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SETTING THE SCENE

Ambivalent Encounters/Visibilities

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The *Edinburgh Evening News* of Saturday 23 December 1899 advertised a number of forthcoming Christmas and New Year entertainments. At the Queen Street Hall, the Modern Marvel Company was presenting the new century cinematograph with animated pictures ‘of our gallant Navy and army’ (*Edinburgh Evening News*, 1899, p. 1). From Mr (later Sir Edward) H. E. Moss and his newly incorporated Moss Empires, we find the pantomime *Babes in the Wood*. Staged at the Empire Palace Theatre (opened by Moss in 1892), it featured a heliotrope ballet, an American dancing troupe, and the Poluski brothers bringing ‘down the house nightly performing a military sketch’. At the Waverley Market, another of Moss’s entertainments, the annual Christmas Carnival, showcased the latest technologies and proclaimed itself the height of modernity with a ‘phantasmagoria’ of cosmopolitan transnational acts from across the Empire. Mixed in with its ‘electric lighting’ and ‘speaking telephones’ were speciality acts, performing lions, lady acrobats, pantomime sketch comedy, Chinese twins, Wild men of Borneo, and – ‘direct from the Antipodes’ – ‘Unzie, the Human Paradox’, an Australian Aboriginal with albinism and a ‘living illustration of black being white’ (*Edinburgh Evening News*, 1899, p. 1). All these performances utilised spectacle and invariably depended on simplistic representations of the British Empire and racial hierarchy to showcase and affirm the nation’s glories, triumphs, and modernity. Yet, they were not without political and social complexities or resistances, and they also captured growing unease about a changing nation and marked the emergence of diverse voices, people who were beginning to move from the margins to the centre, metaphorically and literally. Just seven months later, London hosted the first Pan African Congress, a coming together of global majority leaders, intellectuals, and activists to demand ‘an end to colour and race prejudice’ and devolution of ‘responsible government to the black colonies’ (Fryer, 1984, p. 285).

In many ways, the performances staged on this one evening in December 1899, within days of the turn of the new, twentieth century, challenge Saidiya Hartman’s statement about the authority of the archive which, she argues, sets limits ‘on what can be known’ and on ‘whose perspectives matters’ (Hartman, 2019, p. xiv). However, as the theatre director Declan Donnellan has remarked ‘when we go to the theatre, we go to witness an encounter...when I see something it sees me back... If I see something, I change it by seeing it, but it also changes me’ (Cheek by Jowl, 2020). This dialogical exchange is at the heart of what was distinctive about the modern theatre experience at the turn of the twentieth century. Amidst this active

process – the understanding of possible non-linear exchanges – one-dimensional hierarchical relationships where power is seen only to be held in one place, by the observer, are challenged. It is through an understanding that centres the ways that ‘theatre means- through its narratives, its sign systems, its interaction with audiences and its cultural contexts’ that we can begin to critically acknowledge these performances, their meanings, and complexities (Taylor and Symonds, 2014, p. 79). These diverse entertainments in Edinburgh in the very final days of the nineteenth century embraced several trajectories and temporalities of social and cultural production, providing an array of sensations and spectacle through which old traditions and new perspectives interacted with a diverse mix of people, places, and themes that entertained, but also baffled and unsettled.

