methuen | drama

CRITICAL COMPANIONS

# BRITISH THEATRE AND PERFORMANCE 1900-1950

Rebecca D'Monté

BLOOMSBURY

# BRITISH THEATRE AND PERFORMANCE 1900–1950

**Rebecca D'Monté** is Senior Lecturer in Drama at the University of the West of England, UK. She has edited books on early modern female communities and 1990s British drama, and published extensively on the plays of women dramatists, including Margaret Cavendish, Agatha Christie, Daphne du Maurier and April de Angelis. Currently she is preparing a monograph on British Theatre during the Second World War and a chapter on British Drama 1945–1960.

*Also available in the Critical Companions series from Bloomsbury Methuen Drama:*

THE IRISH DRAMATIC REVIVAL 1899–1939
*by Anthony Roche*

MODERN ASIAN THEATRE AND PERFORMANCE 1900–2000
*by Kevin J. Wetmore, Siyuan Liu and Erin B. Mee*

THE PLAYS OF SAMUEL BECKETT
*by Katherine Weiss*

THE THEATRE OF JEZ BUTTERWORTH
*by David Ian Rabey*

THE THEATRE OF CARYL CHURCHILL
*By R. Darren Gobert*

THE THEATRE OF MARTIN CRIMP: SECOND EDITION
*by Aleks Sierz*

THE THEATRE OF BRIAN FRIEL: TRADITION AND MODERNITY
*by Christopher Murray*

THE THEATRE OF DAVID GREIG
*by Clare Wallace*

THE THEATRE AND FILMS OF MARTIN MCDONAGH
*by Patrick Lonergan*

THE THEATRE OF SEAN O'CASEY
*by James Moran*

THE THEATRE OF HAROLD PINTER
*by Mark Taylor-Batty*

THE THEATRE OF TIMBERLAKE WERTENBAKER
*by Sophie Bush*

THE THEATRE OF TENNESSEE WILLIAMS
*by Brenda Murphy*

# BRITISH THEATRE AND PERFORMANCE 1900–1950

*Rebecca D'Monté*

*Series Editor: Patrick Lonergan*

Bloomsbury Methuen Drama
An imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

BLOOMSBURY
LONDON • NEW DELHI • NEW YORK • SYDNEY

**Bloomsbury Methuen Drama**
An imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

Imprint previously known as Methuen Drama

50 Bedford Square
London
WC1B 3DP
UK

1385 Broadway
New York
NY 10018
USA

**www.bloomsbury.com**



First published 2015



**British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data**
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: HB: 978-1-4081-7492-0
PB: 978-1-4081-6565-2
ePDF: 978-1-4081-6603-1
ePub: 978-1-4081-6601-7

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**
A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

Typeset by Newgen Knowledge Works (P) Ltd., Chennai, India

# CONTENTS

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks are due to Martin Middeke, Peter Paul Schnierer and Aleks Sierz, whose book *The Methuen Drama Guide to Contemporary British Playwrights* recommended me to Mark Dudgeon, my ever-supportive and patient editor at Methuen Drama. Catherine Wood designed the appealing cover and Patrick Lonergan provided valuable feedback. I am grateful to Claire Cochrane, Penny Farfan and Steve Nicholson for responding to my request for contributory chapters and fulfilling their brief so well. Research leave generously offered by the University of the West of England aided the writing of the book, as did the support offered by UWE's library staff. I appreciate the help offered by Kristy Davis, the Collections Manager of The Raymond Mander and Joe Mitchenson Theatre Collection, Heather Romaine, Jill Sullivan and all at the University of Bristol Theatre Collection. Thanks must also be given to the staff at York City Archives, the Mitchell Library Glasgow, the Glasgow University Library Special Collections Department, The John Rylands Library at Manchester University, the Imperial War Museum and the V&A Theatre and Performance Library. Gary Farnell and Claire Warden were kind enough to answer my reference queries. I also owe a debt to Mike Davis, Dawn Fowler, Bill Greenslade, Ed Guy and Andrew Wyllie. The book is dedicated to my son, Sam Seal.

# INTRODUCTION

The years 1900–50 are marked by dramatic and far-reaching events: two world wars, the rise of fascism and communism, the decline and fall of the British Empire, economic disaster, first-wave feminism and new cultural responses to the modern age. If we accept that theatre is part of 'the "cultural apparatus" of society', then it is inevitable that it would reflect the seismic changes taking place.[1] Surprisingly, therefore, there has been a tendency by critics to divide British theatre in the twentieth century into two halves: pre-Second World War drama and post-war drama (which by convention starts at 1956, with the appearance of the so-called working-class realism of John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*). The former is considered conservative, commercial, and class-ridden, while the latter is radical and forward-thinking in subject matter and style. This categorisation, however, does a disservice to both ages. While it is true to say that early twentieth-century drama does refer back to the Victorian age, there is also a constant push towards a different type of stage that reflected the tumultuous socio-political changes taking place; indeed, almost everything that has been said about post-war drama was already in place during the first part of the century.

Contemporary commentators such as Beverley Baxter, W. A. Darlington, William MacQueen-Pope, Camillo Pellizzi, Ernest Reynolds and J. C. Trewin have been useful in helping to formulate a sense of how British theatre was viewed as it developed. However, their tendency was to concentrate on the commercial and professional theatre, especially that purveyed in London's West End, and little attention paid to the regions, the work of minorities, and theatre outside of the mainstream. There has also been a narrow focus on domestic comedy and drama. In contrast more recent critics have given a wider perspective to some of the epoch's most important themes: politics and ideology, gender and sexuality, class and race, family, work and identity. Different genres have also been taken into consideration – thrillers, revues, pageants, musicals and so on – to provide a richer and more complex picture. Chief among these larger studies are Christopher Innes's *Modern British Drama: 1890–1990* (1992), Jean Chothia's *English Drama of the Early Modern Period, 1890–1940* (1996), Richard Eyre and Nicholas Wright's *Changing Stages: A View of British Theatre in the 20th Century* (2000), Baz

Kershaw's *The Cambridge History of British Theatre. Volume 3 Since 1895* (2004), Mary Luckhurst's *A Companion to Modern British and Irish Drama 1880–2005* (2006) and Simon Shepherd's *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern British Theatre* (2009).

Each of these texts is commendable and adds much to our understanding of the theatre, especially at local, national and international levels, political drama and drama by women and the working classes. I continue this trend, as well as further considering the fluidity between the professional and non-professional, and the commercial and avant-garde. Moreover, while some works only have a perfunctory section on theatre between 1914–18 and 1939–45, it is my wish to explore these episodes in detail because, as S. Johanna Alberti has said, 'The war years can be read not as a discontinuity but as a continuation of an extended international tragedy'.[2] The residual impact of the Boer War marked the Edwardian era, which led into sudden preparations for the Great War. This caused not just the loss of a generation but brought about an instability in society, particularly when it became obvious that this was not 'the war to end all wars'. Rather than bringing about peace, the Armistice of 1918 sowed the seeds of the next war, which turned out to be 'five times more destructive of human life and incalculably more costly in material terms'.[3] Even after this, paranoia over the Cold War continued to shape global policy, and most importantly shock waves over the Holocaust and the atomic bomb even affected humanity's perception of itself. This book has therefore been structured around four uneven time periods: the Edwardian era, the First World War, the Interwar years, and the Second World War and after. I make no apology for this deliberate ploy to stress the way in which the first half of the twentieth century was dominated by war. It is also possible to argue that the material conditions of war such as blackouts, bombing campaigns, front-line warfare, brought about some of the most radical transformations to British theatre that would have ramifications for its future.

