CHAPTER 13

Decadence and the Antitheatrical Prejudice

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Theater has long been thought to be inadequate or injurious because of its tendency to go wrong, or to run along lines that are deemed to be, in some way, aesthetically or morally wrong. The theater historian Jonas Barish's magisterial study, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (1981), is the most comprehensive chronicle of theater's manifold wrongness, a subject that the theater scholar Nicholas Ridout later pulled front and center in his wonderfully engaging book, *Stage Fright, Animals, and Other Theatrical Problems* (2006). For Ridout, the precarious liveness of theater – its tendency to break down with the forgotten line or the child performer taking matters into their own hands – forms the very basis of its queasy ontology.[1] But in the late nineteenth century, theater's wrongness had less to do with the mesmeric pull of liveness's vulnerabilities, and more to do with its relationship to the ascendency of bourgeois morality, the perception of declining artistic standards, and a society transformed by industry. Of particular note were those champions of fin-de-siècle decadence and symbolism, like Anatole Baju and Maurice Maeterlinck, who believed that the materiality of theater obstructed the poet's aesthetic and spiritual aspirations. Arthur Rimbaud put their desired solution best when he proposed to embrace the domestic setting as a "a stage-set of sorts," fit for flights of pseudotheatrical fancy.[2]

Each of these considerations – moral, aesthetic, and metaphysical – identify theater's wrongness as a form of impurity, and considering them together can potentially shed some instructive light on core issues of relevance to this volume. Firstly, such an approach enables us to better understand how theater pertained to decadence over the course of the fin de siècle, which, in turn, can help with illuminating the cultural politics of the 1890s. Secondly, a cross-disciplinary methodology that cuts across Literary Studies and Theater and Performance Studies has plenty to teach us about a few misleading assumptions regarding the 1890s – including the extent to which theater was (and in some quarters still is) regarded as a

minor or inappropriate topic in the study of decadence and related areas, like symbolism, where literature tends to steal the limelight – as well as the unfortunate neglect of decadence in Theater and Performance Studies, which has remained stubbornly resistant to even recognizing "decadent theater" as a relevant subject of study. What makes this latter point especially galling leads me to the final issue that this chapter is looking to address: how perceptions of theater as a decadent institution (in the sense of it being in artistic decline or causing some kind of moral corruption) tie in with what Barish identifies as an "antitheatrical prejudice," on the one hand, and an *apparent* rejection of a decadent theater among theatrical modernizers in the 1890s, especially self-professed decadents and symbolists, on the other. As it turns out, this very prejudice was generative in the evolution of theater itself as a site for aesthetic experimentation, which is part and parcel of what makes the 1890s such a fascinating period of study in addressing the early development of modernism.

Of particular concern in addressing each of these areas is discourse *about* theater and decadence, which forms this chapter's primary focus. This discourse threatened the survival of particular theaters after influential voices prompted the enforcement of legislation that led to their closure, just as it threatened the survival of those involved in making theater. It also exposes cultural and political attitudes, be it with regard to the cultivation of bourgeois morality, taste, or a desire for or resistance to industrial "progress." At the same time, plenty of artists and writers associated with fin-de-siècle decadence expressed the view that theater was not decadent enough, which again offers clues as to their values and beliefs. What interests me most in all this is how theater produces not just artistic representations, but the bases upon which those representations and those who do the representing are judged, along with the institution of theater itself. In other words, I am interested in what the discursive conjunction of "decadence" and "theater" can tell us about taste, discrimination, and the attribution of value in the 1890s, and beyond.

Part of the problem in considering how decadents and critics of decadence were thinking about theater's wrongness has to do with the semantic promiscuity of decadence as a concept. The theater and literary critic Richard Gilman is particularly probing in expressing his frustration with the protean qualities of the term "decadence," describing it as "an unstable word and concept whose significations and weights continually change in response to shifts in morals, social and cultural attitudes, and even technology," existing "precariously and almost cabalistically" in and beyond a promiscuous set of words like "world-weary," "self-indulgent,"

"ultrarefined," "overcivilized," "debauchery," "effeteness," "depravity," "hedonism," "luxuriousness," "decay," "degeneration," and "retrogression."[3] As this list suggests, "decadence" is essentially a placeholder term that depends on a specific context for meaning. It also has a theatrical quality insofar as it tends to represent, and often mask, something else: a prejudicial attitude, perhaps, in which the word is used as a generic pejorative that might be linked to any of the other terms that Gilman outlines; or an aesthetic style or genre; or perhaps a taste that can be cultivated – such as a taste for decay or delight in disgust, which the literature scholar David Weir identifies as a key facet of fin-de-siècle decadence in Europe, and which might help with moving "the conceptual difficulty that attaches to decadence" from an "intellectual liability" to "an aesthetic asset . . . more a matter of sensibility than rationality."[4] Equally, though, we might ask what this intellectual liability has to say about the beliefs and values of a given interlocutor. This might help in ascertaining the cultural politics of decadence, staging the ways in which it is imbued with different meanings – for instance, with regard to those who condemn decadence when they see it, and those who embrace its potentialities, not least when such a concept is embodied, and put into practice as a cultural force. Of particular interest in the context of this chapter is the extent to which the semantic promiscuity of decadence informs not just the relationship of theater to decadence, but the cultural politics of the 1890s more broadly, be it with regard to ethics, the emergence of modernism, or the extent to which this emergence was driven by how the relationship of ideas and concepts to their material realization were understood. The ways in which theater's wrongness plays into all three areas invite us to reconsider how we envisage the creativity and cultural tumultuousness of the 1890s, the significance of decadence as a generative aesthetic concern in its own right (and not simply as a poor cousin of symbolism), as well as our understanding of decadence itself, which is still cast in the long shadow of antitheatrical prejudice.

