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Edited by Baz Kershaw

Excerpt

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PART I

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1895–1946

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I

British theatre, 1895–1946:  
art, entertainment,  
audiences – an introduction

DENNIS KENNEDY

In 1895 three major figures in the history of British theatre came centre stage in revealing ways. Henry Irving, master of theatrical illusion and the most famous performer of the age, knelt before Queen Victoria and rose as the first actor in history to be knighted. Oscar Wilde, that Dubliner brilliant in his plays and impudent in society, had two productions running simultaneously in London: *An Ideal Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*. G. B. Shaw, virtually unknown as a playwright, began a three-year mission of modernity and socialism as theatre critic for the *Saturday Review*. Shaw complained frequently that Irving, whom he greatly admired, wasted his talents on weak and insignificant work, and he was disturbed to find himself laughing mechanically at Wilde's masterpiece. Shortly after *The Importance of Being Earnest's* brilliant opening, Wilde was in grave trouble with the law over his homosexuality. Just as his play marks the high point of Victorian comedy, so Wilde's trial signals a turn in the history of Victorian righteousness. Irving's knighthood and Wilde's disgrace: the poles of late Victorian attitudes to the theatre demonstrated within a single year, with Shaw as touchstone commentator.

Despite such anecdotal charm, 1895 does not distinguish the beginning of a new era for theatre in Britain. Yet in some ways it is fortunate that this volume on the twentieth century begins at a date not historiographically remarkable, for what most characterised the theatre in the 1890s was a determined insistence on security and continuity. There were few signs of change and fewer still that there soon would be. The early forays of theatrical modernism in Britain seemed to have had no lasting effect. Though the plays of the Scandinavian visionary of transition, Henrik Ibsen, had been seen in London and championed there by Shaw from 1889, no one could guess that Ibsen's social dramas would in a few years seem out of date. In the 1890s his more palatable propositions were already being naturalised by the principal writers of society 'problem' plays, Henry Arthur Jones and Arthur Wing Pinero. Just

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two years after American actress Elizabeth Robins brought *Hedda Gabler* to the London stage, Pinero's variation on its themes was a great success at the St James's Theatre in 1893. *The Second Mrs Tanqueray* moved Hedda's story into the upper reaches of British society, with George Alexander matching the darkly exotic Mrs Patrick Campbell in the roles of husband and the wife 'with a past' who has deceived him. The graceful worldliness that was Alexander's trademark, and the charged sensual implications of Mrs Pat's performance – Shaw called it 'wicked Pinerotic theatre' – showed a safe view of smouldering sexuality, since the female who was its creator and object would be destroyed.<sup>1</sup> Pinero's *The Notorious Mrs Ebbsmith* in 1895 repeated the casting but handled the 'woman question' differently by turning the plot of *Ghosts* on its head, giving Mrs Pat a marvellous transformation from bluestocking New Woman to conventional female, burning her Bible and keeping her man through time-honoured sexual means. Similarly, Jones had turned Ibsen's *A Doll's House* upside-down in his 1894 adaptation *Breaking a Butterfly* (written with Henry Herman), which has the Nora figure learning her lesson and staying at home.

J. T. Grein had produced *Ghosts* for a small private audience as the opening salvo of the Independent Theatre in 1891, thus making him 'the best-abused man in London',<sup>2</sup> but it remained banned by the censor from public performance until World War One. *A Doll's House* was not staged in London until 1896. Few of Ibsen's later plays were seen in the commercial theatre in London. Why should they be, a manager might ask, when Pinero and Jones were raising the same social concerns without making the audience uncomfortable? The Ibsen movement of the 1890s, engineered chiefly by actresses committed to feminism and anxious for good roles not demeaning to their ideals, had little effect on dominant theatrical practice. Instead of the revolution that Shaw hoped the stage would foster, the major theatres resourcefully redirected Ibsen's interest in women to a conventional eroticism that maintained the status quo.

In 1895 the stylistic and thematic renovations of the first decades of the twentieth century were unimaginable in the London theatre. The audiences were highly varied, ranging from almost the bottom of the social scale to the very top: the Queen avoided the public theatre after Prince Albert died in 1861, but her heir, the hedonistic Albert Edward, Prince of Wales, was a frequent spectator. The spectrum of entertainment available was extremely

1 See Joel H. Kaplan, 'Pineroticism and the problem play: Mrs Tanqueray, Mrs Ebbsmith and Mrs Pat', in Richard Foulkes (ed.), *British Theatre in the 1890s: Essays on Drama and the Stage* (Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 38–58.

