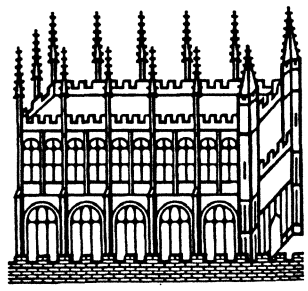
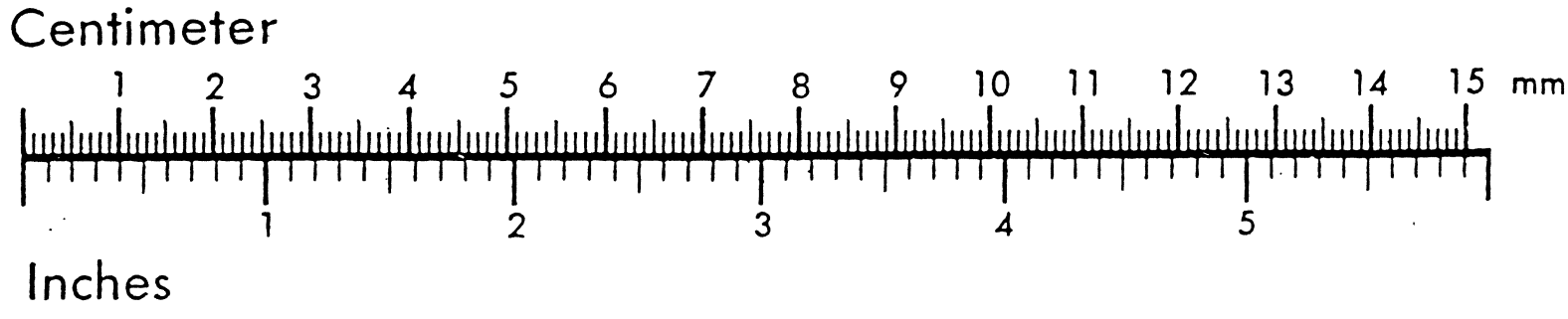
SCANNED BY

OXFORD UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES
IMAGING SERVICE

FROM THE COLLECTIONS IN

THE BODLEIAN LIBRARY
UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD





Images © Bodleian Library, University of Oxford

STUDIES IN THE HISTORY AND FUNCTION OF THE BRITISH THEATRE PLAYBILL AND PROGRAMME 1564–1914

DAVID ROBERT GOWEN

ST. CATHERINE'S COLLEGE

UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

D.PHIL.

HILARY TERM 1998

VOLUME ONE

TEXT

BODLEIAN LIBRARY OXFORD
DEPOSITED THESIS

ABSTRACT

Studies in the History and Function of The British Theatre Playbill and Programme 1564–1914

David Robert Gowen
St. Catherine's College, Oxford

D.Phil.
Hilary Term 1998

This thesis offers a comprehensive account of the history, forms and content of playbills and theatre programmes; of the different contexts of their physical production, dispersal and varied uses; and, beyond their immediate utility as a record of author, work, cast, place and time of performance, considers the evidence they yield of the social contexts of theatregoing. Chapter one demonstrates the ways in which diverse approaches to the classification of playbills and programmes facilitate an understanding of their most basic ingredients. Chapter two offers an account of the production and distribution of playbills and programmes from the mid-sixteenth through the early-twentieth centuries. Chapter three explores the relationship between bills of the play and other theatrical documentation. The historical considerations undertaken in the second section, chapters four through six, represent a chronological overview of the numerous developments to the form and content of the British theatre bill occurring between 1564 and 1914. The functional considerations undertaken in the final section offer an analysis of the duties fulfilled by the British theatre bill, before, during and after a production. Chapter seven is concerned with the role of the playbill in anticipation of the future, as a source of both allure and information. Chapter eight examines the role of the programme in conjunction with the present, as a guide to both the play and the theatre. Chapter nine concludes the study, discussing the role of the bill of the play in reflection on the past, as a chronicler of both theatre history and social history.

PREFACE

Within the text of the present work some attempt is made, through the use of roman and italics, full and small capitals, to represent the varying forms of display found on the bills of the play cited. Additionally, most of the items referred to are reproduced in the accompanying volume and are described in the tables of illustrations and appendices which follow the table of contents in these preliminary pages. Identical tables are also included in the accompanying volume. Each figure is captioned with a brief reference to the identity of the document and to its source, while the appended facsimiles are identified within the tables. All descriptions are cross-referenced to the first part of the bibliography, *items cited*, most entries in which, representing images reproduced from previously published materials, are in turn cross-referenced to the comprehensive list of *works cited*, with which the bibliography concludes.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The completion of the present work has depended heavily on the guidance and support of numerous individuals. I wish to express my sincerest gratitude to my supervisor, Emrys Jones, who at every stage has actively supported both the project itself and my attempts to share it with others, gently directing my reading and research to invariably fruitful ends. I have also benefited tremendously from the advice and encouragement of several additional Faculty members, and wish especially to thank John Carey, Terry Eagleton, Barbara Everett and Don McKenzie for facilitating my introduction to a wide variety of invaluable source material.

I am most grateful to the Society for Theatre Research for a generous award which has contributed significantly to the expense of laser copying hundreds of documents, many of which are included herein. Barbara Cavanagh of Motley Books has kindly permitted my reproduction of several illustrations from *The Century of the Programme* (Romsey, Hampshire: Motley, 1985); and Derek Forbes has thoughtfully shared a number of fascinating specimens from his personal collection. I must also thank the Houghton Library for the opportunity to spend four weeks at the Harvard Theatre Collection, where Michael Dumas, Curatorial Assistant, has remained the tirelessly resourceful friend he became almost immediately upon my arrival. Generous travel grants from St. Catherine's College and St. Hugh's College have enabled this and other research trips abroad. The Houghton Library, the Bodleian Library, the Theatre Museum and the Hertford Museum have all graciously allowed me to reproduce a variety of specimens from their archives.

I wish, finally, to thank Edith Hall and Oliver Taplin for their continued support, and to thank my friends Thomas Barlow and Cynthia Saenz for the cheer, inspiration and insight they have lent to the duration of my residency at Oxford—while my deepest debt of gratitude remains to my parents, Dorothy and Bob Gowen, for the unconditional love, trust and encouragement which they continue to bestow upon their favourite, if only, child.

For my Parents

Dorothy and Bob Gowen

CONTENTS

Preface iii
List of Illustrations bound into Volume Two vii
List of Appendices bound into Volume Two xi

I: CONTEXTS OF PRODUCTION

1. FORM, CONTENT, FUNCTION 2
   Defining the Bill of the Play
   Basic Ingredients
   Variations on the Standard Format
2. COMPOSITION AND DISTRIBUTION 45
   Sponsorship and Authorship
   Printing
   Distribution and Sale
3. RELATED DOCUMENTATION 83
   Theatrical Memorabilia and the Stage
   The Special Case of Playbills and Programmes

II: HISTORICAL CONSIDERATIONS

4. THE SIXTEENTH AND SEVENTEENTH CENTURIES 112
   Elizabethan, Jacobean and Caroline Theatre
   Commonwealth and Restoration Theatre
   Late-Stuart Theatre
5. THE EIGHTEENTH AND EARLY-NINETEENTH CENTURIES 140
   Georgian Theatre
   Early-Victorian Theatre
6. THE LATER-NINETEENTH AND EARLY-TWENTIETH CENTURIES 179
   Later-Victorian Theatre
   Edwardian and Post-Edwardian Theatre

III: FUNCTIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

7. IN ANTICIPATION OF THE FUTURE 209
   Allure
   Information
   Advance Documentation
8. IN CONJUNCTION WITH THE PRESENT 231
   The Play and Its Production
   The Theatre and Its Management
   Concurrent Documentation
9. IN REFLECTION ON THE PAST 255
   Theatre History and Social History
   Collections and Archives
   Retrospective Documentation

Bibliography 281

ILLUSTRATIONS

Bound into Volume Two

CHAPTER 1

Fig. 1. Early identification of both performer and playwright · 1703 1
Fig. 2. Oldest bill heralding a professional indoor production · 1687 2
Fig. 3. Location and starting times included on a playbill · 1672 3
Fig. 4. Venue specified on the oldest illustrated playbill · 1655[?] 4
Fig. 5. Variety of scenes promised for unspecified dates · 1699[?] 5
Fig. 6. Titles consistently positioned below dates · 1829; 1837; 1844 6
Fig. 7. Stars consistently identified above dates · 1831; 1848; 1850 7
Fig. 8. Earliest extant cast list for a professional production · 1716 8
Fig. 9. Souvenir cast list comprising actors' signatures · 1902 9
Fig. 10. Early illustration in an British playbook · c. 1514–1516 10
Fig. 11. Illustrated puppet handbill lacking the royal arms · 1710 11
Fig. 12. Elegant woodcuts dominating a travelling stock bill · 1795 12
Fig. 13. Early allusions to both great bills and playhouse rules · 1718 13
Fig. 14. Royal command printed near the top of a silk bill · 1800 14
Fig. 15. Paper souvenir bill with pierced borders imitating lace · 1850 15
Fig. 16. Anniversary programme printed on a Japanese fan · 1896 16
Fig. 17. Bell-shaped programme accompanying a benefit · 1886 17
Fig. 18. Souvenir programme in the shape of a looking glass · 1893 18
Fig. 19. Wax-sealed envelope enclosing a souvenir programme · 1913 19
Fig. 20. Page in a colour-illustrated souvenir programme · 1880 20

CHAPTER 2

Fig. 21. Sponsorship acknowledged at the foot of a playbill · 1868 21
Fig. 22. Charles Dickens's manuscript cast list additions · 1842 22
Fig. 23. Playbill draft authored by Charles Dickens · 1847 23
Fig. 24. *Times* extract printed in a theatre programme · 1863 24
Fig. 25. Authors' note included in a theatre programme · 1888 25
Fig. 26. George Bernard Shaw's personal programme design · 1899 26
Fig. 27. Theatre manager's order taken by an all-night printer · 1920 27
Fig. 28. Playbills hand-delivered by provincial actors · 18th Century 28
Fig. 29. Playbills sold with oranges at the doors of the theatre · 1804 29
Fig. 30. Bill-poster over-sticking announcements on a hoarding · 1840 30
Fig. 31. Anonymous attack against programme fees · c. 1891–1895 31
Fig. 32. *Punch* cartoon depicting outdoor playbill sales · 1862 32

CHAPTER 3

Fig. 33. Early announcement for a conjuring act · 1795 33
Fig. 34. Various entertainments scheduled on a broadside · 1821 34
Fig. 35. Oldest extant theatre ticket printed on card · 1716 35
Fig. 36. Dress code stipulated at the foot of a playbill · 1853 36

Fig. 37. Cast list included in a prompt book/acting edition · c. 1839 37

CHAPTER 4

Fig. 38. Oldest British document connected with theatrical billing · 1602 38
Fig. 39. Oldest extant French playbill · 1629 39
Fig. 40. Oldest extant German playbill · c. 1630 40
Fig. 41. Cast handwritten onto the '*Drammatis Personæ*' of a play · 1637 41
Fig. 42. Caroline broadside printed by Thomas Cotes · after 1630 42
Fig. 43. Amateur cast list of students reverse printed in Latin · 1681 43
Fig. 44. Royal arms omitted on the oldest British handbill · 1692 44
Fig. 45. Old handbills sharing identical size and format · 1692–1694 45
Fig. 46. Explicit directive printed at the foot of a playbill · 1697 46
Fig. 47. Promotional lure printed at the top of a playbill · 1697 47
Fig. 48. Red ink and prices distinguish the oldest benefit bill · 1703 48
Fig. 49. Formulaic handbill includes the royal arms · 1703 49
Fig. 50. Composers, musicians and dancers credited · 1704 50
Fig. 51. Fragment of a great bill · 1705 51
Fig. 52. Modifications to both royal arms and company's name · 1708 52

CHAPTER 5

Fig. 53. Credits for playwright, actors, singers and dancers · 1724 53
Fig. 54. Physical arrangement of the house described in detail · 1737 54
Fig. 55. Superfluous royal arms omitted from a patent playbill · 1745 55
Fig. 56. Drury Lane playbill designed by David Garrick · 1770 56
Fig. 57. Covent Garden bills during and after John Rich · 1753; 1767 57
Fig. 58. Year included in date on the oldest extant Irish playbill · 1737 58
Fig. 59. Audience responses suggested in lengthy plot synopsis · 1777 59
Fig. 60. Afterpiece playfully described directly above its title · 1778 60
Fig. 61. Production history abbreviated below a touring title · 1778 61
Fig. 62. Alternating lines of type printed in red and black ink · 1779 62
Fig. 63. Song books advertised near the bottom of a playbill · 1781 63
Fig. 64. Settings and processions described in a pantomime bill · 1795 64
Fig. 65. Concluding time estimated on the final line of a playbill · 1794 65
Fig. 66. Comforts described and subscriptions offered · 1798 66
Fig. 67. Printer's name included at the bottom of a playbill · 1793 67
Fig. 68. Managerial indulgence on Master Betty's debut playbill · 1803 68
Fig. 69. John Philip Kemble announces increased ticket prices · 1809 69
Fig. 70. Engraving's caption parodies a conventional billing phrase · 1809 70
Fig. 71. Edmund Kean featured in a playbill-within-a-playbill · 1814 71
Fig. 72. Performers and performances described and promoted · 1815 72
Fig. 73. Eliza O'Neill's absence granted typographical prominence · 1816 73
Fig. 74. Extended puff of a previous evening's entertainment · 1824 74
Fig. 75. Permission of the Lord Chamberlain begins a playbill · 1831 75
Fig. 76. Double bill announcing ballet, drama and pantomime · 1833 76
Fig. 77. Dramatic action rendered on an illustrated playbill · 1833 77
Fig. 78. Multiple stage setting depicted on an illustrated playbill · 1833 78
Fig. 79. House alterations noted near the lower edge of a playbill · 1834 79

Fig. 80. Printed seating plan possibly distributed with a playbill · 1834 80
Fig. 81. Contrastive typography and elaborate narratives · 1839 81
Fig. 82. Twelve woodcut illustrations of scenes from a melodrama · 1839 82
Fig. 83. List of patrons and a prototypical programme biography · 1841 83
Fig. 84. Scenes and action described on a tavern theatre bill · 1850 84
Fig. 85. Parental encouragement included at the foot of a playbill · c. 1850 85