One reason for the relative neglect of or resistance toward the study of theater and decadence has to do with the fact that there is no coherent style, genre, or aesthetic category to which decadence refers.[5] As Sos Eltis, who is an important scholar in the context of this chapter, observes:

> "Decadent theatre" is not an established genre or commonly used category within British theatre studies. . . . Though the word "decadent" was frequently used to bemoan the "foul boulevard cynicism" and "debauched palates" of fashionable playwrights and audiences, it did not delineate an artistic school or movement, but simply a sense that moral and artistic

> standards were dropping; even the pantomime was diagnosed as "decadent" in 1896.[6]

The sense that theater is somehow complicit in the decline of moral and artistic standards is as old as theater itself. It can be found from Plato's condemnation of theater's duplicity and moral dubiousness, right through to debates of our own age about the distribution of public subsidy in periods of austerity and crisis.[7] At the same time, as Barish suggests, "the most active and sustained hostility" toward the stage tends to be provoked in the very moments "when it becomes a vital force in the life of a community."[8] The prominence of decadence as a point of reference in late nineteenth-century theater practice and criticism is no exception. Many writers associated with decadence wrote works for the stage – which is to say, works intended to be embodied and enacted, rather than merely read as verse dramas – and many theater makers and performers either affiliated themselves with decadence's inner circles, or were recognized as embodying the reasons why decadence and associated concepts have been both lauded and condemned. Those associated with decadence in the 1890s may not have formed a coherent artistic movement *as theater makers*, although many came to be associated with both decadence and symbolism by leading critics of the day, captured most clearly in the retitling and development of Arthur Symons's "The Decadent Movement in Literature" (1893) into *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899);[9] but the extent to which *any* movement of the fin de siècle can be definitively taxonomized is up for debate, as the coterminous bed-hopping of naturalists, symbolists, and decadents goes some way toward illustrating. For instance, the playwright Henrik Ibsen might have "had no aspiration towards or association with the Decadent movement," but, as Eltis observes, he remains a key reference point in the study of theater and decadence despite being more generally regarded as a progenitor of realism (Eltis, "Theatre and Decadence," 205). In the eyes of his critics, at least, Ibsen's work was the very epitome of decadence – laced with venereal disease, incestuousness, and with the look and feel of "an open drain; of a loathsome sore unbandaged; of a dirty act done publicly"[10] – but, as Eltis goes on to note, "the distinctions between expelling, exploring and exploiting decadence were often so fine as to exist only in the viewer's mind" (Eltis, "Theatre and Decadence," 207).

So "decadence" is both an unruly concept, and promiscuous in its attachment to genres, styles, and categories. Hence, rather than establishing decadent theater as a coherent concept or practice, it would be better,

I argue, for us to discover how decadence is refracted in the hands of different playwrights, performers, and theater makers; how it travels across countries and decades; how it is shaped by the material circumstances of its production and reception; how it is condemned, appropriated, and queered relative to the dominant tastes and conventions of its day; and how it exceeds the textual as embodied or enacted phenomena. Decadence's penchant for boundary crossing is one of the things that makes decadence decadent, and the "active and sustained hostility" toward the very idea of a decadent theater gives us an excellent starting point for discovering it as a vital force in the artistic exploration of perversity, transgression, and gloriously subversive ruination. Moreover, such an approach to decadence might have something important to tell us about the charge of theater being in some way wrong, with the codification of this wrongness over the course of the fin de siècle being as good a place as any to start.

Moral Scourge

Theater's wrongness is embedded in commonplace metaphors and frames of reference. To "put on an act" or to describe something as "stagey," "melodramatic," or "theatrical" is usually intended to cast doubt on the authenticity or integrity of a person, behavior, or situation. Unruly children or subjects at the end of their tether might also find themselves reprimanded for "making a scene" or "making a spectacle" of themselves. These are all expressions of what Barish calls "the antitheatrical prejudice," and they are confined neither to the English language, nor to recent history. As Barish writes, "European languages abound in such expressions, most of them pejorative. They embody, in current terms, the vestiges of a prejudice against the theater that goes back as far in European history as the theater itself can be traced" (Barish, *Antitheatrical*, 1). Outside of Europe, actors in India, Southeast Asia, and China have been associated with baseness or vileness in ways that excluded them from full social integration (Barish, *Antitheatrical*, 1), and the sheer extent of the antitheatrical prejudice – its historical as much as its geographical reach – suggests that it constitutes more than an aberration. Rather, as Barish puts it, it forms the very basis of an "ontological malaise, a condition inseparable from our beings" that one can trace from Tertullian's theologically motivated condemnation of spectacles as "instruments of malign spirits," to the "saving salt of antitheatricalism" in the work of twentieth-century playwrights like Peter Handke (Barish, *Antitheatrical*: 2, 45, 464). To this we

might add the hyperbolic diatribes of seventeenth-century puritans like William Prynne, who believed theater audiences to be "contagious in quality" and "apt to poison, to infect all those who dare approach them, than one who is full of running Plague-sores";[11] Friedrich Nietzsche's critique of "theatrocracy" in *The Case of Wagner* (1888), concerned as it is with Richard Wagner as "*the artist of decadence*";[12] and Michael Fried's "Art and Objecthood," his famously disparaging assessment of the theatrical condition in (1967)[13] – these being just a few of the best-known examples.

Antitheatricality still haunts the practice and study of theater and performance, not least at a time when actor-statesmen and reality TV presidents demand that we recognize how theatricality has both problematized and become "central to our imagining of the historical *real*."[14] As performance historian and live artist Dominic Johnson acknowledges, "solo performance, body art and performance art have often prompted scholars to imagine that such work is motivated by a seemingly atavistic attempt at embodying truth, presence or authenticity," reclaiming each from a reality blemished by theatricality, be it with regard to the performance maker Ron Athey's self-obliterative martyrdoms, which "attempt to get beyond representation *through representation* itself," or Marina Abramović's insistence on the artist's presence, or in the work of canonical avant-garde playwrights like Handke and Samuel Beckett.[15] I highlight this merely to stress that the "ontological malaise" Barish identifies reaches deep within the study and practice of theater and performance as well as literature, and might even be said to define the emergence of Performance Studies as a discrete discipline in the late twentieth century, not least in the disparagement of theater as "the string quartet of the 21st century: a beloved but extremely limited genre, a subdivision of performance," to borrow from performance scholar Richard Schechner.[16] In Schechner's hands, theater reads as an outmoded institution – a decadent institution at odds with the supposed radicalism of performance in art, protest, and everyday life.