Social and technological changes – especially in terms of gender, sexuality, class and mass media – were impacted upon by war. The campaign for women's enfranchisement had been waged since the nineteenth century, but erupted into a more militant suffragette movement in the 1900s. While this undoubtedly had an effect, Nicoletta Gullace believes that 'Women's suffrage was forged in the crucible of war', and their work during it helped to validate 'feminists' long-standing arguments about the national and imperial value of female citizenship'.[4] Other critics, however, such as Dan Todman, find it 'hard to argue that wartime service led directly to enfranchisement for

women'. Rather, he says, this was a result of short-term political calculations, including giving the vote to older women first in the belief that they would act as a bulwark against the extreme left politics coming out of Russia. Instead, Todman believes that the war had both positive and negative effects for women, such as increased confidence and awareness of other forms of lifestyle, while others 'placed increased emphasis on traditionally feminine behaviour as a reassurance against the shock of the war'.[5]

With some conviction, though, it can be stated that better political, legal and economic status for women caused them to become more visible in society, with an attendant simultaneous pressure to contain them within the home, or to categorise them as 'abnormal' when they rejected conventional behaviour. Significantly, also, the strengthening of capitalism during the first few decades of the twentieth century saw the female body commoditised and fetishised as commercialisation of the theatre grew apace and stronger links were made between, for example, fashion houses and the stage.

The policing of the nation's sexual morality was paramount during the war years, but ironically also became more difficult to sustain. Eventually stage censorship became anachronistic and, ultimately, futile. The representation of lesbianism and homosexuality, in particular, was in direct contrast – and therefore a threat – to the image of the unsullied 'Angel in the House' and the patriotic ideal of the all-conquering war hero.[6] This only serves, though, to highlight the push for a greater recognition of new sexual and gender roles.

Poor health of conscripts and despair at living conditions for returning soldiers encouraged education and welfare reform, and this was further advanced during the next war. Catastrophic decisions taken by those in power engendered a growing distrust of authority, especially among the working classes, who also resented the injustice and constraints of capitalism as well as class hierarchy; this, along with generational conflict, marked a rejection of unquestioning obligation and a move towards the rights of the individual. These tensions underpin the massive rise in political drama, also fuelled by world events such as the Wall Street Crash and Depression, Russian Revolution, Spanish Civil War and rise of fascism. The advent of cinema and radio provided a forum for this discontent, whether through the mass dissemination of news reports or the championing of the 'common man', as in the films of Charlie Chaplin.

Claire Warden has pointed out that 'There was a sense of rupture and change, affecting many different areas of life from politics and international relations to the economy and the societal structure'.[7] This fostered a greater artistic experimentation than ever before, with a rapid rise in new movements,

styles and manifestos as various as Futurism, Dadaism, Expressionism and Modernism. Influences on the British stage came mainly from Europe, and included Henrik Ibsen, Anton Chekhov, Konstantin Stanislavski, Adolphe Appia, Vsevolod Meyerhold, Ernst Toller, Karel Čapek and Bertolt Brecht, although other world stages also exerted a force, such as Japanese Noh theatre and the American Federal Theater Project. All of this was driven by a realisation that there needed to be a break with the conventions of Victorian theatre, which had relied on the picture frame effect of a proscenium arch, the trappings of a 'realistic' box set, a hierarchically arranged audience and the vice-like control of the charismatic actor-manager.

Nevertheless, while there has been a surge of interest in the more radical elements of drama, it is important not to forget that much of the theatrical fare in the commercial theatre can be perceived of as 'middlebrow', and yet still worthy of attention. If the lowbrow revolved around music hall and melodrama, and the highbrow the avant-garde, the middlebrow focused on well-written but undemanding drama and comedy directed at the middle classes. In the 1950s Terence Rattigan unwittingly denigrated the woman who enjoyed his plays by labelling her 'Aunt Edna', while Kenneth Tynan saw the 'Loamshire play' with its middle-class country house setting as epigrammatic of British theatre's sterility.[8] However, it was a format that addressed the audience's concerns by reflecting contemporary society; it questioned the status quo, even if this was not ultimately challenged; and the community it represented functioned 'as an image of unity and totality against which to judge the dividedness of the modern world'.[9] Again, with relevance especially to women, middlebrow writing is 'about the "drama of the undramatic", the steadfast dailiness of a life that brings its own rewards, the intensity of the emotions and, above all, the importance of human relationships'.[10] Much of this was not possible to render within avant-garde theatre, and therefore equal consideration needs to be given to both modes.

Equally, it is important to note that the boundaries between the conventional and unconventional were perpetually in flux. As one of the most prolific theatre managers of the age, Basil Dean produced much middle-class drama, but he was also responsible for the Soviet-inspired pageant, *Salute the Red Army* (1943). During the 1992 revival of Enid Bagnold's *The Chalk Garden* (1956), Charles Spencer noted that when 'John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* arrived at the Royal Court . . . elegant, well-made drawing-room plays like this were supposedly consigned to the dustbin of theatrical history. Yet it is Osborne's drama which now seems strident, sentimental and old-fashioned'.[11] Middlebrow drama has proved the saviour of repertory and

amateur theatre, whereas high culture has become open to sponsorship, as can be witnessed by the growth in state subsidised theatre after the Second World War, the setting up of a National Theatre and the Arts Council. These, and many of the other examples I will describe, show the complexity of the theatre industry.

Another issue to be taken into account is that of national identity. From the turn of the century to the post-war era there were 'shifts in the internal balance of power whereby Britain increasingly became identified with England (and sometimes southern England at that), and the social, cultural and economic dominance of London and the home counties took on new dimensions'.[12] This image of England was deployed during political crises such as the two world wars, both as a shorthand form of propaganda and also as a means of bolstering the south as the power hub of the country. There was, though, resistance from the margins. While much was done to strengthen a sense of patriotic loyalty through pageantry, exhibitions and the celebration of history and culture, this was undermined by England's difficult imperialist relationship with Scotland, Ireland and to a lesser extent Wales. Seen in some quarters as the invading power, England was therefore the enemy, thus leading to a division of loyalties. Assumptions about national identity are equally challenged, a topic that continues to grow in relevance from the influx of people from the colonies after the Second World War to Nigel Farage's UK Independence Party (UKIP) in the twenty-first century, and from the Provisional Irish Republican Army's bombing campaign against England from the 1970s to contemporary debates for and against the devolution of Scotland.

In terms of the theatre, practitioners often rejected the term 'British' and saw their alliances lying with their particular locality. Even this, though, was fraught. Jen Harvie argues that

> national identity can be oppressive when, for example, it is seen as homogeneous, superior, and/or unchanging and it acts to exclude or oppress minorities or perceived 'others' or to restrict cultural change. It can be enabling when it helps develop community identities. Often it is simultaneously, in different degrees, both oppressive and enabling.[13]

Thus, Irish drama came to the fore with the Abbey Theatre during the Edwardian era, and was part of the Celtic Revival movement. Yet while celebrating Irish culture, this also has the effect of pedalling a certain kind of

'Irishness' to its audiences that looked back to the past rather than forward to the future. Again, early twentieth-century Scottish theatre presented a form of 'Scottishness' but this became rapidly internationalised with the political drama of the 1920s and 1930s. Along with this it is interesting to ask why the objective of having a purely Irish or Scottish theatre should be treated as 'regionalism' rather than 'nationalism'. A similar case can be made for the regional theatre as well: if the centre of the theatre industry is splintered and redrawn in a way that moves it away from the metropolis, as happened during the Second World War, then it allows for an interrogation of what is meant by the 'regions' or the 'provinces'. Although such terms are used in this book for simplicity, perhaps now more than ever we need to rethink their applicability and draw away from viewing British theatre as applying to all parts of the United Kingdom in equal measure, and the convention of geographically situating theatre in relation to London.

