

Popular Theater

The construction of canonical modernism has often involved erasing much of what was once genuinely significant. In terms of popular theater, influential progressivist historiographies ensured that genres like melodrama were marginalized as staging posts on the way to fully fledged art forms – European naturalism, say, or American realism. According to this version of things, the popular playwrights of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were not without talent, but, “like television writers,” they were likely to be perceived as “artisans skilled at producing the entertaining effects that audiences wanted.” True, transcendent, cultural value awaited the arrival of the modern genius, a figure like Henrik Ibsen or Eugene O’Neill, “looking to illuminate the human condition or challenge received values.”¹ Musical theater was typically subject to the same mysterious evolutionary process. Early musical comedy, burlesque, revue, and vaudeville were often seen as developmental, flawed products, “one- or two-dimensional at best” and important only insofar as they led to the great flowering of the integrated American book musical heralded by *Showboat* (1929) and culminating in the 1940s and 1950s with shows like *Carousel* (1945), *Oklahoma* (1949), *South Pacific* (1949), and *Guys and Dolls* (1950). In some intellectual cultures, such shows now take on the reified dimensions of the classic art object.²

In an essay titled “From Melodrama to Realism: The Suspect History of American Drama,” the theater historian Tom Postlewait explored what he saw as the pervasiveness of these marginalizing, “teleological narratives,” evident not least in anthologies and collections of historical documents. He observed, somewhat wryly, that such narratives were “hard to suppress,”³ although by 1996, when Postlewait’s essay was published, ideas about cultural value, still extant and carrying authority

in some quarters, had already been seriously unraveled in others. Long before the mid-1990s, progressivist historiography generally had been wrecked by poststructuralism. Moreover, postmodern art practices in such fields as architecture, literature, film, television, advertising, music, and comic-book culture had substantially blurred the high/low culture divide. For many, that antithesis, however embedded it once may have been, was quite simply no longer viable. At the same time, the concept of modernism became hugely problematized, subject to endless reconfigurations as traditional formulations became “deconstructed.” One-time universal artists and art products now became masculinist, Eurocentric, Westernized, or otherwise constructionist and exclusionary. From both sides of things, serious pressure was brought to bear as high modernism struggled to preserve its traditional authority and popular culture extended its range of signification. Cultural studies flourished in this context, if on problematic and unstable footings, with the result that a popular theater form like melodrama could no longer be seriously maintained as the Other of legitimate theater culture. An abundance of intellectual equipment now at the disposal of theater historians meant that the license to study popular theater on its own terms could hardly be in doubt, although the question of what to do with that license remained a complex and controversial one.

Theater historians like Michael R. Booth (melodrama), Jacky Bratton (melodrama, music hall, and pantomime), Peter Bailey (musical comedy), Peter Jelavich (cabaret), Marlene Otte (revue, circus, and *jargon* theater), and many others⁴ have sometimes been quite prickly about the traditional marginalization of popular theater cultures. On the whole, however, such scholars have been careful to avoid the mistake of attempting to oust the likes of Ibsen, Strindberg, Shaw, Jerome Kern, and the Gershwins with an alternative canon composed of such figures as the Melville brothers, Jimmy Davis (“Owen Hall”), Lionel Monckton, and Paul Rubens.⁵ Their research has instead sought to complicate historical narratives, emphasizing the crossovers between the “high” and “low” and illustrating just how rich and complex these popular theater cultures really were in their own right. As a result, and although a great deal more work still needs to be done, we now have quite sophisticated maps of popular theater in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In relation to London’s West End, for example, the standard account of the transformation of music hall from demotic working-class culture to commercial mass entertainment has been joined by other suggestive

narratives. We know how much melodrama, once represented as a small-scale, end-of-pier culture, actually invested in costly spectacle and cultural transfers across European and Atlantic sites. Far from being trivial, it engaged with contemporary issues – typically “questions of race and national origin” in American versions.⁶ British melodrama, on the other hand, tended to focus on “condition of England” matters in relation to urbanism, industrialism, and empire. A spate of later Edwardian melodramas – such shows as *The Worst Woman in London* (1901), *A Disgrace to Her Sex* (1904), and *The Girl Who Lost Her Character* (1904), the so called “dangerous woman” melodramas – engaged anxiously with New Woman identities.⁷

