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Part of a Great Dramatic Renaissance
Short Plays in Britain 1900-1920 in terms of
Realism, Repertory and Variety

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Part One: Short Plays and Realism

Introduction

There are four other principal areas in which one can investigate the development of the realist one-act play in England from the 1890s to the 1920s. These can be divided into tours by foreign theatre companies, and the native phenomena of theatrical societies (whether they be amateur, semi-professional or professional), the repertory theatre and the variety stage. These four areas of the theatre had a central influence on the propagation and maintenance of a one-act dramatic tradition, and on expanding the techniques and subject-matter of the form. There was, indeed, something of a question mark over which area of the theatre had actually played the most decisive part in cultivating the one-act play during this period: whether the form owed its development to such branches of the theatre as the variety stage¹ or the amateur theatre,² for example.

While the commercial stage still used one-acts occasionally, on such pretexts as introducing the work of a difficult European dramatist (typically at matinées) or as items on a charity bill (such as Louis N. Parker's adaptation of W. W. Jacob's horror story *The Monkey's Paw* (Haymarket, 6/10/1903) and Shaw's *The Dark Lady of the Sonnets* (Haymarket, 24/11/1910, *mat.*)), the quality and number of most of these one-act presentations does not merit close study. These four categories embody the main groupings for relatively advanced one-act playwriting of the time, from the founding of the Théâtre Libre in Paris in 1887 right up to the flowering of a national amateur theatrical movement in the 1920s.

¹ See, for example, John Palmer's comments on the dependence of the one-act play on the music hall, in the *Saturday Review*, 1 February, 1913, p.139.

² See Elizabeth Everard's preface to *Twelve One-Act*, pp. 5-6, and John Bourne's comments in *O.A.P.T.*, pp. 222-223 and 228, and in his *Drama Festivals and Competitions*, pp. 15 and 92, and so on.

Foreign Companies

The progressive theatre groups which sprang up in Europe and Britain in the last two decades of the nineteenth century represent a conscious endeavour to break with a theatrical past and institute a departure in theatrical organisation, repertory and performance technique. These were generally small enterprises, curtailed in their ventures by restricted finances, limitations on their performing capacities (involving such topics as the number of actors, the time to rehearse and the acting ability among members), the suspicion with which they were often held by the average theatre-goer (though this naturally lessened), and the difficulty of finding plays or encouraging playwriting which they felt best fitted their dramatic standards.

An advanced type of one-act play was often the answer, in dramatic terms (not even to mention financial, limited talent and other considerations), to their difficulties. This selection was a natural one. Frequently a group could not afford a change of set and could not bring together a large cast; the actors often had only a limited amount of time in which to learn their lines; the dramatists were often novices in playwriting, with a lack of experience in full-length writing combined with the pressures of their full-time occupations – all these factors, plus the critical respect now given to the short dramatic form, characterised by unity and intensity, made the one-act play a very suitable option. This was the case for the Théâtre Libre and its successors in France, and the Irish Players in Dublin.

André Antoine's Théâtre Libre is the first important modern one-act play theatre.³ In its first fifteen months, the theatre presented fourteen one-act plays, of which eleven were being performed for the

³ It presented its first bill, made up entirely of one-act pieces, on 30 May 1887. What is important about the Théâtre Libre in a general sense, wrote John A. Anderson, is that it "was the first theatre to win recognition as a serious rival of existing theatres." *The First Avant-Garde, 1887-1894*, p. 44.

first time and three were adaptations, out of a total of twenty-three plays (seven of these multi-act plays were receiving their first productions).



Théâtre Libre, now Théâtre Antoine (Haguard du Nord).

The Théâtre Libre also managed to have several of these one-act pieces accepted by the prestigious Parisian theatres, a trend which began with one play which was part of the very first programme of four one-act plays, Leon Hennique's *Jacques Damour*, his dramatisation of a story by Zola, which was to be later produced at the Odeon Theatre. This revival can be identified as the origin of the modern tradition of transferring one-act plays (though usually the more conventional ones), originally given at an art or progressive theatre, to important commercial theatres.

In England, this became especially prevalent among the dramatists whose first major productions were at the repertory theatres.⁴ The legacy of the Théâtre Libre, as far as England is concerned, is most obviously its position as a model for J. T. Grein's Independent Theatre, established in 1891.⁵ However, Grein's

⁴ Likewise, new playwrights, having had a one-act composition produced at an advanced theatre, were often commissioned by the manager of a commercial theatre to write suitable one-act or full-length play for his theatre. Stanley Houghton, for example, who began his playwriting career as an author of one-act dramas for the Gaiety Theatre, Manchester, was employed by Arthur Bouchier to write curtain-raisers for the Garrick Theatre.

⁵ In an article published over three months before the Independent Theatre had its first production, J. T. Grein and C. W. Jarvis asked: "Is not a British 'Théâtre Libre' – a theatre

experiment represents a case of restricted emulation, in that it never succeeded in fostering a native playwriting tradition of any real substance and indeed produced only twenty-six plays in seven years, the vast majority of which were foreign and in full-length form.⁶ Even the German equivalent of the Théâtre Libre, the Freie Buhne (estd. 1889), found a good response from indigenous playwrights, with, for example, only one French play in the first season, two out of seven in the second, and Strindberg's *Father* the only other play by a foreign dramatist during the same time. However, interestingly both the German and English enterprises were similar in their failure to produce much one-act drama.

The English theatre possessed an element of moral and convention-preserving condescension which looked with suspicion and prejudice on this foreign theatrical experiment and its off-shoot in London (much as it acted with censoriousness when confronted later by the one-act repertoire of the Grand Guignol). A critic in the *Saturday Review*, writing on the occasion of the first visit of the Théâtre Libre to London in early 1889, commented that the popularity of Antoine's theatre was due in part to the fact that "in the land of Zola there are very many people who are irresistibly attracted by any play that has the recommendation of being what is usually considered revolting," and that as far as the possibility of exporting some of its plays to England was concerned, "The Théâtre Libre has fallen very flat."⁷ Grein himself made sure to declare in no uncertain terms that, in distinction to the Théâtre Libre, his enterprise would

free from the shackles of the censor, free from the fetters of convention, unhampered by financial considerations – is not such a theatre possible?" *The Weekly Comedy*, 30 November 1889, pp. 6-7. See also J. T. Grein's letter to Arthur Symons, written in 1893, at the British Library, 46867, f. 262b.

⁶ Grein arguably succeeded in the first of his aims, in producing "unconventional dramas", but only if one can include later English theatre groups who used the Independent Theatre as their exemplar can one concede that Grein attained his second objective, "to foster the undeniable *renaissance* of the drama." These goals were outlined in "The Independent Theatre," *Black and White*, 14 March 1891, p. 167, an article published the day after the I.T.'s first production (of Ibsen's *Ghosts*).

⁷ "Le Theatre-Libre," *Saturday Review*, 9 February 1889, p. 157.

“banish all that is vulgar, low and cynically immoral.”⁸ Thus, even when the Independent Theatre did produce a play from the repertoire of the Théâtre Libre, the more tame or even innocuous it was the better. For instance, Theodore de Banville’s *Baiser*, a one-act verse fairy play which formed part of the third programme of the 1887-1889 season of the Théâtre Libre, was revived by the Independent Theatre as *The Kiss* on 4 March 1893.



André Antoine, French actor and theatre manager
(photo by Charles Reutlinger, 1900).

Much of the organisational influence of the Théâtre Libre involved its success in proving that an avant-garde theatre could achieve high artistic goals by presenting one-act plays and that, in order to do this, the one-act play could attain an unprecedented level of dramatic competence.⁹ Its repertoire of plays, as the *Saturday Review* critic suggested, did not translate well to the morally codified conditions of the English stage and were avoided by theatres there.¹⁰ Its repertoire was a precursor to the modern one-act play

⁸ “A British ‘Theatre Libre’,” *The Weekly Comedy*, 30 November 1889, p. 7.

⁹ In an interview with George Moore, Antoine said, “The aim of the Théâtre Libre is to encourage every writer to write for the stage, and, above all, to write what he feels inclined to write and not what he thinks a manager will produce.” “The Patron of the Great Unacted,” *St. James’s Gazette*, 5 February 1889.

¹⁰ The extreme realism of the characteristic Théâtre Libre plays, beginning with Jean Jullien’s three-act *Sérénade* in the 1888-1889 season, was described by Augustin Filon as “a sort of vicious ingenuousness, the state of the soul of people who never had any moral sense and who live in impurity and injustice, like a fish in water.” Quoted by Harold Hobson, *French Theatre Since 1830*, p. 82.

tradition in England in terms of a characteristic emphasis on an intensive realism (pressured, that is, by a unity and concentration of material as well as an unadulterated presentation of life) and particularly on the efficacy of social determinism (however, the chief successor to Antoine's theatre venture, the Grand Guignol, was to have a more direct influence on the development of the one-act play in England in the first two decades of the twentieth century). Its other principal success, as far as this study is concerned, was in originating, indeed legitimising, the importance and practices of the modern one-act theatre, which were later to take the form of such ventures as the Théâtre d'Application (1888) and the Grand Guignol (1897) in France,¹¹ the Irish Literary Theatre (1899) in Ireland,¹² and the various progressive and Little Theatre groups in England and the United States,¹³ beginning with the Independent Theatre in 1891 but only becoming a widespread phenomenon in the first decade of the next century in England and in the second decade in America.

The successor to the Théâtre Libre in France which had most influence on the English one-act play was the Grand Guignol. Its own distinctive type of drama originated in Oscar Metenier's depiction of Parisian low life, the one-act *En Famille*, which the Théâtre Libre produced in 1887; this was followed by other one-act pieces of a similar cast which together comprise a "genre Théâtre Libre" (Céard's phrase), the concise dramatisation of amoral and vicious lives.

¹¹ Antoine reflected on the influence of his theatre venture and applauded the fact that other experimental theatre groups were being organised along the lines he had developed and that young dramatists were writing for them. See *Le Théâtre Libre*, II (1889), p. 24. This influence did not stop here: for instance, at least seven of the dramatists who were produced during the first season of the Grand Guignol had work produced already at the Théâtre Libre, taking with them the *réalisme rosse* which had evolved into the characteristic dramatic genre at the Théâtre Libre.

¹² See Yeats' admission of debt to the Théâtre Libre in a letter, "The Irish Literary Theatre," published in the *Freeman's Journal*, 21 January 1899, p. 5. He wrote that in establishing an Irish Literary Theatre, the founders hoped "to do for dramatic literature ... what the Théâtre Libre and the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre have done for French dramatic literature." One should note the emphasis Yeats puts on playwriting rather than on stage presentation.

¹³ Harold Hobson, in his study *French Theatre Since 1830* (p. 196), has also called the Théâtre Libre "the cradle of the 'little' theatres which have swept all over the western world."