As previously mentioned, a deliberate choice has been made to divide the book into approximately four time slots: 1900–14, 1914–18, 1918–39 and 1939–50. Although these are artificially contrived, this has been done to highlight the importance of conflict upon the first part of the twentieth century, a moment when Britain was either anticipating war, involved in war or recovering from war. Again, it has been a conscious decision to write about, not just canonical figures such as W. B. Yeats, George Bernard Shaw, J. B. Priestley, T. S. Eliot and Terence Rattigan, but also to cover those less well-known or regarded: Ivor Novello, Basil Dean, Joe Corrie, Miles Malleson, Esther McCracken, Una Marson and so on.

Chapter 1 engages with recent critical ideas about the destabilisation of history, suggesting that the Edwardian age was far less socially and politically secure than previously considered. There was a considerable desire to break away from the Victorian era, as evidenced through the rise of the Labour Party, women's militancy, problems with Ireland and industrial disturbances. This all showed itself in the theatre, which particularly charted the growing divide between the generations, eventually brought to a head by the First World War. Practitioners started to experiment with different modes of theatre, most notably with the Court Theatre's instigation of the repertory system and the suffragettes' use of political drama.

Chapter 2 tackles the function of theatre in wartime, considering how culture was pressed into service to proselytise for war by encouraging enlistment, demonising the enemy and celebrating British supremacy. Running alongside there was a concomitant concern with the dangers of warfare, arising out of first-hand experience and the growth of the pacifist

movement. The ability of the state to control theatre through censorship begins to be put under pressure as different forms and locations of performance emerge: ad hoc revues, amateur theatre, productions at the front line, subscription clubs. By the end of the war the theatre industry had changed, as the reign of actor-managers was largely over, usurped by a new wave of single-minded businessmen determined to exploit its commercial opportunities, and the mass popular appeal of the cinema.

Chapter 3 follows on from Michael Woolf's view that in the aftermath of the First World War, and the ensuing events such as the rise of Fascism and the Depression, 'the theatre was both a means of escape from, and a means of engagement with, the political and economic realities of the time'.[14] Paradoxically, this was sometimes done through a rejection of realism and an embracement of dramatic techniques gleaned from around the world. One of the reasons for this was the sheer difficulty in coming to terms with the horrors of the war and the need to find a way of representing trauma; another was increased awareness of the possibilities of theatre as a tool, not just to reflect and critique, but to provide urgent social intervention.

Given the paucity of previous criticism on the subject, Chapter 4 covers theatre during the Second World War in some detail. Cultural value can be seen in the utilisation of popular genres and the English way of life to represent the country at a time of national crisis. Equally we can see that issues raised in the plays, as well as the material conditions led to an increased informality, and presaged the social, political and theatrical changes of the post-war period. By the 1950s a dehumanising and depersonalising sense of loss of identity had set in, instigated by insecurity over Britain's loss of global supremacy, disappointment over the failure to create a better society, and a lessened belief in authority. Anger surfaced, not just in kitchen-sink drama, but perhaps more productively through the civil rights movement which championed the interests of the dispossessed: women, homosexuals, people of colour. British theatre was poised on the cusp of a new era, but one that still had strong links to the past as well.

Essays by three expert contributors help to flesh out key issues in this book. During the first part of the twentieth-century theatre was not only opened up to amateurs, communities and schools, but the industry itself also became more professionalised. Skills were raised with the opening of a number of drama schools, and actors were better supported through the founding of the British Actors' Equity Association in 1930. This had already taken place for theatre producers, managers and owners in 1908 with the advent of The Society of West End Theatre Managers. Claire Cochrane's

piece, '"Producing the Scene": The Evolution of the Director in British Theatre 1900–1950' suggests how the role of the director was also changing. At the beginning of the twentieth century, British theatre was broadly bourgeois; that is, designed overwhelmingly for the upper and middle classes, who responded to comfortable, well-made plays. Actor-managers such as George Alexander, Frank Benson and Gerald du Maurier who had all but dominated the theatre since the 1890s, were well aware of this, and responded accordingly. Cochrane traces how the omnipotence of the actor-manager gave way to a situation in which occupations were segregated – actor, director, producer, stage manager and theatre manager – giving more gravitas to each activity. This impacted upon all elements of production, from the pre-rehearsal process through to the use of the *mise en scéne* and the relationship with the audience. The new style of directors provided an intellectual or aesthetic approach to their work, previously missing when the main concern of managers had been to showcase their own talents. Again, in utilising smaller performance spaces, sometimes away from traditional centres of entertainment, they helped to widen the geographical spread of theatre across Britain. The implementation of European stagecraft and working practices, including the setting up of ensemble companies, also helped to move the theatre away from that of the nineteenth-century model.

Between the 1880s and the First World War British theatre was shaped to a certain degree by the plays of Henrik Ibsen's middle career: *Ghosts* (1881), *Rosmersholm* (1886), *Hedda Gabler* (1890), and most notably *A Doll's House* (1879). Penny Farfan analyses the effect of their queer and feminist dimensions on theatre workers in her contribution, '"Masculine Women and Effeminate Men": Gender and Sexuality on the Modernist Stage'. The point is made that the appearance of the New Woman in the 1890s – one who is economically independent, well-educated and politically aware – undermined society at a juncture when notions of masculinity and femininity were already in contention. Farfan claims figures such as Edy Craig, Christopher St John (Christabel Marshall) and Maud Allan as modernists who subvert gender and sexuality through their work and lifestyles: Craig and St John lived together in a ménage a trois with the artist Clare 'Tony' Atwood, and alongside Craig's mother, the actress Ellen Terry; the Canadian dancer, Allan achieved notoriety through her appearance in Oscar Wilde's play *Salomé* (1891) and in 1918 lost a court case about her purported lesbianism because of the resonances emanating from Wilde's 1895 own trial for sodomy and indecency. Farfan also considers the work

of Nöel Coward, whose glittering career as actor, director and writer almost spans the period under investigation. Positing him as a modernist, Farfan demonstrates how Coward's plays not only reflect different ways of living, but also play a role in the creation of newly emerging gender and sexual identities.

Preserving morality was obviously of paramount concern to the state and plays that pushed at its boundaries were constantly monitored. Theatre censorship in this country fully came to fruition in 1737 with The Licensing Act that gave statutory powers to the Lord Chamberlain's Office to licence plays for the public stage. David Thomas, David Carlton, and Anne Etienne note that 'Censorship was clearly viewed by Home Office officials as an essential political tool to ensure that the theatre should be denied any opportunity for subjecting public figures to ridicule'.[15] Nowhere is censorship more evident than when the country was at war or during the preparations for it. Nevertheless, the rules were not always clear-cut. In 'Staging Hitler, Unstaging Hitler', Stephen J. Nicholson draws on the Lord Chamberlain's papers to show how depictions of the Fuhrer were muddled and dependent on the political mood, bringing about conflict between author and the censor and within the Lord Chamberlain's office itself. During the first part of the 1930s, the censor demanded that any negative depiction to the Nazis should be cut out or the play 'ruritanianised': that is, located in an unidentifiable foreign country.[16] After the invasion of Austria in May 1938 even that precaution was considered too dangerous, as confusion reigned over whether or not Germany should be treated as a potential ally or foe. Nicholson's research relates not just to the Second World War, but raises the wider issue of stage censorship and indeed propaganda. As I suggest in my Conclusion, there was a mounting compulsion for theatre practitioners to represent and critique all aspects of society, even that which had once been considered taboo, and ultimately this would strain to breaking point the relationship between state interference and artistic credibility.