Antitheatricalism, then, is not so easily consigned to the history books; nonetheless, it has a habit of spreading at specific historical junctures. The late nineteenth century is just such an example, when puritanical diatribes against theater's "decadence" had serious consequences for its makers and stakeholders. For instance, the power exercised by the Lord Chamberlain's Office, which had the prerogative of censoring plays in Britain from 1737 until the 1968 Theatres Act abolished theater censorship, disincentivized or posed an obvious hurdle to the production of controversial

theater performances in fin-de-siècle Britain. Those who took the plunge in legally permissible private performances often did so at no small risk to themselves – for instance, when J. T. Grein's Independent Theatre Society staged the 1891 London premiere of Ibsen's *Ghosts* (1881), or when Grein's career was effectively ruined during the notorious Pemberton-Billing trial in 1918 following a production of Wilde's *Salomé* (1891) starring the dancer Maud Allan. The trial was initiated when Grein and Allan tried to sue the Conservative Member of Parliament Noel Pemberton-Billing for libel after he permitted his newspaper to publish outrageous attacks on their character, although the trial soon became a platform for Pemberton-Billing to subject them to absurd and explicitly homophobic slander that condemned both as antipatriotic degenerates in a time of war. Likewise, the 1895 trials of Oscar Wilde for "gross indecency" had already set a precedent – with Wilde ultimately imprisoned in Reading Gaol, and regarded as a pariah thereafter – making abundantly clear what was at stake for those associated with a decadent theater.[17]

As literature scholar Matthew Brinton Tildesley points out, the 1888 Local Government Act also gave local councils in Great Britain control over the issuing of music hall licenses, while adherents to a resurgent moral purity movement lobbied local councils "in a partially successful attempt to close down the music halls (distinctly reminiscent of the original puritans' closing of the theaters of the seventeenth century)":

> The mouthpiece for this campaign was Laura Ormiston Chant, who opposed the license for *The Empire* on the grounds that "the place at night is the habitual resort of prostitutes in pursuit of their traffic, and that portions of the entertainment are most objectionable, obnoxious, and against the best interests and moral well-being of the community at large."[18]

For activists like Chant, the performer embodied licentiousness and performed material was prone to spreading moral corruption, prompting temporary closures of music halls while investigations were undertaken concerning the performed material and comportment of the performers. In the case of *The Empire*, this involved making "structural alterations to the building in an attempt to screen off prostitutes from the theater's clientele. This was, however, pulled down by the crowds when the theater reopened" (Tildesley, "Decadent Sensations," 164). (One can imagine the many defenders of sensuous or erotic artistic practice at the time, like Symons and Selwyn Image, being among the first in line to do so).[19]

The early twentieth century, too, was rife with the antitheatrical prejudice in contexts ranging from the political arena, to cultural production. For instance, in a speech delivered to the House of Commons in 1900,

Liberal politician and social purity advocate Samuel Smith condemned "the growing tendency to put upon the stage plays of a demoralising character" – he mentions Arthur Wing Pinero's *The Gay Lord Quex* (1899), along with a couple of touring performances from the United States – calling for stricter supervision of theater performances, and deploring what theater critics had long since recognized as "the decadent character" of "degrading" and "foul and corrupting plays". He goes on:

> The moral standard of a country is largely affected by the drama. Multitudes of young men and young women form their ideas of what is right and wrong in no small degree from what they witness on the stage; and when they see the purest and holiest things of life turned into derision, and disgusting licentiousness treated as the normal rule of life, is it likely that their own moral standard will remain high? Is it not certain that the same effects will follow in London as in Paris in that a decadent drama, and, what always accompanies it, a decadent literature, will produce a decadent nation?[20]

Smith's opprobrium was no doubt exacerbated by a significant rise in the number of theaters in London, where his scorn is largely poured, nearly doubling between 1860 and the mid-1880s (Quilter, "The Decline of Drama," 547). As a consequence, theater itself was seen to take on a virulent quality.

Although Smith set the tone for his remarks in an 1888 speech on literary decadence – in which he publicly deplored the rapid spread of "demoralising" and "pernicious" French literature – the emphasis that he places on plays *in performance* tends to elude the attention of scholarly commentators.[21] "The written words of a play do not really show its moral tendency," he writes: "That depends on dress, gestures, and suggestive acting" (Smith, "Mr Samuel Smith, M.P.," 7). In other words, it is not the metaphysical theater conjured into consciousness when reading verse dramas that is ultimately at stake for Smith in this particular rant, but a theater of bodies in a shared space, and all that means for the potential transmission of affect from a corrupt stage to an impressionable audience. Hostility, then, but at the same time a recognition of theater's place and power as a moral technology not just within an elite metropolis, but, in Smith's hyperbolic assessment, with regard to the very fiber and moral backbone of a nation – a theme that Arthur Balfour, the former Tory Prime Minister, would later pull front and center in his 1908 Henry Sidgwick Memorial Lecture on political and national decadence.[22]