CHAPTER 6

Fig. 86. Multiple typefaces simultaneously employed on a playbill · 1870 86
Fig. 87. One of the very first wholly pictorial theatre posters · 1871 87
Fig. 88. Caricatures of costumed actors frame a programme cover · 1872 88
Fig. 89. Textual double playbill reports the opinions of the press · 1872 89
Fig. 90. Literary magazine programme and a pictorial programme · 1877 90
Fig. 91. Early programme resembling both a poster and a playbill · 1877 91
Fig. 92. Portraits of George Rignold and Charles Wyndham · 1879; 1884 92
Fig. 93. Familiar image retained on programme covers · 1880; 1881; 1884 93
Fig. 94. Scenes entitled and summarised humorously · 1880 94
Fig. 95. Opening-night variation on the usual *dramatis personae* · 1883 95
Fig. 96. Electric lighting announced in a new theatre's programmes · 1881 96
Fig. 97. Stage lighting and special effects credited in a programme · 1883 97
Fig. 98. Early full-colour representational rendering on a booklet · 1885 98
Fig. 99. Music hall bills characterised by a variety of founts · 1886; 1887 99
Fig. 100. Extensive acknowledgements in a pantomime programme · 1887 100
Fig. 101. Drinks lists included on a pictorial music hall bill · c. 1890 101
Fig. 102. Admission prices announced on an illustrated variety bill · 1897 102
Fig. 103. Colour-lithographed portrait inserted into a programme · 1892 103
Fig. 104. Interior and exterior views depicted in a music hall bill · 1894 104
Fig. 105. Exterior architecture at both the Avenue and Daly's · 1896; 1898 105
Fig. 106. Market value of investors listed on an opening night bill · 1899 106
Fig. 107. George Bernard Shaw's attractive decorated *day bill* · 1899 107
Fig. 108. George Bernard Shaw surrounded by fictitious posters · 1899 108
Fig. 109. Painting of a stage set reproduced in a souvenir booklet · 1901 109
Fig. 110. Principal character painted for a souvenir programme · 1902 110
Fig. 111. Painting reproduced on a souvenir parchment scroll · 1903 111
Fig. 112. Touring cast list surrounded by advertisements · 1904 112
Fig. 113. Programme cover depicting exterior architecture · 1904 113
Fig. 114. Edwardian souvenir programmes · 1906–1908 114
Fig. 115. Three large portraits reduced to announce a production · 1910 115
Fig. 116. Costume designer's illustration for a programme cover · 1912 116
Fig. 117. Programme's cover illustration based on a costume design · 1912 117
Fig. 118. Photographs of minor players included in a programme · 1912 118
Fig. 119. Advertisements fill a magazine programme · early-20th Century 119

CHAPTER 7

Fig. 120. Seating re-arrangements anticipated near the foot of a bill · 1788 120
Fig. 121. Payment demanded from servants near the foot of a bill · 1796 121
Fig. 122. Ben Grossmith's protracted maturation · 1831; 1833; 1835; 1839 122

CHAPTER 8

Fig. 123. Coffee and ices advertised at the foot of a programme · 1883 123
Fig. 124. Smoking restrictions included in a programme · 1894 124
Fig. 125. Cigars, curtains and firemen promoted on a playbill · 1904 125
Fig. 126. Bonnetless policy reflected on a programme cover · 1919 126
Fig. 127. Explanatory handbook advertised on a playbill · 1856 127
Fig. 128. Charles Dickens identified as Mr. Crummles on a playbill · 1855 128
Fig. 129. Protest against managerial policy organised on a broadside · 1763 129
Fig. 130. Anti-theatrical tract circulated as a broadside · 19th Century 130
Fig. 131. Colour-lithographed images imported into stationery · 1890s 131
Fig. 132. Theatrical woodcut appropriated by a Victorian broadsheet · 1888 132
Fig. 133. Annotated religious tract disguised as a playbill · 1774 133
Fig. 134. Anti-Tory election poster imitates the layout of a playbill · 1832 134
Fig. 135. Anti-Whig election poster imitates the layout of a playbill · 1845 135
Fig. 136. Renovated coffee house promoted on a playbill · 1834[?] 136
Fig. 137. Grocery store advertised as a Christmas pantomime bill · 1844 137
Fig. 138. Theatre historian's farewell commemorated with a playbill · 1996 138
Fig. 139. Grump remains indifferent to his programme · 19th Century 139

CHAPTER 9

Fig. 140. Police authority invoked in warnings on a playbill · 1852 140
Fig. 141. Oldest extant American playbill · 1750 141
Fig. 142. Nineteenth-century type-facsimile of an old *great bill* · 1807 142
Fig. 143. Title and cast list survive on a decapitated playbill · 1855 143
Fig. 144. Cast list prematurely included on a forged playbill · c. 1820 144

APPENDICES

Bound into Volume Two

App. A. Top and bottom halves of a large pantomime playbill · 1856 145
The Fox and the Grapes, playbill, 1856, rpt. in Robert Wood, *Entertainments*, pl. 30.

App. B. Britain's first in-house magazine programme · 1869 147
Bill of the Play 1.1, magazine programme, 1869, Theatre Museum: 'St. James's Theatre'. Courtesy of the Theatre Museum, Covent Garden.

App. C. Various images of disaster depicted on a playbill · 1856 149
Maureen, playbill, 1876, rpt. in Robert Wood, *Entertainments*, pl. 28.

App. D. Three-panelled, colour-lithographed cardboard programme · 1890 150
London Assurance, programme [facsimile], 1890, Halcyon Cards, n.d.

App. E. Decoration and advertising coexist on a folded programme · 1891 151
The Times, programme [facsimile], 1891, Halcyon Cards, n.d.

App. F. Venue's popular trademark rendered on a programme · 1892 152
Lady Windermere's Fan, programme [facsimile], 1892, Halcyon Cards, n.d.

App. G. Interior architecture depicted on a programme cover · c. 1891 153
The Acrobat, programme [facsimile], c. 1891, Halcyon Cards, n.d.

App. H. Representational art conceals interior advertisements · 1903 154
The Orchid, programme [facsimile], 1903, Halcyon Cards, n.d.

‘The playbill’s the thing!’

Barbara Everett

PART I

CONTEXTS OF PRODUCTION

CHAPTER 1

FORM, CONTENT, FUNCTION

Theatre playbills and programmes are documents. They are texts. They are even books, according to Walter Wilson Greg's definition of *books*, which includes 'not only printed books but manuscripts, and indeed every sort of record made by the symbolic representation of language'.[1] Furthermore, as published documents, bills of the play can potentially be classified according to criteria of form, content and function. But no universal guidelines exist and such classifications do not result in, or from, any absolute definitions. On the contrary, the very fact that any one, or any combination, of these criteria is theoretically applicable renders such objectivity unattainable. Even the apparently simple distinction between *playbill* and *programme* depends upon the approach taken towards such designations. From a formalistic perspective, for example, a playbill might acquire the status of *programme* when it has been printed on more than one leaf; a content-oriented approach might require no more than the playbill's inclusion of a cast list before declaring it a *programme*; and a functional viewpoint might deem as *programme* any playbill which is intended to be read in the theatre, in conjunction with the performance. Many documents will satisfy the requirements of all interpretations: based on the sample guidelines listed above, a bill printed on two leaves, containing a cast list to be read in the theatre would unequivocally qualify as a *programme*. Here the three criteria exist in a complementary relationship. Just as often, however, they contradict one another; and with the addition to the nomenclature of designations such as big-bills, bills-of-the-day, board-bills, books-of-songs, books-of-words, box-office-cards, broadsides, daybills, dodgers, double-bills, fair-bills, great bills, hand-bills, hanging cards, heralds, house-bills, magazine-programmes, pamphlet-programmes, placards, posters, semi-posters, shop-bills, streamers, throwaways, title-boards and window bills, the

---

[1] W. W. Greg, 'Bibliography: A Retrospect', *The Bibliographical Society, 1892–1942* (London: n.p., 1945), p. 25.

likelihood of limiting any of these terms to a single meaning diminishes further still. The three chapters of the present section consider British theatre bills as published texts, classifiable according to their form, content and function. It is not, however, the intention in this chapter to advance specific definitions for all of these documents, but rather to demonstrate the ways in which diverse approaches to the classification of such texts facilitate an understanding of the bill of the play's most basic ingredients—and the numerous variations on its standard format.

Defining the Bill of the Play

While literally dozens of phrases, including the twenty-six listed above, are commonly employed in the description of theatre bills and closely related documents, the definitions found in many reference works frequently concentrate on the distinction between *playbills* and *programmes*. The English word *program* (often realised as *programme*, after the French spelling) originates in the Greek πρόγραμμα, defined by the *Greek-English Lexicon* as a '*public proclamation* or *notice, edict*'; a '*placard, notice*'; as '2. *order of the day, agenda*'; as '3. *title* of a prescription; and as '4. *injunction, advice*'.[2] A citation from Lucian's *Hermotimus* conveys the sense of '*placard, notice*':

> Ὅτι ἐν τῷ παρόντι οὐκ ἂν ἴδοις αὐτόν, εἴ γε χρὴ πιστεύειν τῷ **προγράμματι**. πινάκιον γάρ τι ἐκρέματο ὑπὲρ τοῦ πυλῶνος μεγάλοις γράμμασι λέγον 'Τήμερον οὐ συμφιλοσοφεῖν'.
>
> [That you won't find him now, if we can believe the **notice**; a little board was hanging on the gate with 'No Philosophy Lecture Today' on it in large letters.] (emphases added).[3]

And a citation from Aristotle's *Athenian Constitution* conveys the sense of '*agenda*': καὶ παραδίδωσι τὸ **πρόγραμμα** αὐτοῖς [he hands over the **list of agenda** to

---

[2] *Greek-English Lexicon*, comp. Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, new ed., rev. and augmented by Henry Stuart Jones (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940). 'πρόγραμμα', 2: 1473.

[3] Lucian, *Hermotimus* 11, Loeb ed., trans. K. Kilburn, *Lucian*, vol. 6. (London: William Heinemann; Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1959), pp. 280–281.

them] (emphases added).[4] But there is no specifically theatrical usage implied in this definition, nor in the first part of the *Oxford English Dictionary*'s definition of 'program, programme' as 'A public notice'. In the context of documentation pertaining to entertainment, the word *program* constitutes a relatively recent addition to the billing vocabulary, encompassed in the second part of the *OED*'s definition:

> A descriptive notice, issued beforehand, of any formal series of proceedings, as a festive celebration, a course of study, etc.; a prospectus, syllabus; in current use *esp.* a written or printed list of the 'pieces', items, or 'numbers' of a concert or other public entertainment, in the order of performance; hence *transf.* the pieces or items themselves collectively, the performance as a whole.

The earliest citation conveying this sense of a 'series of proceedings' dates from 1808: '*Sporting Mag.* XXXII. 43 The program of the pantomime differs materially in the exhibition'; while a subsequent citation, dating from 1823, indicates the French precedent of the specifically theatrical context in which the word was, by the early-nineteenth century, sometimes used:

> *New Monthly Mag.* VII. 2 Anticipating the amusement of the month, by a regular program (that is a nice new word I have just imported from France, to supply the hacknied common-place of a 'bill of the play')—a regular program, I say, on the second page of your coloured cover.[5]

The comparative novelty of *programme* as a descriptive term was still in evidence during the latter half of the nineteenth century in a reference to 'the playbill or programme—as we now more genteelly call it';[6] and it remains today the more specific locution of the two: while theatre programmes of the late-twentieth century are sometimes still referred to as 'playbills', it is less common to hear eighteenth-century playbills described as 'programmes'. This is readily explained by the fact that the 'series of proceedings', descriptions of which distinguish *programmes* from *playbills*, developed as a result of the variety increasingly characterising a night at the

---

[4] Aristotle, *The Athenian Constitution* 44.2, Loeb ed., trans. H. Rackham, *The Athenian Constitution; The Eudemian Ethics; On Virtues and Vices*, vol. 20 of *Aristotle* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1971), pp. 124–125.

[5] *OED*. 'program, programme', *sb.* 1; *sb.* 2.a.

[6] 'A Bundle of Old Playbills', *All the Year Round* ns 22 (1878–1879), p. 65.

theatre as recently as the nineteenth century; whereas the *OED*'s definition of 'play-bill', describing 'A bill or placard announcing a play and giving the names of the actors to whom the various parts are assigned',[7] has remained applicable to numerous forms of theatrical documentation for almost three centuries. The *OED*'s earliest 'play-bill' citation, contained in Richard Leigh's *The Transproser Rehears'd*, dates from 1673:

> The Author of the Animadversions upon the Preface to Bishop *Bramhalls* Vindication, *&c.* (if it be not too great a favour to call him an Author that writes a Book upon a Preface) having posted up a Play-Bill for the Title of his Book: And here by the way, we cannot but congratulate his honourable employ, and question not but to hear of his being prefer'd from writing of *Bills* for the *Play-houses* to penning of *Advertisements* for the *Stage-Coaches* and *Bills* for the *Pox*, and after a proficiency therein, to be admitted upon the next vacancy, to form *Draughts* for the *Arithmetick* and *Short-hand-men*, and frame *Tickets* for the *Rope-dancers* and the *Royall Sport* of *Cock-fighting* ...[8]

But more than forty years earlier, in a 1631 edition of Ben Jonson's *The Diuell is an Asse* (1616), Ingine responds to Fitz-Dottrell's enquiry about the day's play, saying, 'O here's the bill, Sr. / I had forgot to gi't you', after which, according to the stage direction, 'Hee gives him the Play-bill'.[9]

Bills of the play and, even more generically, *bills* are conventionally understood as allusions to both playbills and programmes, though the *OED*'s definition of 'bill' is in no way confined to theatrical usage, describing 'A written or printed advertisement to be passed from hand to hand (hence also called *hand-bill*), or posted up or displayed in some prominent place; a poster, a placard'.[10] It is convenient, especially when referring indiscriminately to both playbills and programmes, to consolidate their meanings in a single expression; but an etymological confusion sometimes results when *bills*, mere 'advertisements', are regarded as identical with *programmes*, listing 'the order of performance'. Desirable distinctions collapse when little attempt is made to differentiate among any of the

---

[7] *OED*. 'playbill'.
[8] *The Transproser Rehears'd* [by Richard Leigh] (Oxford, 1673), p. 1.
[9] Ben Jonson, *The Diuell is an Asse*, 1616 (London, 1631), p. 102.
[10] *OED*. 'bill', *sb.*[3]. 8.a.

relevant documents; and a dictionary that defines a *playbill* as a 'theatrical program', while defining a *program* as 'a playbill' proves less than instrumental in the satisfactory classification of these texts.[11] Nevertheless, numerous published descriptions of bills and their variants implicitly distinguish the objects by virtue of the emphasis placed on either their form, their content or their function. The following paragraphs offer a representative sampling from among several twentieth-century reference publications which attempt, with varying degrees of success, to define both playbills and programmes—and to distinguish between the two—according to form, content and function.