In summary, this book is positioned as part of the continuing debate about the relationship between war and culture, the middlebrow and early twentieth-century British drama. It takes up recent developments in critical analysis, which have asserted the relevance of cultural studies, the uses of interdisciplinarity and the questioning of conventional oppositions; that is, private versus public, male versus female, middle class versus working class, middlebrow versus modernism, regional versus national and amateur versus professional. By investigating the role

of the theatre between 1900 and 1950, it is possible to see it as a bridge between the Victorian age and the modern age, in terms of changes to the theatrical institution, as a means of underpinning or subverting the prevailing ideology, and as providing a lasting legacy in the way that we think about theatre today.

# CHAPTER 1
# THE EDWARDIAN THEATRE

## Introduction

Queen Victoria's death just after the turn of the twentieth century in 1901 provoked widespread mourning. During her long reign she had presided over a remarkable process of industrial, scientific and cultural change which resulted in Britain becoming the largest trading nation in the world. As successor Edward VII continued to celebrate and strengthen British power through a series of exhibitions. This culminated sixty years after the Great Exhibition in the Festival of Empire, held at London's Crystal Palace in 1911. The solid Victorian values of diligence and thrift had led to an age of considerable material prosperity, where education was now available at a primary level to the whole population and there was an increased concern with humanitarianism and social welfare. It is not surprising, therefore, that in retrospect the period has been viewed with nostalgia, a world shattered by the brutality of the First World War.

This nostalgia did not reflect the true situation, though, as throughout the period there were simmering tensions that threatened the stable façade: militant demand for rights for women, clashes between the unions and management, and the vexed Irish question all brought into play key political issues to do with imperialism, nationalism and liberalism. The Fabian Society grew rapidly during this period. This was a socialist organisation founded in 1884 by George Bernard Shaw, and Beatrice and Sidney Webb, and went on to include many of the most influential thinkers of the time, such as Leonard and Virginia Woolf, H. G. Wells, Emmeline Pankhurst and – briefly – Bertrand Russell. The movement was named after the Roman politician Fabius the Delayer and endorsed egalitarianism through the gradual reform of injustice. The Labour Party grew out of socialist groups such as the Fabian Society and trade unions. Started in 1900 and led by Keir Hardie, it was created to support the working classes, and betokened a profound concern with the iniquitous situation where the vast majority of wealth was owned by one per cent of the population.[1] The Tories as well as the Liberal Government which came

to power in 1906 saw these groups as a threat to the family and to the class hierarchy, but were unable to stop a series of devastating strikes taking place by coal, rail and port workers, among others. In the run-up to the outbreak of the Great War in 1914 there was serious talk of revolution or civil war. This pull between the old and new has occasioned Samuel Hynes to liken the Edwardian age to 'a narrow place made turbulent by the thrust and tumble of two powerful opposing tides'.[2]

In the Arts rapid changes in areas such as physics, psychology, technology and industry, led to the development of modernism. The work of James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque, Arnold Schoenberg and others, redefined the nature of reality. The Manet and the Post-Impressionists Exhibition at the Grafton Gallery in London prompted Virginia Woolf to write 'On or about December 1910 human character changed'.[3] Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theories about the influence of childhood also began to filter through to Britain, provoking a considered debate about male and female sexuality.

## The Edwardian theatre

During the Victorian era the rapid expansion of the population, economic migration, the growth of London as the largest city in the world, and the change from a basically agricultural and rural life to one that was industrial- and city-based had a concomitant effect on the theatre industry. Claire Cochrane notes its swift commercial development, especially in London, where

> there had developed a large number of play/musical comedy *producing* theatres in very close proximity in an example of what Max Weber called 'agglomeration.' Manufacturing firms, i.e. theatres, could cluster together to achieve economies of scale by concentrating production at one point – again benefiting from the pool of skilled services.[4]

Audiences were larger, more mobile, and increasingly middle class and female. Even the monarch gave her seal of approval, visiting the theatre over 800 times in her lifetime. The many new playhouses of the second half of the nineteenth century appealed to this new spectatorship, while also promulgating a vision of imperialist power through motifs from the Dominions. C. J. Phipps and Frank Matcham were two of the most important

architects of civic buildings of the time; the first specialised in large auditoria and classical architecture; the latter redesigned interiors to improve stage sightlines which allowed the audience to see and be seen.[5] The classes were segregated, often with different entrances and bar areas, but allowing the less-well-off to 'appreciate' the display of wealth from a distance.

In London, theatre became part of 'the Season', a series of social events that those visiting the city from their country estates should be seen to attend. The advance of the dinner hour in polite society to 7 o'clock brought a change to theatre programmes. Instead of performances starting at 6.30 p.m. and a bill of fare continuing until midnight, new patrons came to theatre at 8 o'clock and were content to see a single play, or at most a play and a curtain-raiser. Matinees were introduced to cater for a more leisured and refined audience, with female audiences deliberately courted as a means to raise the tone. Tie-ins with fashion and beauty houses and other commercial enterprises enabled managers to maximise profits. As part of the leisure industry, the expansion of theatres had a concomitant effect on transport, hotels and restaurants, especially in tourist destinations like London's West End, with contemporary commentators such as George R. Sims observing the larger crowds swarming around the playhouses after dark.[6] This impacted upon stage works which, whether musical comedies or social dramas, began to focus more on recognisable, public spheres of work, politics and leisure.

Because of the rise of middle-class theatre, it has been suggested that the nineteenth century saw the theatre informally separate into two different kinds. The 'illegitimate' theatre consisted of music hall, burlesque, farce and melodrama, and was mainly for the working classes. Elsewhere the rowdy and sometimes violent audiences of the early nineteenth century were replaced by a more sophisticated clientele, and this new 'legitimate' theatre was almost entirely middle class in tone, setting and point of view. In London, these two types of theatre were demarcated by location: the working-class East End and the fashionable West End. However, the situation was more fluid than this with audiences attending both forms of theatre regardless of class. It is also important to note that, while the working classes were deemed to be in need of the morally edifying plays of the West End, transfers could also sometimes go in the opposite direction as well, as with the plays of Arthur Shirley and Benjamin Landeck.[7] Improved transport meant a greater ease of movement between geographical areas so that audiences could travel to a wider variety of theatres, although community theatre was still important. The Pavilion in the East End of London, for example, specialised in Yiddish

Theatre, as did the East London Palace.[8] Jewish playwrights including Alfred Sutro and Israel Zangwill also crossed over into the mainstream.

One of the most important changes in theatre in early twentieth century was its division into commercial and artistic companies, with 'theatre ownership and management' passing 'from limited liability partnerships to large publicly owned corporations'.[9] The former theatre was dominated by impresarios. Frank Curzon leased a number of London theatres, at one point having nine under his management. Alfred Butt, whose career as a theatre impresario lasted from 1904 to 1931, built an empire in the metropolis, which included the Palace, the Victoria Palace, the Adelphi, the Empire, the Gaiety and Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, as well as others across the country, such as the Alhambra Theatre in Glasgow. These powerful figures controlled all aspects of their theatres that were mainly run for financial rather than artistic reasons. This meant that difficult or challenging drama was eschewed for entertainment and spectacle, and long runs encouraged so as to maximise profits.