2 Michael Orme, *J. T. Grein: The Story of a Pioneer* (London: J. Murray, 1936), p. 88.

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wide: sophisticated problem plays and comedies at the St James's, rough-and-tumble melodramas in the East End halls, the 'autumn melodrama' filled with technological marvels at Drury Lane, music hall songs and dances scattered throughout the capital and its suburbs, musical comedies at the Gaiety, Shakespeare at the Lyceum, blackface minstrels at St James's Hall, pierrots at the Palace and Royalty Theatres. No earlier period in the history of British theatrical performance provided such diversity of choice or appealed so widely across the social scale.

This introduction will look at some of the audiences for theatre after 1895, what they attended and why, and how they changed in the course of the first half of the twentieth century. The main outline of the picture is easy to draw: audiences diminished. From huge and varied assemblies in the many theatres at the turn of the century, they dwindled to smaller and relatively specialised groups by 1946. The chief reason, of course, was the competition provided after 1910 by the upstart cinema. But other factors were at play as well, including the modernist-driven division of the audience into aesthetically based segments, the effects of the two world wars and larger cultural and political changes in British society. For clarity, I will classify the highly varied theatrical diet into four types of entertainment, each notionally representing a different audience: the bourgeois theatre, the modernist theatre, the populist theatre, and the catch-all category of Shakespeare performance. In the first three sections I concentrate on the initial twenty-five years or so, when most of the patterns were established; the final section will look in more detail at the second half of the period, the years between the wars.

## The bourgeois theatre

Theatre chiefly intended for middle-class audiences was dominant in both 1895 and 1946. 'Bourgeois' or 'middle class' must be understood in a broad way in this context, especially in the earlier years, extending from the *petit bourgeois* (say, shopkeepers) to the *haut bourgeois* (merchant bankers, self-made industrialists), and even into the reaches of the upper classes (aristocrats, the land-owning gentry). All the changes in this period did not affect the abiding importance of this group of theatre-goers as trendsetters, despite major alterations in what they were seeing. For example, the actor-managers who controlled the London theatre were overwhelmingly aware of the importance of middle-class gentility to their enterprise and usually worked to bolster it.

In 1895 the actor-manager system appeared unassailable, an industrial powerhouse of theatre, both logical and efficient. Up until the end of World

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War One '[t]he actor in management was, indeed, the very symbol' of the period, wrote Allardyce Nicoll.<sup>3</sup> The system was perfectly in keeping with late Victorian notions of economic practice – and patriarchy. A single entrepreneur owned the acting and production company, owned the theatre or leased it for a long term, chose the plays or had them written to order, organised the productions and took the leading role. And actor-managers were overwhelmingly men. A few women became managers, often taking an entirely different approach: Emma Cons and Lilian Baylis at the Old Vic, Lena Ashwell at the Kingsway, Annie Horniman in Manchester, though of these only Ashwell was an actress.<sup>4</sup> The actor-manager would find and supervise the capital, take the risks and reap the rewards. The concept of the 'director' (or 'producer', as he would soon be called) as a functionary separate from the actors or playwright was unknown in Britain until after 1900. The actor-manager wielded the power of the director *avant la lettre*, and much more besides. He had to be an engaging or even charismatic performer, a businessman, a leader of personnel, a cultural touchstone and popular as a person with audiences all at once. The financial, artistic and social rewards could be great. With so much power in the hands of a single figure the practice was clearly open to trade abuse, though the abuse was probably not greater than in other areas of Victorian life regulated by private or family-run commerce.

Historical views of the actor-manager have been heavily influenced by the disdainful approach taken by modernist reformers, who believed that far too much of the life of a theatre was dedicated to the ego of the owner. There is no doubt that the actor-managers marked the enterprise of theatre-making – from playwriting to casting, from production economy to audience comfort – with their heavy individual stamps. The critic P. P. Howe in 1913 found the plays of Henry Arthur Jones badly affected by 'the trail of the actor-manager', which demanded as protagonist 'a bright, shrewd man of about fifty' who (in Act 3) decides 'the destinies of several persons' before (in Act 4) laying successful siege 'to a younger heart that has long held out against him'.<sup>5</sup> But while it is true that the hegemonic demands of actor-managers restricted stylistic and structural innovation, it is also true that they were in a tradition that had pleased audiences since the 1660s and had kept theatre attendance climbing throughout the nineteenth century.

3 Allardyce Nicoll, *English Drama 1900–1930: The Beginning of the Modern Period* (Cambridge University Press, 1973), p. 22.

4 See Tracy C. Davis, 'Edwardian management and the structures of industrial capitalism', in Michael R. Booth and Joel H. Kaplan (eds.), *The Edwardian Theatre: Essays on Performance and the Stage* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 111–29.