Form

In attempting to define the *playbill* in terms of its formal characteristics, most reference works concur that, strictly speaking, such an artefact consists of only one leaf. This is explicitly stated in the *Batsford Dictionary of Drama*, where the *playbill* is described as a 'Single sheet'.[12] It is also implicit in numerous allusions to the fact that such a document is often affixed to another object—which additionally suggests that it has been printed on only one side: *A Handbook for Producers and Players*, for example, equates the *playbill* with a 'poster';[13] and the *Penguin Dictionary of Theatre* refers to the *playbill* as being 'displayed'.[14] By contrast, the *programme* is more typically described as appearing 'in the form of a booklet';[15] or, according to the *Theatre Handbook and Digest of Plays*, as a 'folder … or pamphlet'.[16] In fact, 'many programmes issued by professional companies … are of the minor publication size

---

[11] Walter Parker Bowman and Robert Hamilton Ball, *Theatre Language* (New York: Theatre Arts, 1961), pp. 262, 275.
[12] Terry Hodgson, *Batsford Dictionary of Drama* (London: Batsford, 1988), p. 281.
[13] Charles Benjamin Purdom, *Producing Plays: A Handbook for Producers and Players*, 1930, 3rd ed. (London: Dent, 1951), p. 217.
[14] John Russell Taylor, *The Penguin Dictionary of Theatre*, rev. ed. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970, 1978), p. 220.
[15] Terry Hodgson, p. 281.
[16] Bernard Sobel, *Theatre Handbook and Digest of Plays* (New York: Crown, 1940), pp. 639–640.

and not ephemera', formally classifying them in opposition to playbills.[17] In September 1933 a correspondent to *Notes and Queries* sought the identification of the 'first theatre to substitute for the old broadside playbill a programme in booklet form'.[18] Two weeks later the same journal printed a reply, referring to 'such programmes in 1849 at Her Majesty's Theatre', which were eight pages in length.[19] Yet the very essence of this dialogue—the differentiation between 'old broadside playbill[s]' and 'programme[s] in booklet form'—was pointlessly obscured by the heading which appeared over both entries, erroneously synthesising the two variants to announce 'Playbills in Booklet Form'.

The distinction between printed and handwritten documents constitutes another formal attribute contributing to their definition. In *An International Dictionary of Theatre Language*, for example, the *playbill* is specifically deemed to be a 'printed notice'[20]—a contentious inclusion among criteria, given that handwritten bills preceded their hand-printed counterparts by several decades, if not centuries. Few *programme* definitions however—including the description in *Theatre Procedures and Practice* of a 'typed sheet'[21]—fail to specify, or imply, that these more modern documents are almost invariably printed. The medium, however, is of real interest only to the extent that it affects the message—with respect both to the amount of information that can be conveyed in a bill of the play and to its legibility.

Content

Many definitions of the *playbill* refer to its content as well as to its form—sometimes itemising the ingredients most commonly found on such an artefact, but

---

[17] Chris E. Makepeace, *Ephemera: A Book on Its Collection, Conservation and Use* (Aldershot, Hampshire: Gower, 1985), p. 105.
[18] P. McP., 'Playbills in Booklet Form'—Readers' Queries, *Notes and Queries* 165.10 (9 September 1933), p. 170.
[19] Gabrielle Enthoven, 'Playbills in Booklet Form', *Notes and Queries* 165.12 (23 September 1933), p. 211.
[20] Joel Trapido, *An International Dictionary of Theatre Language* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1985), p. 658.
[21] Pauline Stuart, *Theatre Procedures and Practice* (Banbury, Oxon: British Theatre Institute, in association with Kemble, 1982), p. 93.

more often alluding rather generally to the 'detailing [of] the evening's entertainment in the theatre'.[22] Simply put, a programme usually incorporates the playbill's information and adds more; and it is within definitions of the *programme* that more specific descriptions of individual constituent elements are included. *A Handbook for the Amateur Theatre*, for example, lists several of the programme's components which convey 'pertinent information about the play to be seen':

> characters, with the actors playing them; scene of the play; time; list of technical staff; and most important, title of play and author and producer.[23]

Augmenting this inventory, the *Illustrated Encyclopaedia of World Theatre* contains, in its *programme* definition, 'information about ticket prices … future productions … biographies of actors and historical articles'.[24] Additional ingredients enumerated in other sources include the 'passage of time elapsing between scenes and acts';[25] 'programme notes';[26] 'acknowledgements';[27] and, inevitably, 'Copious advertisements'.[28]

Among the various items frequently included in bills of the play, the cast list is often the element whose presence or absence is deemed to differentiate the *playbill* from the *programme*. W. J. Lawrence implicitly distinguishes the two variants along such lines in a reference to the 'introduction of the programme, or bill with cast', in the early-eighteenth century.[29] Montague Summers delineates this opposition more explicitly:

> The brief old play-bill did not give any cast; not even the names of the principal actors were mentioned, with or without any indication of the rôles they sustained. … finally [in the early-eighteenth century] a full

---

[22] Terry Hodgson, p. 281.
[23] Peter Cotes [Peter Arthur R. Boulting], *A Handbook for the Amateur Theatre* (London: Oldbourne, 1957), p. 377.
[24] Martin Esslin, *Illustrated Encyclopaedia of World Theatre* (London: Thames, 1977), pp. 220–221.
[25] Sobel, pp. 639–640.
[26] Martin Harrison, *Theatre: A Book of Words* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1993), p. 207.
[27] Stuart, p. 93.
[28] Terry Hodgson, p. 294.
[29] W. J. Lawrence, *The Elizabethan Playhouse and Other Studies*, 2 vols. (Stratford-upon-Avon: Shakespeare Head Press, 1912-1913), 2: 85.

> cast, or practically a full cast, was supplied and the programme had come into existence.[30]

The 'programme' to which Summers refers was initially that printed in the newspapers in reaction to a three-year ban on playbill posting between 1700 and 1703 (described in chapters two and four); but, before the decade had ended, actors' names were also appearing on the regular bills distributed throughout London. An example dating from the very year during which the bill-posting ban effectively ended identifies the actor for whose benefit the performance was to be given, along with the character he was to portray, and is found at the foot of a Drury Lane playbill advertising Ben Jonson's *Volpone* in 1703 (fig. 1).[31]

In addition to the numerous descriptive accounts contained in the definitions outlined above, occasional attempts have been made to advocate the inclusion of certain information within the contents of any theatrical document declared to be a *programme*. The most obvious instances are found in production guidebooks, such as the *Play Director's Survival Kit*, which includes a 'checklist of the information you must include in any size program'.[32] A notable example among these prescriptive definitions was published in 1969 by the editors of *Theatre Notebook*, who issued a 'plea for every programme to list the bare minimum of factual documentation that a theatregoer needs in order to appraise the play in its historical context':

- the cast list and credits
- the name of the author
- the name of the translator (if any)
- the date and place of the play's first performance (in its original language)
- the date and place of its first performance in England (if different)
- the date of the first performance of the present production, and its history if it has transferred from another theatre.[33]

---

[30] Montague Summers, *The Restoration Theatre* (London: Kegan Paul, 1934), p. 11.

[31] *Volpone*, by Ben Jonson, playbill, Drury Lane, 19 May 1703, rpt. in Ifan Kyrle Fletcher, 'British Playbills before 1718', *Theatre Notebook* 17.2 (Winter 1962/3), pl. 4, btw. pp. 50–51.

[32] James W. Rodgers and Wanda C. Rodgers, *Play Director's Survival Kit* (West Nyack, NY: Center for Applied Research in Education, 1995), pp. 228–230.

[33] Editorial, *Theatre Notebook* 24.1 (Winter 1969), p. 3.

While contemporary theatre criticism falls outside the scope of the present study, this catalogue of requirements has nevertheless been reproduced in order to observe that, prior to 1914, it was extremely rare for any but the first two or three of these items to appear on a bill of the play. From the tone of the editorial, which rhetorically concludes, 'Is it too much to ask for?', it might be inferred that, well into the later-twentieth century, theatres continued to show little interest in documenting, on their bills, the production histories of the plays they staged.

Function

The *playbill* is frequently defined, not only by its form and content, but also with respect to its function, in anticipation of the future, as a 'notice' of a production yet to occur.[34] Fulfilling this role prior to the scheduled date of the entertainment, the *playbill* may be classified as a form of 'advertising';[35] for, in 'announcing a theatrical performance', it attempts to attract the attention of as wide a readership as possible.[36] In contrast, the role by which the *programme* is more commonly defined concerns its function, in conjunction with the present, 'at a performance'.[37] And, whether 'given or sold to an audience', it is no mere announcement for, but an adjunct to, the entertainment[38]—for the audience receiving it is already 'attending a performance'.[39]

Based on these functional interpretations, a playbill can easily act as a 'programme' simply by surviving through the commencement of the presentation it has advertised, whereupon it acquires its new status as an accompaniment to the event. However, a programme cannot possibly serve as a 'playbill'. This superior functional flexibility of the *playbill* variant over the *programme* variant may offer an additional explanation for the correspondingly greater semantic versatility of the

---

[34] Trapido, p. 658.
[35] Taylor uses the word *advertising* as a participle, describing the seventeenth-century playbill as a 'small ticket advertising a play production', p. 220.
[36] Purdom, p. 217.
[37] Cotes, p. 377.
[38] Stuart, p. 93.
[39] Sobel, pp. 639–640.

former term over the latter; but it can also impede the discrete categorisation of the documents themselves.

The contradictions alluded to at the outset of this chapter sometimes arise when classification is sought for a particular specimen using two or more of the approaches outlined above, for the criteria they generate may appear to define the document in question as both a *playbill* and a *programme*—or as neither variant. A description incorporating all three approaches—form, content and function—such as Louis A. Rachow's, appears to result in a very precise pair of definitions:

> By *programme* we mean a printed sheet or pamphlet which gives the title of the play, the author, the cast of characters, the city and the theatre, the date, and other data relating to a production, and which was intended for actual use within the theatre building on the night of the performance. A *playbill* is usually a single sheet giving all or a substantial portion of this information but printed in advance as a form of advertising[40]

—but the thoroughness of these specifications in no way guarantees their exactitude: with reference to both British and American bills of the play Marvin Carlson notes that, in particular, the 'function[al] … distinction confuses at least as much as it clarifies', for the 'old style "playbills"', in addition to serving as advertisements, were often intended for use in conjunction with the entertainment, 'making them essentially "programs"'.[41] This observation applies directly to Rachow's classifications, for the document he designates a '*playbill*' served, through most of the eighteenth century, in the capacity of the document he designates a '*programme*'.

Further complications arise from the fact that the billing definitions found in some reference texts are less reliable than those in others. The assertion, in *Brewer's Theatre: A Phrase and Fable Dictionary*, that programmes are 'free in Britain and sold at a nominal price in America' is doubly fallacious.[42] And, although William

---

[40] Louis A. Rachow, 'Care and Preservation of Theatre Library Materials', *Special Libraries* 63.1 (1972), p. 29.

[41] Marvin Carlson, 'The Development of the American Theatre Program', *The American Stage: Social and Economic Issues from the Colonial Period to the Present*, ed. Ron Engle and Tice L. Miller (Cambridge: CUP, 1993), p. 102.

[42] Jonathan Law, et al., *Brewer's Theatre: A Phrase and Fable Dictionary* (London: Cassell, 1994), pp. 360–361.

Davenport Adams's definitions cannot be disproven, they do leave something to be desired: in *A Dictionary of the Drama*, published in 1904, the entry for *bill of the play* found in volume one (A–G) of this alphabetical reference advises the reader to 'see Playbills'; but volume two was never printed.[43] The remainder of this chapter, however, is less concerned with the finer distinctions between playbills and programmes than with their collective, common content. An exploration into the bill of the play's most basic ingredients is followed by an examination of some typical variations on its standard format.

Basic Ingredients

Even if every item deemed a *bill of the play* could be unequivocally classified as either a *playbill* or a *programme*, enormous diversity would still exist within each of the two variant classes. A synchronic analysis reveals numerous inconsistencies: playbills, for example, usually specify the time at which a performance is to commence, but do not always list the prices of admission, or name the playwright; and programmes almost invariably include cast lists, but only occasionally provide detailed production notes, or reproduce original artwork. A diachronic analysis renders additional internal irregularities even more apparent: the extensive technical credits crowding the margins of innumerable nineteenth-century playbills were nowhere to be found on their counterparts from the seventeenth century; and the glossy colour photographs gracing the pages of many twentieth-century theatre programmes were unheard of at the inception of this variant nearly 150 years ago. After focusing on the very few components which have consistently appeared in almost all billing artefacts, the following paragraphs briefly outline a variety of additional ingredients—both descriptive and illustrative—by which, individually or collectively, bills of the play are frequently identified.

---

[43] W. Davenport Adams, *A Dictionary of the Drama* (London: Chatto, 1904), p. 159. Adams is to be credited with remarkable foresight, having stated in his preface, 'No claim to an impossible "completeness" is made for this work', p. vii.

Descriptive Information

Notwithstanding the synchronic and diachronic variation in the content of both playbills and programmes over the past five centuries, a small core of essential information, specifying the performance venue, the date of the event, the title of the entertainment and the identity of its exponents, has prevailed on bills of the play throughout their printed history, advising audiences where and when to see what featuring whom. On the oldest extant playbill heralding a professional indoor production, in 1687, the first line of text adverbially identifies the playhouse: 'AT the THEATRE ROYALL' (fig. 2).[44] But even older specimens—such as the bill from 1672 advertising an outdoor performance 'AT the Booth at *Charing-Cross*' (fig. 3),[45] or the announcement for 'John Harris'*s BOOTH*, *in* Bartholomew-Fair *between the* Hospital-gate *and* Duck-lane-end, *next the Rope-dancers*' (fig. 4)[46]—devote their initial phrases to the name and location of the venue. This pattern continued through the eighteenth century; and even on those occasions when a few lines of text precede it, the theatre's name retains its precedence, often appearing in larger type, or entirely in capitals. In the early-nineteenth century some playhouses printed their names as 'individual badges … in the style of an insignia' at the top of their bills, further emphasising their identity;[47] and by the later-nineteenth century the venue's name was so thoroughly associated with its predominant position at the head of the document as to be termed the 'rubric'.[48] The priority given to the clear and immediate identification of the theatre, whether indoor, outdoor, permanent or temporary, has endured, from the seventeenth through the twentieth centuries, with the name of the

---

[44] *A King and No King*, by Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher, playbill, Drury Lane, 22 February 1687, rpt. in Eleanore Boswell, 'A Playbill of 1687', *The Library* 4th ser. 11.4 (1931), pp. 500–501.

[45] *The Dutch Cruelties at Amboyna*, playbill, The Booth at Charing Cross, 11 November 1672, rpt. in George Speaight, 'The Earliest Known English Playbill', *Theatre Notebook* 6 (October 1951–July 1952), opp. p. 36.