Similarly, we know about the displacement of West End burlesque, typically a comic parody of “high” culture interpolated with songs, dance routines, and comic business, by musical comedy. This latter, without doubt the single most popular form of West End theater entertainment between the mid-1890s and 1914, was self-styled as a thoroughly modern commodity, professionalized by impresarios like George Edwardes to attract the broad-based middle classes – men and women, husbands and wives, and seasonally whole families. In stark contrast to melodrama, it celebrated a chirpy version of bright femininity, with shows like *A Gaiety Girl* (1893), *The Geisha* (1896), *Florodora* (1899), *San Toy* (1899), *The Girl From Kay’s* (1902), *Our Miss Gibbs* (1909), and *The Arcadians* (1909) dominating popular theater stages through to the end of World War I.⁸

At the same time, competition from continental operetta worried some theater critics, who in the immediate prewar period complained about “foreign invasions.”⁹ In reality, by the time these exports reached London or New York, they had been thoroughly Anglicized or Americanized. In the process, especially in this early period, the distinctions between operetta and the ascendant form, musical comedy, were often blurred.¹⁰ The huge success of Franz Lehár’s *The Merry Widow* in London in 1907 was followed by a string of continental operettas, all, like musical comedy, styled in contemporary ways – Oscar Strauss’s *A Waltz Dream* (1908), Leo Fall’s *The Dollar Princess* and *The Girl in the Train* (both 1910), and a string of Berlin shows composed by Jean Gilbert – *The Joy Lady* (1912), *The Girl in the Taxi* (1912), and *The Cinema Star* (1914).

As these outlines suggest, popular theater, especially in its musical formations, should be understood as generic to the cosmopolitan metropolis at this early time. A vibrant exchange-and-transfer culture that went back into the nineteenth century was greatly stimulated by the successes of such shows as the 1895 American musical *The Belle of New*

York and, especially, the George Edwardes production *The Geisha* (1896). Prompting an international revival in Japonaiserie, the latter, a show that posited but finally withdrew from interracial romance, played an extraordinary 760 performances on its first London run. It toured the provinces, went to New York, and visited such sites as Johannesburg, Cape Town, Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide, Dublin, Singapore, Mumbai, and Allabad. Here the best of modern chic, exoticism, and spectacle was sent on a civilizing mission to those administering the far-flung corners of the empire. At the same time, and like many other pre–World War I shows, *The Geisha* was adapted for such urban centers as Paris and Budapest. The German version, *Die Geisha, eine japanische Theehausgeschichte*, adapted by C.M. Röhr and Julius Freund, became a hit in Berlin and subsequently across the whole of Germany and Austria. This was a significant and fashionable culture, then, that crossed what were often seen as traditional national hostilities. In many respects, it could be naïve and repetitive, but, according to William Archer writing in 1908, it was also subtle and “sensitively modern,” understanding its significance as “the real New Drama.” So much a “sign of the times,” it is not surprising at all that this early show, *The Geisha*, should have been paid the compliment of a *Geisha Parodie*, performed at the Alexanderplatz-Theater in June 1897.¹¹ Nor should it surprise that in the search for modern popular entertainment, traditional boundaries of cultural status and values were often blurred. Writing about the “new spirit in European drama just after the First World War,” the theater critic Huntly Carter turned to the popular theater form, revue, to illustrate a contemporary opening up of experimental possibilities and transcultural pilfering. He described a 1921 revue, *The League of Nations*, in which popular entertainment appeared to fuse with art theatre, modern dance, and contemporary art practice:

[T]here was a “Hell’s Kitchen” belonging to the Moscow Art Theatre; a “fete des Mannequins” staged by M. Paul Poirer; “An Episode with Benda Masks” that recalled the modern mask school; and a “Persian Dance” that had stepped out of “The Russian Ballet”; and there were bits of scenery by Marc Henri of the Belgian New Art School.¹²