The Grand Guignol carried on this aspect of Antoine's repertoire, developing in the process new *mise en scène* techniques and a novel performer-audience relationship, both of which were chiefly the result of rethinking the technical emphasis and pacing of the one-act play in terms of greater tension and atmosphere, intensified as they were by elements of violence. This innovation was enhanced by the playwright André de Lorde, the author of ten one-act horror plays between 1903 and 1910. He developed the element of anticipation so that suspense became as integral a part of the plays as the actual presentation of horror. This represented a good way of holding the attention of an audience and giving the piece a certain unity of tone or atmosphere, particularly important in a form in which there is little room for preparing a climax. De Lorde testified to the importance of this: "... the author should strive to create an atmosphere, an ambience, to suggest to the audience, little-by-little, that something is going to happen. Murder, suicide, and torment seen on the stage are less frightening than the anticipation of that torture, suicide or murder."¹⁴

This was the chief lesson Grand Guignol drama had to teach – the power of integral atmospheric effect. However, only in a small number of English one-act plays before 1920 is there a recognisable debt to the Grand Guignol. Christopher Holland's *The Old Women* (Little, 29/6/1921) is unquestionably derived from the methods of the French company, as well as a number of plays of various lengths by José Levy. This can be partly explained by the tastes of the English theatre-going public, and the coming of war just as the influence of Grand Guignol was gaining ground: their 1915 tour to London, for instance, was not a success. The *Stage Year Book* commented, "The London public, naturally enough, were not in much humour for this sort of art, and the audiences attracted were neither very large

¹⁴ Quoted by Frantisek Deak, "Théâtre du Grand Guignol," *Tulane Drama Review*, Vol. 18, no. 1 (1974), p. 36.

nor very numerous.”¹⁵ Louis N. Parker’s adaptation of a short story by W. W. Jacobs, *The Monkey’s Paw* (Haymarket, 6/10/1903), has been described as “the best Grand Guignol thriller ever written”¹⁶ and it has undeniably a certain suggestive horror: Parker even recalled that the first production met “with such success that several ladies were carried out fainting” and suspected that some of the critics were “hysterical” in suggesting that at the close of the play, one could see the ghost of the boy or a coffin through the open door (there was nothing visible) or the churchyard (it is described in the play as being a mile away).¹⁷ But the piece itself is as much the product of the native vogue for the macabre and the supernatural (as in the stories of Charles Whibley and the young Algernon Blackwood) as the typical horror-dramas of the Grand Guignol, which were only to become really influential after their 1908 London season.¹⁸

However, what the tours of the Grand Guignol succeeded in doing was, firstly, to accustom audiences to violent action on the stage, as witness the contrast of the view of the critics in 1903 that *The Monkey’s Paw* was “the most cheerless and morbid thing that we have had on the stage for some time”¹⁹ and “too gruesome and fantastic to meet with general acceptance,”²⁰ to Parker’s observation that the play was soon afterwards seen as rather tame because “Grand Guignol has hardened our sensibilities.”²¹ Secondly, it led to greater significance being given to the unifying elements of suspense and atmosphere. Thirdly, it was to find some imitators, a good example of whom is Lord Dunsany with his *A Night at an Inn*, a

¹⁵ *The Stage Year Book 1916*, p. 6.

¹⁶ William Macqueen-Pope, *Carriages at Eleven*, p. 24.

¹⁷ Louis N. Parker, *Several of My Lives*, p. 205.

¹⁸ Other one-act plays dealing with the supernatural include Henry James’ *The Saloon* (Little, 17/1/1911) and Pinero’s rather unsuccessful comedy *The Widow of Wasdale Head* (Duke of York’s, 14/10/1912).

¹⁹ *The Era*, 10 October, 1903, p. 17.

²⁰ *The Stage*, 8 October, 1903, p. 16.

²¹ *Several of My Lives*, p. 206.

piece based on a one-act drama presented on the company's first London tour as part of the second bill, *Les Trois Messieurs du Havre* (Shaftesbury, 27/3/1908) by Leo Marches and Clément Vautel (see Appendix C). Lastly, the Grand Guignol had a central part in the rise of the full-length crook and detective plays in the 1920s (though the tension which held good in the one-act form often rang false and sensational in full-length treatments).



Edward Plunkett, Lord Dunsany
(undated – Bain News Service)

Many of Dunsany's plays are characterised by a quality of mystery, often coloured by cruelty; likewise, there is the recurrent themes of man's absurdly limited powers (as in the aptly named *The Golden Doom* (Haymarket, 19/11/1912) and *The Laughter of the Gods* (New York, 15/1/1919)) and the inexorability of punishment (as in *The Queen's Enemies* (New York, 14/11/1916). *A Night at an Inn* (Neighborhood Playhouse, New York, 23/4/1916; Palace, 6/11/1917, mat.) is about the greed of men and their impotence when faced with supernatural powers. Four men have robbed the ruby eye of an idol, but already two others have been killed and, by some means, the three priests who pursue them can detect where exactly the ruby is.

Albert. I had the ruby and they were following me...

Bill. Who told them you had the ruby? You didn't show it.

Albert. No ... But they kind of know.

Sniggers. They kind of know, Albert?

Albert. Yes, they know if you've got it ... Ugh! When I think of what they did in Malta to poor old Jim.

Bill. Yes, and to George in Bombay before we started.

Sniggers. Ugh!

These items of information make us expect that the coming of the priests is inevitable and that their vengeance, should the thieves be incapable of defending themselves, will be a hideous death. But the cleverest among them, the rather smug Toff, has considered their predicament and confidently arrived at a way of a ridding themselves of the priests. The others will hide themselves, the Toff will sit in plain view holding the ruby, then the priests will enter, be overpowered by the thieves and killed. "If you're a little slow," he tells them, "you will see enacted the cheerful spectacle that accompanied the demise of Jim."

The three priests come in individually and we see on the stage each get "knived" in the back. That should be the end of the matter. "Aye," Bill comments, "that's all there are. There were only three in the temple. Three priests and their beastly idol." But the atmosphere is still charged with expectations of the supernatural, assisted by such devices as Bill's final allusion. The men, meanwhile, resolve to put the bodies in the cellar and give 'Toffy' a dinner in gratitude. This calm, however, betrays a sense that the thieves are deluded in their feelings of safety. Then the terrified Sniggers comes back into the room.

Sniggers. You shall have it, Toffy, you shall have it yourself, only say Sniggers has no share in this 'ere ruby. Say it, Toffy, say it!

Bill. Want to turn informer, Sniggers?

Sniggers. No, no. Only I don't want the ruby, Toffy ...

The Toff. No more nonsense, Sniggers. We're all together in this. If one hangs, we all hang; but they won't outwit me.

The Toff believes that it is the police who have made Sniggers so agitated and that he can again use his intelligence to escape. But the tension is raised by the anxious indirection of Sniggers' replies.

Sniggers. There's no police.

The Toff. Well, then, what's the matter?

Bill. Out with it. .

Sniggers. I swear to God...

Albert. Well?

The Toff. Don't interrupt.

Sniggers. I swear I saw something *what I didn't like*.

The Toff. What you didn't like?

Sniggers [*in tears*]. Oh, Toffy, Toffy, take it back. Take my share. Say you take it.

The Toff. What has he seen?

The tension is peculiarly grave because their adversary is unnamed and unquantified – he is merely suggested, such is the strained manner of genuine fear and disbelief. The idol appears, puts the ruby into a socket in its forehead so it can see, leaves but stops off-stage and calls each man in turn. The thieves are terrified by the apparition and fears over their fate, and even the once conceited Toff “*gazes stupidly in horror*”; but still they leave as under the will of the idol. Their deaths are in keeping with their defencelessness and inability to understand just what the idol is: they depart one by one in some desperation, to be killed off-stage in a way which is no less effective than the earlier concrete presentations of murder (and which confirms de Lorde's view on the power of suggestion). The fact that we cannot see these later killings preserves the supernatural significance of the idol which the play has built up. “I did

not foresee it” is the last, despairing remark of the Toff when he too is called by the idol.²²

Dunsany’s play has without question elements of brutality, moral detachment and the mysterious, all of which it shares with most Grand Guignol pieces. However, the English stage was not as willing to welcome the frank suggestion of violence as its French counterpart. Grand Guignol, wrote Lynton Hudson, “has never become acclimatized in England. The horrible on the stage is necessarily visual, and if it does not horrify it is ridiculous by its excess of extravagance.”²³ There is a restraint in this play, which is less pronounced but still present in others like Richard Hughes’ *The Sister’s Tragedy* (Amateurs, 24/1/1922; Little, 31/5/1922) and *The Man Barn to be Hanged* (Portmadoc, April 1923; Lyric, Hammersmith, 26/2/1924), which diffuses their creation of a “single, pure emotion of fear,”²⁴ as is the aim of a Grand Guignol play. The horror of *A Night* is undermined by the appearance of the “hideous idol”, the sight of which could never match the thieves’ terror of it; one could very well believe that the arrival of the idol into view would be anti-climactic, if not actually comical. The interest of the play lies in the degree of empathy which is attained as the audience itself takes on the terrified perspective of the characters; if, however, this terror is shown to be exaggerated, or the acting is not credible,²⁵ then the power of the piece is correspondingly lessened.

The Irish Literary Theatre became the Irish National Theatre Society (the I.N.T.S.) on 1 February 1903. This reorganisation gave the enterprise the solidity it needed to attempt a tour abroad, and they visited England in that year and over succeeding years. It might

²² The critic James Agate felt that the essence of Grand Guignol “is that however inexplicable, however ghostly the interference, man shall retain his dignity.” *The Saturday Review*, 4 February 1922, p. 114. This is a very questionable surmise, as one can see from the conclusion of Dunsany’s play.

²³ *The English Stage 1850-1950*, p. 183.

²⁴ Frantisel Déak, “Théâtre du Grand Guignol,” p. 39.

²⁵ Graham Sutton spoke about the necessity of good acting in productions of Grand Guignol pieces, in *Some Contemporary Dramatists*, pp. 193-202.

be argued that the company needed success in the English provinces but most of all in London to consummate and advertise the work it had done in Dublin. An original member of the Irish Players, W. G. Fay, recalled their first incursion into London on 2 May 1903, at the rather modest Queen's Gate Hall in South Kensington.

We had achieved the most signal dramatic success that London had known for many a year ... we found our performances described and discussed by the column in every London daily paper, morning and evening.²⁶

In many ways, the British theatre was to profit from the model of the Irish company, in terms of their example of understated acting and the encouragement of native playwrights working on local themes,²⁷ and the establishment of a philosophy of repertory theatre which insisted, among other things, on the importance of the one-act play. The Irish Literary Theatre was founded after the example of the Théâtre Libre and thus it is not surprising that there was little or no embarrassment about this dependence on a one-act repertoire. In addition, the Irish repertoire represents perhaps the most honoured confirmation in the British Isles that the one-act play is a natural vehicle for an innovative theatrical enterprise in its infancy, as novice playwrights, encouraged by a newly founded local theatre, attempt to put their ideas in dramatic terms. The I.N.T.S. "is part of a national movement," wrote the critic A. B. Walkley on the occasion of their first London visit in May 1903, "it is designed to express the spirit of the race, the 'virtue' of it, in the medium of actual drama."²⁸ In

²⁶ W. G. Fay and Catherine Carswell, *The Fays of the Abbey Theatre*, p. 133. Allowing for some exaggeration, Fay's remarks give an idea of the excellent reception this tour and later tours were accorded.

²⁷ James Cousins recalled that "the Irish drama movement began in the full sense of plays on Irish themes by Irish writers, performed by Irish actors." Letter dated 9 September 1938. Ms.11,000, National Library of Ireland.

²⁸ "The Irish National Theatre," *The Times Literary Supplement*, 8 May 1903, p. 146.

parallel to the emergence of an aesthetic of the modern one-act play, the new Irish theatre began with relatively little native dramatic legacy: it was not lumbered with the necessity of extricating itself from a well-established local theatrical tradition, as the theatre in England and France was for instance.²⁹ This might well help explain why it managed to develop such a substantial and original body of one-act drama.

This poverty in resources compelled ... the organisers to begin at the beginning and gave them all the advantages of so beginning in the possibility for educating audience, players and playwrights.³⁰

The venture itself was unusual in being the creation of writers, rather than, as with the Théâtre Libre and the Moscow Art Theatre, the invention of producers and actors (this emphasis was not lost on the Gaiety Theatre, Manchester, the first of the major modern British repertories in the provinces, which was described by its artistic director as “a dramatist’s theatre”³¹). Dramatic writing, thus, assumed a status which was in its way unique up to then, a state of affairs which meant that a one-act repertoire, for example, could be pursued with some tenacity, aided as these circumstances were by the sponsorship of Annie Horniman. One should not forget that the choice of an avowedly Irish repertoire – based as much on a nationalistic as an artistic impulse – was cemented by the provisions of the patent under which the theatre operated (it was not under the licensing control of the Lord Chamberlain, which is why Shaw’s *The Shewing-Up of Blanco Posnet* could be produced there, unlicensed, in 1909).

²⁹ The stated challenge for the Irish was to initiate a dramatic tradition independently of the English theatre.