[46] *The Court of King Henry the Second*, playbill, John Harris's Booth, Bartholomew-Fair [1655?], tipped into *Bartholomew Fair*, quarto vol., Harvard Theatre Collection: TS.555.l; Thr.386.37., n.pag.

[47] Derek Forbes, 'Colour and Decoration on Nineteenth-Century Playbills', *Theatre Notebook* 51 (1997), p. 35.

[48] Writing in 1893, Francis Edwards uses this expression in descriptions of playbills from the Marylebone Theatre in 1847; from the Garrick Theatre in 1854; and from the New Royalty Theatre in 1863, in *Playbills: A Collection and Some Comments* (London: Edwards, 1893), pp. 8, 16, 29.

venue invariably appearing at, or very near, the top of almost every playbill and on the cover of almost every programme.

Of a practical importance comparable to location, the date of the performance has traditionally provided the next ingredient on British bills of the play. The Drury Lane playbill from 1687, described in the preceding paragraph, begins its second line of text by advising readers that the performance is to take place 'this present Tuesday'; and the second phrase on the Charing Cross bill from 1672, also cited above, offers its entertainments 'every day in the Week'. Some of these early temporal references depended for their clarity on the playgoer's knowledge of the current theatrical season. A bill for '*Parker*'s and *Doggett*'s Booth, NEar *Hosier-Lane End*, in *Smithfield*', for example, announces a droll to be performed simply 'during the Time of *Bartholomew*-FAIR' (fig. 5).[49] There was, perhaps, some chance that a bill might remain posted for a week or two beyond the period of its intended service, thereby becoming, not merely obsolete, but potentially misleading; and so, as the date-line continues on the Drury Lane playbill from 1687, 'Tuesday' is further specified as 'being the Twenty Second day of February'. There was, however, no chance whatever of such a document remaining visible and intact for an additional twelve months, creating ambiguity as to the year in which the performance was to be held; and, as a result, the dates printed on London playbills prior to the season of 1766–1767 customarily include only the day of the week, the day of the month and the month itself, omitting the year as superfluous.[50] For almost one hundred years, between the later-eighteenth and later-nineteenth centuries, playbills bearing complete dates displayed them in the usual place of prominence, directly below the theatre's name; but the introduction of programmes intended for distribution only at the theatres themselves, and only at the time of the performance, obviated the necessity of any date at all, and it was frequently excluded altogether in the final decades of the

---

[49] *Fryar Bacon*, playbill, Parker's and Doggett's Booth, Smithfield, [1699?], tipped into *Bartholomew Fair*, n.pag.

[50] William Van Lennep, 'Some Early English Playbills', *Harvard Library Bulletin* 8.2 (1954), p. 238.

century when, in 1890, S. J. Adair Fitz-Gerald asked, 'why cannot acting managers date the programmes?'.[51] Henry Irving had already undertaken this practice at the Lyceum Theatre in the previous decade,[52] and was considered 'especially [to] deserve … the gratitude of playgoers' for doing so;[53] but the precedent he had set was neither absolute nor enduring, and for the remainder of the nineteenth century, and long into the twentieth, the presence or absence of a date on a bill of the play varied from theatre to theatre and from season to season. Dates, both partial and complete, have appeared, vanished and reappeared on playbills and programmes throughout the period under review. But on all documents intended to serve as advance publicity they have remained an essential component, secondary only to the identification of the venue.

Not surprisingly the title of the work to be enacted has been included on bills of the play with relatively uninterrupted consistency for centuries, often comprising the third unit of information displayed on the documents. Returning once more to the Drury Lane playbill of 1687 for the earliest extant specimen announcing a professional indoor performance, the phrase 'will be presented, A Play called, A King, and No King' directly follows the identification of the venue and the date of the production. Over the next two hundred years various additional elements sometimes intervened between theatre, date and title, but this essential pattern remained in place, to a greater or lesser degree, for the duration of the playbill's existence. In the late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries, titles were often set off from their surrounding text by a variety of typographical means, including capitalisation, italics, larger fount sizes and additional leading. But through much of the eighteenth century these contrasts diminished—especially on the bills published by the patent houses—and the name of the play was often most readily recognised as such by virtue of its location just under the date. The nineteenth-century boom in printing technology

---

51 S. J. Adair Fitz-Gerald, 'Play-Bills—Old and New', *Theatre* ns 15 (1890), p. 309.

52 Gabrielle Enthoven, 'Playbill, Programme', *Oxford Companion to the Theatre*, 3rd ed., ed. Phyllis Hartnoll (London: OUP, 1967), p. 743.

53 'Down with the Fee System', broadside [c. 1891–1895], Theatre Museum: 'Programmes' file, n.pag.

resulted in playbill titles that once again sought the attention of the reader through their typographical novelty, now varying widely not only in their size, but also in the enormous range of new faces employed in their realisation. Towards the middle of the century novel founts naming the play were competing with novel founts naming the players—the latter often appearing in bigger, bolder letters than the former—but, owing to the consistent positioning of titles below dates, and the identification of stars above them, even those playbill readers deprived of both historical and theatrical backgrounds could immediately determine that 'ROB ROY', 'WILLIAM TELL' and 'MUNGO PARK' indicated performances and not performers (fig. 6),[54] whilst 'THE CELEBRATED Man Monkey', 'THE GENTLEMEN FROM LONDON' and 'HISTRIONIC DOGS' referred to entertainers, not entertainments (fig. 7).[55] As minor publications in their own right, the theatre programmes of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries formally distinguished the name of the play from all additional editorial material to an even greater degree, their covers often resembling title pages or, in the case of illustrated specimens, frontispieces. And as these documents acquired an increasingly bookish appearance, with their expanding size and their eventual inclusion of notes and essays, the connection between the author's literary text and the company's performance text was underscored by the title they shared, appearing as it did on each and every bill of the play.

The identification, individual or collective, of the artists responsible for the entertainment marks the final item of information almost invariably found on bills of the play throughout their printed history. Again the Drury Lane playbill of 1687

---

[54] *Rob Roy*, by Walter Scott, playbill, Theatre Royal, Edinburgh, 11 March 1829, rpt. in Mary Fleming, 'Old Edinburgh Theatre Posters', *Scotland's Magazine* December 1950, p. 39; *William Tell*, playbill, Billy Purvis's Pavilion, Hartlepool, 22 May 1837, rpt. in Joe Ging, '"The Morn's the Fair": A Bi-Centennial Tribute to Billy Purvis (1784–1853)', *Theatrephile* 1.3 (June 1984), p. 6; *Mungo Park*, playbill, Theatre Royal, Brighton, 15 November 1844, rpt. in John Lewis, *Printed Ephemera* (Ipswich: Cowell, 1962), p. 104.

[55] *Jocko the Brazilian Ape*, playbill, 1 August 1831, rpt. in Susan Ward, 'The Greatest Play on Words: The Amazing History of Theatre Posters and Playbills', *Art and Antiques* 9 June 1973, p. 32; *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, by William Shakespeare, playbill, Theatre Royal, Edinburgh, 17 July 1848, rpt. in Wilson F. Engel III, 'Shakespeare in Edinburgh Playbills: The Theatre Royal, 1810–1851', *Theatre Survey* 20 (1979), fig. 6, p. 36; *The Taming of the Shrew*, by William Shakespeare, adapted by David Garrick, playbill, Adelphi Theatre, Edinburgh, 28 September 1850, rpt. in Engel, fig. 9, p. 40.

provides the earliest surviving example of such acknowledgement pertaining to a professional indoor production, including in its final line of type the phrase '[By the]ir MAJESTIES SERVANTS'; and again the older Charing Cross bill from 1672, advertising outdoor booth performances, carries a similar message, stating that its farces and drolls will be presented 'by Mr. *Anthony Devo*, His Majesties Servant'. In the first decade of the eighteenth century the wording of this credit was altered slightly and relocated, from the bottom of the document to very near its top, the phrase 'By Her Majesty's Company of Comedians' appearing just above the name of the playhouse on a Drury Lane bill from 1708.[56] In the following decades numerous minor variations on this standard theme preceded the playbills' identification of their theatres: 'By the Company of Comedians' at Lincoln's Inn Fields;[57] 'By the Rt. Hon. the LORD MAYOR's Company of Comedians' at Dublin's Smock Alley Theatre;[58] 'By His MAJESTY's Company' at Drury Lane;[59] and 'By His MAJESTY's SERVANTS' at Lancaster's New Theatre.[60] But by the end of the eighteenth century such collective recognition was less frequently printed on the bills, having been virtually replaced, in the second decade, by one of the most important ingredients to remain on playbills for the duration of their existence, surviving to this day in the theatre programmes by which they were eventually replaced—the cast list.

The gradual progression towards the regular inclusion of a chart naming the company's actors and their corresponding roles is discussed in chapters four and five, but the earliest extant document to contain a complete cast list for a professional production advertises a performance of John Crowne's comedy *The Country Wit*, staged by His Majesty's Company of Comedians at Drury Lane on 17 July 1716 (fig.

---

[56] *The Pilgrim*, playbill, Drury Lane, 24 May 1708, rpt. in Fletcher, 'Playbills', pl. 7, opp. p. 51.

[57] *King Lear*, by William Shakespeare [adapted by Nahum Tate], playbill, Lincoln's Inn Fields, 28 March 1724, rpt. in Van Lennep, 'Playbills', pl. 2b, opp. p. 237.

[58] *The Sharper*, playbill, Smock Alley Theatre, Dublin, 25 January 1737, rpt. in W. J. Lawrence, 'The World's Oldest Playbills', *'The Stage' Year Book*, ed. Lionel Carson (London: 'Stage', 1920), btw. pp. 26–27.

[59] *Rule a Wife and Have a Wife*, by Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher, playbill, Drury Lane, 15 January 1771, rpt. in John Lewis, *Printed Ephemera*, p. 100.

[60] *Edward and Eleanora*, playbill, New Theatre, Lancaster, 11 August 1777, rpt. in Susan Ward, p. 32.

8).[61] Below the title the names of the three principal male characters appear in italics, centred on the page, followed by their exponents, whose surnames are capitalised:

Sir *Mannerly Shallow* by Mr. MILLER.
Sir *Thomas Rash* by Mr. NORRIS.
Tom Rash by Mr. JOHNSON.

Below this are enumerated, in two paired columns, the additional roles for, respectively, men and women, along with their corresponding representatives:

Ramble		Mr. *Mills.*			
Merry	by	Mr. *Will. Wilks.*	Frisk	by	Mrs. *Garner.*
Booby		Mr. *Leigh.*	Isabella		Mrs. *Baker.*
Constable		Mr. *Cross.*			

—and below that the three female leads are presented in identical fashion to their male counterparts:

Lady *Faddle* by Mrs. HUNT.
Christina by Mrs. HORTON.
Dame *Rash* by Mrs. WILLIS.

Originally, however, bills of the play had listed their *dramatis personae* in relation to their fictional status, as William Rufus Chetwood explains in a reference to the earliest years of the eighteenth century:

> Distinguished Characters in Bills were not in Fashion, at the Time … they were printed in Order according to the Drama as they stood, not regarding the Merit of the Actor. As for Example, in *Macbeth*, *Duncan* King of *Scotland* appear'd first in the Bill, tho' acted by an insignificant Person; and so every other Actor appear'd according to his Dramatic Dignity, all of the same-siz'd Letter.[62]

But from 1716 onwards the head and foot of the bill remained places of almost equivalent prestige, with a 'string of inferior players' between them; and by 1741, on the playbill commemorating David Garrick's debut as the eponymous lead in William Shakespeare's *Richard III*, the final name to receive credit was further set apart from the others 'by a wide blank and distinct paragraph':[63]

---

[61] *The Country Wit*, by John Crowne, playbill, Drury Lane, 17 July 1716, rpt. in Fletcher, 'Playbills', pl. 8, opp. p. 51.
[62] William Rufus Chetwood, *A General History of the Stage* (London, 1749), p. 59.
[63] Percy Fitzgerald, 'The Play Bill: Its Origin and Development', *Gentleman's Magazine* 264 (1888), p. 378.

> *And* the part of Lady Anne
> By Mrs. Giffard.[64]

Percy Fitzgerald attests to the formidable authority of the italicised conjunction:

> This little 'and' has a significance of its own; it seemed to bid a vulgar crowd 'clear out of the way' and let the great one come on.[65]

In the following decade the additional phrase 'to be performed by' often preceded the names of the actors considered most important in productions staged at Covent Garden;[66] and by 1758 that playhouse billed its entertainers according to their rank in the theatre—except in the case of new pieces, when their names were printed in an order that reflected their salaries.[67] But the supreme position has almost always remained the very top of the bill, and a century after Garrick's debut heading the cast list at Goodman's Fields William Charles Macready was demanding of his manager, Benjamin Webster, that Macready's name consistently appear above all others on the Haymarket's documents:

> I mentioned the position of my name on the playbills, that it should not on any occasion be put under any other person's, as it had been.[68]

The general ordering arrangement described above, in which 'male roles came first with the lead in number one position, followed by female roles with the lead at the end', remained popular throughout most of the eighteenth century, and was gradually augmented by numerous additional methods of distinction:

> Five or six type sizes were used, and 'leading' was heavy or light to throw into prominence the names of prominent actors. Large type was used to indicate what the managers, critics, and public vaguely judged to be the major roles, with smaller, light-face type for minor parts. When a famous actor, however, such as Garrick (or Cibber before him)

---

[64] *The Life and Death of King Richard the Third*, by William Shakespeare, playbill, Goodman's Fields Theatre, 19 October 1741, transcribed in Fitzgerald, 'Origin', p. 377.

[65] Fitzgerald, 'Origin', p. 378.

[66] *The Distressed Mother*, playbill, Covent Garden, 30 April 1753, transcribed in Percy Fitzgerald, 'The Play-Bill: Its Growth and Evolution', *Gentleman's Magazine* 288.2034 (June 1900), p. 540.

[67] 'History of the Stage, from the Commencement of Garrick's Management', *Monthly Mirror* 7 (1799), pp. 177–178 n.

[68] William Charles Macready, *The Diaries of William Charles Macready, 1831–1851*, ed. William Toynbee, 2 vols. (London: Chapman, 1912), 2: 85. The entry is dated 28 September 1840.