The Waverley Carnival was just one of the Moss Empires venues which spanned across Britain and marked a ‘turn of the century trend... to transform ownership and management from individuals to limited liability partnerships and then to larger so-called public companies’ (Davis, 2000, p. 175). Incorporated in 1899, it brought together the variety theatres and music halls of Sir Edward Moss, Frank Thornton, and Sir Oswald Stoll ‘with joint capital of £1,650,000, based on ten separate companies with fourteen music halls, Moss Empires built-up to £2,086,000 by 1906. With twenty houses in 1900 and thirty-five in 1906’, they entertained audiences in Edinburgh, Birmingham, Newcastle, Sheffield, Glasgow, Cardiff, Swansea, Liverpool, Leeds, Hull, and Nottingham (p. 176). The merger of Moss, Stoll, and Thornton showed ‘the Victorian music hall had been successfully assimilated to the cultural apparatus of a capitalist society and its history can be read as an analogue of the capitalist transformation of industrial manufacture’ (p. 177). Commercialisation had always been a driving force in performance arts practice; however, the political, social, and cultural changes of the late nineteenth century influenced theatrical entertainment in other profound ways. Theatre was a site of consumption. As Erika Diane Rappaport emphasises, ‘late Victorian theatre translated consumption into visual pleasure and spectacle’. ‘If the New Drama of Ibsen and others depicted modern life as one of fraught social relations’, she argues, ‘the commercial theatre interpreted it as a richly material world of exteriors, interiors, furnishings and costumes’ (2000, p. 184). The theatre, whether it be in London’s West End, or in any other metropolis across the nation, ‘was a space in which a diverse audience [and performers] both provisioned and envisioned’ themselves (p. 36).

Moss Empires introduced a new business model for the British commercial theatre industry with a reflexive array of entertainments for the growing leisure consuming public characterised by a mix of local and global narratives. The group’s most prestigious theatre, The London Hippodrome, opened in January 1900 in Leicester Square London, with *The Times* announcing that ‘it signalled a departure from anything that had hitherto been attempted ...a home for ...a combination of entertainments such as no other building in London is capable of housing’ (*Times* 1 January 1900, p. 5). This ambition to provide the greatest variety of entertainments marked the wider connections between popular performance and intellectual and avant-garde theatre and recognised a dynamic theatre-going public, not passive spectators but spectators demanding the latest in contemporary performance from across the world. The London Hippodrome and the Waverley Christmas Market Carnival featured a collection of acts and performers that toured the country in the Moss theatres. As a commercial enterprise, Moss sought to attract as broad an audience as possible, exemplified by the Carnival admission price and advertisement statement, ‘sixpence... to give everyone an opportunity of witnessing the world’s greatest show’ (1899, p. 1). However, as John Carey highlights, this growing commercialism and democratisation was bemoaned by intellectuals who were disturbed by the movement of the mass public which was now accessing spaces and challenging traditional power dynamics (1992, p. 155).

It was felt by some that the social political and cultural changes affecting the country through modernisation, urbanisation, mechanisation, educational reform, and social legislation were degenerating, lowering artistic standards and adversely affecting the quality of theatre. In this way of thinking, the ‘neoclassical hierarchy of the arts often marked “true creativity”...[as] manifested by the individual artist, [while] lesser products emerge spontaneously as collective creations from an inchoate body known as the folk’ (Senelick, 2003, p. 272). The emergent popular performances were categorised as the latter. As Laurence Senelick notes, a narrative emerged where ‘professional performers [were] unmoored to any community or society...[and] loosely grouped together as “popular entertainment” considered infra dig’ (p. 272). The late nineteenth-century cultural critic Matthew Arnold had argued for culture as ‘the best which has been thought and said in the world’: artistic excellence; a high culture that marked boundaries very clearly with standards maintained by a small, elite minority, protecting it against a degrading mass of mediocrity who were accused of damaging artistic traditions (1869, p. viii). The growth of an entertainment-seeking public, and an expanding middle and lower-middle class, both of which were the ‘result of the emergence of the imperialist and international economy of the late nineteenth century’, epitomised this demise, with the theatre ‘threatened to a greater extent than ever before by commercialisation’ (Carey, 1992, p. 58; Shepherd, 2009, p. 1).