³⁰ Thomas H. Dickinson, *The Contemporary Drama of England*, p. 174.

³¹ Ben Iden Payne, quoted by Rex Pogson, *Miss Horniman*, p. 28.



Portrait of the splendid-looking Charles Robert 6th Earl Spencer, Lord Chamberlain from 1905 to 1912 (Althorp: Collection of Earl Spencer). Policing of the theatre was only one of his responsibilities: as Lord Chamberlain, he was the “senior official” of the Royal Household, and as such was chief functionary of the court and generally responsible for organising all court functions.

The theatre was to produce only “plays in the Irish or English language written by Irish writers on Irish subjects, or such dramatic works of foreign authors as would tend to interest the public in the higher works of dramatic.”³² This had the effect, when combined with the limited presentational and financial resources of the enterprise, as well as the inexperience and interests of the playwrights, of forming a body of drama mostly concerned with peasant life³³ or mythological figures,³⁴ both heavily influenced by Maeterlinck, and characteristically in one act. As the reference to the work of foreign authors in the terms of the patent and the influence of Maeterlinck suggest, the venture welcomed the plays of contemporaries from abroad. The cosmopolitan Yeats wrote that to “multiply its chances of creating writers ... [the theatre would have] to perform selections from foreign masterpieces chosen as much for a means of training as for anything else ... the final object ... is to create in this country a

³² Quoted in Robert Hogan and Thomas Kilroy, *Laying the Foundations, 1902-1904*, p. 108.

³³ The peasant plays began with the October 1901 production of Douglas Hyde’s one-act drama *Casadh an tSúgáin* (*The Twisting of a Rope*).

³⁴ See Yeats’ comments on the Abbey Theatre in *The Freeman’s Journal*, 16 October, 1906,

National Theatre after the Continental pattern.”³⁵ This was an orientation which was very soon much imitated in England, in particular among the new repertory theatres (Annie Horniman helped found the first one – which eventually became the Gaiety Theatre, Manchester – in late 1907).



Gaiety Theatre, Manchester: architect's drawing of the planned theatre, 1884 (Arthur Derbyshire, architect).

The Abbey acted somewhat as a precedent for British repertory theatres in the inclusion of one-act plays in bills as serious dramatic works in their own right and as a genuine element in establishing the best repertory system feasible under the circumstances. Even so, however, the custom of presenting one-act plays and even of counting them as actual plays did not go uncriticised.³⁶ The criticism indicates the different levels of respect accorded to a one-act and full-length play-producing theatre, and embodies the attitude of most commentators: that for a theatre to remain presenting mainly one-act plays suggests a cessation of its own artistic development and creative shortcomings among its contributing playwrights. The repertory theatres, however, were often to operate a combined one-

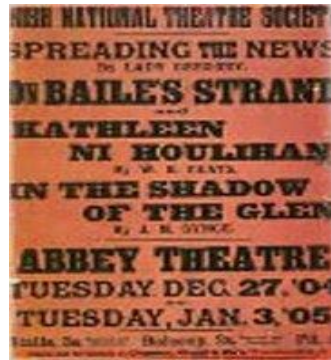
³⁵ Memorandum from W. B. Yeats to Lady Gregory and John Millington Synge, dated 2 December 1906. Microfilm 5380, National Library of Ireland.

³⁶ See, for example, the critique by 'Scrutator', "Private Theatricals in Excelsis," *Sinn Féin*, 27 April 1907, p. 3; and W. J. Lawrence's similar criticism made in the *Stage Year Book* of 1914 (p. 43) that the Abbey had produced ten new plays during the year, of which six were in one act, "a statement of fact subtly indicative of the short-windedness of the rising Irish playwright."

act and full-length play system which helped them avoid this accusation of over-dependence on one-act plays.

The other major lesson of the Irish theatre was to propagate an enthusiasm for local subject matter and idiom, in pursuit of artistic autonomy. The repertory theatres in the provinces of England followed this course, as they attempted to gain independence from the theatrical domination by London's West End. To do this, they set out to foster their own local dramatists, just as the Irish had done, and, as with the Irish experience, these dramatists overwhelmingly initiated their repertory careers with one-act pieces. One indication of the impact of the Irish tours is the remarkable similarity between certain Irish plays and those of English repertory dramatists: in storyline, Harold Brighouse's *The Price of Coal* (Scottish Repertory Theatre, Glasgow, 15/11/1909; Liverpool Playhouse, 28/11/1911) is very close indeed to Synge's *Riders to the Sea* (Dublin, 25/1/1904; Royalty, 26/3/1904, I.N.T.S.), though in the case of Brighouse's play, the son eventually arrives home alive; and Stanley Houghton's *The Dear Departed* (Gaiety, Manchester, 2/11/1908; Coronet, 7/6/1909) is similar to *In the Shadow of the Glen* (Dublin, 8/10/1903; Royalty; 26/3/ 1904, I.N.T.S.). The Abbey's influence even permeated to London, where a higher standard of one-act Cockney play than heretofore was written by Harold Chapin (an American by birth) and Frederick Fenn, among others.³⁷

³⁷ *'Op-O'-Me-Thumb* (Court 13/3/04), by Frederick Fenn and Richard Pryce is, along with other one-act plays like Edward Granville's *'Energy Brown* (Town Hall Chelsea, 20/5/1901; New, 23/6/1903), an early example of the endeavour to put genuine Cockney characters on the stage, beginning a tradition of relatively serious one-act Cockney drama. This developed into better plays like Harold Chapin's *The Dumb and the Blind* (1911) and Gilbert Cannan's *In the Park* (Mary Ward Settlement, 15/ 10/ 1924, Dramatic Art Centre), the latter similar to *'Op 'O Me Thumb* in presenting two characters, Misterobbs and Missisobbs, whose initial attempt to find solace in fantasies turns finally into an acceptance of the grinding reality of a world from which they cannot escape.



A poster for the opening run at the Abbey Theatre from 27 December 1904 to 3 January 1905.

The conditions prevailing by the closing two decades of the nineteenth century were receptive to this influence, as well as to independent native work in this field.

For the first time for generations popular writing and literature shared common territory and often a common content. Urban working-class life suddenly existed in literature in its own right, as it did not, for instance, even in Dickens's novels.³⁸

The Irish National Theatre was largely responsible for this general vogue for one-act dialect play (although its origins in England are also to be found in local pageants of the turn of the century) which had definite local elements: its ground-breaking work in this field played a central role in having local pre- occupations, characters and idiom recognised as worthwhile elements of drama, whether it be in one-act or full-length form.³⁹

The ideas of the *commedia dell' arte* had won a large following by the first decade of the twentieth century and were the inspiration of such fantasies as J. M. Barrie's *Pantaloon* (Duke of York's, 5/4/1905) and Oliphant Down's *The Maker of Dreams* (Court,

³⁸ Walter Allen, *The Short Story in English*, p. 22.

³⁹ Examples of full-length plays which are the product of this interest in dialect drama are Graham Moffat's 'Scottish comedy' *Bounty Pulls the Strings* (Playhouse, 4/7/1911) and Eden Phillpott's *The Farmer's Wife* (Repertory, Birmingham, 11/11/1916).

25/10/1910), and such poetical pieces as John Drinkwater's *The Only Legend: A Masque of the Scarlet Pierrot* (Cadbury Works Summer Party, Bourneville, Birmingham, 10/7/1913). As a parallel to this, Noh plays were published in 1913, thirteen years after the first visit of Sada Yacco's Japanese company to London, with a second series following in 1916. While these had little influence on one-act plays in prose, they had an important effect on one-act verse drama, by Yeats, John Masefield and Gordon Bottomley, among others.

There were other tours by foreign companies but none was to have the effect on native British playwriting as those of the Irish Players. In February 1908, the Sicilian Players were to perform a well-received repertoire of plays at the Shaftesbury Theatre for the first time, including a couple of one-act plays, to be followed the following month by the first London season of the Grand Guignol de Paris company at the same venue. In June and July of the same year, the companies of Constant-Benoît Coquelin and Séverin-Mars presented bills, mostly or entirely composed of one-act plays, at His Majesty's and the Royalty theatres respectively (this, however, had been Coquelin's custom for a number of years). It is interesting to note that one-act plays of a number of the more important European dramatists were the first of their works seen on the English professional stage. The first high-profile production of Strindberg was of his one-act drama, *The Stronger*, at His Majesty's for two matinées on 9 and 10 December 1909.⁴⁰

Chekhov's one-act vaudeville *The Bear* (Kingsway, 13/5/1911) was the first of the Russian dramatist's plays seen in performance in England, preceding the production of *The Cherry Orchard* at the Aldwych by just over a fortnight. The wisdom of introducing a difficult foreign playwright through his one-act work is borne out by the favourable reception won by the production of *The*

⁴⁰ In London, this was followed by the three-act *The Father* (Rehearsal, 23/7/1911), the Stage Society production of *Creditors* (Prince's 10/3/1912, mat.), and *The Sirocco* (Vaudeville, 28/8/1913), an adaptation of *Sumun*.

Bear and the bafflement expressed at the subtleties of the longer work. The one-act plays of Arthur Schnitzler first appeared in England at the Court under the Vedrenne-Barker management, in the form of Christopher Home's adaptation of *In the Hospital*, on 28 February 1905. *The Farewell Supper* and *Literature*, which were presented by the New Stage Club at the Bijou Theatre, Bayswater, on 11 March, anticipated the celebrated productions of Harley Granville Barker's adaptations of five of Schnitzler's *Anatol* one-act plays by three years.⁴¹

The years from 1903 (the year of the first visit to England by the I.N.T.S.) to the close of the First World War mark an important period for the production of one-act plays by foreign companies; and one may, with some justification, date the coming of age of the modern one-act play in England in general from about this period. The new repertory theatres, the variety theatre, and play-producing societies were all engaged in staging superior one-act plays by contemporary authors, both native and foreign. A great many play-producing groups were set up at about this time, in large part assured by the success of these visiting companies that the presentation of one-act plays could be a reputable exercise. Therefore, with the founding of the repertory theatres and the rise of an advanced amateur and part-time professional play-producing movement, combined with the recent trend among several of the larger music halls to produce short drama, a higher standard of one-act play could be written which had a good chance of being produced (even, it must be said, in the more cautious commercial theatre).

⁴¹ The two plays were translated by Edith A. Browne and Alix Grein.

Native Theatre

The three most important theatrical organisations in the advancement of drama set up in the period between 1890 and 1907 – the Independent Theatre, the Stage Society and the Vedrenne-Barker management of the Court Theatre (1904-1907) – are significant to the rise of the modern one-act play in England largely through the influence they had in extending the subject-matter of English drama, encouraging the writing of plays by native dramatists, producing some advanced one-act drama, and acting as a model for the re-organisation of the theatre. The Independent Theatre, for example, managed to present only one new play by a British dramatist other than Shaw's *Widower's Houses*, Arthur Symonds' *The Minister's Call* (4/3/1892), a one-act drama. Like the Stage Society, however, it presented a number of one-act plays by foreign playwrights; the Stage Society mounted the first English productions of Strindberg's *Creditors* (Prince's 10/3/12, mat.) and Wedekind's *The Tenor* (Imperial 9/3/1907), as well as Maeterlinck's *Interior* (translated by William Archer) and *Death of Tintagiles* (translated by Alfred Sutro) (Globe 29/4/ 1900). The Vedrenne-Barker partnership was more willing to produce one-act plays, in pursuit of a repertory turnover of plays, and more successful in encouraging the composition of plays by British writers (leaving aside Shaw's massive contribution), and most of these again were one-act pieces. In the period from 18 October 1904 to 29 June 1907, there was one triple bill and four double bills, eleven one-act plays out of a total of thirty-two plays by seventeen authors.