The transnational dimensions of popular theater, involving both the translation and movement of shows, personnel, performance styles, legal and promotional networks, and so on, is one reason popular theater is significant for understanding modern metropolitan life before World War I. It implies a common culture of material, aesthetic, and intellectual

dimensions. Since Peter Bailey's essay "Theatre of Entertainments/ Spaces of Modernity: Rethinking the British Popular Stage, 1890," (1998), contemporary cultural historians have become used to recognizing the role of popular theater in shaping generic urban space at the turn of the century and influencing its characteristic styles and zoning. It impacted on architectures, transport systems, and the development of retail centers in places like Berlin's Friedrichstraße and the redeveloped eastern half of London's West End – around Northumberland Avenue, Charing Cross Road, and Shaftsbury Avenue. Like the department store, theaters such as the Berlin Metropol, the Gaiety, and Daly's in London were signifiers of city style and highly self-conscious of their status in this respect. Indeed, some of the most popular shows of the period – *The Girl from Kay's*, *The Girl Behind the Counter* (1906), *Our Miss Gibbs*, and so on – were nothing less than celebrations of fashionable consumerism. The early Metropol revues – beginning with *Neuestes, Allerneuestes!* in 1903 and ending with *Chauffeu – ins Metropol* (1912) – operated similarly, featuring scenes set in well-known department stores. Here escalators and revolving doors were reproduced as emblems of the modern age; songs applauded the apparently endless diversity and glamour of the modern shopping experience; costume often became product placement in what turned out to be a symbiotic relationship as department stores sold theater tickets, decorated their shop windows like stages, and sometimes bought stocks in theater companies. From this intimate basis, musical theater wrote anthems to the wonder of the consumerist age and one of its most potent emblems, the place where you could buy just about anything you wanted:

Do you want a hair in curl or switches?
Mattresses, ladies' riding breeches?
Pianolas, petticoats,
Or Quaker Oats?
Or tennis nets,
Or cigarettes,
Enamel chains
Or aeroplanes?
Precious stones,
Gramophones?
Cauliflowers, paperweights,
Or bromide plates?
A telescope,
A cake of soap²¹³



FIGURE 16 Doing Other cultures. Marie Tempest in *The Geisha* (1896)

Against the complaints of critics of the new department stores who frequently highlighted their corrupting effects – invariably on women – these shows allowed for a celebration of these shopping cathedrals as a “new heterosocial space,” a sexualized site offering the opportunity for men and women to mingle relatively freely.¹⁴

The scale of these shows was often spectacular, involving elaborate efforts to stage the many spectacles of modernity. Racecourses, restaurants, factories, dance halls, fairs, and exhibitions – all were subject to the confident reproductive powers of modern popular theater, as, indeed, were other cultures. *The Geisha* was only one of a string of shows including *The Belle of Cairo* (1896), *A Chinese Honeymoon* (1901), *The Cinglalee* (1904), and *The Blue Moon* (1904), in which places like Japan, India, Ceylon, and Burma were subjected to a confident orientalism often celebrated with what was taken to be anthropological accuracy – although in reality these representations were more pastiche and parody than anything else (Figure 16). Demonstrations of natural power, like the earthquake that erupted twice daily in Robert Courtneidge’s production of *The Mousmé* (1911), for example, filmsets, ancient Greece, far-away planets, eighteenth-

century France – nothing, apparently, was beyond the staging powers of the popular stage as it searched for the latest new craze to bring before urban audiences. The Drury Lane “autumn drama” *The Whip* (1909), for example, famously comprised in a single extravaganza the staging of a horse show, the Chamber of Horrors at Tussaud’s waxworks, the pursuit of a train by an automobile, the wrecking of that train as it ploughed into a railway horse van, and a “climactic derby at Newmarket.”¹⁵ Not surprisingly perhaps, production costs were so high that a single failure could bring a theater to the brink of bankruptcy, which is why some theater companies were floated on the Stock Exchange. Richard Schultz, manager of the Metropol, spent the fantastic sum of 200,000 Reichmarks on the *mise-en-scène* of a single revue, while the Royal Opera House in Berlin had to make do with 30,000 for a revival of *Aida* in the same year.