> played a minor role, such as Abel Drugger in the *Alchemist*, both the part and the actor's name were apt to be cast in large, boldface type.[69]

A sarcastic reference in *The Connoisseur* from 1754 is often quoted in support of the argument that David Garrick was responsible for the introduction of large type faces on the playbills of the mid-eighteenth century:

> When the present manager of Drury Lane first came on the stage, a new set of types, two inches long, were cast on purpose to do honour to his extraordinary merit.[70]

But George Winchester Stone, who has 'transcrib[ed] … over twelve thousand playbills', finds no practical evidence substantiating this claim, stating, 'Differences in type size for important actors was a practice in vogue years before Garrick ever thought of going up to London'.[71] In any event, the practice has remained in vogue ever since, and it has often been 'extremely difficult to suit the size of the name to the ambitious expectation of the actor'.[72] In the eighteenth century Charles Macklin accused his manager, fellow performer Thomas Sheridan, of printing his name in larger type than that used for Macklin and the remaining cast; and in the early-nineteenth century Edmund Kean almost abandoned an engagement at Drury Lane when his name appeared in smaller capitals than usual. As a precaution against the repetition of such an oversight, Kean's contract of 1818 stipulates '"that his name shall be continued in the bills of performance in the same manner as it is at present", viz. large letters'.[73] Shortly thereafter, at the same theatre, the comedian William Dowton raised a lone voice of opposition to the immoderate use of capitalisation, complaining to Robert William Elliston, Drury Lane's manager, about Dowton's own name appearing in excessively large type:

---

[69] George Winchester Stone, Jr., introduction, *The London Stage 1747-1776*, ed. Stone (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1962), pt. 4 of *The London Stage 1660–1800: A Calendar of Plays, Entertainments and Afterpieces*, ed. William Van Lennep et al., 11 vols. in 5 pts. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1960–1965), pp. lxxiii–lxxiv.

[70] *The Connoisseur*, 1754, qtd. in Dutton Cook, *A Book of the Play*, 1876, 3rd and rev. ed. (London: Sampson Low, 1881), p. 57.

[71] Stone, p. lxxiv.

[72] 'History of the Stage', p. 178.

[73] Qtd. in Cook, p. 57.

> I am sorry you have done this. You know well what I mean. This cursed quackery, these big letters. There is a want of respectability about it, or rather a notoriety, which gives one the feeling of an absconded felon, against whom a hue and cry is made public. Or if there be really any advantage in it, why should I, or any single individual, take it over the rest of my brethren? But it has a nasty, disreputable look, and I have fancied the whole day the finger of the town pointed at me as much as to say, 'That is he. Now for the reward!' Leave this expedient to the police officers, or those who have a taste for it. I have none.[74]

In spite of Dowton's protest, fount anxiety persisted at the patent houses in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, and may partially be explained by a modification to the ordering of the playbill's cast list introduced by John Philip Kemble shortly after assuming the management of Drury Lane. On 3 February 1790 Kemble had returned to the original arrangement described by William Rufus Chetwood, above, and 'listed all the characters in the playbill … according to their social rank: kings, peers, gentry, servants'.[75] In 1803, undertaking the management of Covent Garden, Kemble had again 'introduced the same sensible system, which was generally adhered to during the remaining term of monopoly' enjoyed by the Theatres Royal.[76] As the most famous performers once again found their names surrounded by those of less popular actors, typographical methods of distinguishing their celebrity status understandably acquired an increased significance. It is unclear precisely when during the early-twentieth century the policy of listing characters and their exponents in order of their appearance on stage began to acquire popularity; but, based on the documents examined in connection with the present work, it does not appear to have been common practice in 1914, at the close of the period under review. Sixty years later John Barber 'call[ed] it bad manners when a programme does not list the characters in their order of appearance';[77] and in 1994 Benedict Nightingale declared that, when 'Characters come alphabetically rather than in order of importance,

---

[74] Qtd. in Raymond Mander and Joe Mitchenson, 'The Story of the Theatre Programme', *Theatre World* March 1948, p. 20.

[75] Charles Beecher Hogan, introduction, *The London Stage 1776-1800*, ed. Hogan (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1963), pt. 5 of Van Lennep et al., p. cxl.

[76] Fitzgerald, 'Origin', p. 380.

[77] John Barber, 'Bad Manners are in the Programme', *Daily Telegraph* 25 March 1974, p. 11.

appearance or speaking', an evening at the theatre can develop into a 'demented scamper up and down a list of 28 performers, the fifteenth of whom delivered the first line'.[78]

The enormous size and variety of type employed in the identification of star performers during the mid-to-late-nineteenth century has already been noted; and, given the quantities of ink devoted to the realisation even of comparatively short surnames such as *Kean* and *Toole*, it is surprising that the playbills of the period cost no more than one or two pennies. However, with the introduction of smaller, folded bills in the later decades, this typographical extravagance was to some extent abandoned, owing both to the reduced size of the page and to the increased presence of advertising, which paid for the production costs of the programme.[79] A particularly interesting cast list from the early years of the twentieth century is found in the souvenir programme marking the two hundredth performance of James Matthew Barrie's fantasy, *The Admirable Crichton*, at the Duke of York's Theatre on 4 November 1902. The *dramatis personae* are listed in the usual manner, down the left side of the sheet; but the names of their exponents, appearing in the opposite column, are expressed as the actors' individual signatures. Management and production personnel are similarly identified on the same page: Charles Frohman's autograph appears at the top, as lessee and manager, under the heading of the theatre; Barrie's is the next signature, found just below the title of the play; and the list concludes with costume design attributed to J. Bernard Partridge and direction to Dion Boucicault (fig. 9).[80] Frohman may well deserve the credit for the novel layout of this early-twentieth-century cast list, if his previous employment had remained a source of inspiration: prior to assuming various administrative posts, the manager had himself been 'selling souvenirs and programmes'.[81]

---

[78] Benedict Nightingale, 'Palpable Pap to Provoke the Punters', *Times* 13 July 1994, p. 31.
[79] Catherine Haill, '"Buy a Bill of the Play!"', *Apollo* April 1987, p. 284.
[80] *The Admirable Crichton*, by James Matthew Barrie, programme, Duke of York's Theatre, 4 November 1902 (London: Hentschel, 1902) Harvard Theatre Collection: *46-2070F 1902.
[81] 'Frohman, Charles', *Oxford Companion to the Theatre*, 4th ed., ed. Phyllis Hartnoll (Oxford: OUP, 1983, 1993), p. 307.

While bills of the play have almost invariably included elements specifying the location of the theatre, the date of the production, the title of the show and the identity of the performers, numerous additional components have, over the centuries, contributed to the informational content of playbills and programmes, providing further details prior to, or concurrent with, the relevant entertainment. These include curtain times, admission prices, behavioural warnings, plot synopses, production histories, managerial addresses, directorial notes, critical commentaries and an abundance of accreditation additional to the basic cast list, acknowledging virtually every participant in the conception and execution of the staged performance—including the playwright. These and many other descriptive ingredients are discussed in the central and final chapters of the present work from, respectively, historical and functional perspectives. But non-verbal constituents have featured in the bills as well, with almost equal consistency, throughout the 350-year period under review, enriching their appearance and thereby enhancing their value. The following paragraphs offer a brief overview of various illustrative and decorative elements found on British bills of the play, while additional descriptions of such pictorial material continue through the remaining chapters.

Illustration and Decoration

Perhaps the earliest extant illustration to be published in conjunction with a British dramatic document is the woodcut of a woman and man 'in conversation or dancing', found on the title page of Henry Medwall's late-fifteenth-century interlude, *Fulgens and Lucrece*, printed 'sometime between 1514 and 1516' (fig. 10).[82] No surviving texts advertising actual performances, however, predate the seventeenth century; and the few that exist prior to 1655 are adorned, not with anything as pictorially representative as the image just described, but with ornamentation and

---

[82] 'Man and Woman', woodcut, c. 1512–1516, *Fulgens and Lucrece*, by Henry Medwall, c. 1514–1516, title page, rpt. in Clifford Davidson, *Illustrations of the Stage and Acting in England to 1580*, Early Drama, Art and Music Monograph Series 16 (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute, Western Michigan University, 1991), p. 129.

insignia: they are *decorated*, not *illustrated*.[83] The ornate printed borders which 'sometimes enhanced Continental theater broadsides … were hardly known in England';[84] but throughout the seventeenth century and for the first four decades of the eighteenth, the royal coat of arms appeared on almost all publicly displayed playbills advertising legitimate drama—though not necessarily on the handbills which were personally delivered to patrons' homes.[85] Following the passing of the Theatres Licensing Act in 1737, the use of this monarchical device diminished at the patent houses since, with their performance monopoly confirmed, they were less concerned to flaunt their privileged status through a visual reference to sovereignty.[86] But for at least the previous 135 years this emblematic allegiance had been so consistently expressed in the posted documents that its absence, even on a bill announcing a puppet show, supports the dating of that specimen to the Interregnum.[87]

The playbill in question, advertising performances of various entertainments at John Harris's booth in Bartholomew Fair, also happens to be the oldest extant specimen to include an illustration, predating its closest successor by more than half a century. The image, located at the top of the bill above the descriptive text, consists of a woodcut, depicting four of the characters from the performance—Friar Bungay, Friar Bacon, Punchinello and a Brazen Speaking Head—situated between two trumpeting angels (see fig. 4).[88] Because the beasts typically depicted within the coats of arms are more appropriately classified as *decoration* than *illustration*, this document, conjecturally dated 1655, is utterly unique to the seventeenth century.

---

[83] This useful distinction in terminology differentiates *decoration*—'coloured inks, coloured papers, insignia, and ornamentation'—from *illustration*—the 'pictorial representation of features from the act being advertised'—and is advanced in Forbes, 'Colour', p. 26.

[84] Jeanne T. Newlin, 'A Charleston, South Carolina, Playbill of 1794', *Antiques* 131 (1987), p. 432.

[85] Four unarmed handbills from Drury Lane and Dorset Garden, dating from the early 1690s, are reprinted in Lawrence, *Playhouse*, btw. 2: 240–241—*Henry the Second King of England*, by John Bancroft and William Mountfort, Drury Lane, 9 November 1692; *The Indian Emperour*, by John Dryden, Drury Lane, 30 November 1692; *All for Love*, by John Dryden, Queen's Theatre, Dorset Garden, 9 May 1694; *Theodosius*, by Nathaniel Lee, Queen's Theatre, Dorset Garden, 12 June 1694.

[86] Forbes, 'Colour', p. 33.

[87] William Van Lennep, 'The Earliest Known English Playbill', *Harvard Library Bulletin* 1.3 (1947), p. 383.

[88] *The Court of King Henry the Second*, playbill, [1655?].

Even from the eighteenth century surviving pictorial material is extremely rare on bills and is seldom, if ever, connected directly with the performance of live drama by sentient beings. A handbill issued in 1710, for example, advertises another puppet show, 'Performed by a Company of *Artificial Actors*' at Punch's Theatre in St. Martin's Lane, entitled 'The Last Years CAMPAIGNE'. This production was staged 'For the Entertainment of the Four Indian Kings, viz. (A) The Emperor *Tee Yee Neen Ho Ga Row.* (B) King *Sa Ga Yean Qua Rah Tow.* (C) King *E Tow oh Koam.* [and] (D) King *Oh Nee Yeath Tow no Riow*'—and the woodcut on the playbill depicts this quartet of honoured dignitaries, each with a letter above his crowned head corresponding to the appropriate printed description (fig. 11).[89] A much later document, from 1795, announces a visit by Pidcock's Menagerie 'For this Day only … *in the MARKET-PLACE in this Town*', elegant woodcuts dominating the travelling stock bill with their portrayals of a 'most stupendous Male Elephant', a 'beautiful ZEBRA' and a '*fine young LION*' (fig. 12).[90] For another fifty years various creatures remained the principal subjects of many pictorial playbills since, through the first half of the nineteenth century, 'managers considered animal-graphics more important than any other type of device on their bills'.[91] But in the 1820s children were sometimes featured too, as performances by Master William Grossmith, 'the Celebrated Young Roscius', were advertised in a series of illustrated playbills using 'abundant wood-cuts to show the boy … in postures from the act, often mounted in some form of surround' as a panelled border framing the document's text. In some of Grossmith's bills from the following decade, 'the pictures occupy more space than the written text'; and the portrait format proved popular enough to be copied on the bills of other juvenile performers as well.[92] But engraved and woodcut illustrations on posted bills

---

[89] *The Last Years Campaigne*, handbill, Punch's Theatre, St. Martin's Lane, 1 May 1710, rpt. in Richmond P. Bond, *Queen Anne's American Kings* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1952), opp. p. 4.

[90] *Pidcock's Menagerie*, bill, 1795, rpt. in Haill, 'Bill', p. 281.

[91] Derek Forbes, 'Illustrated Playbills and E. J. Bath's Theatrical Engravings', tabled at the Picturing Performance conference, University of Kent at Canterbury, 3–5 July 1997, p. 1.

[92] Derek Forbes, 'The Earliest Grossmiths and Their Pictorial Playbills', *Scenes from Provincial Stages: Essays in Honour of Kathleen Barker*, ed. Richard Foulkes (London: Society for Theatre Research, 1994), pp. 65, 80, 85 n. 18.

of the play remained 'comparatively rare' during the middle decades of the century, possibly through 'fear of confusion with the "penny dreadful" comics';[93] and by the 1850s the 'pictorial playbills of the 1820s and 1830s had become fully pictorial posters'.[94]

References to the mid-nineteenth-century division of the single-sheeted playbill into, on the one hand, the primarily visual theatre poster and, on the other hand, the primarily textual theatre programme, tell only part of the story. The pictorial component was readily incorporated into the programme format of many theatrical managements whose bills depicted not only scenes, settings, characters, and costumes from current productions, but also views of the theatres themselves—both exterior architecture and interior furnishings.[95] The 'idea of asking different painters to illustrate … programmes' originated with André Antoine in Paris, where, in 1888, the 'medium preferred … was lithography or photo-lithography';[96] but in Britain, too, the 'early woodcuts … gave way … to elaborate lithographs';[97] and Cyril Sheldon defends the merit of such theatre art against the 'opponents of bill-posting', citing the quality and reputation of British talent in the early-twentieth century:

> the designs of artists like Walter Crane, Professor Herkomer, Sir John Millais, Sir Edward Poynter, Charles Ffoulks, R. Fowler, Anning Bell, and the late Mr. Linely Sambourne … would give dignity to any business.[98]

Of particular interest during this period is the adoption by many playhouses of a readily identifiable house style for the covers on, and illustrations in, their programmes. The colourful rendering of a Beefeater, for example, occupied the front cover of George Alexander's Victorian and Edwardian programmes at the St. James's

---

[93] Sarah Gibbings, 'Early Theatrical Playbills', *Antique Collector* November 1978, p. 74.
[94] George Speaight, *Collecting Theatre Memorabilia* (Ashbourne, Derbyshire: Moorland, 1988), p. 21.
[95] Barbara Cavanagh, *The Century of the Programme: An Archive of Theatre Programmes from Their Inception in the 1860s through Their Continuous Development to the 1960s* (Romsey, Hampshire: Motley, 1985), p. 16.
[96] Claude Schumacher, 'Programmes for Parisian Theatres', rev. of *Artistes et Théâtres d'Avant-Garde: Programmes de Théatre Illustrés Paris 1890–1900* by Geneviève Aitkin, *Print Quarterly* 10.2 (June 1993), p. 193.
[97] 'Playbill, Poster, Programme', *Concise Oxford Companion to the Theatre*, ed. Phyllis Hartnoll (London: OUP, 1972), p. 421.
[98] Cyril Sheldon, *Billposting* (Leeds: Sheldons, 1916), p. 68.