This was to prove an important lesson for the new repertory theatres over the coming years, since this practice of combining a one-act with a full-length play helped realise the objective of Granville Barker to create the best repertory system possible under English theatrical conditions. It anticipated as well the tendency

among the repertory theatre dramatists to begin with one-act contributions to the repertoire. The Court system also influenced the growth of matinées presenting bills of advanced full-length and one-act plays,⁴² such as Beerbohm Tree's 'Afternoon Theatre' at His Majesty's (from December 1908),⁴³ which were felt to be too difficult for the average (evening) theatre-goer. And, of course, it had a bearing on the repertoire of some of the London theatres, in particular Lena Ashwell's Kingsway Theatre and Gertrude Kingston's Little Theatre, where a minor tradition of one-act play-production was established; and on the modern phenomenon of the advanced play-producing society.



Lena Ashwell, British actress and manager (J. Beagles, 1905/6).

The London play-producing societies largely begin with J. T. Grein's Independent Theatre in 1891. There were numerous reasons for their foundation: several (such as the Play Actors and the Oncomers' Society⁴⁴) wished to advance the cause of drama; a number (for example, the Repertory Players) intended to present plays so as to exhibit the acting abilities of their members and convince West End managements to take on the play complete with cast (for the reason that one-act plays would be far less likely to gain attention, this group avoided the short play-form); and others still had political (the

⁴² For an account for the vogue in matinée presentations, see the *Tribune*, 26 November 1907, p. 8.

⁴³ Tree's 'Afternoon Theatre' imitated the Court so far as to have matinées on Tuesdays and Fridays, as had been the case at the Court.

⁴⁴ Seven out of eleven of the plays produced by the short-lived (1911-14) Oncomers' Society in 1911, for instance, were one-act pieces.

Actresses' Franchise League and the Pioneer Players), archeological (the Morality Play Society and the Phoenix) or other objectives. These societies represent collectively an important body in the history of the one-act play since their cultivation of it in the capital city kept a higher standard of one-act play in the public eye, gave the plays themselves a professional mounting, and encouraged the writing of new work (such as the one-act plays of Harold Chapin and those of a number of women dramatists) which would meet their tastes and purposes. The main advantage private theatrical societies had concerning experimentation in drama was that no stage-play licence was required from the Lord Chamberlain. This was so because the Lord Chamberlain, according to the provisions of the Theatre Act of 1843, only had jurisdiction over stage-plays intended to be "acted for hire", that is where an admission fee was levied directly or indirectly, where the purchase of certain goods was a prerequisite for admission, or where excisable intoxicants were sold.⁴⁵ Though play-producing societies often did exact a fee indirectly, through subscriptions, the Lord Chamberlain did not in practice require their plays to be licensed. While this did not lead to an inordinately radical theatre until the flirtation with expressionism and other modes at the Gate theatre and elsewhere from the 1920s onwards, it did consolidate the principle of producing what was for its time advanced drama.

A good example of one of these play-producing societies is the Play Actors' Society, which was in existence between 1907 and 1914 and then again in the 1920s. It was formed in June 1907 with three objectives: to put on the plays of Shakespeare and other verse drama without scenery or special costume, to produce original work by English authors, and to present plays by foreign authors. Only professional actors could become active members. Out of a total of

⁴⁵ The precedent for this was established in the 1862 case, *Fredericks v. Payne*, 1H&C/585, 32 L.J.M.C.14.

thirty-nine plays submitted to the council of the Play Actors in its first year, nine were produced, and of these five were one-act plays. This represents another instance of the call for drama by native writers being met with one-act plays. Up to the beginning of hostilities (and the cessation of society activities) in 1914, the Play Actors produced more new plays in one-act than in full-length form (11 out of 15 in 1910. 3 out of 8 in 1913, 5 out of 9 in 1914). Indeed, during the same time, the society, along with the Actresses' Franchise League and the Pioneer Players, became perhaps the principal purveyor in the capital of bills made up exclusively of one-act plays. These were chiefly mounted at the Royal Court Theatre, recently vacated by the Vedrenne-Barker company and now under J. H. Leigh's proprietorship – the main venue in London at the time, along with the Rehearsal, Little and Kingsway Theatres, for professionally mounted (occasional) one-act drama. Other companies at the Court presented a double bill on 2 June 1908, a matinée of four one-acters on 7 July and another double bill on 2 November before the Play Actors presented its first bill of four new one-act plays there on 8 November. The society also presents a good example of members writing one-act drama for their group – in this case a stage-manager, Harold Chapin, and an actor-manager, Fewlass Llewellyn – that is reminiscent of the Abbey directors, and predates Basil Dean at the Liverpool Repertory and John Drinkwater of the Birmingham Repertory (among others), and other play-producing societies, whether made up of professionals or amateurs, such as F. Sladen-Smith of the Unnamed Society in Manchester.

The achievement of the Play Actors lies in its success in encouraging the composition of new plays (and, almost as worthy, in performing substantial plays which had not yet been produced). These not alone included one-act pieces but also full-length plays of some merit, such as Elizabeth Baker's *Chains* (Court 18/4/ 1909). The range of subjects treated in the one-act plays presented is also

very impressive: the life of the poor is looked at in Harold Chapin's *The Dumb and the Blind* (Court 19/5/1912) and *It's the Poor that Helps the Poor* (Court 18/5/1913); the women's question in *The Apple* (Court, 14/3/1909) by Inez Bensusan, secretary of the Actresses' Franchise League (established in 1908) and Henry Arncliffe Sennett's *Pillars of the State* (18/5/1913), as well as the revival of *How the Vote was Won*, by Cicely Hamilton and Chris St. John (Court 9/5/1909; originally produced, Royalty 13/4/1909, A.F.L.); the contemporary voting system in *Secrecy of the Ballot* (Court 18/12/1910), a one-act 'polemic' by Elfriden and Clarence Derwent, as well as comediettas and other one-act trifles. No other society of this time presented such a wide spectrum of issues in either one-act or full-length form over such a long period, except the Stage Society and the more politically motivated Pioneer Players (established in 1911). In addition, it is interesting to note that quite a few of the one-act plays were mounted often largely with the same casts by commercial theatres, in the same fashion that Charles Frohman brought *Chains* to the Duke of York's Theatre in mid-May 1910.

The society, however, like other groups such as the Oncomers and the English Play Society, mounted one-act pieces which would not be unduly amiss on the bill of a commercial theatre, even those dramas which presented some degree of social criticism (with the probable exceptions of the pieces dealing with a woman's place in the political process). The conventional realistic and formal treatment were wholly acceptable to most theatre-goers; however, it is fair to say that the one-act repertoire of the Play Actors represents as a whole, along with those of the repertory theatres and the Pioneer Players, some of the best short drama written during this time.

Conclusions

The technical features of the English realist one-act play of the opening two decades of the last century were to a large extent derived from the one-act farce of the nineteenth century. This relationship can be identified in the various features they both share: the overall formal restraint; the structural and narrative unity obtained by concentrating on one story element or by constructing some sort of unified harmony between the various elements of a complex story; the climactic presentation of the dramatic story and, with it, the methods of retrospective suggestion and the theme of determinism; the simplification of characterisation and atmosphere in the interests of dramatic economy; the use of irony and in particular ironic reversal. However, this evolutionary connection with farce was rather ignored, when a more serious version of the one-act play was receiving artistic and critical attention, in the interests of hiding what was held to be a background largely unworthy of remembrance.

The appearance of one-act plays on bills was both a perpetuation of the old custom of multi-item bills and a way of presenting the one-act work, whether this was innovative or whatever, of new and established dramatists alike. One has only to think of the repertory theatres to arrive at this conclusion. During the first two decades of this century, the one-act play had a hand in the rise of such phenomena as self-contained epilogues to full length plays (which were effectively separable one-act pieces), relatively concentrated full-length plays (or even 'tabloid' plays, which the variety theatre produced⁴⁶), and in the propagation of the benefits for all types of drama of a greater structural and narratory unity and economy. Furthermore, many one-act plays assisted in the introduction of new content and styles into English drama. For

⁴⁶ See the comments of E.M. Samson in the *Stage Year Book 1914*, p. 50.

example, the I.N.T.S. accelerated the burgeoning interest in England in plays involving local situations and idiom, by demonstrating that the one-act form was a suitable dramatic vehicle of local expression. This encouraged the writing of dialect drama in the provinces and Cockney drama in London in one act and in this way assisted in curtailing the grip of the West End on the national drama. To give further examples: the one-act dramas of the Grand Guignol led directly to the crook plays of the 1920s; and the element of fantasy in a number of one-act plays dealing with and written during the First World War was adopted when the same subject was given full-length treatment in the decade following the war.

The one-act play was presented on the bills of visiting companies from abroad, such as the Théâtre Libre, the Irish Players and the Grand Guignol, which managed to secure some notice and, in the case of the last in particular, some degree of notoriety, largely on the strength of their one-act repertoire. Along with the Court seasons from 1904 to 1907, these foreign companies were to have a pivotal influence on the setting up of play-producing societies in London and elsewhere, and repertory theatres in the provinces. These native theatre ventures too followed the current thinking about ways of advancing drama, in encouraging local playwrights and in regularly mounting one-act plays by these novices and others; and the more novel presentations were frequently in this form.

Part Two: Short Plays and the Repertory Theatre

Introduction

The modern repertory theatre in Britain, as a successful artistic venture, was largely a provincial phenomenon. With the exception of the Court seasons from 1904 to 1907, the theatrical enterprises in London which approximated to a repertory system (such as F. R. Benson's 1899-1900 season at the Lyceum and Charles Frohman's 1912 season of six one-act⁴⁷ and four full-length plays at the Duke of York's) were short-lived experiments. There were a number of conditions present in the provinces which facilitated the rise of a repertory movement there,⁴⁸ the two most important of which were the relatively low expenses involved in mounting productions outside London and the strong motivation to foster an autonomous theatrical tradition by severing links with the West End and establishing a local corps of actors and dramatists.⁴⁹

In the 1907 *Stage Year Book*, E. A. Baughan commented on the eve of the beginnings of the repertory theatre movement in the provinces, '... one desires to see producing centres other than the West End – towns-theatres, stock companies under modern conditions, and other variants of a full supply, from which the London play-market would soon begin to benefit.'⁵⁰ The first definite sign of a resurgence of provincial drama was the convening of local pageants

⁴⁷ These were *Old Friends*, *The Twelve Pound Look* and *Rosalind* by J. M. Barrie, *The Sentimentalists* by Arnold Bennett, Pinero's *The Widow of Wasdale Head* and Shaw's *Overruled*.

⁴⁸ Thomas H. Dickinson outlined these conditions in *The Contemporary Drama of England*, p. 162.

⁴⁹ This dependence on the London theatres was criticised in the late nineteenth century. See, for example, "A Dramatic School," *The Theatre*, February 1882, pp. 73-76, and the *Saturday Review*, 24 November 1888, p. 615.

⁵⁰ *The Stage Year Book 1907*, p. 25. See also Shaw's similar comments made in the *Saturday Review*, 21 March, 1896, p. 300-302. Shaw speculated that "commercialism is more likely to die of dramatic art" than vice versa (p. 302).

at the turn of the century, by men such as Louis N. Parker.⁵¹ The one-act play was in part a response to this set of circumstances, since it was both cheap to mount and, initially at least, the chief vehicle of dramatists for the expression of local subject-matter. Furthermore, the question of why the repertory theatres (in Manchester, Glasgow, Liverpool and Birmingham) relied so heavily on the one-act play can be explained in a number of ways.



Liverpool Repertory Theatre.

Obviously, the new theatres wished to discover the best arrangement possible to create some sort of repertory system, and the double bill of a one-act and full-length play in a week or two week run presented an excellent way of establishing a semblance of true repertory within very limited constraints. Secondly, and specifically in the case of the rather misleadingly labeled 'Manchester School of dramatists'⁵² at the Gaiety Theatre, these local dramatists lacked experience in full-length play-writing and, as it turned out, typically responded in the beginning to the call for new plays with one-act submissions.

⁵¹ See William Archer, *The Old Drama and the New*, pp. 368-369.

⁵² In an obituary to Harold Brighouse, the anonymous writer notes that "It is more accurate to speak of the 'Manchester drama' rather than of a Manchester school of dramatists." From a newspaper cutting of 26 July 1958, in the Theatre Museum.