As with most examples of the antitheatrical prejudice, Smith identifies a threat to established structures of power and privilege in ways that acknowledge theater's potentially transformative power, priming the

rhetorical toolbox for subsequent critiques of theater and theatricality in the twentieth century, including the theatrical or performative presentation of self. For instance, in 1935, the North American art critic Thomas Craven took aim not just at paintings, but at the dandyish demeanor and mannerisms of painters. His vitriol targeted the "shapely, slender hands" of male artists, their sensitivity, and involvement in what he dubbed "the modern cult of effeminacy."[23] As the performance historian Amelia Jones has persuasively argued, examples like this evidence a clear connection between decadence and homophobic antitheatricality, in which Wildean dandyism came to be seen as the glue connecting "effeminate and implicitly homosexual weakness in artistic execution to the supposed decadence of European art" and literature, *especially* with regard to the "threat" of theatricality.[24] As Jones puts it, in such contexts theatricality is understood to be "debased because it is connected implicitly to femininity or to gay men who are effeminate; in turn, femininity and gay masculinity are assumed to be theatrical, lesser versions of human embodiment and subjectivity" (Jones, *In Between Subjects*, 131). Here, theatricality stands as the "perverted" cousin of self-formation, aligning more with "the artificial, the unnatural, the abnormal, the decadent, the effete, the diseased," always and forever "infected with queerness."[25]

Theater in Decline

Moral purity advocates had a particular axe to grind in condemning theater's supposedly inherent wrongness, but a very different set of diagnoses come into play when we turn to theatrical declinism, especially with regard to the creative sclerosis of an industry dominated by commercial incentives and the popularity of melodrama. There is no shortage of examples of theater critics and impresarios condemning the "decadence" of theater as an outmoded institution buckling under the weight of declining artistic standards. Examples range from Louis Charpentier mourning the "decadence" of taste in eighteenth-century France, to Peter Brook's influential condemnation of "deadly theater" in *The Empty Space* (1968).[26] Eltis has usefully drawn attention to a number of other examples that are specific to the late nineteenth century, including the English critics Harry Quilter and Oswald Crawfurd.27 Quilter diagnosed late nineteenth-century theater in London as being subject to an insidious process of decay: the contemptible consequence of neglecting tragic drama and "genuine" comedies in favor of "the decadence of the lighter forms of dramatic representation," and an unhealthy favoring of Gallic dramas

(Quilter, "Decline," 552). His xenophobia and snobbery are thinly veiled, as is his chauvinism in perceiving "that decadence in national spirit and taste, which has made of us late years think that all artistic products emanating from France must of necessity be superior to those of our own country" (Quilter, "Decline," 552). Crawfurd, too, thought that appeals to the taste of rural and working-class audiences at the cost of "educated" metropolitan counterparts, the prioritization of melodramas suited to long runs, and the actor-manager system were all causes of theater's decadence" (Crawfurd, "The London Stage," 501–06). Bigotry clearly guides their diagnoses of theater's decadence, as it did with the moral puritans, but Quilter and Crawfurd were really taking aim at what they saw as declining standards in the quality of playwriting and theater making.

It is the insistence on theater's unique characteristics as an art form – a temporal and material art of bodies acting in space – that tends to be highlighted by these critics as a particularly worrisome concern. Quilter was not just taking aim at the moral dubiousness or derivative qualities of plays; rather, he traced the decadence of London theater to "the conditions of the stage itself" (Quilter, "Decline," 554–55). Putting aside the xenophobic perception of foreign influence on the composition of plays, it was the "upholsterer" of theater (who we might now call a scenographer, although he really means anyone other than the playwright) who was ultimately to blame for the degradation of English drama (Quilter, "Decline," 556). Similarly, Crawfurd reserves his most stringent criticism for the actor-manager. In other words, recognizing the fact that these critics advocate for putting art before profit,[28] the very assets that distinguish theater from dramatic literature stand as primary culprits in the diagnosis of theater's decadence (Crawfurd, "The London Stage," 510–11).

The Italian performer Eleonora Duse is an important figure in this discussion, as she exemplifies how an individual decrying artistic stultification can be acknowledged in turn as the very embodiment of decadence.[29] Her commentaries and influence on the theater of the 1890s is also a fascinating example to consider in appreciating the counterintuitively generative role played by the antitheatrical prejudice in the emergence and development of modernism. In words that would go on to inspire Symons and the theater designer Edward Gordon Craig, she famously declared that "to save the Theatre, the Theatre must be destroyed, the actors and actresses must all die of the plague. They poison the air, they make art impossible."[30] This is typical of the rhetoric favored by avant-gardists and modernists of the period, who found the making and reception of theater to be unbearably sclerotic. Better, they thought, to

start over in the pursuit of a craft worthy of the name, which for Duse led to the pioneering of a modern, naturalistic performance style. However, where stock references to a need for theater to be "cleansed" reek of macho and fascistic grandstanding (Filippo Tommaso Marinetti being a prime example), Duse's mid- to late career – after her split with the decadent author and playwright Gabriele d'Annunzio – lends a feminist edge to her demands for innovation. Her attitude toward feminist activism in Europe may well have been conflicted, but, as Susan Bassnett acknowledges, she was determined to celebrate women on stage "who impose their will upon the world around them," surviving *in spite* of their suffering.[31]

Duse's association with New Womanhood was fostered through her predilection for playing roles like Pinero's Paula Ray, or Ibsen's Nora Helmer and Hedda Gabler. Although her fame was linked to her naturalistic depiction of these roles, which was considered innovative and was celebrated as such, her gendered association with modernity and modernism also fueled disparaging allusions to decadence and disease in the eyes of contemporaries. She was seen as "the woman of modern times," as fellow actress Adelaide Ristori put it, "with all her complaints of hysteria, anaemia and nerve trouble and with all the consequences of those complaints; she is, in short, the fin de siècle woman."[32] It is as though the role that helped establish her career – a portrayal of the consumptive Camille in Alexandre Dumas *fils*'s play *La dame aux camélias* (1852) – had "infected" her playing of a very different kind of woman in search of agency and autonomy, at least in the eyes of commentators for whom the New Woman was both subject to sickness as well as a kind of disease. With Duse and her critics, the cultural politics of decadence and disease played out as a battleground over which the relationship of a modern theater to its past was fought.