Theatre for years, effectively creating a sort of representational trademark.[99] And the portraiture of Charles Buchel was inextricably linked to the programmes produced over two decades at His Majesty's Theatre, from the dawn of the twentieth century, under the management of Herbert Beerbohm Tree.[100] Associated this closely with a particular venue, such familiar iconography almost acquires the practical utility of the textual elements described above: a consistent, recognisable image is surely as effective in identifying a playhouse as the orthographic rendering of its name—and, from a distance, may even prove superior.

While illustration and decoration have remained popular ingredients in the post-Edwardian theatre programmes of the twentieth century, their presence is neither essential nor determining in the classification of bills of the play. Rather, unlike the principal units of descriptive information discussed earlier, they may be seen as optional components in either *playbills* or *programmes*, creating additional sub-variants within each of those categories. As such, illustration and decoration comprise just two of many variations on the standard billing format, with a discussion of which this chapter concludes.

Variations on the Standard Format

Provisional distinctions between *playbills* and *programmes*—whether described in terms of form, content or function—represent the most common variation encountered in the classification of bills of the play. Yet, by almost any definition, the evolution of the former variant into the latter involved a gradual process, incorporating many changes, over a lengthy period of time. Representatives from both categories existed simultaneously during only a limited portion of that transitional period, and are best suited to an historical analysis of the sort undertaken in the central section of the present work. Numerous other variations, however, are

---

[99] Fitzgerald, 'Growth', p. 549.
[100] Geoffrey Ashton, 'Charles Buchel and the Beautiful Theatre', *Antique Collector* April 1987, p. 81.

more readily compared synchronically, often appearing as alternations between essentially similar items published at exactly the same time, or as minor alterations in texts printed within hours, or days, of one another. Souvenir bills, including those produced for benefit nights, royal commands and gala performances further exemplify the diversity of these documents. And magazine programmes, whether issued by a single theatre or syndicated across an entire nation, offer yet another variation on the standard format.

Alternations, Alterations, and Altercations

Perhaps the earliest alternation to be witnessed in bills of the play is the simultaneous posting of both handwritten playbills and their printed equivalents throughout, and beyond, the later-sixteenth century. This persisted longer in the provinces than in London, as strolling players often lacked the means to hand-print their announcements; however, it is unlikely that a single company would have issued both varieties concurrently, and by the dawn of the seventeenth century manuscript bills were almost certainly 'the exception, not the rule'.[101]

Another alternation dating from at least the early-eighteenth century is alluded to in a reference near the foot of a playbill advertising Drury Lane's production of Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher's *Rule a Wife and Have a Wife* in 1718. The text asserts that details pertaining to the 'Entertainments of Singing and Dancing … will be Express'd in the Great Bille' (fig. 13).[102] *Great bills* contained more information than the more common daybills, and were posted nearer to the date of the performance.[103] As a result of their additional ingredients, these documents were also larger than the regular bills; and because comparatively few great bills were printed,

---

[101] Lawrence, *Playhouse*, 2: 60.

[102] *Rule a Wife and Have a Wife*, by Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher, playbill, Drury Lane, 14 April 1718, rpt. in George W. Nash, 'An Early London Playbill', *Theatre Notebook* 14.2 (Winter 1959), pl. 8, opp. p. 55.

[103] Haill, 'Bill', p. 282.

they were displayed just outside the theatres.[104] By the later-eighteenth century these posters sometimes carried alternating red and black lines of type, expanding on such occasions to four times the size of their conventional counterparts.[105] But, unlike the simple distinction between handwriting and printing, the variety characterising these artefacts is reflected in their content as well as in their form and, as a result, in their function, too: enticing descriptions of an evening's entertainment may exert greater influence on an undecided playgoer than mere titles and cast lists.

Another formal alternation resulting from variations in content and function is embodied in the contemporaneous issue of 'two kinds of programmes' intended for use within the theatre during the mid-nineteenth century:[106]

> Sometimes they cut down the playbills to serve as programmes. Then the original playbill was distributed in the cheaper sections of the theater, while the smaller playbill was sold to those in boxes and more expensive seats.[107]

The 'vile, badly printed' specimens used by less affluent patrons are sometimes classified as *semi-posters*, 'the ink of which used to come off on the hands and smelt abominably'[108]—for these folio pages were devoid of the delicate fragrances with which the perfumer Eugene Rimmel began, in the 1860s, to scent the octavo bills sponsored by his firm. In the final decades of the nineteenth century even the quality of the stock on which such bills were printed reflected the disparity between the ordinary and extraordinary bill of the play: at the Haymarket Theatre, for example, between 1886 and 1896, cardboard was used in the programmes intended for the stalls and dress circle, while the programmes circulating through the pit and gallery continued to be produced on paper.[109]

---

[104] Catherine Haill, 'Programmes, Posters and Publicity', *Images of Show Business from the Theatre Museum*, ed. James Fowler (London: Methuen, 1982), no. 79.

[105] Catherine Haill, *Theatre Posters* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1983), p. 5.

[106] Lawrence, *Playhouse*, 2: 91.

[107] This assertion is attributed to Marjorie Mason (the 'young lady in charge of the book and postcard booth' at Hall's Croft in 1956), in R. W. Babcock, 'Playbills and Programs: The Story of a Summer's Quest', *Studies in Honor of John Wilcox by Members of the English Department, Wayne State University*, ed. A. Dayle Wallace and Woodburn O. Ross, 1958 (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries, 1972), pp. 94-95.

[108] Fitz-Gerald, p. 308.

[109] Enthoven, 'Playbill', p. 743.

Into, and throughout, the twentieth century, the billing variant which perhaps best reflects the entire dramatic process, from conception to execution, remains the book of the play. It is in this document that the playwright's entire script is reproduced, at once providing the theatregoer with records of both the original literary text and the occasional performance text, while still including all the vital information found in every bill of the play. Yet in the later-eighteenth century books of the play often fulfilled only a retrospective function, reflecting on past performances, for, unlike the song books available at opening performances of musical drama, they were not sold until at least a week, and more often a month, after the opening of a production.[110] They nevertheless remained popular, and during the first half of the nineteenth century playbill vendors 'derive[d] most of their emolument from the sale of the "book of the play"', which was available within the theatre.[111] Purchasing such a document outside of the theatre, however, the unsuspecting reader in the latter half of the century was sometimes left to the mercies of unscrupulous swindlers who were less than honest with regard to its content. In 1893, for example, as Henry Irving portrayed the eponymous hero of Alfred Tennyson's *Becket* at the Lyceum Theatre, cheap reprints of Douglas Jerrold's *Thomas À Beckett: An Historical Drama*, initially staged at the Surrey Theatre in 1829, were sold near the venue as contemporary books of the play: 'These were disguised in a gay red wrapper upon which was printed in bold letters "Becket; Sir Henry Irving as Becket"'.[112]

The alternations described above typically reflect adjustments to the format of the relevant documents; but innumerable variations among otherwise identical specimens occur on bills of the play as the result of alterations to their content. The occasional announcements of opening nights, closing nights, new managements, architectural renovations and other positive or predictable developments are discussed in chapter seven in terms of their allure to the playgoer in anticipation of the future.

---

[110] Hogan, introduction, p. cxxxviii.
[111] Will o' the Wisp, 'Play-Bills', *The Table Book*, by William Hone, 2 vols. (London: Hunt, 1827–1828), 1: 587.
[112] Summers, p. 14.

But most changes to the information found in these documents involve details connected in some way with the bill's most basic descriptive ingredients. Such modifications to the location, the date, the entertainment and the performers occur more often on playbills than in programmes, owing to the proportionally greater frequency with which the former variant was printed, and to the extensive flexibility demanded by the repertory system it served, compared with the relative consistency afforded by the longer run. Nevertheless, printed information slips have been inserted into programmes following the omission of important details, or in the event of a change;[113] and the qualification 'THIS PROGRAMME MAY BE SUBJECT TO ALTERATION' further reminds the reader that the document in question may have been printed before the show even opened.[114]

While alterations to the intended venue of performance are exceedingly rare, they have been known to occur. The following proclamation appeared on an Olympic Theatre playbill for *The Hunchback* in 1833, when the Covent Garden company was obliged at short notice to seek a temporary playing space for the remainder of its interrupted season:

> The Performers of the Theatre Royal, Covent Garden, most respectfully beg leave to announce to the Public, that the Lessee having suddenly terminated his Season at an unprecedentedly early period, they have upon an application unanimously made, received a License to continue their Performances until the usual number of nights shall have been completed, at the Theatre Royal, Olympic, which will accordingly remain open, on their own responsibility.[115]

This advertisement for the performances of one theatre on the playbills of another constitutes an alteration to the documents of both houses.

Modified dates have appeared on bills only slightly more frequently than changes of location. In the eighteenth century theatre managers were particularly

---

[113] Pauline Menear and Terry Hawkins, *Stage Management and Theatre Administration* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1988), p. 111.

[114] This announcement appears on a the cover of a programme from the Royal Music Hall, c. 1890, rpt. in Cavanagh, p. 54.

[115] *The Hunchback*, playbill, Theatre Royal Olympic, 20 June 1833, John Johnson Collection: Playbills and Programmes, London, 'Olympic Theatre' folder.

reluctant to timetable their coming attractions too far in advance, lest they later be obliged to amend the information with an altered document:

> The foot of a playbill was a convenient space to announce coming attractions, but was sparingly used unless those attractions were sure to materialize on the date listed.[116]

Yet, in the nineteenth century, 'Bills were often misdated by the printers';[117] and at least some of these errors were discovered in time to reset the type prior to a subsequent printing of the advertisement.

Unanticipated changes to the scheduled entertainment itself were somewhat more common before the introduction of playbills since, without a printed forecast constraining their itinerary, theatrical companies were at greater liberty to substitute unannounced plays in place of those originally planned. Once the playbill had become a popular advertising medium, the titles it promised were carefully observed by its readers, who were quick to respond—favourably or otherwise—to any published alterations. An exchange in John Dryden's *Sr Martin Mar-All* alludes to this practice in the seventeenth century, as Warner tells Sir Martin, 'There was an ill Play set up, Sir, on the Posts, but I can assure you the Bills are altered since you saw 'um, and now there are two admirable Comedies at both Houses'.[118] In the mid-eighteenth century *Romeo and Juliet* was simultaneously running at Drury Lane and Covent Garden. David Garrick and John Rich, respectively, were engaged in direct competition with one another; and, following several consecutive days of this marathon, the latter manager simply changed his play:

> Rich turned conjurer, and in the bills for Friday (October 12th [1750]) announced the *Beggar's Opera* … The town, satiated with *Romeo and Juliet*, flew in crowds to their old favourite dish; and the house overflowed, so eager were the theatrical amateurs to prefer any change.[119]

---

[116] Stone, p. lxxv.

[117] G. B. Cross, rev. of *Playbills and Programmes from London Theatres 1801–1900 in the Theatre Museum, London*, *Nineteenth Century Theatre Research* 14 (1986), p. 121.

[118] John Dryden, *Sr Martin Mar-All* (London, 1668), p. 27.

[119] Tate Wilkinson, *Original Anecdotes Respecting the Stage* (London: n.p., [1805]), p. 6.

A less popular modification is recorded from the early-nineteenth century when, in February 1806, Drury Lane altered the title on its bills:

> The play-bills of the early part of last week announced, for yesterday evening, a well-supported revival of Congreve's *Love for Love*; but the managers, following the example of the other house, in a late announcement of *King Lear*, have since chosen, by the most mysterious silence, to cancel their engagement. We are every way at a loss to discover why the fag-end of a play-bill should thus moralize; why the pleasures which it promises, like many of those in life, should exist but in anticipation, and vanish when approached; particularly as we should have supposed that such practices would militate as pointedly against the interests of Managers as against the entertainment of the Public.[120]

Leigh Hunt's obvious disappointment and dissatisfaction at this substitution testify to the importance playgoers customarily attach to the fulfilment of their expectations, as dictated by the titles announced on the bills.

The most common alterations to the basic ingredients on bills of the play concern the identity of the performers scheduled to enact the drama. This was of virtually no consequence to the documents of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, before the names of the actors regularly appeared on playbills. But by the mid-eighteenth century it had become customary for the patent houses to reprint their handbills on the day of the performance, especially during the benefit season, incorporating any casting changes into their latest issue—sometimes in red ink. In the event of the last-minute withdrawal of prominent actors, a 'new bill was printed if time allowed', incorporating an 'explanation of the reason'; but the credibility of some excuses waned as their frequency increased and, according to George Winchester Stone Junior, the 'Drury Lane playbills for the 1769–70 season preserve a calm and objective tone, thereby concealing the exasperation caused the management by the eleventh-hour illness' of Spranger Barry and his wife, Ann Dancer.[121] This practice continued through the final decades of the century, during which the 'playbill would frequently carry a notice of the reason for the change, it being almost

---

[120] Leigh Hunt, 'Theatricals—Drury Lane', *The News* 24 February 1806, p. 327.
[121] Stone, pp. lvi, lxxiv-lxxv.

invariably the indisposition of a leading actor or actress'.[122] By the early-nineteenth century this excuse had become so common, and the resulting announcement so predictable, that when Junius Brutus Booth missed a performance as Iago to Edmund Kean's Othello at Drury Lane in 1817, claiming poor health, the following lines from a contemporary street ballad commemorating the event caused little confusion:

> Print a bill—say I'm ill—
> Got the gout—can't come out,
> I will play another day!
> Gammon bold—sack the gold.[123]

The audacity attributed to Booth in this semi-fictional account of his stage truancy recalls Walter Scott's reference to 'the play-bill, which is said to have announced the tragedy of *Hamlet*, the character of the Prince of Denmark being left out'.[124]

Describing numerous adjustments made to bills for both opera and straight drama, Kathleen Schlesinger observes that a change to the principal ingredients often resulted in additional modifications to secondary elements on the re-issued texts:

> When, on account of some alteration in the programme, the hand-bills had to be reprinted on the day of the performance, the information as to the purchase of tickets, no longer necessary, was often omitted.[125]

Yet even *Hamlet* without the Prince of Denmark could be forgiven, if proclaimed as such, and was preferable to the unacknowledged default on even the smallest promises made on the bill. Explanations for any changes to the entertainment as advertised were 'demanded if not made' voluntarily; and altercations sometimes resulted in the absence of such reports. At Drury Lane in 1768, for example, a performance of William Wycherley's *The Plain Dealer* was interrupted by a heckler, demanding of the manager, 'Mr. Holland, what is the reason we have not Mr. [Thomas] Weston according to your Publication in the Bills?'. When this outburst

---

[122] Hogan, introduction, p. lxxv.