There can be little doubt that the popularity of musical theater in such centers reflected booming economies and the conditions that produced a rise in per-capita incomes, in England reaching “a comfortable 150 per cent above subsistence in 1914.”¹⁶ Although popular theater has often been associated with aristocratic glamour, its general audience at this time was in fact much more everyday – composed of respectable men and women enjoying institutionalized forms of public performance. The productions to which they flocked were designed as commercial entertainment. Sometimes teasingly associated with the dangerous glamour of the *demimonde*, popular theater was in fact defined much more centrally by its formalizing of the limits of the acceptable. It ceremonialized the shifting boundaries where the urban respectable became manifest, and that is a central part of its fascination and significance.

If popular theater was part of the everyday fabric of mainstream modern urban life, it was also constituent of contemporary *modernisms*, producing fascinating, and often fantasist, interpretations of what the modern world was and how people lived in it. Its authority in this respect was presumably one reason Wyndham Lewis, like many intellectuals from Georg Simmel to a young Aldous Huxley, excoriated popular theater. The first issue of Lewis’s iconoclastic *Blast* (1914), for example, took the trouble to get intimate with such phenomena as “Daly’s musical comedy,” the “Gaiety Chorus Girl,” George Edwardes, the musical comedy producer, and Seymour Hicks, the actor, writer, and producer – all being thoroughly “blasted” as products of a bourgeois Victorian Britain.¹⁷ Unlike more intellectual cultures, a popular theater like melodrama dramatized a moral order in which good prevailed, even against the worst dangers and most

disruptive changes. While intellectual elites typically mourned what was perceived as a loss of hierarchy and distinction, popular musical theater went even further than melodrama in celebration of the benign order of the modern world. In musicals, the upbeat dispensation of “gaiety” was immanent in the plots of hundreds of shows across the period, which time and again reproduced for their audiences an energizing experience of living in contemporary life, sometimes in ways surprisingly resonant for later generations. Alongside characteristically turn-of-century perspectives on such issues as race, class, gender, and sexuality, there was a strong sensitivity shown to what we might now conceptualize in terms of “hyperrealities” or the “ceremonising of the world.”¹⁸ Berlin popular theater, especially the *Jahresrevue* produced between 1903 and 1913, was thematically obsessed with the representation of modern Berlin itself and demonstrated a parallel concern with self-reflection and image generally.¹⁹ Thus in the Kaiserreich musical comedy *Die Kino-Königin* (1913), reproduced in the West End a year later as *The Cinema Star*, film became indistinguishable from real life as actual politics and their film reproduction merged into each other. In a decidedly postmodern moment, a character declares that in her film image, she sees herself “for the first time.” Even earlier, the Edwardian hit *The Arcadians* (1909) contains a second act that reproduces the idyll of its first-act Arcadia, cut off by the Gulf Stream at the North Pole and forgotten by time, as a London city restaurant – a Disney-like simulacrum of the real thing complete with waitresses dressed as Arcadians, a vegetarian menu, and copied versions of the key Arcadian equivalent to institutions.

Musical theater reflected the modern urban experience back to its urban and suburban audiences in very particular ways, constructing a version of modernity usually at odds with prestigious intellectual cultures of the day – and with the realities of modern life in many respects. With astonishing consistency, the fantasist narratives of musical shows in particular celebrated a seemingly limitless capacity for assimilation and accommodation, quite contradicted in most respects by urban contemporaneities. A show like *Nelly Neil* (1907), for example, staged socialism in a harmless sing-along version; *The Quaker Girl* (1910) embraced religious dissent by rendering plainness of dress and manner as Parisian haute couture. More than a convenient motif or disposable fashion, this appetite for cohesion was the central organizing principle of popular theater at this time. It was evident in a show like Franz Lehár’s *The Merry Widow* (1907), a game-changing operetta which, far from retreating to a

fantasy “Ruritania,” reconciled traditional aristocracy (Count Danilo) to a version of modernity more conservative and respectable than the decadent hedonism of bohemian Paris, also staged in the show. Agency here is represented by Anna, a figure who makes the transformation from peasant to the engaging and astute widow of a figure most emblematic of the modern world in many of its guises – a powerful banker. Leo Fall’s *The Girl in the Train* (1908) was again an operetta styled in modern terms, as was *The Dollar Princess* (1909) set in New York City and “Aliceville,” Canada. The latter opens with a chorus of female typists and the narrative challenge in which new money is in the ascendancy and traditional aristocracy reduced to servitude. The gender counterpart to this potentially destabilizing inversion, entirely commonplace in these shows, is that the brains behind the agency are female. Thus it is Alice, the dollar princess, who successfully advises her father on investments, at the same time as making a personal fortune for herself “on the side.” The working out of these farce elements into harmonious resolution constitutes the central narrative device of the show around which all its songs and social dances circulate.