5 P. P. Howe, *Dramatic Portraits* (London: Martin Secker, 1913), pp. 74–5.

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One of the greatest changes in this period was directly linked to the actor-manager system: the rise in the social position of performers. Henry Irving's knighthood is the most obvious sign that actors, at least at the top end, had moved from opprobrium at the beginning of the century to admired gentlemen at its close. Once Sir Henry had breached the wall of Victorian respectability there was no stopping; in the twentieth century performers of all types moved more and more firmly into the centre of social recognition and even political power. Between 1895 and 1922 actors were made knights at an average rate of about one every three years. But these men received the honour only partly for achievements as actors, as it was their contributions as managers that set them off from hundreds of other successful performers; they were not knighted as artists but as capitalists. And gender played its usual role: though a few non-managerial actresses received the equivalent honour of Dame of the British Empire, none of the female managers of the period were so rewarded.

Two examples will show what the general run of actor-managers were like. George Alexander (1858–1918) and Wilson Barrett (1846–1904) were opposites in thought and effect and entirely successful at what they did. Alexander started acting with Henry Irving at the Lyceum in 1881 and a decade later took over the St James's Theatre, which he ran with flair for over a quarter of a century, until his death. The St James's was admired by smart society in part because of its location in the fashionable section of Piccadilly but chiefly because its manager made his leading spectators feel as comfortable as in their own drawing-rooms. An astute cultural entrepreneur, Alexander capitalised on his location by selecting plays about society characters conducting lives parallel to those in the audience. His spectators were well aware of their positions in this social panopticon: "The most expensive seats were occupied by Society with a capital "S", the less expensive ones by those who longed to be in Society, the least expensive by those who wished to see what Society looked like."<sup>6</sup> Hesketh Pearson's view finely captures the symbiotic relationship of the British classes in the theatrical context.

Alexander and his company provided models of behaviour and dress for the audience. His actors and spectators operated as doubled figures in an exemplary world, with the plays of Pinero, Jones and Wilde the meeting ground of the real and the ideal, their characters righteously manipulating the status quo. As Joel Kaplan and Sheila Stowell have shown, the playhouse of this period became more and more illustrative of fashion, often using society couturiers to create the actresses' gowns that might be copied for wealthy patrons, and

6 Hesketh Pearson, *The Last Actor-Managers* (London: Methuen, 1950), p. 23.

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something similar can be said about the stage settings and the gestural habits of the actors.<sup>7</sup> Everything surrounding a play at the St James's justified power and affluence: the manners of the theatre's attendants, the advertisements in the printed programmes (often from London's elegant clothiers and furriers), the drinks at the interval – even the box office manager, who always wore a top hat while on duty. Patrons in the stalls and dress circle were required to dress formally, just as they would for an elegant dinner; complimentary tickets at the St James's were printed on special cards with a sharp reminder that evening dress was essential for admission.

Alexander understood that his curious position as a society actor was dependent upon impeccable deportment and reputation. Though a kind man, he ensured that decorum went beyond the walls of the theatre, insisting that his actors who played society people on stage dress like them in their private lives, and when he discovered sartorial violators walking in public he threatened them with dismissal on the spot.<sup>8</sup> One is tempted to conclude that Alexander could not sufficiently distinguish between the fictions on his stage and the actors who portrayed them, who in reality obviously were not of the same social class as most of their prominent spectators. But no doubt he understood the difference well enough, for what concerned him were appearance and manners; he knew that the habit of the gaze was widespread in the life of the time, not restricted to the stage alone. He was careful to ensure that no scent of the street enter the refined aura of his theatre, which he treated not so much as a temple of culture – as Irving did the Lyceum – but as a church of social class, a space with precise performative functions, idealised as a regulator of distinctions and differences. In some ways his knighthood was the most unnecessary of the actorly honours, for Society already considered him one of 'us'.

The St James's was not unusual in requiring evening dress in the prime precincts of the house. All the theatres with social pretensions had done so since the middle of the nineteenth century at least and many would continue until World War Two, their interior architecture designed to display the formal fashions of patrons in the boxes, stalls and circle and to make nearly invisible the punters in ordinary clothes in the pit and galleries. Black tailcoat, white tie, stiff collar for the men – all evoking older styles – elegant and revealing long gowns for the women: in the Victorian and Edwardian ages attire was

7 Joel H. Kaplan and Sheila Stowell, *Theatre and Fashion: Oscar Wilde to the Suffragettes* (Cambridge University Press, 1994).

8 See Dennis Kennedy, 'The New Drama and the new audience', in Booth and Kaplan (eds.), *Edwardian Theatre*, p. 144.



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the chief and most ready visual signifier of wealth and class. Before the time of mass-produced stylish clothes, only those with bags of money or significant lines of credit could afford to dress in a way acceptable for entrance to any area of high social life. (Accent and speech, of course, would signify just as well: Henry Higgins in *Pygmalion*, Shaw's parody of the English class system from 1914, finds Eliza's speech much harder to change than her dresses.) Spectators in cheaper seats had separate entrances in alleyways and separate bars for the interval, leaving the quality and gentlefolk undisturbed in their righteous otherness. Audience arrangements were quite different and much less formal in the East End theatres, in the suburbs and the provinces, but for managers like Alexander the distinctions of dress code, speech and behaviour – on both sides of the footlights – were central to the theatrical performance of class and wealth.