Discontent with theater – the kind that prompted Duse to say that "the Theatre must be destroyed" – had a formative role to play in the evolution of modernism, not least modernist theater and drama. As literature and theater scholar Martin Puchner writes: "Even the most adamant forms of modernist antitheatricalism feed off the theater and keep it close to hand. The resistance registered in the prefix *anti* thus does not describe a place outside the horizon of the theater, but a variety of attitudes through which the theater is being kept at arm's length and, in the process of resistance, utterly transformed."[33] Puchner's remarks offer vital insight into the relevance of the antitheatrical prejudice for modernist theater and drama – and indeed the period of modernism – but equally they offer insight into those strands of theatrical and literary experimentation in the late nineteenth century that have been misleadingly described as intermediaries

between the agony of romanticism and the early years of modernism, respectively: namely, decadence and symbolism.[34] What is more, as the section "Metaphysical Impurity" explores, the antitheatrical prejudice played an important role in how poets, playwrights, and theater makers associated with decadence and symbolism were thinking about their practice, including the innovativeness of that practice (a counterintuitive notion that has been amply substantiated in Vincent Sherry's work on the "essentially progressive energy" of a decadent modernism turned against modernity).[35] In fact, it had a formative role to play in how these poets, playwrights, and theater makers were thinking about a wide range of transformations, be it with regard to the self, cultural expression, or the forward march of industrial progress.

Metaphysical Impurity

Several important playwrights and commentators associated with decadence had an uneasy and at times confrontational relationship with theater. In part this is due to the close intersections between decadence and symbolism – or, as I put it in this chapter's opening section, the tendency for fin-de-siècle playwrights to bed-hop, experimenting with multiple affiliations between and within different artistic and intellectual communities. For example, Wilde and Rachilde championed the leading symbolist theater of the day – the Théâtre d'Art – and wrote plays that became closely associated with symbolism, but at the same time they were recognized as decadents, and these very same works are routinely folded into the orbit of decadence. The bifurcation of symbolism and decadence – especially the former's association with modernist beginnings, and the latter with crepuscular endings – is really the product of "literary polemic," as Sherry puts it, rather than adversarial struggle (Sherry, *Modernism*, 7). And an important cornerstone of this polemic was the antitheatrical prejudice.

As theater historian John Stokes explains in an elucidating commentary on the "Paterian paradox," the symbolist yearning for a disembodied voice became "an intolerable ideal, a contradiction even, once the Decadent was given the opportunity of assuming a public presence, an identifiable and vocal personality" (Stokes, "The Legend of Duse," 151). Many symbolists regarded the search for metaphysical purity as being in some way tainted once expressed, or made public, not least when sullied by a public art of bodies in space, like the theater. Theater renders the Paterian paradox particularly acute, which explains why many symbolists and decadents

were resistant to the prospect of staging. Thus we find Anatole Baju, who founded the literary review *Le Décadent* (1886–89), suggesting that "life itself was theatre, or at the very best circus"; reason enough, he thought, to abandon theater's material trappings.[36] It is worth stressing that Baju's writing on decadence lacked any real consistency, and he came to see *décadisme* and *symbolisme* as rival literary schools;[37] nonetheless, as a self-professed decadent, his call for the abandonment of theater is odd given the theater's various associations with sensuousness and perversity of the kind surveyed in this chapter. It is even more odd given how many of his peers in France and neighboring countries were committed playwrights, including Wilde, Rachilde, Jean Lorrain, Remy de Gourmont, Maurice Maeterlinck, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, and Gabriele d'Annunzio.

Many of the primary culprits for propagating the pursuit of metaphysical purity in symbolist art and literature held a more complex relation to theater than outright dismissal, like Stéphane Mallarmé. Mallarmé's "systematic retreat from the stage" only started after the Théâtre-Français rejected two fragmentary plays that he had been writing between 1864 and 1867 – *Hérodiade* (1871) and *L'Après-midi d'un faune* (1876) – prompting him "to formulate the famous doctrine of symbolism: 'To paint not the object, but the effect it produces'"[38] Interestingly, as Puchner acknowledges, the evolution of *Hérodiade* from a rejected play to a closet drama, which was eventually published in 1871, is characterized by the removal of stage directions, "as if to prove how little he was thinking of theatrical representation" (Puchner, *Stage Fright*, 59). Puchner sees this transition as encapsulating a view of theater withdrawn from reality that was to reach its apogee in the decadent protagonist of Joris-Karl Huysmans's *À Rebours*, Des Esseintes, "whose favorite activity resides in reading Mallarmé's poetic dramas in the solitude of his own closet" (Puchner, *Stage Fright*, 59). But the reverence with which Mallarmé viewed and valued "the effect" produced by an object of symbolist interest was still deeply invested in *the idea* of the performing body, and was inspired by encounters with its movements. For instance, Mallarmé regarded Loïe Fuller's dances as an exceptional form of poetry, and although he was more interested in the dancer as a metaphorical figure than he was in their physicality, it was their physical being which prompted his metaphysical interests. In other words, Baju's antitheatricalism (in 1887, at least) reduced a more complex antinomy – the Paterian paradox – to a caricature of Mallarmé's more nuanced sense of this antinomy *as* an antinomy, which depends on the performing body in the crafting of a mimetically impossible enterprise.[39]

The best-known example of a playwright concerned with the aesthetic "wrongness" of theater is the Belgian playwright Maurice Maeterlinck, whom Eltis describes "as the pre-eminent Decadent dramatist" of fin-de-siècle Paris (Eltis, "Theatre and Decadence," 201). Maeterlinck suggested in his writings that theater should be no more than a "temple of dreams," and that the "mystic density of a work of art" risked being jeopardized by the corporeality of living actors.[40] This is in fact typical of modernist antitheatrical prejudice, which tended to center on the actor – albeit not always for the same reason as Maeterlinck, who viewed the actor as an impediment to ethereality. This is why, as Frazer Lively notes, Maeterlinck "refused to let his first play be produced in the theater, and for a time he resisted having any of his works staged. He envisioned his dramas as plays for marionettes" (Lively, "Introduction," 10), or shadows – but this did not stop him from becoming one of the foremost playwrights of his age, perhaps *because* he held fast to a belief that "the more uncompromisingly one dismisses theater, the more triumphantly one can claim it back" (after all, he was as much a master of atmosphere and the scenographic technologies needed to produce it as he was of poetry).[41] In light of Puchner's observations about modernist antitheatricality, perhaps we might think of Maeterlinck's apparent antitheatrical prejudice less in terms of being a call to abandon theater, and more as a basis for its redemption. Read along these lines, decadent theater emerges not simply as the regressive underside of those genres typically regarded as "modernist," like naturalism, but as an important cornerstone in a theater aspiring toward a state as yet unrealizable, and for that reason all the more appealing to those interested in transgressing the recognized limits of theatrical possibility.