The repertory theatres, then, comprised the chief body of quality one-act play production outside London during the period from 1907 to the close of the 1910s. Indeed, the interdependence between the one-act play and the repertory theatres was felt to be so great that Frank Vernon commented in 1924 that

The rise and fall of the one-act play synchronises with the rise and fall of the Repertory Theatres, which, if one-act plays were all, were easily the cocks of the whole dramatic walk.⁵³

The first of the modern repertory theatres in England, and arguably the most important one in terms of the quality and number of original realist one-act plays produced there, was the Gaiety Theatre, Manchester. Both of the people most closely involved in its founding had only recently been helping to run the Abbey Theatre (itself effectively the first modern repertory theatre in the United Kingdom) in Dublin. A.E.F. (Annie) Horniman and Ben Iden Payne, the latter at one time a managing director of the Abbey and then artistic director of the Gaiety, were heavily influenced by their experiences at the Abbey, and put into practice many of the lessons they had learned there⁵⁴ (although only Alfred Wareing's Scottish National Repertory Theatre approximated to the avowed nationalism of the Irish⁵⁵) as well as the lessons of the Vedrenne-Barker seasons at the Court between 1904 and 1907. They were accordingly to bring with them an acceptance, indeed a disposition which amounted to a penchant, for the production of one-act plays. The following account by W. G. Fay describes the situation they had left behind in Dublin.

⁵³ Frank Vernon, *Twentieth Century Theatre*, p. 87.

⁵⁴ "As an inspiration to the repertory cause in Britain," wrote George Rowell, "the Abbey, Dublin, rated next to the Court under Barker and Vedrenne." *The Repertory Movement*, p. 36.

⁵⁵ The principle behind Glasgow's repertoire of plays was, "To encourage the initiation and development of a purely Scottish drama ... national in character written by Scottish men and women of letters." *Daily Chronicle*, 13 September, 1912, in Horniman Scrapbooks. The one-act historical play *Campbell of Kilmohr* (Royalty, Glasgow, 23/3/1914) by I. A. Ferguson, is probably the best play written for the S.N.R.T.

As we never put on any play that took a full evening to perform, it was possible to have always on hand a programme of short plays, which demanded a minimum of rehearsal and gave us a reasonable chance of replacing actors who moved on to other things or left town.⁵⁶

Horniman, who subsidised both the Abbey and the Gaiety ventures (the former up to November 1910), was determined to repeat the success of the Irish theatre in encouraging the writing of a genuinely innovative and substantial body of plays (one might in addition speculate that the energy behind her challenge to English dramatists was partly the result of her grievance at the treatment accorded to her by certain of the Abbey actors and directors⁵⁷). She wrote:

I want to find the English dramatists who will write better than the Irish. We ought to be ashamed of ourselves. If Lancashire playwrights will send their plays to me I shall pledge myself to read them through. Let them not write as one dramatist does, about countesses and duchesses and society existing in imagination, but about their friends and enemies – about real life.⁵⁸

The Gaiety had the good fortune, just as the later Birmingham Repertory Theatre had, to have a wealthy patron sponsor the establishment of an imaginative pool of plays:⁵⁹ this arrangement

⁵⁶ W. G. Fay and Catherine Carswell, *The Fays of the Abbey Theatre*, p. 71.

⁵⁷ This sense of grievance is clear from her letter to W. B. Yeats, one of the Abbey directors, of 16 July 1906, expressing a loss of “all confidence” in the company. Ms. 10,952, National Library of Ireland. Conversely, that there were grave misgivings about the consequences of Horniman’s interference in the company is shown in a memorandum written by J. M. Synge, another director, in 1906. Microfilm 5380, National Library of Ireland.

⁵⁸ Quoted in Rex Pogson, *Miss Horniman and the Gaiety Theatre*, pp. 36-37. The Gaiety was by no means unusual in this goal of encouraging local playwriting talent; see, for instance, the comments of ‘C. R.’ in the *Glasgow Herald*, 29 June 1907. After the start of the trial season at the Midland Hotel in 1907, Horniman’s business manager Edwin T. Heys wrote at the end of August announcing the main features of the repertory theatre Horniman was funding. The first of these was: “A Repertory Theatre with regular changes of programme no matter how successful the play ... thoroughly catholic... with an especially widely open door to present-day British writers ...” HO 16/17, Manchester Public Library. However, Horniman later denied that she particularly favoured local writers; see the *Manchester Dispatch*, 26 January 1914 (in Horniman Scrapbooks).

⁵⁹ This caused some resentment among the populations of both cities and led Granville Barker to remark: “Miss Horniman’s Theatre is provided for, rather than by, the citizens” (*The Theatre: The Next Phase*, 1910, p. 631). Barry Jackson, owner of the Birmingham

gave Horniman a tight control over the selection of plays⁶⁰ but she seems to have been scrupulous in reading as many as thirty to forty submissions a week.⁶¹ Horniman herself desired variety in her programmes,⁶² and she and Payne shaped these according to three principles: that the plays selected to be produced would be of a higher standard than was the custom in the provinces, that they had a popular appeal, and that, if possible, they contained a local interest. The dramatist Harold Brighouse recalled in 1920 what had been the effect on him and others of the founding of a repertory theatre in Manchester. "Stimulated by Miss Horniman's catholic repertoire, local authors sought to express in drama local characteristics."⁶³

The one-act plays produced at the Gaiety helped to fulfill this objective of variety, just as they met the preference for realism (in contrast to Barry Jackson's own preference at the Birmingham Repertory Theatre for verse drama), local colour and a high quality. There was one other reason why the Gaiety concentrated on drama written by local playwrights. The management found it difficult to arrange the production rights to London successes, the London theatres fearing that a successful run by a provincial theatre would pre-empt a tour of the provinces by their own companies. While this did not generally concern one-act plays from London, the lack of co-operation had a hand in fostering local talent.⁶⁴ Hence, both intention and circumstances coincided to bring about a distinctive drama.

Repertory Theatre, was conscious of a similar attitude among the local citizenry to his theatrical venture; see his foreword to *The Birmingham Repertory Theatre* by Thomas C. Kemp, p. vii.

⁶⁰ See Annie Horniman, *A Talk about the Drama*, p. 87. This was a life-long commitment to high standards; see her letter to Joseph Holloway, dated 28 September 1904, telling of her genuine interest in "dramatic art." Ms. 13,267, National Library of Ireland.

⁶¹ This scrupulousness is well documented: see the *Daily Mail*, 18 February 1914 (in Horniman Scrapbooks); *A Talk about the Drama*, p. 86; and Pogson, *Miss Horniman*, pp. 37-38.

⁶² See *A Talk about the Drama*, p. 86.

⁶³ Preface to *Three Lancashire Plays*, p. 12.

⁶⁴ See Shaw's explanation of why he was withholding the rights to his plays from the Gaiety, in a letter of 16 November 1907 to Payne, in "Some Unpublished Letters of George Bernard Shaw," edited by Julian Park. He felt that the acting standards of the company at that time were just not good enough.

Indeed, such was the interest (or “local patriotism” to use Laurence Housman’s phrase⁶⁵) of many members of the public and the Manchester press in the venture that the *Manchester Guardian* critic Allan Monkhouse posed the rhetorical call-to-arms, before the repertory theatre had in any way been properly established, “whether we may not even develop our own school of dramatists.”⁶⁶

The play which initiated the Gaiety’s autonomy as a centre of local playwriting was Monkhouse’s one-act “tragedy”, *Reaping the Whirlwind* (28/9/1908), produced a year after the repertory experiment began in Manchester. Monkhouse was of local stock, as were the two best one-act playwrights of the Gaiety Theatre, Stanley Houghton and Harold Brighouse, who quickly followed Monkhouse in commencing their repertory careers with one-act dramas: with *The Dear Departed* (2/11/1908) and *The Doorway* (10/4/1909) respectively.⁶⁷

The first year of production (September 1907 to August 1908), in Manchester and on tour, saw the Gaiety firmly establish itself as a theatre of week-long runs of one-act as well as full-length drama, developing the old-fashioned method of double bills and (occasionally) bills of one-acters to implement the new repertory system. The importance of the one-act play in these early years of artistic probing and financial restraints is self-evident. The inclusion of a one-act item on an evening bill was an adaptation to the prevailing conditions, since it served as a way of achieving a short-run system while adapting to “the incorrigible laziness of the British playgoer”, who was incapable of “registering the fact of more than

⁶⁵ “The Conditions of the Modern Drama,” *Stage Year Book 1913*, p. 19.

⁶⁶ *Manchester Guardian*, 25 July 1907, quoted by Pogson, *Miss Horniman*, p. 26.

⁶⁷ As Lynton Hudson has recorded, “In the provincial repertory theatre the would-be playwright had a chance to make a beginning with a one-act play and thus find out what he could do before attempting something larger” (*English Stage 1850-1950*, pp. 154-155.) Graham Sutton also came to the same conclusion: “The one-act, one-week play gave the tyros their opportunity” (*Contemporary Dramatists*, p. 135).

one play being done in a single theatre during one week.”⁶⁸ Another reason for the use of one-act plays was the very limited time for rehearsals for a company which only numbered twenty-three just before the war;⁶⁹ for instance, a revival of Barker’s four-act *The Voyage Inheritance* was rehearsed over a mere ten days, compared to the six weeks at the Court Theatre that the Vedrenne-Barker company spent rehearsing it in October and November 1905. Indeed, the relative ease and lack of cost in giving one-act plays worked in favour of the aim of adequate preparation (one of Payne’s central tenets), and brought a flexibility of casting by which a hierarchical structure of players could be avoided.

During the second season (September 1908 to May 1909), the Gaiety produced eight one-act plays, of which seven were receiving their first presentation; by way of contrast, twenty-three full-length plays were produced during the same period and eighteen of these were new. However, the number of one-act plays had increased to sixteen by the third season, of which six were new; over the same time, there were eleven new and eight revived full-length plays. The larger number of one-act plays can be explained in this way. By the end of the second season, it was realised that, with the Manchester theatre-going public accustomed to seeing plays on certain nights of the week, it would take a larger company than the Gaiety could afford to realise a true repertory system. Consequently, as the next best way of varying the programme as often as possible and mounting the submissions of short drama sent in by novice dramatists whom the Gaiety wished to encourage, the theatre now consistently employed the expedient of multi-item bills (even triple bills of one-act pieces, beginning in October 1908 and presented periodically afterwards). In addition, the Gaiety would sometimes change the opening (one-act) offering more than once in the course

⁶⁸ Cecil Chisholm, *Repertory Theatre*, p. 16. See also the examination of the phenomenon of “weekly repertories” in the 1910s, in the *Stage Year Book 1916*, pp. 11-12.

⁶⁹ This figure is given by H. K. Moderwell in *The Theatre of Today*, pp. 308-309.

of a week, as exemplified by the substitution of Houghton's *The Dear Departed* by McEvoy's *Gentlemen of the Road* to accompany John Galsworthy's full-length *Strife* (which had been a great critical and popular success) in November 1919. Most of the repertory theatres would quite often pair a new or revived full-length play with a new one-act play, for instance, thus ensuring the attainment of novelty and guarding themselves against disappointing their audience with a bill which might otherwise be too short, fragmented (as in a triple bill of one-acters) or experimental.

What impresses one on looking at the repertory one-act plays is, first of all, their comparatively advanced realism of situation and characterisation,⁷⁰ and the genuineness of the localised dialogue in many of them, such as in Brighthouse's *Lonesome-Like* (Royalty, Glasgow, 6/2/1911) and *The Price of Coal*, the latter converted from its original Lancashire dialect to that of Lanarkshire for its first production by the Scottish Repertory Theatre in Glasgow on 15 November 1909. Brighthouse recalled that among many of the Lancashire pieces, but "mostly one-act plays, there was never the least chance of their emerging from Lancashire owing to the fact that many were written deliberately in dialect."⁷¹ These dialect plays, he quickly adds, comprised only a minority of the Gaiety repertoire. Secondly, the range of subject and tone is very broad, from the bitterness of family feuding in Houghton's *The Master of the House* (Gaiety, Manchester, 26/9/1910) and the conventionally treated marital tensions in Monkhouse's *Reaping the Whirlwind*, to the lower-class comedy of McEvoy's *Gentlemen of the Road* (Gaiety, Manchester, 5/10/1908) and the farce of Houghton's *Fancy Free* (Gaiety, Manchester, 10/11/1911). Thirdly, though occasionally one comes across a piece in which a subject has been given a rather conventional treatment reminiscent of contemporary curtain-raisers

⁷⁰ See the criticism of this made in the *Porcupine*, *Special Supplement*, 21 March 1914.