Revue in this period, often represented as an outgrowth of music hall and variety, worked similarly, at least before the war and despite the fact that it typically broke with narrative coherency, using other structures to replace the same obsession with happy order. Writing about the 1907 Metropol revue *Das muß man sehen*, Marline Otte shows how conservative and liberal spirits were reconciled through the figures of an agrarian compère (male host) and the liberal Fräulein Freissinn (the commère or female host). The twinning had racialized dimensions inasmuch as agrarian conservatives were associated with anti-Semitism while liberalism was constructed in terms of a Jewish politics. In the show’s version of things, these potentially conflictual forces end up not quite in agreement but at least firmly cemented through matrimony. Children are subsequently produced and the tale concludes with an explicit plea for harmony:

Commère: Well what do you say about these two fine specimens?

Compère: I don’t find it all that silly. If the exchange continues as it is – between countries and estates – little by little, many prejudices and many barriers have to fall and so it will be just a step toward general understanding, towards world peace.²⁰

The suggestion of this framing narrative was clear. As Otte points out, “no antagonism in German society was too great to overcome,” at least

in theater land – a message repeated over and over in both individual sketches and other more encompassing frameworks in early revue.²¹ Here again, the idea of an assimilative modernity was central – just as it was in musical comedy and operetta. A narrative figure often used to structure these same Metropol revues, to take a further example, involved rural visitors coming to town to experience, and be reconciled to, the sophisticated delights of a modern metropolis – the device derived from the travel scheme first used by Jacques Offenbach in *Orphée aux enfers*, in which the gods, bored by the drabness of life on Olympus, visit hell. At the Metropol, traditional deities metamorphosed into country yokels being shown around the dazzling sights and social events of Berlin, thereby becoming familiarized with life in the modern metropolis. Thus in *Neuestes, Allerneuestes* (1903), *Serenissimus* – a caricature of the perceived self-importance of rulers in the small German principalities then in existence – travels from the country to Berlin, where he is treated like a tourist. Many members in the audience could presumably relate to such experiences – a crucial part of the Metropol's audience was made up of tourists from all over Germany.

Revue in the West End similarly celebrated modernity's powers of national and metropolitan assimilation. *Odds and Ends* (1914) did so in a particularly self-conscious way. This show begins within a "let's make a show" narrative device that welcomes French and Belgium actress refugees; the black-American boxer Jack Johnson; and "Turkish girls from Ispahan" – "We don't want Votes for Women or to be a Suffragette / All we want's one husband for the night" – all to the accommodating world of the modern musical stage.²² Again, *The Bing Boys Are Here* (1917), billed as a revue, uses that organizing device of country boys coming to London in a show very difficult to distinguish from a musical comedy (Figure 17).

These kinds of devices and narratives again suggested that the popular theaters of places like London, Paris, Berlin, New York, Vienna, and Budapest shared a great deal of common territory, although this often ran alongside the equally determined "local" and "national" dimensions. For popular theater also reproduced strong-spirited nationalist sentiment in city characters and city vernaculars, perhaps especially in the case of a city like Berlin, a relatively new capital and the product of astonishing growth in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – "a growth spurt unprecedented in European urban history."²³ Here popular theater, while underwriting cosmopolitan status, also played



FIGURE 17 The “upbeat dispensation of gaiety.” *The Sunshine Girl* (Paul Rubens, 1912) celebrated factory life.

a particular role in the formation of localized urban identities. Highly suggestively, Richard Schultz, manager of the Metropo, took the opportunity of his first revue, *Das Paradies der Frauen* (1898), to dedicate his theater to the greater glory of the city. He wrote in the program notes for this production that the Metropo “in its dimensions, in the grandeur of its interior decoration” was “a house . . . truly worthy of the German Empire’s capital. It is a metropolitan establishment in the true sense of the word.”²⁴ The contradictions implied here between the stylish metropolitan melting pot – modern, universalizing, and multiple – and the more conventional attachments to nation, empire, and race go to the heart of musical theater culture as it was constituted at the turn of century and its self-conscious position at a turning point of modernity.