Redeeming Decadent Theater

Once we read Maeterlinck's relationship with theater as being predicated on a desire to transform its potential, we can begin to appreciate why he permitted the impresario Paul Fort to stage his works with his Théâtre d'Art. The Théâtre d'Art produced eight varied programs between 1890 and 1892, presenting plays by several writers associated with decadence and symbolism, including Maeterlinck, Rachilde, Pierre Quillard, Remy de Gourmont and Catulle Mendès. And it did so in ways that were, as cultural historian Patrick McGuinness recognizes, "interestingly staged, innovatively designed and thoughtfully performed," (McGuinness, "Mallarmé," 151), while at the same time actively supporting a community of peers – for instance, by holding benefit performances for decadent

playwrights and poets, like Paul Verlaine.[42] Decadent glitterati were also closely involved in promoting and supporting the Théâtre d'Art, including Rachilde and Wilde. Rachilde's reputation, which was firmly established by 1890, brought their programs to the attention of literary and intellectual elites who were drawn to the staging of her own plays. She also joined the theater's programming committee and wrote favorable reviews of productions. Wilde, too, served as an artistic advisor. If, as literature scholar Matthew Potolsky argues, decadence is less a coherent mode of production than it is "a characteristic mode of reception," or "stance,"[43] then the communities that built around theaters like the Théâtre d'Art provided a forum for cultivating and even enabling this stance. Hence, while an international and cosmopolitan "republic of letters" fostered cross-pollination in the development of this mode of reception, excuses for gathering and supporting one another as a community with shared interests – be it at the theater, the café, or the salon – were at least of equal significance. This invites us to put to rest more reductive characterizations of decadence, due in no small part to the influence of Paul Bourget, that celebrate it merely as an atomistic literary tendency advanced by solipsistic antiheros.[44]

However much symbolist poets and their affiliates lauded metaphysical purity, and however much they denigrated theater's necessarily public means of expression, it is notable that reviews of work performed at a "temple" of symbolist theater, the Théâtre d'Art, tended to appraise it on the basis of the physical attractiveness of a performer. It was ultimately the "skinniness" of Georgette Camée as the leading role in Percy Bysshe Shelley's supposedly unperformable play *The Cenci* (1819), and the "disproportionate size" of Lucie Dénac as The Wife in the 1890 premiere of Rachilde's *La Voix du sang (Voice of Blood)*, that drew the staunchest criticism (Lively, "Introduction," 13–16). As Lively puts it, "no matter how 'cerebral' or 'ideal' the symbolists intended a production to be, the libidinal effect of the actors on the audience could still make or break a show" (Lively, "Introduction," 16). And it was not just the performers on stage who drew attention. The audience, too, appeared eccentrically dressed, described by one critic, Georges Roussel, at the opening night of Rachilde's *Madame La Mort* (1891), as "decadentish-instrumentish-Maeterlinckish-symbolist poets, painters, neo-traditionalist, pointillist-impressionist or not pointillist! So many revolutionary mops of hair! All those floppy felt hats, in colors which strangely complement one another!" (Lively, "Introduction," 20). To attend the premiere of a work that might claim its seat at the table of decadent theater was also to participate in the

formation of a decadent *socius*, performing allegiance with a "decadentish" crowd in ways that ought to prompt pause for thought about decadent atomization. Theater's publicness made decadent cosmopolitanism explicit – it performed it – just as it had a hand in its very possibility.

It is important to add that some of the leading lights of fin-de-siècle aestheticism and decadence were also critics and theorists of theater and performance. For instance, Symons, in an essay on Wagner, describes how

> the drama written as literature, at a distance from the theatre, and with only a vague consciousness of the actor, can be no other than a lifeless thing. . . . Wagner's best service to drama, in his theories as in his practice, is the insistence with which he has demonstrated the necessary basis of the play in theatre. . . . No one has seen more clearly the necessity of "tempering the artistic ends to be realised" to the actual "means of execution" which are at the artist's disposal.[45]

In other words, the emphasis so often placed on the preservation of metaphysical purity in studies of decadence and symbolism, such as those famous studies advanced by Symons himself, ought at least to be colored by recognition of the fact that he was an advocate not just of drama, but the creation of "beauty for an instant" in live performance (Symons, *Plays, Acting, and Music*, 3). Even when writing about Maeterlinck's plays, "which do all they can to become disembodied," Symons insists on the importance of their being staged, aspiring toward "atmosphere without locality . . . [which] Mr. Craig can give us so easily" (Symons, *Studies*, 358). And this recognition of the *potential* for theater to provide a home for even the most extravagant or "unperformable" scenes is ultimately what prompts him to find a potentially exciting compromise with the scenographic, inviting us to resist thinking about decadent or symbolist drama as a drama of the mind only. This accounts for Symons's desire to draw pantomime (a wordless art) into dialogue with poetic drama (a metaphysical literature), just as it accounts for why he dedicates his essays on theater in *Studies in Seven Arts* (1906) to considerations of Wagner, Duse, Craig, and Alfred Jarry, all of whom, with the possible exception of Craig, have been associated with decadence in some form or another. These artists were interested in more than contemplation; for them, sensational experience came first and foremost, as did the practice of theater *as a practice*.

