes by outright hostility. Many objections to the theatre arose from notions of immorality in the plays or among the players. But more threatening objections came from factory owners who feared that the plays would stir protest among the workers. Especially during the wars with France, there was also a fear that the theatre would further the political unrest already stirring. 'The theatre', however, is not a uniform concept. In some remote locations performances would be held in the town hall or an inn, and the performers would be