⁷¹ Preface to *Three Lancashire Plays*, p. 13.

of the West End theatre (as in several of Monkhouse's plays), the one-act pieces of repertory dramatists are generally less superficially mannered than their London equivalents, being neither of the drawing-room type nor unduly didactic or experimental.⁷² Their theme, said one critic, concerned "the repression of the individual by the conventions of a narrow-minded Puritanism ... a rebellion against the doctrines of submission to work and duty and of the worship of material success."⁷³

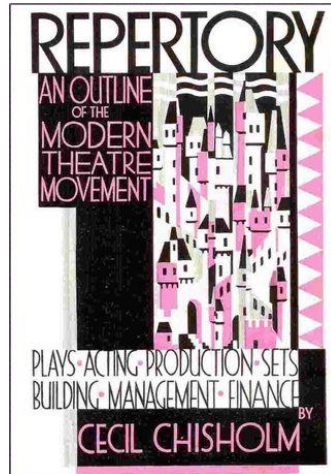
The special formal character of the one-act play accommodated these pre-occupations, since they involved a genuinely felt, determinist and combative story-line related in a climactic way. The first artistic director of the Gaiety, Ben Iden Payne, the architect with Miss Horniman of the part full-length, part one-act repertory system, resigned in October 1911,⁷⁴ to be replaced by a veteran of the Vedrenne Barker Court seasons, Lewis Casson, who was then succeeded in October 1913 by Douglas Gordon. These three men, though they had different priorities in their selection of the Gaiety's repertoire, managed to maintain a high level of one-act production, in contrast to the policies practised at Birmingham and particularly at Liverpool of reducing the presence of one-act drama on bills, as a matter of financial necessity, audience demands and the view that full-length play production reflected a theatrical maturity. However, the quality of one-act drama at the Gaiety after Payne's departure was arguably not generally as good as during the seasons from 1908 to 1911. Brighouse and Monkhouse were writing full-length plays more and more, and often for other theatres, while Houghton ended his short life writing

⁷² Grace Wyndham Goldie explains the middle course taken by repertory theatres of this time in their selection of plays, in *The Liverpool Repertory Theatre*, p. 14.

⁷³ Lynton Hudson, *The Twentieth Century Drama*, pp. 46-47.

⁷⁴ Rex Pogson had this to say of Payne's years at the Gaiety: "During the four years of Payne's connection with it the Gaiety more closely approximated to the ideal repertory than any other venture in England has done" (*Miss Horniman*, p. 111). This opinion rather ignores the repertory organisation instituted at other theatres, such as at the Liverpool Repertory Theatre during its commonwealth period between 1914 and 1916, but it bears testimony to Payne's impact on the early work of the Gaiety.

conventional curtain-raisers for Arthur Bouchier at the Garrick Theatre in the West End. Their loss as contributors of one-act plays to the Gaiety was partly responsible for the poorer standard of most one-act plays presented there after 1911.



Major studies of the serious work undertaken by the repertory theatres were published from an early date: a good example is Cecil Chisholm's book *Repertory: An Outline of the Modern Theatre Movement* (London, 1934).

On the other hand, the Gaiety seasons at various places in England but most influentially at the Coronet Theatre in London testified both to the possibility of an operable repertory system built on a combined full-length/one-act repertoire, and to the adequacy of the one-act form as a vehicle of local expression. In this, it was reminiscent of the Abbey tours, though unlike the Abbey, there were no grounds for calling the Gaiety a one-act playhouse. During the first of six London seasons (7 to 26 June 1909), the Gaiety presented four one-act plays and seven full-length plays in the course of three weeks.⁷⁵

There were also tours to other parts of England (during which it helped lay the seeds for the appearance of other full- and part-time repertory theatre ventures, as well as a more sophisticated amateur theatre), Canada and the United States, where it had an effect on

⁷⁵ See Pogson, *Miss Horniman*, pp. 206-209.

the emergence of the Little theatre movement.⁷⁶ Furthermore, Miss Horniman had no objection to allowing other theatre companies to perform the plays she might otherwise have kept solely for her company, though it was not the customary theatrical practice to do so. This enabled the other repertory theatres, for example, to use one-act plays originally performed on the Gaiety stage on their bills and even to mount the first productions of one-act pieces by playwrights initially associated with the Gaiety, such as Monkhouse's light comedy *The Grand Cham's Diamond* (Rep., Birmingham 21/9/1918). London theatres also produced one-act plays originally presented at Manchester (and, later, at the other repertory theatres), such as Brighouse's drama in Lancashire dialect, *The Price of Coal*, at the Playhouse (28/11/1911) and Houghton's comedy of lower middle-class avarice, *The Dear Departed*, at the Criterion (28/5/1913, for 288 performances). The decisive breakthrough for repertory theatre drama in the capital had come with the production of Houghton's full-length *Hindle Wakes* at the Playhouse and later the Court, for 108 performances from 16 July 1912. This production scored great critical and popular success, and opened the way for the London presentation of one-act as well as full-length plays from the various provincial repertory theatres. This acceptance was relatively tenuous, since what the repertory theatres had done was to "make a virtue of provincialism",⁷⁷ with its distinctive elements of local dialect and subject-matter. But the West End rapidly accommodated the new provincial drama and learned from it.⁷⁸

The adoption of the one-act play by the repertory theatres was in a way a continuity of the tradition in the commercial theatre of curtain-raisers and triple bills, only here the preliminary piece was typically of a higher and often more serious character. The high

⁷⁶ Payne himself was to become directly involved in the development of "Little" theatres in Chicago and elsewhere after emigrating to the U.S. in 1913.

⁷⁷ Ashley Dukes, "The Repertory Theatre," pp. 416-417.

⁷⁸ Grace Goldie discusses this influence in *The Liverpool Repertory Theatre*, pp. 160-161.

artistic principles, combined with an audience which was receptive to progressive drama⁷⁹ and support from good playwrights, had helped bring this about, and large subsidies in Manchester and Birmingham enabled the best but not always profitable drama to be given there.⁸⁰ The repertory theatres concentrated on a social realism which was of a comparatively advanced kind without being too innovative for a reasonably wide audience⁸¹ (Birmingham, however, was to pursue a more radical programme under Barry Jackson and became the centre of one-act verse drama⁸²). Again it was said that the one-act play had been saved from oblivion.

As an artistic form, it [the one-act play] seemed fated to extinction when the repertory theatre movement, part of a great dramatic renaissance, gave it new life.⁸³

This cultivation of the short play form encouraged a vogue for it among amateurs and certain professional theatres, while the absence of one-act drama from the bills of a repertory theatre could give rise to complaints of a missed opportunity, a view which indicates the widespread recognition of the time of the significance of the one-act play to the repertoire of the new ventures.

Indeed, Harold Brighthouse admitted that, leaving aside his *Hobson Choice* and Houghton's *Hindle Wakes*, the two wrote at their

⁷⁹ See Harold Lake, "That Audience," *The Gaiety Annual* 1909, p. 24, and Allan Monkhouse's letter to the *Manchester Guardian*, 9 December, 1913 (in Horniman Scrapbooks).

⁸⁰ Basil Dean explained that the Liverpool Repertory Theatre was better at discovering "new acting talent" than in establishing a coterie of local dramatists because of "the weakness of our finances and... the fact that there are too many people to pass judgment on the manuscripts." *Liverpool Daily Post*, 11 November, 1932 (in the Theatre Museum).

⁸¹ Oscar Drey, for instance, complained about the unwillingness of the Gaiety to experiment; see the *Manchester Playgoer*, vol. 2, no. 1, September 1912, pp. 18-19.

⁸² Interestingly, early in its history, the Birmingham Repertory Theatre was criticised for not producing many short plays: "Perhaps the theatre has hardly done enough to encourage the writing of one-act plays, usually so negligently treated in the ordinary theatre," wrote the critic T. W. J. Wilson in the *Stage Year Book 1914*, p. 47. This opinion suggests the perception that the repertory theatre was very important to the cultivation of the one-act play. Jackson's ideas about the repertory theatre are found at some length in his introduction to Bache Matthews' *A History of the Birmingham Repertory Theatre*, in particular pp. xiii-xiv, and his foreword to Thomas C. Kemp's *The Birmingham Repertory Theatre*, particularly pp. vii-viii.

⁸³ John Hampden's comment, in his introduction to *Twenty-Four One-Act Plays*, p. vi.

best in the one-act form: "In the long run, if the one act plays can be ignored, Houghton and I are one-play men."⁸⁴ There were other dramatists associated with the various repertories – Allan Monkhouse, Basil Dean, Gilbert Cannan, Harold Chapin, Eden Phillpotts, Elizabeth Baker, and others – some of whose best plays were in one act (it was certainly the form Dean, Cannan and Chapin were most successful in). It must also be pointed out that much of the new drama fostered by these early repertory theatres was in one act: in the case of Birmingham, over a third of those plays receiving their first production were one-acters.⁸⁵ One gets the feeling that at Liverpool, the writing and production of one-act drama was regarded as the occupation of an immature theatrical enterprise, and that the writing and staging of full-length plays gave the theatre a sense for itself and an image to the outside world of having reached theatrical adulthood. This progression from double bills to just one item was compounded by pressures emanating from its shareholders.⁸⁶ On the other hand, even in the short life of the Scottish National Repertory Theatre (April 1909 to April 1913) in Glasgow, over forty one-act plays were presented in a total of 129 plays,⁸⁷ and the Gaiety, under severe financial difficulties, managed to present fourteen one-act plays in a total of twenty-six new plays in the two and a half years before it ceased as a repertory theatre.

⁸⁴ *What I Have Had*, p. 178.

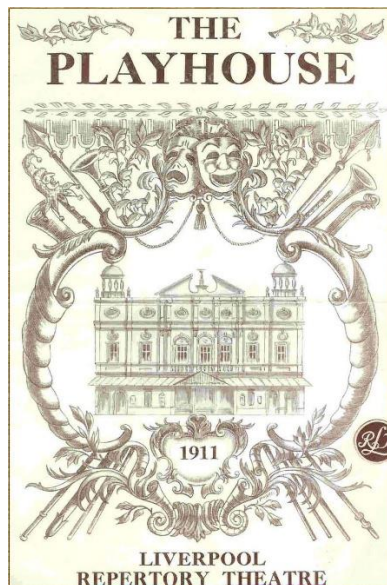
⁸⁵ The group out of which the Birmingham Repertory developed, the Pilgrim Players, performed twenty-eight plays in its five-year history, seven of which were new, with five of these being one-act plays. These were *Ser Taldo's Bride* by Barry Jackson and John Drinkwater, Oliver Lodge's *The Labyrinth*, *The Garret* and *Womankind* by W. W. Gibson, and Drinkwater's *Cophetua*.

⁸⁶ The proportion of one-act to full-length plays in the first three seasons of the Liverpool Repertory Theatre (from 1911 to 1914) were 9:14, 5:24 and 5:26. During the 'Commonwealth' years from January 1914 to late 1916, one-act plays were rapidly dispensed with as the theatre contended with three or four different full-length plays each week with a limited number of players, with no longer the need to present multiple bills to achieve a limited realisation of the repertory ideal. One-act plays were to appear again in numbers under William Armstrong during his association with the theatre as producer and then managing director from the 1922-1923 season onwards. In the 1920-21 season, no one-act plays were produced; from the 1922-23 season to that of 1924-25, the proportion was 6:13, 8:11, and 5:13.