As Claire Cochrane points out in this book, actor-managers had held sway throughout the Victorian period, with material devised around their 'star' quality. This not only led to a limited repertoire and an attrition of other acting talent, but they also ensured the profitability of the theatre, increased its reputation and even toyed with new forms of drama. The system followed Victorian ideologies of economic practicality and patriarchy, and would continue until the 1920s. While there were several female theatre managers at this time, it was rare that they were actresses as well; Lena Ashwell is a notable exception, and Lillah McCarthy ran a series of theatres alongside her husband, Granville Barker.[10] The main male figures included Charles Wyndham who managed three London theatres: the eponymous Wyndham's, the Criterion and the New Theatre. George Alexander was lessee of St James's, which he ran with benevolent autocracy, specialising in the drawing room comedies of Oscar Wilde and Arthur Wing Pinero. Herbert Beerbohm Tree was an actor, director and manager of various West End theatres, most notably His Majesty's. His hallmark was lavish productions of Shakespeare, historical drama and the classics in which he tended to take the central role. Like Henry Irving, the pre-eminent Victorian actor-manager, his intention was to stir the audience's imagination through extravagant and quasi-realistic settings and costumes, even if this meant being historically inaccurate.

Tree took over from Irving as the main proponent of Shakespeare's work, a role eventually taken on by Lilian Baylis at the Old Vic. He built an international reputation for his Shakespeare productions, staging

unusual plays such as *King John* and *Henry VIII*, and mounting an annual festival from 1905 to 1913. While his dramatic style quickly went out of fashion with the rise of playwrights such as George Bernard Shaw and Granville Barker, Tree also helped to promote the work of Ibsen, Maurice Maeterlinck and W. Somerset Maugham. He was also quick to see the possibilities of technology; his 1899 production of *King John* is the first-recorded film of a Shakespeare play and he went on to complete several others.

The other great actor-manager of the time was Gerald du Maurier. Well-connected, he was the son of George du Maurier, author of *Trilby* (1894) and brother of Sylvia Llewelyn Davies whose children inspired J. M. Barrie to write *Peter Pan* (1904). He took the dual role of George Darling and Captain Hook in this, as well as Ernest in Barrie's *The Admirable Crichton* (1902). As co-manager, with Curzon, of Wyndham's Theatre from 1910 to 1925 he held a position of power, enhanced by his considerable stage presence.

Fourteen new theatres were opened in London's West End between 1880 and 1900 and these, combined with the reconditioning of old buildings, provided greater comfort and ceremony. New names were introduced to match the increasing wealth and grading of middle class and lower-middle-class groupings: orchestra stalls, pit stalls and pit; dress circle and family circle; upper circle, amphitheatre and gallery. Foyers, saloons, smoking rooms and buffets were added to the front of house to make more of an all-round experience designed to replicate the home.

This verisimilitude helped audiences feel at ease in the theatre. It also educated them about correct social behaviour. This was popularised through the trend for drawing room comedies, also known as 'cup and saucer' plays, thereby reinforcing their sense of privilege and power. The box set allowed actors to play inside the scenery rather than in front of it, and the proscenium arch – now with an elaborate wide border – completed the full 'picture stage' frame; this fourth wall effect gave the audience the impression that they were watching a moving picture, while at the same time becoming part of it. Realistic scenery and props used to create replicas of drawing rooms that were furnished and designed by leading interior designers.

Paradoxically, technical advances both increased the sense of realism on stage and created the opposite as theatre managers vied with one another to provide the greatest spectacle. New machinery included pulleys capable of hauling actors up to the 'sky', trap doors, lifts, revolving stages and various smoke effects. Real horses were used for racing scenes in *Ben Hur* (1902)

and *The Whip* (1909), the latter also including a dramatic train crash. In 1908 a tidal wave was recreated in a play of the same name.

Technological advances – the telephone, photography, cinema, radio – also had an impact on the connection between visual and oral modes of communication. Theatre buildings started to be fitted with electric lights after 1880, and once the front of house could be darkened, the relationship between audience and performer became more intimate. This meant that there was less of a focus on theatre as part of a social ritual where people went to see and be seen, and more on what was being presented on stage. Bruce McConachie argues that 'Many of the tensions in modern theatrical practice after 1900 can be traced to conflicts between the kinds of realities induced by photographic and audiophonic modes of communication'.[11] Photography suggested that objective reality only existed through the visual; the telephone and phonograph separated the voice from the body. We can see this with the emphasis placed upon the spoken word in plays by George Bernard Shaw and Granville Barker, for example, and the visual-driven modernistic theatre of Edward Gordon Craig. Moreover, the separation between the 'real' and the facsimile of the 'real', as with photography, led to an increased appetite for staging the body and for reinterpretations of reality, as well as a rise in celebrity.

Although acting was still on the whole considered an undesirable occupation, especially for women, the latter part of the nineteenth century and first decade of the twentieth century saw the gradual transformation of the acting profession, in terms of respectability, craft and actor training. George Bernard Shaw demanded a new form of acting in his preface to the second volume of *Plays Pleasant and Unpleasant* (1898). This rejected the bombastic and romantic gestural style of actors such as Charles Kean, William Macready, Irving and Ellen Terry, for one more suited to the new drama of the time. Because this was written to have a socially transformative effect, Shaw argued, acting needed to become more scientific, rational and enquiring.

Henry Irving became the first actor to be knighted in 1895, followed by Herbert Beerbohm Tree in 1909. Unionisation led to better conditions for actors and actresses in the ensuing decades, and professional training was given a boost with Tree's foundation of the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA) in 1904. Women were offered support and took an active role through initiatives such as the Theatrical Ladies Guild founded in 1891 and the Actresses' Franchise League (AFL, 1908). They also took on positions of authority, inspired by the suffrage movement that had increased numbers

of women writing for the theatre. Elsie Fogerty founded Central School of Speech and Drama (CSSD) in 1906 and was instrumental in the field of voice training, Irene Vanbrugh was the first woman to sit on the administrative council of RADA, and women such as Athene Seyler, Sybil Thorndike, May Whitty and Judith Gick were members of various boards, helping to effect fundamental changes to the running of these places.[12]

Ibsen had a profound influence upon the development of drama in Britain country, although as Katherine Newey has acutely observed, his work quickly moved from being banned to becoming mainstream.[13] This fuelled an interest in social drama which dwelt on more problematic subject matter that reflected the realities of contemporary society, especially changes towards women. From the 1880s his plays were popularised by the theatre critic and reformer, William Archer, and socialist circles, such as that run by Eleanor Marx and her husband, Dr Aveling. Perhaps his most famous champion was George Bernard Shaw whose lecture *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (1891) 'can be seen as the watershed between traditionalist and modern perspectives, with its call for a revolution in the nature and function of the dramatic experience'.[14] Because much of Ibsen's work was censored, private theatres and theatre companies were set up – frequently by women – in order to present his material. The actress Janet Achurch put on a production of *A Doll's House* in 1889, Elizabeth Robins and Marion Lea appeared in *Hedda Gabler* in 1891, and Florence Farr appeared in *Rosmersholm* at the Independent Theatre in the same year. Farr became Shaw's mistress and muse, and he much admired her New Woman lifestyle, but it is important to note that figures like Elizabeth Robins were less enamoured with Ibsen's politics than his ability to offer challenging female roles. Actress-producers were also inspired to write plays themselves, such as Robins's and Florence Bell's *Alan's Wife* (1893) and *Mrs Daintree's Daughter* (1894) written by Achurch.[15] Penny Farfan considers Ibsen's influence on the modernists in her chapter on pp. 213–22.