Again, such dimensions became particularly engaged in cultures of translation and adaptation. These transformed Paul Lincke’s *Frau Luna* (1899) into a London West End stage show produced at the Scala in 1911. Here a production originally set in the vicinity of Alexanderplatz, a locality with which every Berliner and tourist would be familiar, became reconfigured as *Castles in the Air*, a translation of one of the show’s three big hit songs in the original “*Schlösser, die im Monde liegen*.” A show that must

have once seemed quintessentially “Berlin” – one of its songs, “*Berliner Luft*” (“Berlin Air”), became a great theme song for the city – was in this way newly convened for West End audiences in a Notting Hill setting. On the one hand, the capacity for fluid metamorphosis was part of a generic modernizing world that musical theater represented and in some ways made real. On the other hand, the imperative to construct these shows in “native” terms seemed a reminder of the more fixed dimensions of regional, national, and racial identities.

During World War I, Continental transfer and exchange ceased almost overnight. By the time such interchange resumed in the 1920s, the popular theater landscape had changed in some key respects. The jubilant embracing of contemporaneity as “gaiety,” so much the stock in trade of musical comedies and earlier German operettas, appeared no longer viable to the same degree, or, at least, not in the standard West End formulation. The war had rendered their particular variety of naïve and cheerful optimism in the face of the modern world obsolete, not to say tasteless. In terms of the Continental export market, operettas remained popular but in a revisionist form: the once-characteristic mix of localism and cosmopolitanism firmly positioned as a confident negotiation of the modern gave way to spectacles of a different kind: historical romances such as *Madame Pompadour* and *Die Barry*, both of which were set in prerevolutionary France. Or else, like Lehár’s *Die Blaue Mazur* (1920) – which played London in 1927 as *The Blue Mazurka* – or *Wenn Liebe erwacht* (*When Love Awakens*, 1922), they existed in mythic no time and fairy tale no place. In postwar operetta, contemporary complexities were displaced by a return to the safeties and securities of aristocratic order, traditional romance, and waltzes – the standard components of a “Viennese” musical theater now being virtually mass produced in the new center for this kind of product. Berlin became the principal exporter of operetta after World War I, with that form later becoming one of the few versions of popular theater culture to be appropriated by National Socialism.²⁵

Play after play in this period followed the same design: after an initial nod to the contemporary condition, they back-pedaled into less controversial territory. *Die Frau im Hermelin* (1919), performed in London as *The Lady of the Rose*, notionally a historical musical, nevertheless pointed to potential contemporary conflict because, produced just a few years after real European revolution, it was set in the days of the Italian *risorgimento*. Within a few pages, however, the show had become a romantic Gothic

romance, its terms of reference shifting from revolution to the more domestic domain of a lady's "honour." *Der Vetter aus Dingsda* (*The Cousin from Nowhere*, 1923), on the other hand, began with contemporary dialogue and potential conflict between age and youth. But what starts as the modern story of a young woman coming of age and exerting authority over her guardian quickly shifts gear when a modern house is transformed into a castle in "Faeryland / As in the tales of the days that have been." Here the real 1920s and the notoriously unstable flapper identity were ceremoniously discarded to make way for the return of a traditionalist cousin singing "a yodelling song."

By comparison to the earlier period, the 1920s and 1930s saw a taste developing for a particularly safe version of the romantic. A popular theater that once struggled to embrace the volatility of the modern world seemed now in retreat. Global war, economic upheavals, and social and political bifurcation appeared to have rendered accommodation beyond the bounds of "entertainment." Against this background, it comes as no surprise that adaptation of the cosmopolitan modern gave way to uniform escape into the nonspecific world of "Ruritania" or a snowy "Austria." The dynamic exchange culture of prewar musical theater, in which metropolitan centers competed for authority over the unstable modern, was put firmly back in its box.