[123] 'Theatrical Squabbles, or a Booth in Covent Garden', *Theatrical Street Ballads*, ed. J. W. Robinson (London: Society for Theatre Research, 1971), p. 46. The fourth line may be paraphrased 'A bold deceit—pocket the money'.

[124] Walter Scott, *The Talisman.* [1832], ed. George L. Turnbull (London: Dent [1905], p. xxvii.

[125] Kathleen Schlesinger, 'Opera Play-Bills from the Manskopf Collection', *The Connoisseur* 4 (1902), p. 33.

was dignified with the explanation that Weston was unwell, the complainant continued, 'then pray make an apology for him'.[126] In the final decade of the eighteenth century two actresses billed to appear on 8 February 1792 were replaced, unannounced, due to their ill health. The indignant audience responded by demanding three repetitions of the first act before allowing the second act to commence. By this time it was too late to tell them that the playbills they had purchased outside the theatre were forgeries.[127]

The alternations, alterations and altercations discussed thus far have largely been concerned with the periods leading up to, and including, the performance event. Still other variations on the standard billing format have been designed to continue serving their readership long after the final curtain has dropped, both as mementoes of the production attended and as sources of general theatrical information. The following paragraphs describe two such variants which have long retained especial popularity—the *souvenir bill* and the *magazine programme*.

Souvenir Bills

Strictly speaking a souvenir bill commemorates a significant occasion within the history of a playhouse or the run of a show, such as the opening of a new theatre, the first night of a production, a noteworthy anniversary or a command performance before distinguished patrons. By a less rigid definition, however, this category may be expanded to include those bills of the play connected with benefit nights, a portion of the proceeds from which are bestowed upon the beneficiary following the performance. Judging from the large proportion of benefit bills surviving among the total number of preserved specimens, it may reasonably be inferred that many actors have considered the receipt of such a windfall to constitute a significant occasion

---

[126] This account appears to be attributed to a source named 'Hopkins', in Stone, pp. lxxiv-lxxv. Stone summarises a number of alterations and altercations, aptly concluding, 'Woe to the manager who substituted another for the name advertised'.

[127] *Morning Herald*, 9 February 1792; *Morning Herald*, 10 February 1792, cited in Hogan, introduction, pp. xli–xlii.

indeed—if only within their own careers—and that these special publications, often bearing the donee's name in large capitals near the top of the document, frequently do serve as souvenirs, at least for those whose interests they have helped to advance.

The enlarged and prominent appearance of the relevant surname represents only one of several textual alterations which have appeared on these printed announcements. Authorship on such occasions was often the responsibility of the beneficiary, and some performers in the eighteenth century took advantage of this opportunity to personalise their advertisements. In 1744, for example, Dr. Clancy, a blind actor, quoted John Milton at the top of his Drury Lane playbill—'The day returns, but not to me returns'—before playing the sightless Tiresias in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*.[128] A 'collection of old playbills issued by the Theatre Royal, Manchester', in the late 1780s includes a variety of customised benefit bills: Mr. Grist offers on his a detailed account of the 'conditions of his engagement' with the playhouse, including his salary, before 'solicit[ing] … the patronage of the public'; Mr. Ryley includes on his a lengthy complaint against the poor treatment he feels his wife has received from other members of the company, including a 'gross falsehood' allegedly perpetrated by a fellow actor; and Mr. Penn demonstrates that one need not actually appear on stage to qualify as a beneficiary, composing his announcement from prison:

> as the future happiness or misery of his life depends on the Profits of this night, he most humbly but earnestly solicits the patronage of a public, ever remarkable for their spirited endeavours to succour the distressed, to countenance the only chance now left him to procure (that Blessing so dear to every species of Humanity)—his Liberty![129]

Incarceration was not the only state in which the recipient of an evening's takings might avoid the footlights. These arrangements were made for a variety of theatre

---

[128] Jacob Larwood [Herman Diederik J. van Schevichaven], *Theatrical Anecdotes* (London: Chatto, 1882), p. 86.

[129] Qtd. in 'A Bundle of Old Playbills', pp. 67, 68. Whether or not the anonymous author of this eight-column article has invented the surnames of the beneficiaries mentioned, they remain remarkably appropriate to their respective conditions: Grist is concerned with profit and advantage; Ryley is riled indeed; and Penn is certainly penned in.

personnel—'even the humble Bill-sticker'[130]—and one of the oldest extant playbills to be printed on silk, dated 12 October 1790, commemorates a performance at the New Theatre, Brighthelmston, 'for the benefit of R. Thomas, the Boxkeeper'.[131] Special fabrics were often employed in the manufacture of these bills, further strengthening the argument for their classification as *souvenirs*: a 'heavy satin example', issued on 22 February 1796, the oldest of its kind to survive, also records a benefit performance, for 'Mr. Miller at the Theatre Royal, Hay-Market'.[132]

Benefits in the nineteenth century continued to assist both cast and crew, and it may be presumed that extra care was taken in printing the corresponding bills of the play when the funds raised were to be given to the printers themselves;[133] and that bills advertising performances for the 'benefit of … [the] Bill distributor' were posted almost everywhere.[134] In the later-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries these events were sometimes held in aid of institutions as well as individuals, and on such occasions the bills might include information about the causes supported, such as the Hospital for Diseases of the Throat and Chest, described in a Lyceum Theatre programme in 1879.[135]

On rather different occasions it was the institutions themselves which initiated the evening's entertainment, the British monarchy historically providing a notable example, and bills of a correspondingly suitable elegance were produced, distributed and saved to announce, accompany and commemorate royal command performances:

> When Royalty visited the theatre in the eighteenth century they found silk programmes pinned to the cushions in the box, for which audiences were inclined to scramble when the Royal party left.[136]

---

[130] Robert Wood, *The Victorian Provincial Printer and the Stage* (Newcastle: Newcastle Imprint Club, 1972), p. 14.

[131] Patrick MacClellan, letter, *Daily Telegraph* 20 April 1960, p. 12.

[132] Raymond Mander and Joe Mitchenson, letter, *Daily Telegraph* 13 April 1960, p. 12.

[133] *The Wonder*, by Susannah Centlivre, playbill, Garrick Club, 17 January 1842, Garrick Club, *Scrapbook*, Harvard Theatre Collection: Thr.353.15.5, n.pag n.pag.

[134] *The Founding of the Forest*, playbill, Swansea, 2 September 1813, listed in Cecil Price, 'Playbills of the English Theatre in Wales, 1801–21', *National Library of Wales Journal* 7 (1951–52), p. 213.

[135] *Hamlet*, by William Shakespeare, playbill, Lyceum Theatre, 24 February 1879, John Henry Brodribb Irving, *Royal Lyceum Theatre: Programmes*, 17 vols. (London, 1879–1905) British Library: C.120a.1., 1: n.pag.

[136] John Kennedy Melling, *Discovering Theatre Ephemera* (N.p.: Shire, 1974), p. 47.

In addition to the luxurious materials formally distinguishing these artefacts from ordinary playbills, they differed also by virtue of including an extra line of text inserted between the name of the theatre and the date of the performance: the phrase 'BY COMMAND OF THEIR MAJESTIES' appears just below the coat of arms on a silk bill from Drury Lane commemorating a royal performance of Susannah Centlivre's comedy, *A Bold Stroke for a Wife*, dated 22 January 1800 (fig. 14).[137]

Throughout the nineteenth century silk and satin remained the media of choice in the production of royal command bills—sometimes 'fringed with gold';[138] at other times bordered by a 'pale mauve fringe'.[139] But in 1850 a particularly attractive effect was achieved with paper on a document announcing the staging of Richard Brinsley Sheridan's *The Critic* at Windsor castle. This specimen was 'produced … with pierced borders, to appear as if edged with lace' (fig. 15).[140] The command bills of the early-twentieth century, while retaining some of the formal elegance of their predecessors, began to carry an increasing amount of descriptive information concerning the performances for which they were published. The bill commemorating the coronation of George V in 1911, for example, lists a full set of credits for seven different events, and more closely resembles a contemporary theatre programme, which had by this time virtually replaced the playbill, than a lavish souvenir.[141]

Lavish souvenirs, none the less, have never gone out of fashion. Rather, their most consistent and extravagant application has usually concerned the celebration of the venues from which they were issued and the productions for which they were published, at gala performances on significant dates. The inauguration of a new

---

[137] *A Bold Stroke for a Wife*, by Susannah Centlivre, playbill, Drury Lane, 22 January 1800, rpt. in Ian Bevan, *Royal Performance: The Story of Royal Theatregoing* (London: Hutchinson, 1954), opp. p. 92.

[138] Walter Gordon, 'Old and New Playbills', *Theatre* 3rd ser. 4 (1881), p. 145.

[139] D. Greer, letter, *Daily Telegraph* 7 April 1960, p. 12.

[140] *The Critic*, by Richard Brinsley Sheridan, playbill, Windsor Castle, 19 December 1850, rpt. in Haill, 'Bill', p. 284.

[141] *Coronation Gala Performance*, programme, His Majesty's Theatre, 27 June 1911, Harvard Theatre Collection: HTC-LC.PN.2582.K55.C67x.1911.F.

playhouse, for example, has often been celebrated with the creation of a unique bill. On 21 December 1868, as the Gaiety Theatre first opened its doors, patrons were presented with a programme in the form of a fan to accompany the production of William Schwenck Gilbert's *Robert the Devil*. This elaborate artefact was made and perfumed by Eugene Rimmel, and bears illustrations rendered by poster artist Jules Chéret, as well as information concerning the actors, the scenes, the orchestra, the costumes, times, prices and access points from surrounding streets.[142] The opening of a new play has also sometimes occasioned the printing of a special bill. Richard D'Oyly Carte, while manager of the Opera Comique Theatre, distributed a 'fringed silk programme' coinciding with the first performance of William Schwenck Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan's *H.M.S. Pinafore* in 1878;[143] and through much of the later-nineteenth century 'the programmes of the St. James's Theatre were printed in gold on cardboard for first nights'.[144] Various landmarks within the run of a successful show have often been commemorated with special bills as well. To celebrate the one thousandth performance of Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado* in 1896, the Savoy Theatre printed its programmes for the evening on the back of tasselled Japanese fans (fig. 16);[145] and some of Herbert Beerbohm Tree's gala anniversaries at the venue formerly known as the Queen's Theatre were enhanced by programmes in 'the form of a scroll … with wooden batons at each end, housed in a cardboard box'.[146] In *The Lyle Price Guide to Printed Collectibles* [*sic*], Tony Curtis lists a number of anniversary programmes from the early-twentieth century, suggesting that the period between 1900 and the beginning of the first world war provided the most 'sumptuous productions' of such texts.[147]

---

[142] Yvonne Willcocks and Clive Willcocks, *The Story of a Theatre Fan*, Theatre Museum: PN.2596.-L7.G34.Pamphlet, n.pag.

[143] Eugene Goossens, letter, *Daily Telegraph* 16 April 1960, p. 6.

[144] Enthoven, 'Playbill', p. 744.

[145] *The Mikado*, by William Schwenck Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan, programme, Savoy Theatre, 1896, rpt. in Haill, 'Bill', p. 285.

[146] Speaight, *Memorabilia*, p. 20.

[147] Tony Curtis, *The Lyle Price Guide to Printed Collectibles*, 1984, rev. ed. (Glenmayne, Galashiels, Scotland: Lyle, 1987), p. 421.

A playful connection between the formal characteristics of many souvenir bills and the titles they carry remains particularly evident in specimens from the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. In 1886, for example, a bell-shaped programme was produced to accompany 'MISS MINNIE BELL'S ENTERTAINMENT' at St. George's Hall 'IN AID OF THE PADDINGTON GREEN HOSPITAL FOR CHILDREN' (fig. 17);[148] in 1893 the Royal Globe Theatre issued a programme in the shape of a looking glass in conjunction with Sydney Grundy's comedy, *The Glass of Fashion* (fig. 18);[149] and in 1913 Drury Lane enclosed the programme for its production of *Sealed Orders* in a brown envelope, secured with a red wax seal (fig. 19).[150] Other souvenir bills fulfilled practical functions beyond their usual mandate. Often these appeared in the form of fans, such as the folding paper specimen produced by the Shaftesbury Theatre in 1891,[151] and the 'Memento from theatreland', another folding fan, depicting a playhouse interior filling with spectators.[152] British printed fans were not uncommon in the theatres of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Nor was the suggestion that they be regarded as published texts, for 'it was required by law ... that they should bear the date of their issue and the name of their publisher':

> Unfortunately, this information was almost always printed on the lower part of the mount and here it was quite often trimmed off during the operation of fitting the mount to the sticks.

In addition to cast lists and the pictorial representations of scenes and costumes from the play, some fans were printed with the 'names of subscribers together with the numbers of their boxes or seats at a particular theatre'.[153] Patrons attending the

---

[148] *Miss Minnie Bell's Entertainment*, programme, St. George's Hall, 15 February 1886, rpt. in Geoffrey Ashton, 'Paintings in the Theatre Museum', *Apollo* April 1987, pl. 2, p. 261.

[149] *The Glass of Fashion*, by Sydney Grundy, programme, Royal Globe Theatre, September 1893, rpt. in Cavanagh, p. 13.

[150] *Sealed Orders*, by Cecil Raleigh and Henry Hamilton, programme, Drury Lane, 1913, rpt. in Cavanagh, p. 14.

[151] Haill, 'Bill', p. 284; photographed in Ashton, 'Paintings', pl. 2, p. 261.

[152] A photograph of this specimen appears in Everna Zabell, 'Playing It Cool: The Changing Art of Advertising on Fans', *The Lady* 30 January 1975, p. 193. A manuscript notation on the photocopy of this page found at the Theatre Museum, Covent Garden, reads, 'Souvenir of the Palace Theatre'.

[153] Bertha de Vere Green, *A Collector's Guide to Fans over the Ages* (London: Frederick Muller, 1975), pp. 141–142, 190–191.

theatre merely to be seen had at last considerably simplified the task for *their* audiences.