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Theater should not be dismissed as an erroneous or marginal topic in the study of late nineteenth-century decadence. The cultural politics of

decadent rhetoric clearly affected what plays were staged, and how they were staged – if they were staged at all – but there is no shortage of examples of plays and indeed a whole host of performance forms that might usefully be reclaimed as important examples of decadent theater and performance, especially when we consider decadence as a concept and a practice that travels across styles, genres, movements, and aesthetic categories.[46] Such an endeavor demands that we pull into focus the grounding of theater in particular historical moments, particularly those that subject decadence to conflicting cultural associations and instrumentalist political uses, as was clearly the case in Britain and France in and around the 1890s, when decadence served as a cultural-political crucible that evolved in tandem with the antitheatrical prejudice. It also demands that we recognize the important discursive roles played by decadence and the antitheatrical prejudice in the fostering of a modern theater, at once opposed to modernity's valorization of commerce, and invested in the transformational impulses of modernism.

For moral puritans of the 1890s, the relationship of theater to decadence was black-and-white: theater is a moral technology, and hence capable of advancing the decadence of a community, society, or nation. But for playwrights or would-be playwrights and poets like Maeterlinck and Mallarmé, the antitheatrical prejudice takes on a paradoxical character of a kind that does not merely signal the atrophy or decline of artistic innovativeness; rather, as Puchner recognizes, antinomy toward theater and the theatrical plays into the evolution of theater itself. To this end, theater's decadent wrongness – moral, aesthetic, or metaphysical – and indeed theater's standing as an embodied and enacted practice, may be the best starting point we have for appreciating its role in a nascent modernism. Equally, theater's decadent diagnoses in the late nineteenth century invite reconsideration of movements and categories, like naturalism and symbolism, that are so often taken for granted in Theater and Performance Studies as coherent and stable points of reference. In short, dwelling on theater's decadent wrongness might stand as a corrective for theater's omission from studies of decadence, as well as the disregard for decadence that has for so long affected the study of theater and performance.

Acknowledgment

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Notes

1 Nicholas Ridout, *Stage Fright, Animals, and Other Theatrical Problems* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 3. Ridout borrows the notion of an "ontological queasiness" from Barish.
2 Arthur Rimbaud, "VIGILS (*Illuminations XX: Veillées*)," in *Arthur Rimbaud: Selected Works in Translation*, ed. and trans. A. S. Kline (London: Poetry in Translation, 2008), 168.
3 Richard Gilman, *Decadence: The Strange Life of an Epithet* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975), 19, 33.
4 David Weir, "Afterword: Decadent Taste," in *Decadence and the Senses*, eds. Jane Desmarais and Alice Condé (Cambridge: Legenda, 2017), 219–28 (220).
5 For exceptions, see "Staging Decadence," https://www.stagingdecadence.com/blog (accessed July 21, 2021); Adam Alston and Alexandra Trott, eds. "Decadence and Performance," special issue of *Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies* 4, 2 (Winter 2021).
6 Sos Eltis, "Theatre and Decadence," in *Decadence: A Literary History*, ed. Alex Murray, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 201–17. See also Harry Quilter, "The Decline of Drama," *Contemporary Review* 51 (April 1887): 547–60 (551–52); Oswald Crawfurd, "The London Stage," *Fortnightly Review* 47, 280 (April 1890): 499–516 (506); Charles Dickens, "On the Decadence of Pantomime," *Theatre* 27 (January 1896): 21–25.
7 See, for instance, Assed Baig, "During Times of Austerity Art is Just Middle-Class Decadence," *Huffington Post* (February 20, 2013), https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/assed-baig/during-times-of-austerity_b_2349132.html (accessed February 8, 2019).
8 Jonas Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1981), 66.
9 Arthur Symons, "The Decadent Movement in Literature," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* (November 1893), 858-67; Arthur Symons, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (London: Archibald Constable & Co., Ltd., 1908).
10 Editorial Comment," *Daily Telegraph* (March 14, 1891)," in *The Fin de Siècle: A Reader in Cultural History C. 1880–1900*, eds. Sally Ledger and Roger Luckhurst (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 127.
11 William Prynne, *Histriomastix: The Player's Scourge, or Actor's Tragedy* (New York: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1972 [1632]), 152.
12 Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Case of Wagner (1888)," in *The Nietzsche Reader*, ed. Keith Ansell Pearson and Duncan Large (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 451–55 (453), emphasis in original. For a complete version of this text with the postscripts referencing "theatrocracy," see https://archive.org/stream/thecaseofwagnern25012gut/25012-pdf_djvu.txt, (accessed June 3, 2021).
13 Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood,"in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battock (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1968), 116–47.