In these historiographies, then, popular culture is not part of a progressivist force leading to the flowering of art cultures but rather responds to shifts in the precise historical conditions that surround its formulation. These are never linear, but nor are they simple, and it is, of course, not the suggestion here that by the 1920s popular theater as a vibrant urban culture had lost its force. Clearly it had not. An engaged popular theater entertainment was far from dead and buried. On the contrary, it was becoming more strongly identified with the stylish and sophisticated innovations of an American stage now strongly competing for authority over the modern. At the same time, other forms of popular theater were constructing new versions of contemporary life – new modernisms – sometime with alarming implications.

Again, it was revue, one of the most underresearched forms of popular theater, that led the way, in this respect constituting, in the postwar period, a new wave that frequently took iconoclastic positions in specific relation to what was now perceived as the established, and tired, conventions of musical comedy. In its postwar West End incarnation, revue was very much a new kind of entertainment that laughed at the passing of

the old. Indeed, the revue of the postwar years took the fantasy worlds defined by musical comedy and operetta and turned them upside down. Operating with a new sense of speed and urgency, revue displaced the stately dynamics of the popular theater plot with a wild energy. Far from creating a consistent fabric, whether in terms of narrative or style, the up-and-coming form aimed for bizarre shifts and dramatic transformations at every level. Melodrama could snap into show-time glitz at any minute; film was often interpolated into the performance, implying a multimedia practice that emphasized difference rather than assimilation. The whole production, although written as a single text with songs, dance routines, and sketches, had little interest in narrative coherence. It was not that revue was too unsophisticated to sustain traditional story, as was sometimes argued, but, rather, that it eschewed what it saw as the narrative simplicity and romanticism of the earlier form. Its humor was more abrasive, more risqué, and less stylized than in musical comedy. Routines became parodies of routines; indeed, parody and pastiche became a definite hallmark of revue. More than a simple displacement of one fashion for another, shows like Charlot's *London Calling* (1923), scripted by Noël Coward and Roland Jeans, exemplified the challenge of revue as a complex expression of the new against the passé.

This dynamic of shift and engagement, far from being alien, was, and is, general to modern commercial culture. It expressed the characteristic imperative for innovation and demonstrated how conceptions of cultural value could change almost overnight in the world of popular entertainment. But more than this, in the London manifestation, revue carried the idea not just that popular theater in its traditional forms had become old hat but that modernity itself had changed in ways that the conventional stage simply could not accommodate. As I have expressed it elsewhere, “in its *most* disruptive, anarchic form, revue represented a kind of *walpurgnacht* version of modernity, where reality, far from being mediated, contained and generally made safe, was always in danger of running out of control.”²⁶

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Notes

- 1 Gerald M. Berkowitz, *American Drama of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Longman, 1992), 1.
- 2 Gerald Bordman, *American Musical Theater: A Chronicle*, 2nd edition (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 58.
- 3 Thomas Postlewait, "From Melodrama to Realism: The Suspect History of American Drama," in *Melodrama. The Cultural Emergence of a Genre*, eds. Michael Hays, Anastasia Nikolopoulou (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), 47.
- 4 A brief indicative bibliography might include Michael R. Booth, *Victorian Spectacular Theatre 1850–1910* (London; Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981); Jacky S. Bratton, *Music Hall: Performance and Style* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1986); Peter Jelavich, *Berlin Cabaret* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); and Peter Bailey, "'Naughty but Nice': Musical Comedy and the Rhetoric of the Girl," in *The Edwardian Theatre*, eds. Michael R. Booth and Joel H. Kaplan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
- 5 The Melville brothers (Walter and Frederick) were composers of melodramas in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; Jimmy Davies, who called himself "Owen Hall" because of his notorious financial debts, wrote the librettos for such musical comedies as *A Gaiety Girl* (1893) and *Floradora* (1899); Lionel Monckton was one of the most well-known composers of musical comedy – he worked on the scores of *The Cingalee*, *The Country Girl* (1902), *Our Miss Gibbs*, and many others. Rubens was a gifted librettist and composer who worked on *The Dairymaids* (1906), *Dear Little Denmark* (1909), *The Balkan Princess* (1910), and so on.
- 6 David Meyer, "Encountering Melodrama," in *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian and Edwardian Theatre*, ed. Kerry Powell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 147.
- 7 See Elaine Aston and Ian Clarke, "The Dangerous Woman of Melvillean Drama," *New Theatre Quarterly* 12, (1996), 30–42. For an outline approach to melodrama, see Meyer, "Encountering Melodrama," 135–63.
- 8 This was also partly a response to the New Woman. See Len Platt, *Musical Comedy on the West End Stage* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 130–17.
- 9 See Frank E. Washburn Freund, "The Theatrical Year in Germany," *The Stage Year Book 1911*, 57–68 (65).
- 10 The forms were converging in this period, but operetta remained the more serious form in musical terms and musical comedy more disposed toward comic interventions.
- 11 William Archer, *The Theatrical World of 1896* (London: Walter Scott, 1896), 298–305.
- 12 Huntly Carter, *The New Spirit in the European Theatre 1914–1924* (London: Ernest Benn Ltd, 1925), 85.
- 13 James T. Tanner, *Our Miss Gibbs* (British Library: Lord Chamberlain's Plays, 1909), 2.
- 14 See Judith Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (London: Virago Press, 1994), 45–50.
- 15 Meyer, "Encountering Melodrama," 160. See also David Meyer, "Changing Horses in Mid-Ocean: *The Whip* in Britain and America," in *The Edwardian Theatre: Essays on Performance and the Stage*, eds. Michael R. Booth and Joel H. Kaplan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 220–35.
- 16 Jose Harris, *Private Lives, Public Spirit: A Social History of Britain 1870–1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 33.