## Popular genres

### *Melodrama*

Literally meaning music with drama, melodrama has its roots in medieval mystery and morality plays and Italian commedia dell'arte. This developed into seventeenth-century tragi-comedy, a 'deformed hybrid' as David Mayer

calls it.[16] Two centuries later this genre had an exaggerated plot, generally depicting a struggle between good and evil, and stereotyped characters. A gestural acting style reflected the central premise of melodrama: to express emotion. 'Autumn dramas' – collaborative melodramas created by Augustus Harris – were popular in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These were elaborate and technically advanced, but sized down for touring productions both in Britain and abroad.

On the one hand, the melodrama did more though than pander to the tastes of an unthinking mass audience. It exposed sites of tension arising from increased industrialisation and the shifting demography, with class, work, morality and sexuality as major themes. As a genre it grappled with the struggle between good and evil, order and disorder, and justice and injustice. Michael Booth sees the genre as 'anti-aristocrat, anti-employer, anti-landlord, anti-landowner and anti-wealth, often violently so'.[17]

On the other hand, however, it could also reinforce racial prejudices, imperialist propaganda and social anxieties. The villainy of the wicked upper-class gentleman or landlord gradually began to be replaced by xenophobic representations of corrupt Asians or 'barbaric' Africans who threatened the Christian way of life but were trounced by British heroism and moral supremacy. Again, Mayer notes the titles of a series of melodramas from the 1890s onwards written by Frederick and Walter Melville. These are '"backlash" pieces expressing many of the lower-middle and working-class fears of unruly New Women and a patriarchal society in consequent disarray . . . Walter's *The Worst Woman in London* (1899), *That Wretch of a Woman* (1901), *A Disgrace to Her Sex* (1904), *The Girl Who Wrecked His Home* (1907) and *The Shop-Soiled Girl* (1919), and Frederick's *In a Woman's Grip* (1901), *The Ugliest Woman on Earth* (1903), and *The Bad Girl of the Family* (1909)'.[18] Melodrama's reinforcement of the dichotomous view of women as Madonna/whore developed into a more complex engagement with women's changing role in society. While, as Sos Eltis has said, 'The discarded mistress, seduced maiden, and unmarried mother crop up again and again as the motivation behind untold acts of villainy and familial disruption', the appearance of the Ibsenite heroine, New Woman, and suffragette all problematised these archetypes'.[19]

Thus, melodrama, once the leading popular form of the Victorian age, started to decline as a genre during the first couple of decades of the twentieth century. Political drama took over the role of its representation of gender and class antagonism, and the moral imperatives of the earlier period became increasingly at odds with the more ambiguous social drama of the late Victorian and early Edwardian theatre.

### *Variety and music hall*

As Victorian cities grew in size, more leisure time was available for the rising middle classes, and the working classes needed escape from the drudgery of industrial life. While eventually cinema would take over as the main form of entertainment for the working and lower middle classes, music hall started originally as a place where 'songs had been "the mouthpiece, the oracles of the people", where audiences had gone "not as spectators but as performers"'.[20] Its heyday was from the latter decade of the nineteenth century to about 1910, with its transformation into Variety bemoaned by many who disliked its over-capitalisation by big business. This, it was felt, led to the quashing of individuality and spontaneity and, with the appearance of foreign acts – especially those from America – the loss of an authentic and regional working-class voice. One offshoot of this was the necessity to find artists who could break through regional barriers to find national – and even international – fame. Harry Lauder was one such figure who anglicised his vocabulary, while using other Scottish elements to become acceptable to a wider audience. For example, the semiotic use of the kilt and other tartan trappings allowed him to 'negotiate images of Scottish identity that connected the present with the historic past through celebration of a shared culture'.[21] This larger-than-life Scottish persona proved popular throughout the world, and was successfully replicated by a number of other performers.

The London Hippodrome, opened by Frank Matcham in 1900, put on acts that were initially taken from the circus, but was also able to provide aquatic displays in its large water tank. These underwater spectacles could often be risqué, featuring young women in bathing costumes. Other venues in towns such as Birkenhead, Doncaster, Blackpool and Ipswich would bring together chorus lines and comedians, as well as specialty acts involving animals, acrobats, magicians and 'freak show' attractions. In 1898 the Australian-born Oswald Stoll and Sir [Horace] Edward Moss merged their businesses to form Moss Empires, and soon most towns or cities in Britain had an 'Empire' or a 'Coliseum' theatre. Here you could see the likes of Dan Leno, Marie Lloyd and Vesta Tilley, who became among the highest paid performers in the country. Their images were reproduced on photographs and postcards, as well as used to sell products, and their antics were a direct influence on the silent movie routines of comics such as Laurel and Hardy and Charlie Chaplin. Moss Empires was also instrumental in bringing to these shores some of the more avant-garde or experimental performers from

around the globe, including the Spanish Ballets Russes, and the movement and light shows of American dancer Loïe Fuller.

Stoll Moss's major rival was Alfred Butt who was managing director of several regional and West End theatres, including the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane; his Variety Theatres Controlling Company Ltd started in 1910 and became Britain's second largest chain of music halls. From the 1890s music hall started to be gentrified and brought into line with the 'legitimate' theatre. Audiences were less likely to eat and drink while watching the shows and the repertoire became more standardised and polished. Musical theatre received legitimacy when the first Royal Command Performance was held in 1912 before King George V and Queen Mary.

Music hall has often been overlooked in traditional theatre histories because it is a form of popular entertainment associated with the working classes and the socially marginalised. There has been a divergence of opinion as to the function and influence of the genre. Some critics view it as essentially conservative in the way that it was seen to uphold dominant ideology. Laurence Senelick describes the Victorian acts that included the appeals to a flag-waving crowd by the political singer whose 'patriotic song was a panegyric to England couched in a vein of overblown chauvinism', with this unthinking jingoism becoming more prevalent in the period from the Boer War to the First World War.[22] Jacky Bratton also points to the genre's xenophobia. In works such as *In Darkie's Africa* (1893) the 'clowning is richly suggestive of the music-hall intervention in imperialist discourse: it burlesques triumphalist versions of the invasion of Africa, the heroic tales of explorers pitted against alligators and savages, and also the contradictory nineteenth-century visions of black races as noble and as savage'; songs such as 'Looking for a Coon Like Me' only helped to reinforce existing prejudices.[23]

In contrast, other critics like Gordon Williams position music hall as a form of opposition to the hegemony, especially in terms of addressing issues of nationhood, class or gender.[24] Acts could question the social hierarchy, expose tyrannical bosses or explore economic distress, as with Marie Lloyd's 'The Cock Linnet song'; also known as 'My Old Man Said Follow the Van', this humorous song was actually about a family forced to do a 'moonlight flit' to avoid paying the rent. Others emulated the 'Lion Comique', or young 'swell' who aspired to the good life, like George Leybourne's Champagne Charlie. Vesta Tilley's female-to-male cross-dressing act followed in the tradition of seventeenth-century 'breeches' roles, which allowed actresses not only to titillate the audience, but also to draw strength from an exchange of gender, enabling them to negotiate their way in a male world.

Moreover, as feminist film critic Mary Ann Doane attests, 'the transvestite wears clothes which signify a different sexuality, a sexuality which, for the woman, allows a mastery over the image and the very possibility of attaching the gaze to desire'.[25] In the process of a female parody of the male roles, Tilley moved up the social ladder (eventually becoming Lady de Frece), took direct control of her career and financial affairs, and established herself as one of the highest paid working women in Britain. Tilley's act parodied the prevailing male power structure through her satires on male authority roles – policemen, soldiers and aristocrats – and her songs poked fun at the rich; 'Burlington Bertie' and 'Following in Father's Footsteps' are two such examples. She signified the inequality of male dominance through her female presence, helping to lay a key foundation for a change in popular attitudes towards the emancipation of women in society. Yet she did not consciously challenge the prevailing patriarchal structures of society and her use of cross-dressing always signalled fact that woman's body underneath; her publicity material invariably showed a real photograph of her alongside her male impersonation and on stage there was the contrast between the physical appearance of a man and her own soprano voice. In this way she provided safe titillation for the audience and was therefore accepted by the theatrical institution and respectable society.