Moss theatres were across the whole country, and in some respects, they set the theatrical agenda of what was performed more widely. The sheer mass of theatre and the variety of entertainments being staged called into question the tastes of the ‘newly educated’ mass audiences as this ‘massification... centralisation and collectivism [implied]...erosion’ and loss (Ayres, 1999, p. 100). Debates about a national theatre and what it should look like included a discussion of demarcations about types of performance, as the role and value of theatre found expression in wider debates about definitions of the British nation in an era of intense national reflection and challenges to Britain’s position in the world as a colonial power. In this atmosphere, theatre was one of the primary ways of constructing and disseminating narratives of meaning about the nation. Directly and indirectly in both its business organisation and performance themes, theatre across the country captured debates that reflected the nation. Challenges to colonial rule, as well as class and gender roles, marked for some a crisis that was reflected socially country wide. The philanthropist Charles Booth’s multiple investigations highlighting poverty, and the explorer and anthropologist Francis Galton’s influential work on eugenics and biological determinism, spotlighted a country that for some was ‘sick’ and needed to define itself and its borders (see Booth, 1889, 1891, 1897, 1903; Galton, 1909).

These debates were foregrounded and further intensified as Britain fought the second Boer War. In theatres across Britain, the nation was constructed and symbolised in acts of spectacular patriotism in ‘jingoistic’ war and colonial adventures such as *Death or Glory Boys* (Oldham Colosseum), *Indian Mutiny* (Metropole Theatre Gateshead), *A Soldier and a Man* (Lyceum, Eccles), and *At Duty’s Call* (Empress Theatre, Hartlepool). Previously, the music hall had been seen as the ‘national theatre of its day’. As John Smart argues, the halls provided ‘a closer reflection of the lives led by its audiences’ (2002, p. 11). At the dawn of the new century, Moss theatres and wider entertainments perpetuated narratives of British Empire, which treated ‘the imperial enterprise in a completely unproblematic way’ (Radford, 1997, p. 20). *Savage South Africa’ Life in the Wilds of Africa* was part of the Great Britain Exhibition which was running in London at the Empress Theatre Earls Court. As Ben Shepherd argues, the power of the show derives from the ‘violent juxtaposition of cultural worlds it evokes’ (Shepherd, 1986, p. 108). The African performers were constructed as ‘bestial’ presented to British audiences as a ‘series of stereotypes of savagery, darkness and cruelty’ through the presentation of half-naked bodies (1986, pp. 107–108). These

were on the whole exotic extravaganzas that sought to celebrate Britain's Empire and could be found across the country in performances that mixed military spectacle with patriotism.

Theatrical styles crossed over, as can be seen in the Edinburgh Carnival and the Imperial Exhibitions that combined aspects of circus and 'Showbiz Imperialism'. In this plethora of Imperial and Colonial shows, we also see a theatre landscape reflecting a world in motion, a contradictory space where the centre and the margins mixed. In London in 1900, the first Pan African Congress takes place, with the literal movement of the people of the Empire coming to the metropolitan centre, to 'assert their rights...to take an equal place among nations', causing disruption and seeking independence (Fryer, 1984, p. 283). This was a process that was to continue apace into the First World War, with thousands of soldiers from India, Africa, and the Caribbean journeying to the heart of whiteness. However, acts such as 'Unzie' and shows such as *A London Arab* (1899) were already reflecting change and destabilising ideas of British identity in unorthodox ways. *A London Arab* by Myles Wallerton and Frances Gilbert at the Theatre Royal Peterborough was one of a plethora of Oriental shows that took place on British stages. Others include *SanToy* (1899), *Madame Butterfly* (1900), and *The Geisha* (1896). Based on parody and pastiche of the Orient, they provided general affirmations of British authority and perpetuated the unifying narrative of Empire and the civilising mission, but they also reflected a black British presence across the country. As Edward Said famously stated, forms of Orientalism 'resisted its ideological as well as political encroachments', reaffirming that where there is oppression there is always resistance (Said, 1986). Simplistic and reductive racial representations of British subjects at the centre of British stage culture were confronted off stage by an articulate and intellectual black and brown British community. Indeed, some of the background or 'blackground' actors earned a living through performing in these Oriental extravaganzas. Noted black internationalist, activist, journalist, and actor Duse Mohamed worked in the West End and toured the country in productions of 'Shakespeare, Biblical dramas, and Oriental exotica', as well as pantomimes (Dorman, 2023, p. 35). Mohamed 'played dark parts' as a member of actress-manager Sarah Thorne's company in Margate, but by the summer of 1900, he was touring in Hull in the melodrama *On Active Service* by Herbert Leonard (2023, p. 35).