- 17 Lewis shows a surprising capacity for discrimination in singling out the popular musical actress Gertie Millar for praise. Instead of being “blasted,” this particular performer is “blessed,” perhaps in acknowledgment of her beauty. Wyndham Lewis, *Blast 1* (1914; London: Thames and Hudson, 2009), 11, 21, 21, 28. While some fin de siècle artists and intellectuals – Rudyard Kipling, F. Anstey, Max Beebohm, Arthur Symons, Arnold Bennett, Walter Sickert, and so on – had a regard for musical hall, few expressed any serious interest in the more bourgeois forms. One exception in this respect was James Joyce, who built the “Sirens” episode of *Ulysses* in part around *Floradora* and incorporated titles of musical comedies into *Finnegans Wake*. See Len Platt, *James Joyce and Finnegans Wake* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 121–37.
- 18 Jean Baudrillard, *Fatal Strategies*, trans. Philip Beitchman and W.G.J Niesluchowski, ed. Jim Fleming (London: Semiotext(e)/Pluto, 1990), 166–79.
- 19 See Jelavich, *Berlin Cabaret*, 104–17. London was a dominant theme in an earlier stage of London drama, as suggested by the titles of plays like *The Heart of London* (1830), *The Scamps of London, or the Crossroads of Life* (1843), *London by Night* (1845), and so on. Later musical theater was differently disposed. See Michael R. Booth, “The Metropolis on the Stage,” in *The Victorian City*, vol. 1, eds. H.J. Dyos and Michael Wolff (1973; London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1976), 211–24. London returned as the subject of latter revues like *London Calling* (1923) and *The London Revue* (1925).
- 20 Metropol Theater, *Das muß man sehn!* (1907), 1907, Rep. 30 c/a. Theater Z, Neuir Teil, Landsarchiv, Berlin.
- 21 Marline Otte, *Jewish Identities in German Popular Entertainment, 1890–1933*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 265.
- 22 H. Grattan, *Odds and Ends* (British Library manuscripts: Lord Chamberlain’s Plays, 1914, n.p.).
- 23 Jay Winter and Jean Louis Gordon, *Capital Cities at War: London, Paris, and Berlin 1918–19* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 26.
- 24 Quoted in Ines Hahn, “Das Metropol-Theater. Theater als sichere Geldanlage,” in *Theater als Geschäft*, ed. Ruth Freydank (Berlin, 1995), 93.
- 25 See Richard Traubner, *Operetta: A Theatrical History* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), ix. Traubner’s account gives some indication of just how central Berlin was in this respect. The full extent of Berlin’s importance in this respect, however, has yet to be fully articulated.
- 26 Platt, *Musical Comedy on the West End Stage*, 134.