14 Alan Ackerman and Martin Puchner, "Introduction: Modernism and Anti-Theatricality," in *Against Theatre: Creative Destructions on the Modernist Stage*, eds. Alan Ackerman and Martin Puchner (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 1–17 (4), emphasis in original.
15 Dominic Johnson, "Introduction: Towards a Moral and Just Psychopathology," in *Pleading in the Blood: The Art and Performances of Ron Athey*, ed. Dominic Johnson (London: Live Art Development Agency; Bristol: Intellect, 2013): 10–41 (12–13), emphasis in original; see also Ridout, *Stage Fright*, 5–6.
16 Richard Schechner, "A New Paradigm for Theatre in the Academy," *TDR* 36, 4 (Winter 1992): 7–10 (8).
17 See Philip Hoare, *Wilde's Last Stand: Scandal and Conspiracy During the Great War* (London and New York: Duckworth Overlook, 2011).
18 Laura Ormiston Chant, quoted in Matthew Brinton Tildesley, "Decadent Sensations: Art, the Body and Sensuality in the "Little Magazines,'" in Desmarais and Condé, *Decadence and the Senses*, 162–81 (164).
19 See Joseph Bristow's writing on Symons's "addiction" to The Empire: Joseph Bristow, '"Sterile Ecstasies": The Perversity of the Decadent Movement', in *The Endings of Epochs*, ed. Laurel Brake (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1995), 65–88 (74–75). See also John Stokes, *In the Nineties* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester-Wheatsheaf, 1989), 60–61; Arthur Symons, 'The Paris Music Hall', in *Plays, Acting, and Music* (London: Duckworth and Co., 1903), 123–26 (123).
20 : Samuel Smith, 'Mr Samuel Smith, M.P., on immoral plays', *Rhyl Record and Advertiser*, May 19, 1900, 7, https://newspapers.library.wales/view/3638338/3638345/50 (accessed January 9, 2021); see also Eltis, 'Theatre and Decadence', 207. 9
21 Quoted in Simon Heffer, *The Age of Decadence: Britain 1880 –1914* (London: Random House, 2017), 502. Julie Stone Peters's brilliant chapter on "the theatrical obscene" does not address Smith's speeches, but it nonetheless speaks to this point; see Julie Stone Peters, "Performing Obscene Modernism: Theatrical Censorship and the Making of Modern Drama," in *Against Theatre*, eds. Ackerman and Puchner, 206–30.
22 Arthur James Balfour, *Decadence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1908). I am borrowing the term "moral technology" from Terry Eagleton, via Ridout's discussion of theater as a moral technology. See Nicholas Ridout, *Scenes from Bourgeois Life* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2020), 68–73 passim.
23 Thomas Craven, "Effeminacy?," *The Art Digest* (October 1, 1935): 10.
24 Amelia Jones, *In Between Subjects: A Critical Genealogy of Queer Performance* (London and New York: Routledge, 2021), 152.
25 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Andrew Parker, "Introduction," in *Performativity and Performance*, eds. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Andrew Parker (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), 1–18 (5, 6); see also Jones, *In Between Subjects*, 133.

26 Louis Charpentier, *Causes de la décadence du goût sur le theatre (Causes of the decadence of taste in theatre*, (Paris: Dufour, 1768); Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (London: Penguin, 2008).
27 See Eltis, "Theatre and Decadence."
28 Both Quilter and Crawfurd condemn the commercialization of the English stage; however, Crawfurd goes further in calling for a robust system of public arts subsidy as the only sensible means of remedial action that might be taken.
29 See John Stokes on Duse's being "firmly identified with Decadence as an international phenomenon." John Stokes, "The Legend of Duse," in *Decadence and the 1890s*, ed. Ian Fletcher (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1979), 151–71 (154).
30 Eleonora Duse quoted in Arthur Symons, "Eleonora Duse," *Contemporary Review,1866–1900* 78 (August 1900): 196–202 (198).
31 Susan Bassnett, "Eleonora Duse," in *Bernhardt, Terry, Duse: The Actress in Her Time*, eds. John Stokes, Michael R. Booth, and Susan Bassnett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 119–70 (167).
32 Quoted in Meredith Conti, *Playing Sick: Performances of Illness in the Age of Victorian Medicine* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), 74.
33 Martin Puchner, *Stage Fright: Modernism, Anti-Theatricality, and Drama* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 2.
34 See, for instance, Mario Praz, *The Romantic Agony*, 2nd ed., trans. Angus Davidson (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1970). To paraphrase Edmund Wilson, we might say instead that decadence and symbolism thrived in one another's teeth. Edmund Wilson, *Axel's Castle: A Study of the Imaginative Literature of 1870–1930* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004), 10.
35 Vincent Sherry, *Modernism and the Reinvention of Decadence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 24–25.
36 Quoted in Frantisek Deak, *Symbolist Theater: The Formation of an Avant-Garde* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 22–23. See also Anatole Baju, *L'Ecole décadente* (Paris: Vanier, 1887), 31.
37 See David Weir, "Decadent Anarchism, Anarchistic Decadence: Contradictory Cultures, Complementary Politics," in *Anarchism and the Avant-Garde: Radical Arts and Politics in Perspective*, ed. Carolin Kosuch (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2019), 129–52 (141).
38 Mallarmé quoted in Puchner, *Stage Fright*, 59.
39 "[*Hérodiade* is] absolutely scenic, not possible in the theater, but requiring the theater." Mallarmé quoted in Puchner, *Stage Fright*, 60.
40 Quoted in Frazer Lively, "Introduction," in Rachilde*, Madame La Mort and Other Plays*, ed. and trans. Kiki Gounaridou and Frazer Lively (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 10.
41 Patrick McGuinness, "Mallarmé, Maeterlinck and the symbolist via negativa of theatre," in Ackerman and Puchner, *Against Theatre*, 149–67, 150. Maeterlinck's pact with theatre also speaks to Petra Dierkes-Thrun's writing on the "postmetaphysical." Petra Dierkes-Thrun, *Salome's Modernity: Oscar*

Wilde and the Aesthetics of Transgression (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2011), 3, 28.

42 The Théâtre d'Art held a benefit performance for Paul Verlaine and Paul Gauguin in 1891, presenting Maurice Maeterlinck's *L'Intruse* (1891), Verlaine's *Les Uns et les Autres* (1884), and Charles Morice's *Chérubin* (1891). See Théâtre d'art, printed serial, March 20, 1891, https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k1051560v/f4.item (accessed May 28, 2021).

43 Matthew Potolsky, *The Decadent Republic of Letters: Taste, Politics, and Cosmopolitan Community from Baudelaire to Beardsley* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 4.

44 Paul Bourget, "The Example of Baudelaire," trans. Nancy O'Connor, *New England Review* 30, 2 (2009), http://cat.middlebury.edu/~nereview/30-2/Bourget.htm (accessed April 20, 2021). For a study of the same tendency in Symbolism, see Wilson, *Axel's Castle*, 211.

45 Arthur Symons, *Studies in Seven Arts* (London: Archibald Constable and Company Ltd., 1906), 283–84.

46 For a much broader and more international range of examples not covered in this chapter, see the website for the Staging Decadence project, https://www.stagingdecadence.com.