The theatrical performers and performances that travelled around the country at this time comprise a diverse and complex set of entertainments. The theatres were sites of contradiction and juxtaposition, able to hold opposites at the same time. Theatre narratives of Empire and colonial prestige as well as minstrel shows were common in England, Scotland, Wales, and Ireland as the Empire was celebrated in all four nations. In Belfast, at the Ulster Hall, you could watch the spectacle of black face minstrelsy with a 'most enjoyable entertainment' from the Livermore Brothers ('no more popular troupe of minstrels visits the city') numbering 'no less than fifty' (performers in blackface) (*The Era*, 1899c). To support this affirmation of white supremacy, you could also catch one of the Victorian popularisers of science the Phrenologist Professor Buckley – 'now in his thirteenth week' at Carter's Waxworks – perpetuating white supremacy through the pseudo-scientific spectacle of live performance (*The Era*, 1899c). The popularity of minstrelsy would remain undiminished well into the latter part of the twentieth century, with Orientalism arguably equally prolific, as other musical comedies and operettas, including *A Chinese Honeymoon* and *The Emperor's Own*, began touring across the country.

The emerging form of revue that developed in this period would in some respects attempt to be a model of 'total theatre' with dance, song, and drama combining to produce contemporary social commentaries in a fragmented form. Alongside progressive 'new woman' depictions challenging prevailing patriarchal structures, a plethora of one-dimensional sexualised roles can be seen in shows such as *Secrets of the Harem*; Lyceum Theatre, Glasgow (1900). In musical comedies and

revues, we see an abundance of female bodies in chorus lines, objectified but also having agency and power in nuanced and complex performance dynamics. The gender and racial stereotypes in these shows did not go without challenge. Gilbert Murray's play *Carolyon Sahib* (1900) was an attempt to 'infuse the drama of Empire with Ibsenite principles' and in it 'a woman is the agent of radical change to existing stereotypes' (Radford, 1997, p. 21). Such plays created 'metatext of debate on the role of women in empire' (Ibid.).

While Victorian music hall had been seen as the 'national theatre of its day', and as providing 'a closer reflection of the lives led by its audiences', it was a particular vision of Britain and its place in the world, that was performed on stages across the country at the beginning of the twentieth century: one that utilised diverse performances and styles to imagine and invent narratives of the nation for entertainment (Smart, 2002, p. 11). Popular performance's explorations of 'difference', be it of people, places, or experiences, or of all three, reveal an important liminal space marking the emergence of multiple national and racial identities which would become pivotal in the creation of a modern Britain. In this context, the 'urban entertainments and the new leisure world offered a repertoire of roles that enabled audiences to negotiate the unsettling encounters of urban life' (Bailey, 1998, p. 21). The novelist Arnold Bennett had highlighted the lower middle classes 'in the industrial Midlands and the north...as the great potential reading public' which had an inner life as complex as any intellectual and the newly educated 'mass woman' and 'mass man' seemed open to the possibilities of change if allowed access to it (Carey, 1992, p. 155). The British theatrical landscape at the turn of the century thus reflected an industry and arts practice questioning itself, in the process of reinventing and transforming its identity and intent on reflecting and capturing the lived experiences and sensations of its audiences. New theatre spaces, practices, performers, and audiences seemed intent in re-defining themselves politically and culturally, creating a 'new spirit, consequent upon changing conditions', alongside new forms and relations in cultural production (Nicoll, 1973, p. 4). Surveying the popular theatres and entertainments on offer across the country, we can identify recurring themes, styles, and scenarios, similar to those presented in *Waverley*: Christmas pantomimes of aspiration and transformation, romanticised Orientalist racial spectacle, and Imperial and colonial narratives of glory and duty. However, within those narratives, we also see a theatre and nation grappling with change, as conventions and traditions begin to be challenged in the various new 'encounters' between those 'viewed' and 'viewing'. This confluence enables moments that resist narrow homogenised ways of seeing and being and offers possibilities for agency.

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