⁸⁷ The full list of plays presented by the S.N.R.I is given in Winifred F. E.C. Isaac, *Alfred Wareing*.

Conclusions

The legacy of the repertory theatres for (among others) the amateur⁸⁸ and art theatre groups of the post-war period was very significant – many owed much of their programme arrangements to the repertory model as it existed before and during the war – while the younger repertory theatres generally followed the example of the Liverpool Playhouse in their selection of bills after the war.



Poster of the Liverpool Repertory Theatre, 1911.

These enterprises also found inspiration in the lesson the repertory plays seemed to teach, that anyone can genuinely put their own ideas or stories into play-form, even in one act.⁸⁹

As far as innovation in subject-matter and style of presentation are concerned, the most advanced one-act pieces were arguably those mounted by the minority-interest play-producing groups in London and elsewhere, and by the repertory theatres, in

⁸⁸ The influence of the Gaiety at a time of immense growth in amateur theatricals is borne out, for instance, in a letter sent by John Masefield to Miss Horniman in 1920, quoted in Pogson, *Miss Horniman*, p. 197.

⁸⁹ The editor of the *Manchester Playgoers' Magazine*, O. R. Drey, recognised this element early in the history of the Gaiety; see the *Gaiety Christmas Annual*, 1910, p. 70.

particular those in Manchester and Birmingham. The Play Actors and the Pioneer Players, for example, presented dramas which addressed the current social conditions of the immediate pre-war period, typically from a general and a women's perspective respectively. The Pioneer Players continued on during the war to produce a number of non-naturalist pieces by foreign dramatists, for the simple reason that dramas critical of current social conditions appeared pointless and that a departure from realism seemed appropriate under war-time conditions. A number of art theatres carried on this tradition of producing non-naturalist one-act drama in the 1920s: the Everyman, Gate and Cambridge Festival theatres produced most of the early one-act expressionist work of Eugene O'Neill, for instance; and other one-act works by Strindberg, Evreinov, Kaiser and Pirandello were also produced. The one-act form, in this case and in many others, represented the most accessible vehicle of difficult drama for a country with a then very under-developed tradition of experimentation in playwriting.

Part Three: Short Plays and the Variety Stage

Introduction

The history of the one-act play in the music-hall is inextricably linked to other subjects: the endeavour of the variety stage to up-grade its entertainments and to gain a wealthier clientele; the conflict with the various licensing authorities and commercial theatre managements over the right of variety theatres to include dramatic items on their bills; the engagement of leading players of the straight stage who required an appropriate vehicle for their visit to the variety stage; and the decreasing popularity of old-fashioned variety entertainment in a world of melodrama, revue and musical comedy, and later cinema.



The Oxford Music Hall c. 1875 (London Theatre Museum Collection).

In many respects, the one-act play was suited to the particular conditions of the variety stage, being short, climactic and easily apprehended. The more popular actors and actresses from the straight theatre usually chose to perform in either a one-act play or an excerpt from a full-length work when they appeared on the variety

stage. The presentation of short drama also represented a response to the in-roads made in variety audience numbers by the cinema. Furthermore, during the First World War, the variety stage presented a large number of short dramas dealing with the war which reflected in their forthright melodramatic character something of the temper of the population during that time. In this situation, the one-act play held an unprecedented importance as the main item on the bill. On the other hand, the adoption of dramatic items on bills was a cause and a symptom of the decline of the variety stage, particularly in the 1910s. However, for a period, the destiny of one-act dramatic pieces and the variety stage seemed interdependent; the critic John Palmer felt justified in commenting in 1913:

It is already quite clear that the future of one-act plays is almost wholly bound up with the future of the music-hall ... A real recovery has come now that accomplished actors are willing and able to appear in one-act plays as part of a vaudeville programme.⁹⁰

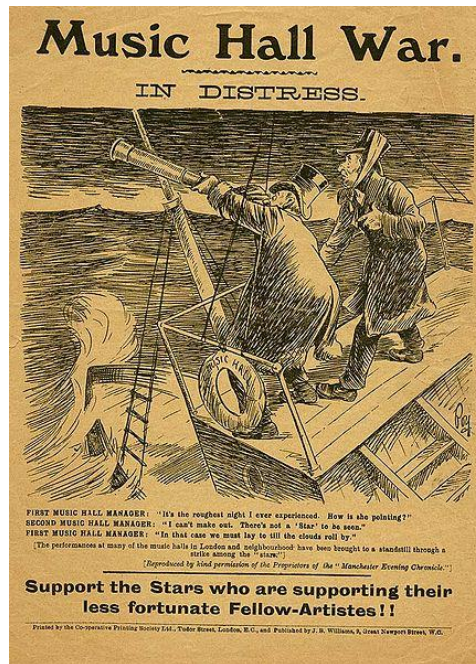
For nearly seventy years after the right to present stage-plays was extended to the minor theatres in 1843, the now enlarged group of legitimate theatres protected its own interests by maintaining very careful vigilance over its exclusive entitlement to mount straight drama for the public.⁹¹ If it was not granted a stage-play licence, a music hall was not legally entitled to put on a play, since usually all it possessed was a music and dancing licence (issued under the conditions of the Disorderly Houses Act of 1751).⁹² These conditions created the situation of antagonism between the regular theatre and

⁹⁰ *The Saturday Review*, 1 February 1913, p. 139.

⁹¹ The opening by Charles Morton of the Oxford Music Hall in March 1861 marks the first real break with the old 'free-and-easies' and the beginning of direct competition with the legitimate stage. At about the same time, the London Music Hall Proprietors Association was set up to protect halls against legal actions taken by legitimate theatres and others.

⁹² Geo. 2, c. 36. If the music hall was located in the administrative county of Middlesex, it was subject to the provisions of the Music and Dancing Act (Middlesex) Act, 1894 (57 and 58 Vict. c. 15). The licensing authority in the case of London was the Metropolitan Board of Works (which later became the London County Council).

the music hall – in the process slowing down the halls’ endeavour to improve their reputations – which became known as the ‘Sketch Question’. This episode was invigorated by such phenomena as the ‘Anti-Music Hall Crusade’ led by Benjamin Webster of the Haymarket Theatre in the 1860s and the watchfulness of such individuals as Mrs. Ormiston Chant and quite a few ‘common informers’.



1907 poster about the so-called “Music Hall War” between artists and theatre managers, canvassing support for the music hall strike of 1907 (Victoria and Albert Theatre Museum).

Charles Morton, a music hall proprietor, was the principal campaigner in prosecuting the cause of drama on the variety stage in the second half of the nineteenth century, beginning with an 1855 production of a short pantomime in the burlesque tradition, *The Enchanted Hush*, by W. F. Vendevell. Under pain of a £20 a night fine, Morton arranged for one of the two performers to play all the parts himself, in this way ceasing to contravene the provisions of the law. Ten years later, he presented a short version of *The Tempest* called *Hodge Fodge or, The Butterfly’s Christmas Party!*, but was fined £5 for presenting a play on unlicensed premises (interestingly,

a Select Committee sitting a year later discovered that there were at the time twenty-eight music halls in London presenting theatrical entertainments without the appropriate licence). Morton was, however, to obtain a theatrical licence in 1871 after he was again threatened with legal action over his presentation of another short burlesque, *Prince Love*, at the Philharmonic Music Hall in Islington. During the last episode of his campaign to present dramatic pieces – his presentation of a shortened version of the opera *La Soledad* at the Palace Theatre (that is, of varieties) in 1903 – he explained to an interviewer.

The desire to supply my patrons with novelties was, I suppose, too strong with me ... the thin end of the wedge had been introduced into the breach and as time wore on theatrical managers, either from laziness or complacency, ceased to trouble themselves about our doings. And thus, eventually, the 'Sketch' established itself upon me Music Hall stage.⁹³

During the second half of the nineteenth century, as Morton suggested, a number of events had occurred to prepare the way for the adoption of one-act drama, as well as other abbreviated forms of drama (occasionally used when a suitable one-act play was not to be found⁹⁴), by the variety stage. The most significant of these developments involved the advance of certain variety theatres up-market, as they attempted to attract wealthier patrons. This meant lessening any resemblance to their more proletarian origins,⁹⁵ both in furnishings and programming, and taking on a more distinctively theatrical form of entertainment, involving the presentation of stage-plays and, inevitably, the services of leading theatrical performers. Straight players were first engaged by Morton and Alfred Butt at the

⁹³ Quoted by William Macqueen-Pope, *The Melodies Linger On*, pp. 99-100.

⁹⁴ See Felix Barker, *The House that Stoll Built*, p. 106.

⁹⁵ See Shaw's comments in his preface to *The Shewing-Up of Blanco Posnet*, in *The Complete Prefaces of Bernard Shaw*, p. 425, and those of H. K. Moderwell in *The Theatre of To-Day*, pp. 650-654.

Palace at the turn of the century. This was very much a gradual change; the low opinion Henry Irving had of the variety stage⁹⁶ and the belief that drama was not suited to its special conditions,⁹⁷ to give two examples, testify to the prejudice, amounting at times to open hostility, against the progressive theatricalisation of the music hall. The music hall had not by this stage shown that it could be trusted to safeguard the aesthetic and moral standard of straight drama, nor was it felt that guardian bodies like the Lord Chamberlain were capable of guaranteeing the maintenance of these standards, especially when confronted by “the songs and antics of comic performers.”⁹⁸

All the same, a very close relationship had developed between the music hall and the theatre by 1900,⁹⁹ even though a demarcation of types of entertainment was still vigorously insisted on by the legitimate stage. Many of the music halls had gained a high level of respectability and most were reducing the prevalence of musical items. A few new ventures were so large and magnificent that they were called ‘Palaces of Variety’. These quickly became the main venues of one-act entertainment in the variety theatre. There were three chief reasons behind the inclusion of one-act plays in bills. The first was to enlarge the breadth of patronage to embrace those people who would be attracted by a theatrical presentation: thus, the one-act ‘turn’ would often appear in the second half of the

⁹⁶ The Theatre, Irving was quoted as saying, has “nothing whatsoever in common” with the music halls “except that the latter are allowed to infringe openly upon certain rights of presenting plays which was safeguarded by the Theatres Act.” *The Saturday Review*, 17 November 1894, p. 534. Ironically, Irving’s own theatre, the Lyceum, became a variety house in 1904.

⁹⁷ See the *Saturday Review*, 17 June, 1893, p. 659. A critic writing in the *Saturday Review* in early 1878, having shown the “pernicious” influence of “café-concerts” and “vaudevilles”, observed that the extension of the stage-play licence “may serve to warn us against the danger of an innovation which is pretty sure sooner or later to be again attempted.” *The Saturday Review*, 16 February 1878, p. 209.

⁹⁸ *The Saturday Review*, 26 April, 1879, p. 523. See also W. R. Titterton, *From Theatre to Music Hall*, p. 50. This attitude had not changed much by the early twentieth century: Max Beerbohm wrote in 1904, “The theatre should have a monopoly of drama” since “Only in the theatre can drama thrive.” *The Saturday Review*, 27 February, 1904, p. 264.

⁹⁹ See Pinero’s comments in the *Athenaeum*, 16 November, 1889, p. 682.

bill, a placement that seemed to suit these more cultured patrons.¹⁰⁰ The second reason concerns the appearance of popular straight players, who, given the limits on performance time and their wish not to lower themselves with a poor vehicle (a number were to appear in short comic sketches, however), frequently brought their own one-act play, which was either a curtain-raiser or a commissioned piece. In an article in the *Stage Year Book 1909*, the writer mentions “the growing popularity of sketches and scenas” which he thought was largely accounted for by the advent of so many prominent actors and actresses who have come from the regular theatres tempted by “the charm of variety and the large salaries.”¹⁰¹

Occasionally, amateur clubs were hired to perform these pieces and even the Grand Guignol and the Irish Players were to perform at variety theatres, their one-act pieces having been found to be well suited to variety bills.¹⁰² Lastly, the presence of one-act drama in variety programmes was a reflection of the personal tastes of variety theatre proprietors and managers: Oswald Stoll at the London Coliseum Theatre and Alfred Butt at the London Palace Theatre epitomise this aim to raise the reputation of their houses from the notoriety of its background and distinguish it from many of the music hall establishments of that time. “The music-hall impresario,” wrote the theatre critic John Palmer, “is alert, experimental, bold in innovation, continually feeling his way with a critical public – or rather with a number of critical publics, each wanting to be competently entertained.”¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ See Bernard Well’s comments pertinent to this enterprise in the *Stage Year Book 1915*, p. 14.