The wooing of the middle classes had started in the nineteenth century and continued into the next century, with Williams suggesting that the music hall was a production of capitalism, and attracted 'the bourgeoisie just as much as workers seeking respite from the ugly industrial grind'.[26] Operas were staged in the music halls and composers like Elgar were brought in to conduct their own work. Vulgar material was gradually reduced, and sentimental songs appealed to all classes, especially when performed by the likes of Gertie Gitana. However, even this was not enough to stop its slow decline as other amusements such as cinema, radio and television began to take over.

### *Pantomime*

Pantomime first appeared on the London stage in the eighteenth century as part of an evening's entertainment. It had evolved from Classical theatre via Italian Commedia dell'arte, with the Greek word meaning 'an imitator of things'. Constantly reinventing itself to take in slapstick comedy, music, dance, acrobatics and theatrical illusion, it appealed to a wide-ranging audience to become a fixture of the Christmas season. This genre was popular during

the Edwardian period but it often subsumed into others such as fairy plays, fantasy, musical and spectacle. Like music hall, cross-dressing was also a feature of pantomime, but with the exception of the principal boy, focusing mainly on female grotesques: the needy spinster, 'elderly widow and nagging wife'.[27] Dan Leno and Herbert Campbell were two of the most popular female impersonators in pantomime, and their success fuelled by Augustus Harris's lavish annual productions at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane.

J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan; or, The Boy Who Wouldn't Grow Up* incorporates cross-dressing and other pantomimic features. The character of Peter Pan originally appeared in a 1902 novel, *The Little White Bird* and was famously based on Barrie's relationship with the five sons of family friends, Sylvia and Arthur Llewelyn Davies. The first production starred Gerald du Maurier as Captain Hook and Nina Boucicault as Peter.

The tragedy of the story is that the central character remains a child while all other children grow up and take on the responsibility of adulthood. Wendy Darling provides solace as the mother figure, although her attraction towards Peter and the killing of the father figure, Captain Hook, have also been given a Freudian interpretation.[28] The parents and Hook represent the forces that crush spontaneity: Mr Darling's work takes him away from the house and children, and his inflexibility means that he is unable to fully participate in life. As the mother, Mrs Darling has the role of educating her children but this involves '*tidying up their minds just as if they were drawers*', a nod to the restrictions of Edwardian society.[29] This is highlighted by Hook's final words, 'Floreat Etona', the motto of the public school Eton College, a bastion of the Establishment. Peter Pan refuses to grow up 'Because I heard mother talking of what I was to be when I became a man'.[30] As his name implies, Peter Pan is linked to the Greek god of the wild, nature and the pagan, the opposite of social conformity. He may be narcissistic and impetuous, but he is also able to create a magic world with his mind. Peter's insistence that nature and imagination are more important than society and rationality is a rejection of the materialistic Edwardian age, and the audience are mischievously drawn into aligning themselves with this by a direct appeal: 'If you believe in fairies, clap your hands'![31]

### *The 'spectacular body' and musical comedy*

Fascination with the 'spectacular body' – one that is meant to be looked at – manifested itself in a number of different ways. It could be both 'freakish', as with contortionists, strong men, and 'human oddities', or sexually titillating:

the chorus line and 'girlie' shows. The chorus line evolved out of variety and the music hall. The Manchester-based Tiller Girls were formed in 1890 by John Tiller. Tiller ensured that each chorus line was made up of women with the same measurements and their choreography was composed of precision movements, becoming famous for their high-kicking routines. It eschewed puritanical Victorian morality, with acres of flesh now on public display, and the regimentation of the body also provides us with a different interpretation brought forward by Futurists: this movement, launched by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti in 1909, spoke of a society ruled by machinery and technology, precision and automation.

This was most evident in a series of pieces based on the modern working woman taking her place 'within an emergent consumer culture, whose centre was the already theatricalised glamour of the purpose-built department store': *The Shop Girl* (1894), *The Girl Behind the Counter* (1906), *Our Miss Gibbs* (1909) and *This Way Madam* (1913) are cases in point. Peter Bailey argues that this was where 'older paternalist modes of authority combined with the newer patterns of industrial production, while the military ideal of well-drilled preparedness reflected the additional priorities of an imperial age'.[32] Scientific efficiency and economic usefulness are thus allied to more conventional erotic titillation, with use of the word 'girl' rendering safe this potentially disruptive figure.

Moreover, the stage settings sometimes replicated well-known shops, as when Swan & Edgar in London's Regent's Street appeared in facsimile at the Queen's Theatre next door for the production of *This Way Madam*, creating subliminal links between two forms of commodified space. In musical comedy's first flush of success, before the First World War, it represented a 'celebration of fashion, shopping and general excess', and was driven by the need for 'status and acceptability' within the theatre and by an awareness of women as consumers.[33]

George Edwardes's Gaiety Girls appeared in musical comedies at the Gaiety Theatre in the 1890s, bringing fame to women such as Ellaline Terriss, Lily Elsie and sisters Zena and Phyllis Dare. Celebration of the modern chorus girl was very much at the centre of musical comedy, as evidenced by a list of some of the most famous titles: *A Gaiety Girl* (1893), *The Geisha* (1896), *Floradora* (1899), *The Quaker Girl* (1910), *The Sunshine Girl* (1912) and *Maid of the Mountains* (1917).[34] The genre achieved its zenith of popularity between the decline of Gilbert and Sullivan's operettas in the 1890s and the rise of American musicals in the 1920s, and celebrated the more optimistic qualities of the period. Edwardes was quick to note a change in audience

tastes and his provision of family-friendly entertainments gave him an almost unrivalled position in the commercial theatre. As well as the Gaiety, his London theatres included Daly's and the Adelphi, and he popularised the musical comedy format by touring his productions around Britain and abroad. The script, lyrics and libretto were generally written separately, with Edwardes skilled at choosing the right mix of people to work together. The genre had original scores rather than relying on existing tunes, scripts utilised light-hearted banter between the sexes that was flirtatious without being risqué, and uncomplicated plots gently mocked society or gambolled through romantic entanglements. This glamorous vision of the shop girl who ultimately escapes its confines through a profitable marriage is, as we shall see, at considerable odds with the more realistic portrait painted by women dramatists such as suffragist Cicely Hamilton.

An interesting variation on modern life was *The Arcadians* (1909). Written by Mark Ambient and Alexander M. Thompson, with music by Lionel Monckton and Howard Talbot, this musical comedy fused interest in classical times, already mined by Gilbert and Sullivan's *Iolanthe* (1882), with the new pursuit of aviation. Aghast by tales of corrupt London, the Arcadians crash land there to warn its denizens. Instead, they begin to be seduced by city's temptations, and while the play ends on a happy note, its social commentary is serious: a simple life is more preferable than that rooted in commercialism.