Wilson Barrett succeeded diametrically. He did not have a permanent theatre, he spent much time touring abroad, and his finances were often shaky. Successful in leading roles in melodramas in the 1880s, especially *The Silver King* and *The Lights o' London*, he is interesting chiefly because of *The Sign of the Cross*, which he wrote and opened in America in 1895 before bringing to London the next year. It is a Christians-and-lions melodrama of intense but fraudulent spirituality, with a heroic role for the manager in the form of Marcus Superbus, Prefect of Rome during Nero's persecution of 'the Galileans and Nazarenes'. A dissolute patrician, Marcus falls in love with Mercia, the virginal Christian always dressed in white, attempts to seduce her, shamelessly begs Nero for her life after she has been arrested, in desperation offering marriage and all worldly riches if she will renounce Christ. Of course she refuses. In the final scene, overwhelmed by her faith and piety, he recognises his sinful life, makes a last minute conversion as she declares the purity of her love for him, and they go together to face the lions in the arena. 'Come, my bride', he says at the curtain, 'come – to the light beyond'.<sup>9</sup>

The 'toga play' was a popular form at the end of the nineteenth century and became equally important for film, lasting there well into the 1950s. It is easy to disdain these works set in ancient Rome, as Victorian and Edwardian sophisticates indeed did, but they had enormous appeal on many levels of the social scale. They cleverly combined tropes about empire with titillating sexuality submerged in religious righteousness. As David Mayer reminds us, after a period of relative calm the last two decades of the century saw grave

9 Wilson Barrett, *The Sign of the Cross*, in David Mayer (ed.), *Playing out the Empire: Ben Hur and other Toga Plays and Films, 1883–1908; a Critical Anthology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), p. 187.

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unrest in the colonies, in Constantinople, Afghanistan and the Sudan; the press regularly reported these wars 'as conflict between Christian and pagan'. In a number of adventures that involved the Great Powers in the 1890s, the British were 'continually undecided whether to support Christian imperialism or to encourage pagan opposition to a potentially dangerous Christian rival'.<sup>10</sup> In this circumstance Rome elided Britain, the great ancient empire silently signifying the great modern one – but without any overt insistence that the fall of the first meant the likely decline of the second. Interestingly, the South African (or Boer) War ran more or less parallel to *The Sign of the Cross*, and Barrett took one of his numerous touring companies there during the conflict.

But the chief reason for the play's triumph was its religious theme, its fundamentalist or primitive Christianity strongly appealing to prevalent evangelical and chapel persuasions. Hence, Barrett received unrivalled worldwide attention; his biographer estimates that by the end of 1896 the play was seen by 70,000 people a week in Britain alone; it may even have been the most popular play of the nineteenth century. By the time of Barrett's death in 1904 it had been performed over 10,000 times around the globe and seen by over 15 million spectators who bought a further 2.5 million copies of the sixpenny novel version.<sup>11</sup> Even the sheet music of the Christians' hymn sold and sold, an early example of vertically integrated theatre merchandising. Many pious people who would not otherwise go near a theatre were drawn to watch the piece, and, once present, behaved with the kind of reverence reserved for church. Jerome K. Jerome reported a revealing incident involving proletarian admirers in Rochdale in 1896: 'I saw the rough cotton-factory workers slip off their clattering wooden shoes, and between acts steal softly about the pit and gallery in stockings feet, as though, with *The Sign of the Cross* in the theatre, they trod upon sacred ground.' The Bishop of Truro wrote a preface to Barrett's novelised version, the Bishop of Norwich offered dispensation from Lenten observance for those of his flock who attended the play, and a vicar in Surrey published a sermon urging 'every man and woman in Croydon to go and see it'.<sup>12</sup>

If George Alexander was a kind of theatrical *flâneur*, ideally suited to the sophistication of the capital, Barrett was a rough and ready colonialist, a dramatic equivalent to Cecil Rhodes who, in our starting year of 1895, became one of the few persons in history to have a country named for him. A later Barrett

<sup>10</sup> David Mayer, 'Toga plays', in Foulkes (ed.), *British Theatre in the 1890s*, p. 78.

<sup>11</sup> James Thomas, *The Art of the Actor-Manager: Wilson Barrett and the Victorian Theatre* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1984), pp. 134, 162.

<sup>12</sup> Mayer, 'Toga plays', pp. 84–5.