¹⁰¹ The *Stage Year Book 1909*, p. 36.

¹⁰² The Abbey Company visited the Coliseum, for instance, on quite a number of occasions between 1912 and 1928.

¹⁰³ John Palmer, *The Theatre of Tomorrow*, p.11; see also p. 8. Stoll was as much recording his intention as his achievement when he remarked, “I provided the masses with clean and wholesome entertainment.”



A recent photograph of the 1904 London Coliseum, one of many Frank Matcham-designed theatres with London's widest proscenium arch.

What the variety theatres had to overcome was the legal proscription against the public performance of stage-plays outside properly licensed venues. Three years after Morton's 1903 prosecution, a 'concordat' was reached between the music hall proprietors and directors and the Theatrical Managers Association. The provisions of this agreement dictated that no dramatic performance would exceed a duration of thirty minutes; that it would not have more than six speaking parts; that the piece itself would not be all or part of a dramatic work licensed by the Lord Chamberlain, except where fifteen years had elapsed since the first public performance; and that only one other sketch of fifteen minutes' duration and four speaking parts, or a musical sketch of one scene, not related to or directly preceding or following the larger dramatic piece, could be performed.¹⁰⁴

While this agreement was by no means a perfect solution to the problem (as witness the prosecution in 1909 of the Coliseum for

¹⁰⁴ For details about these regulations, see Albert A. Strong, *Dramatic and Musical Law*, particularly pp. 65-68.

presenting a version of *Richard III* with the well-known stage actor Seymour Hicks which went over the thirty-minute ceiling), it opened the way for a much larger vogue for one-act plays than had been the case previously on the variety stage. Indeed, for a time, the one-act play assumed an importance it never had on the legitimate stage, becoming something akin to the principal attraction at certain variety houses, especially when famous authors and actors were involved. One critic wrote in October 1911, after a performance of Sutro's *The Man in the Stalls* at the Palace, that it was

one of the those happenings that does more to hasten a solution of the question of plays in music halls than any number of diatribes or speeches from aggrieved authors ... The variety theatre has fathered the one-act play, housed it sumptuously, and nourished it with an exceeding care undreamt of in the so-called legitimate houses. The one-act piece, as it were, is the wastrel of the theatre; it is admitted on sufferance, carelessly played, badly cast, and shabbily staged. At a variety theatre like the Palace the best cast that can be engaged is only good enough.¹⁰⁵

The position of the variety stage as a venue for drama was exacerbated by the now very common practice of granting individual variety theatres a double licence (a stage-play, and music and dancing licence), as the London Council did for seven music halls in November 1911. By June of the following year, the decision was made to grant stage-play licenses to variety theatres, to some wild exclamations that this would be the undoing of the legitimate stage but also to a sense of anticipation that the new freedom would result in the writing of good one-act plays.¹⁰⁶

Abbreviated music hall sketches or skits comprised by far the vast majority of dramatic items presented at or written specifically for

¹⁰⁵ *The Era*, 7 October 1911, p. 24.

¹⁰⁶ See John Palmer's comments in the *Saturday Review*, 13 January 1912, p. 44. The first play on a variety programme to be revised in accordance with the censor's wishes was Dion Clayton Calthrop's *A la Carte* (Palace 1/9/1913).

the variety stage.¹⁰⁷ Easily the most important of the one-act pieces presented at variety theatres – judged by the standards of dramatic quality, the process of elevating variety’s good name, and the participation of popular players in variety bills – were those written by playwrights usually associated with the legitimate stage (although the pieces by several variety theatre writers, such as John Le Breton’s *A Sister to Assist ‘Er*, have some merit of their own). For this reason, a large proportion of the pieces were essentially plays of the straight theatre, lacking much modification for the variety stage; Shaw’s *Annajanska* (Coliseum, 21/1/ 1918), the only piece he wrote specifically for the variety theatre, is one exception to this, a play whose rumbustious character Shaw knew from his frequent visits to the halls – a rare custom among the better-known playwrights – would find favour. The production of Henry Arthur Jones’ *The Knife* at the Palace in December 1909 heralded the highly remunerative practice among theatre dramatists of writing one-act plays (again mostly star vehicles) for the largest of the variety theatres. This was an important breakthrough for, while a small number of dramatists had already allowed their short plays to be performed on the variety stage, the fact that a playwright of prestige (though no longer so certain of box-office success in the straight theatre) actually composed a play for variety presentation signaled that the music hall was now an acceptable market for the plays of established dramatists.

Over the following years, such bastions of the regular stage as Sutro and Pinero wrote for this formerly detested branch of the theatre, spurred on by requests for short drama from leading straight performers and such devices as Stoll’s playwriting section set up

¹⁰⁷ Roger Wilmut remarked that when the music hall came under the jurisdiction of the Lord Chamberlain, “in practice the longer, serious sort of item disappeared from the bills” and short comic sketches became dominant (*Kindly Leave the Stage*, p. 40). D. E. Oliver had predicted this when he remarked that dramatic pieces would have to take the form of “exciting melodrama, crude farce or flaccid innuendo comedy” not to have the effect of disappointing the regular and established audience (*The English Stage*, p. 82).

during the war to encourage patriotic work. Even Barrie, initially the most adamant among the major dramatists of the time in his refusal to allow any of his plays on the variety stage, gave in and permitted much of his one-act work to be performed there. Actor-managers, the leaders of the theatrical profession, would come as well: Herbert Beerbohm Tree, for instance, made his variety début in a revival of F. Kinsey Peile's one-act dramatisation of a Kipling story, *The Man Who Was*, at the Palace in January 1912. And finally, theatre critics followed, furthering the gradual theatricalisation of many variety theatres.¹⁰⁸



An example of Variety luxury: the London Coliseum, Oswald Stole's "people's palace of entertainment," opened in 1904 (photo: Mike Peel).

In effect, the variety stage assumed much of the custody of the one-act play tradition as it had developed erratically by the first years of this century in the straight theatre. The sort of one-act play which functioned as the minor piece in a bill but, for which there was little demand among the legitimate theatres, was now being written for the variety stage.¹⁰⁹ The presence of conventional theatre one-

¹⁰⁸ See the *Stage Year Book 1917*, p. 25.

¹⁰⁹ Allardyce Nicoll supports this contention; see his *English Drama 1900-1930*, p. 29.

acters continued during the First World War, in part because short dramatic pieces were required as the extremely long runs at theatres left straight players with few stages on which to practise their profession, and because charity performances of short dramas at the large halls could realise very large sums. There were also artists from France and elsewhere (such as Réjane and Jean Coquelin) who presented dramatic pieces during the war, sometimes in one act, or as a source of income with work in France naturally difficult to come by (at the same time, other performers, like the French Players, were presenting one-act plays on the legitimate stage).

Of course, the one-act play was one of the most obvious signs that variety was itself becoming outdated. It was the opinion of some observers at the time that the decline of variety began with the advent of dramatic turns in variety bills and that, after the changes of 1912, music hall no longer existed.¹¹⁰ It was certainly true that very shortly after full stage-play licensing was granted to variety theatres that a number of them were presenting full-length plays in weekly installments after these theatres had found it very difficult to procure suitable one-act pieces; and that a steady number of music halls were transformed into at least part-time full-length play theatres.¹¹¹ Against this, one might say that most music halls, if they changed their entertainments at all, became cinemas rather than straight playhouses, which reveals that their ultimate development was not in the direction of the legitimate stage, assisted, as it were, by the one-act play. Revue, which had been included in variety bills from the first decade of the century, had been much more popular and more

¹¹⁰ See, for instance, Charles Elland, "A Common Person's Complaint," *Daily Mail*, 25 November, 1913, quoted in D. F. Cheshire, *Music Hall in Britain*, p. 52; and H. G. Hibbert, *Fifty Years of a Londoner's Life*, p. 208.

¹¹¹ The Oxford, Palace and London Pavilion each had one full-length presentation in 1917. A. C. Armstrong warned against making conclusions from this as this phenomenon represented merely "a war-time rapprochement" between the theatre and the music hall (*The Stage Year Book 1918*, p. 24). But this development was in fact portentous. For example, the four-act romantic play *His Royal Happiness*, Gilbert Murray's adaptation of *The Trojan Women* and *Little Women* were all presented for a run of matinées at the Holborn Empire in 1919 and many of the larger halls became theatres after the war.

widely performed among the halls; as revue is more suited to the variety stage, it is arguable that the one-act would have had a greater impact had revue been less successful or not developed at all (one must include the regular stage in this speculation, as revue became very fashionable among the straight theatres in the 1910s).

Conclusions

There is, however, some truth that one-act drama of a serious character performed in music halls and ‘palaces’, and performed by stars of the legitimate stage, did ostracise certain members of the traditional audience (one has only to think of the reaction of some patrons of the Coliseum to the appearance there of Sarah Bernhardt from 1910 to 1916).¹¹² During the 1920s, the variety stage used dramatic turns far less than before. However, the assiduity with which a hall like the Coliseum persisted in giving one-act plays was felt by one critic to “have had a bearing on the eventual falling-off in attendances,” since the taste by now was for the more dynamic items which made up “New Variety”.¹¹³

If one recognises that the typical music hall audience wanted “amusement without intellectuality,”¹¹⁴ one can see why the serious one-act play was not a natural outgrowth of the variety traditions but was, rather, a theatrical form often with the mercenary status of star vehicle, with the protective function of upgrading the particular hall and fending off the challenge of such entertainments as the cinema. The fact that the variety stage often used the very one-act plays or the sort of one-act plays produced on the regular stage proves that it

¹¹² Compare this with the rather unperceptive comments of Arthur Coles Armstrong that the music hall public had tastes almost indistinguishable from the theatre-going public, in the *Stage Year Book 1909*, p. 36. See also the *Manchester Guardian*, 24 January 1912.

¹¹³ See Roger Wilmut, *Kindly Leave the Stage*, p.118. Wilmut adds that the Coliseum “catered less for ordinary music hall goers than for a public interested in the theatres” (p. 120).

¹¹⁴ *The English Stage*, p. 81

was being handed a one-act tradition from an alien source, and that the origins or the main influences of the one-act drama it produced did not come from within its own resources.



The London Palladium, another West End variety theatre designed by the architect Frank Matcham and built in 1910, photographed in 2009 after a centenary of reincarnations (photo: Panhard).

Both the variety and the amateur theatres largely refrained from innovation in their one-act presentations. Since the variety stage usually included a one-act play in bills because a well-known player desired to appear in a piece of a certain dramatic quality – with the opportunity, as in a large number of farces of the previous century, to dominate proceedings – most of the plays presented were climactic dramas with a conventional structure, story-line and characterisation. Henry Arthur Jones' *The Knife* and Max Beerbohm's *A Social Success*, custom-made for the talents of their respective star players,¹¹⁵ are examples which testify to this conclusion. The amateur stage also avoided innovative work, preferring instead to produce conventional realistic drama. This preference was compounded by the conservative tastes of those running the one-act play competitions for amateurs and the very

¹¹⁵ Violet Vanbrugh and Arthur Bouchier performed in Jones' play and George Alexander made his variety debut at the Palace on 27 January 1913 in Beerbohm's play.

minor position of the text in the evaluation of the performance. There is, however, first, no denying the central role played by the amateur theatre as the main custodian of the one-act play between the wars and, as such, second, the fact that the form represented the sole or primary dramatic work of most of those involved in or attending amateur theatrical productions.

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