The irony of this was lost on Edwardes, who exploited his actresses' good reputations, leading to several of them entering into the peerage via advantageous marriages, or acquiring sponsorship deals with fashion and beauty houses.[35] Victorian and Edwardian actresses became acutely canny about controlling their own image, through advertising, autobiographical writings, and critical articles, and 'an actress's off-stage persona could become an entity in itself, not her "veridical" self but a persona that usefully complemented her on-stage repertoire'.[36] The cult of celebrity was fuelled through photography and film, because, as David Mayer makes clear, stage photography only took place from the 1890s as lighting techniques became more advanced; before this a 'simulacrum of the theatrical settings in which she [the actress] appeared at the theatre nearby' was set up in the photographer's studio.[37] A less salubrious side of this was the peddling of dressed and undressed photographs of artistes, often taken backstage to provide a frisson to the theatrical experience. In a similar vein, there was a fascination with the body of the female daredevil in figure-hugging outfits that mimicked nudity.[38]

### *Staging the empire*

Ancient Rome, Greece, Egypt, Babylon and the Holy Land were popular settings on the Victorian stage, and continued to be so for the next era. This theatrical codification became a way to contrast contemporary urbanisation and industrialisation with an imagined golden age, to comment on national identity and the intrepid explorer/educator, and to titillate an audience with images of the exotic other. The literary 'worthiness' of the plays was emphasised through the *mise-en-scene*, which revelled in vivid colour, sumptuous settings and triumphal music.

Tree followed in the footsteps of Irving, both of whom were 'masters of the pictorial stage'.[39] Tree had already scored successes with plays such as *Julius Caesar* (1898), which was the opening show for his new theatre, Her Majesty's in the Haymarket, London. He went on to produce a string of classically inspired plays: *Paolo and Francesca*, *Herod* (both 1900), *Ulysses* (1902), *The Sin of David* (1904) and *Nero* (1906), all written by Stephen Phillips, the rising star of the Edwardian theatre, who had drunk himself to death by 1915. John Masefield, better known as a poet, wrote a series of plays on Classical or Biblical subjects, including *The Tragedy of Pompey the Great* (1910) and *Esther* (1921), as did Gordon Bottomley who became known for his verse drama.

Other forms of Classical Drama popular at the time were toga plays, a term for loosely related works and coined around 1895–6, eventually to be overtaken by the toga film, as with *Ben Hur* (1907). They focused on 'realistic spectacle' of Ancient Rome and tableaux vivant which depicted the Hellenic world, and drew on similar conventions to the 'sensation' melodrama. David Mayer suggests that 'By the final decades of the nineteenth century the concepts of Rome and the identities of Roman persons, objects and institutions had become inextricably linked to the nature and destiny of modern empires'.[40] The imperialist policy of Great Britain had been dented by the First and Second Boer Wars (1880, 1899–1902), therefore the subject matter of this kind of drama helped to bolster Britain's image of itself.

Both Biblical and Classical drama 'cleverly combined tropes about empire with titillating sexuality submerged in religious righteousness'.[41] The visual representation of the ancient world is similar to academic artists of the time such as Lawrence Alma-Tadema: a form of education, but one that had little to do with historical accuracy. Inevitably, the focus was the eroticised female body, alarmingly at odds with the militancy of the suffrage movement taking place at the same time. Penny Farfan also discusses the allure of exotic semi-nudity in relation to the dancer Maud Allan, on pp. 216–19.

George Bernard Shaw was one dramatist who used historical settings in a different way: as a comment on the contemporary situation. *Caesar and Cleopatra* (1906) may be set in Ancient Egypt but it is in fact about British Imperialism in Africa. *Saint Joan* (1924) is ostensibly about fifteenth-century France, but as Christopher Innes has pointed out, it 'reflects the contemporary struggle for Irish independence . . . Joan's martyrdom parallels the execution of Roger Casement, the Anglo-Irish patriot, while her canonization in 1920 – which was the overt inspiration for the play – also contains a modern political reference, La Pucelle having been the major propaganda symbol used by the French military during the First World War'.[42]

As well as classical settings, parts of the far-flung Empire were also mined for theatrical spectacle. John M. MacKenzie alerts us to the numerous plays and musical comedies set in India, reflecting Queen Victoria's 1877 inauguration as Empress of that country.[43] Other imperialist events, such as the Zulu Wars and the Anglo-Sudan War, were also represented, but it was the taste for exotic glamour that dominated. This was marked by the appearance of Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado* (1885) and the popular musical comedies, *A Geisha Girl* and *A Chinese Honeymoon* (1901). The fashion continued with David Belasco's *The Darling of the Buds* (1902), one of the first important transfers from America's Broadway to London's West End. Herbert Beerbohm Tree restaged this with himself in the leading role. The *New York Times* describes the original production as 'a series of really splendid tableaus [sic], with long waits between them, of gorgeous costumes and gaily diversified crowds, of acrobats and tumblers, of choruses of Geisha girls from Geisha street, and all the rest'.[44]

The exotic spectacle functioned in a number of different ways. On a superficial level it was a way of flouting censorship and the desired and desiring body; scantily clad men and women supposedly became less concerning when positioned within a legitimate setting. This genre celebrated the civilizing effects of the white man's influence and superiority through bringing Christianity and the British way of life to all parts of the world, it showed off the trading links between this country and others, and created a sense of international unity by bonding the dominions to the motherland. Edward Said's seminal work on Orientalism has, of course, alerted us to the pejorative stereotyping explicit in Western imperialism, where 'Orientals' – drawn from a vast and unconnected area – were depicted as inscrutable, manipulative and sexually dangerous: the 'exotic other'.[45] Underpinning all of this, though, as MacKenzie has observed, the Orient 'had become a source of anxiety and strain, a place of complex trading relations and periodic

warfare'.[46] On stage it could be controlled and rationalised, its mystery lying in glamorous costumes and picturesque settings, rather than the more dangerous reality.

A more direct way of staging the empire was through the use of pageants. These were a type of transient theatrical effect designed to consolidate hegemony. In Medieval times they were predominately a product of the church or the merchant classes: to cement power, promote trade guilds, celebrate civil pride and to provide a sense of community. At this time they moved from place to place on the back of pageant wagons – an early form of promenade theatre. Pageants were especially popular from the late Victorian period to the end of the Second World War. They were usually fixed to one spot, and designed to be educational (i.e. to provide a moral) or patriotic (to appeal to a sense of history). Countries around the world used fairs and exhibitions as a means to demonstrate their scientific, technological, artistic and colonial superiority. Examples include the Great Crystal Palace Exhibition (1851), the Paris Expositions (1855, 1889) and the St Louis World Fair (1904), with their imperialist, monarchist and trading objectives exploited through the production of commercial ephemera. Indeed, Ayako Yoshino sees pageants as instrumental in developing the tourist industry during the first decade of the twentieth century.[47]

Pageants can be seen in terms of what Baz Kershaw describes as 'spectacles of domination' or 'rituals of the powerful'; essentially, then, a conservative form.[48] As the British Empire grew, dozens of major exhibitions were organised in Britain, India and Australia as a means of deepening national pride, espousing the reach and power of its empire, and building trade links between the colonies. Bruce McConachie concludes that, 'As the "mother country", Great Britain displayed its noble traditions, royal munificence, ships and armaments, and, of course, its imperial leadership. A wide range of performances available to visitors from around the world – opening ceremonies, impressive parades, and royal receptions in addition to folk performances, costumed pageants, and music hall turns – cemented the interconnections made possible through the Empire'.[49]

One of the most spectacular was the 1911 Festival of Empire at the Empire Stadium (later Wembley Stadium), which took many years to plan. Subtitled 'An Historical Epic', it was designed to represent, as the souvenir book claimed, 'the gradual growth and development of the English nation, as seen in the history of this, the Empire City'. It was a huge undertaking, consisting of four parts, staged over three days by 15,000 volunteers, and ran for four months. It was organised by Frank Lascelles, who was known at the