Many souvenir programmes from the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries include extensive collections of sketches, paintings and photographs. In the twelve-page document published for the Lyceum Theatre's production of *The Corsican Brothers* in 1880, the cast list, technical credits and plot synopsis are followed by colour renderings of scenes from each of the three acts in the drama (fig. 20).[154] Some of the photographic souvenir programmes from the same period consist of little more in the way of printed matter than a cast list and production credits, the rest of the artefact being devoted to the visual representation of the drama. In 1900, for example, Her Majesty's Theatre issued a souvenir of Stephen Phillips's *Herod*, featuring Herbert Beerbohm Tree in the title role. Twenty large photographs are contained within a thick red cardboard casing, on one side of which is printed the title of the play, and on the other side of which the 'Characters of the Play' are listed.[155]

In conjunction with benefit nights, royal commands and gala performances, an enormous variety of media, including 'engravings, photography, fancy papers, silk, satin, glass, wood, and even pottery and bronze' have historically been employed in the manufacture of innumerable souvenir bills.[156] Often softer to the touch than their regular counterparts, and sometimes more fragrant as well, they nevertheless best distinguish themselves among the most interesting variations on the standard billing format by virtue of their immediate visual impact, having served, for at least the past three centuries, as 'eye candy to the playgoer unsatisfied with a mere playbill'.[157] Yet, for all their merit as artistic creations, they usually supply information limited to the productions they commemorate. The final variant to be noted in this chapter, the

---

[154] *The Corsican Brothers*, by Dionysius Boucicault, programme, Lyceum Theatre, 1880, rpt. in Speaight, *Memorabilia*, p. 19.

[155] *Herod*, by Stephen Phillips, programme, Her Majesty's Theatre, 30 October 1900 (London: Langfiér, 1900), Bodleian Library: M.Adds.124d.33.

[156] Edward R. Byram, 'Concerning Playbills', *New England Magazine* ns 32 (1905), p. 554.

[157] *Broadway Bound: American Musical Theater in First Edition and Manuscript*, Lakin and Marley Rare Books, Catalogue Seven (Mill Valley, CA: n.p., 1997), p. 15.

magazine programme, expands this remit to encompass, not only the play, but the venue, and sometimes the entire theatre community as well, often listing the entertainments on offer at other houses. Whereas the reader glancing at an old souvenir bill is probably recalling an evening spent at the theatre, the reader perusing a used magazine programme may be planning another visit.

Magazine Programmes

As dramatic documents published in connection with staged entertainments, advising their readers of the locations, dates, titles and performers of the productions for which they are issued, magazine programmes must necessarily be included in any account of variations on the standard bill of the play. Yet unlike the souvenirs described above, which have existed in one form or another for as long as there have been theatre bills of any kind, and unlike the innumerable alterations acknowledged earlier, which are the ongoing and inevitable consequence of a changing repertoire, magazine programmes evolved at particular stages in the development of the playbill into the programme, and are thus explored in greater detail from a historical perspective in connection with the Georgian and Victorian theatre discussed in chapters five and six.

Notwithstanding their resistance to synchronicity, these particular documents may be further classified into three additional categories, consisting of *periodical listings*, *in-house magazine programmes* and *syndicated bills of the play*. Technically, the first of these sub-variants may be said to have originated with the earliest publication, in 1700, of the patent theatres' playbills in the *Flying Post*.[158] But, while numerous daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly and annual journals have, for centuries, reproduced bills of the play, both before and after the theatrical event, the periodicals with which the present study is concerned are those which, since the early-

---

[158] Henry Sampson, *History of Advertising* (London: Chatto, 1874), pp. 137–138.

nineteenth century, have been sold at or near the venue, prior to the performance, in order to accompany the playgoer throughout the entertainment.

In-house magazine programmes first appeared in Britain in the second half of the nineteenth century, at least a decade after their American predecessors, providing a welcome alternative to unmanageably large playbills printed with malodorous ink on tissue paper. The quantity of information typically included on the documents during this period was more appealingly presented in the form of a booklet and, with their cast lists printed on the cover, these folded sheets could be held and read as playbills before the contents of their interiors were perused.

Syndicated bills, also originating in America, and acquiring popularity in Britain near the dawn of the twentieth century, are published *for* the theatres, not *by* them, providing each participating playhouse with essentially the same basic document, into which its own literary and pictorial materials are then inserted. Characteristic of this sub-variant, one text—incorporating the common features of the generic magazine programme—merges with a second text—featuring the items contributed separately by each theatre—to create a unique artefact for every production at every venue.

Taken collectively, all theatrical bills, including playbills, programmes, books of the play, souvenirs and magazine programmes, imply the existence of at least two additional texts of indispensable importance—the playwright's script, which precedes the publication of the bill; and the company's enactment of that script, which follows the publication of the bill. With this understanding, the aggregate *bill of the play* may itself be regarded as an textual variant—both of the literary text on which it depends, and of the performance text which it serves. But, while many bill-collecting theatregoers may never partake of the script connected with the ephemeral document they save, most will have witnessed its enactment. In fact, for the majority of audience members, bills of the play constitute the only tangible reminders of a visit to the playhouse. In essence, all theatre programmes are souvenir programmes.

This chapter has been concerned to demonstrate that, while it may be possible to classify satisfactorily any number of objects connected with theatrical documentation, plenary descriptions, inflexibly applied, ultimately prove more limiting than liberating. Plural definitions of individual variants, for example, cannot be tolerated simultaneously when the formal approach demarcating a *playbill* conflicts with the functional viewpoint delineating a *programme*. The four ingredients advanced as basic to every bill of the play do not always appear in full complement when, for example, the date is omitted from a programme. And, based on the taxonomy proposed in the final pages, a bill appearing in a playhouse journal containing the complete text of a piece whose one hundredth performance, requested by the ruling monarch, was devoted to raising funds for the lavatory cleaner would accurately, if not helpfully, be deemed a magazine programme book of the play souvenir royal command benefit bill. Marvin Carlson observes that the 'terms program, playbill, and bill of the play were all used more or less interchangeably throughout the late nineteenth century' before declaring the territory he intends to explore:

> My own discussion will deal with printed material, whatever it was called, designed to be available to the audience member during the actual production, whether brought into the theatre from outside or, more commonly, obtained there.[159]

These agreeably broad parameters afford a suitably flexible description of the entire range of documents, often collectively referred to in the following chapters as *bills*—for the distinction between *playbill* and *programme* enjoys only limited, albeit specific, relevance in the remaining sections of the present study. Before these ephemeral texts are considered from historical and functional perspectives, their status as legitimate documents will be established through an account of the various stages involved in their composition and distribution—the subject of the following chapter.

---

[159] Carlson, p. 102.

CHAPTER 2

COMPOSITION AND DISTRIBUTION

Like many documents, theatre playbills and programmes are published. Responsibility for this publication throughout the five centuries of their printed history, however, has invariably rested with the theatres themselves and not, as in the more usual commercial publishing context, with an external body distinct from the sponsor, author, printer, distributor and seller. Theatres, after all, finance and write their own bills, arrange for their printing, re-acquire their own product at its point of origin and retail it on their own premises. Nevertheless, the sequence of events inherent in more conventional publishing ventures provides a useful framework within which to examine the bill of the play. This chapter explores the sponsorship and authorship, the printing and the distribution and sale of playbills and programmes of the British theatre, treating each topic chronologically, from the mid-sixteenth through the early-twentieth centuries.

Sponsorship and Authorship

Programme advertising is perhaps the most obvious means by which bills of the play are sponsored; but this marks a relatively recent development as, for the first three hundred years of their printed existence, playbills were mercifully devoid of such intrusive commercialism. They have been financed by printers, playwrights, theatre managers, newspaper editors and even shopkeepers—all of whom have supported their publication in the hopes of at least reclaiming, if not redoubling, their investment. And as playbills evolved over the centuries, growing both in their physical size and in the amount of information they contained, their sponsors often simultaneously assumed an active role in their *authorship*—a term which, in the present discussion, denotes virtually all contributions to the production of editorial material found in the theatrical documentation under review.

The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries

Prior to the advent of programme advertising in the mid-nineteenth century, rather than an individual or organisation underwriting the publication of the bill of the play, theatres simply took such costs into consideration when planning their budgets. On at least one occasion in the seventeenth century, however, this pattern was broken, and a theatre programme, of sorts, was sponsored by the very playwright whose work it accompanied. In 1697 Peter Motteux's five-act play, *The Novelty*, was presented at Lincoln's Inn Fields. Each act of *The Novelty* consists of a new tale told in a different genre—pastoral, comedy, masque, tragedy and farce.[1] The third act, entitled 'Masque of Hercules', was enhanced, at the first performance, by a book of the masque, which was given to members of the audience without charge; and the publication of this document was apparently funded by Motteux himself.[2] This exception notwithstanding, it was in most cases still the responsibility of the theatre staging a production to finance the bill of the play.

Because the vast majority of seventeenth-century bills were purely factual in their limited content—formulaically announcing where and when to see what featuring whom—playbill authorship during much of the period consisted mainly of the printer's selection from among the available typographical options. At the patent houses following the Restoration, bill writing amounted to a joint effort shared among the manager, the prompter and the printer. The play to be produced and the date of its performance—two essential ingredients on even the most meagre bill—were invariably determined by the manager. As a result of numerous hours spent on book at rehearsals and on writing out all the parts from each play, the prompter enjoyed an intimate acquaintance with the company's repertoire, its players and the respective roles they customarily enacted, and so would prepare much of the playbill copy, limited though it usually was prior to the eighteenth century. The remaining authorial options were left to the printer; and while these choices often amounted to little more

---

[1] Peter Motteux, *The Novelty: Every Act a Play* (London, 1697).
[2] W. J. Lawrence, 'Book of Words', *The Stage* 29 June 1933, p. 15.

than selecting from among various typefaces and sizes, and their centering or justification, such decisions influenced enormously the appearance and readability of the finished product. One of the oldest extant theatre bills, announcing a puppet play at Bartholomew Fair, may well have been sponsored, authored and even printed by the very showman whose performances it advertised.[3]

The Eighteenth Century

Throughout the eighteenth century theatre managers continued to participate in the production of their own playbills, and records from the period begin to reveal some of the charges incurred by the patent houses in sponsoring the publication of these documents. Drury Lane's accounts between 1712 and 1716, for example, indicate that the daily cost of its bills ranged from ten to fifteen shillings;[4] and, recalling the second and third decades of the century, Colley Cibber reports that the same theatre further allocated a 'separate Allowance of Fifty Pounds a Year, for writing our daily Play Bills' to fellow manager Robert Wilks—adding that this particular task was 'the only one we car'd to trust to his particular Intendance, or could find out for a Pretence to distinguish him'. Such a sum, however, was by no means typical recompense for 'so insignificant a Charge' as bill writing; and Wilks's pension, 'which was no part of our original Agreement' in this unhappy managerial partnership, 'was merely paid to keep him quiet'.[5] In the second half of the eighteenth century the burden of playbill sponsorship was sometimes partially offset through fees remitted to the playhouses by various shopkeepers for the privilege of placing bills in their store windows[6]—a commercial transaction somewhat difficult to grasp in the present era, in which the money associated with promotional postering usually represents a debit, not a credit, to the theatre's account. Taxation added nothing to the

---

[3] Van Lennep, 'Playbill', opp. p. 382, 384.
[4] Haill, 'Bill', p. 282.
[5] Colley Cibber, *An Apology for the Life of Mr. Colley Cibber, Comedian* (London: Watts, 1740), p. 330.
[6] Cook, p. 59.

cost of publication during this period, as posted playbills remained exempt from advertisement duty throughout the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.[7]

The task of playbill authorship at the patent houses was still largely undertaken by the theatre's prompter who, after receiving instructions from the manager, passed them on to the printer in the form of a manuscript bill.[8] From the earliest years of the eighteenth century dramatic performances were also announced in daily papers—by which, in yet another curious business arrangement, the theatres once again earned, rather than spent, money—and the copy written by the prompter would often serve for both the newspaper advertisement and the playbill.[9] In *A General History of the Stage* William Rufus Chetwood, Drury Lane's prompter for twenty years, reminds his readers that, in addition to satisfying the wishes of the manager and the requirements of the printer, he has also to contend with the expectations of the actors in the company, whose pride sometimes exerted an additional influence on his authorship. Referring to the contemporary theatre of the mid-eighteenth century, Chetwood describes the dilemma he faces composing the theatre's playbills:

> I have found it a difficult Task to please some *Ladies*, as well as *Gentlemen*, because I could not find Letters large enough to please them; and some were so very fond of Elbow-room, that they would have shoved every body out but themselves, as if one Person was to do all, and have the Merit of all.[10]

Final decisions concerning the arrangement and size of type were more likely made by the printer than by the prompter;[11] but most bills of the eighteenth century remained the product of a multiple authorship, for in the latter decades the prompters at each of the three major houses—Drury Lane, Covent Garden and the Haymarket—continued to draft the playbills on the evening preceding their associated

---

[7] Terry R. Nevett, *Advertising in Britain: A History* (London: Heinemann, 1982), p. 53.
[8] Lawrence, *Playhouse*, 2: 87.
[9] W. J. Lawrence, 'The World's Oldest Playbills', p. 27.
[10] Chetwood, p. 59.
[11] Stone, p. lxxiv.

performances, when they were sent 'before ten at night to three different printing houses' to be realised in their final form.[12]

Within the companies of strolling players touring the provinces various personnel shared in the process of composition. A particularly creative approach to playbill authorship during the final decades of the eighteenth century is attributed to the highly successful circuit proprietor, Sarah Baker. Though reputedly illiterate all her life, the 'Governess-General of the Kentish Drama' effectively composed her own drafts on a regular basis:[13]

> she … manufactured the daily play-bill, by the help of scissors, needle, thread, and a collection of old bills; cutting a play from one, an interlude from another, a farce from a third, and sewed them neatly together.[14]

The unqualified credibility of this account is perhaps somewhat damaged by an assertion, earlier in the same account, that Baker, despite her alleged inability to read and write, nevertheless kept the box-book in which she recorded the sale of seats.[15] But, according to Thomas Dibdin, these fabricated playbills 'precluded the necessity of pen and ink except where the name of a former actor was to make way for a successor'; and under such circumstances 'a blank was left for the first performer who happened to call in, and who could write, to fill up'.[16] On the occasion of their own benefit performances, however—from which a portion of the proceeds would be issued to the beneficiary—the travelling players assumed a far more active role in the authorship of the relevant bills. Circuit manager Tate Wilkinson muses on the inevitably subjective process of promoting one's own cause in print:

> on his benefit night, what he or she would abuse, as a brother actor's bill, they would recommend as excellent for their own night; and what is more extraordinary, make himself or herself believe he is speaking truth: For we speak and see very differently when self-interest is

---

[12] *Morning Chronicle, and London Advertiser* 26 February 1773, microfilm, British Library; Colindale Newspaper Library, reel 713, n.pag.

[13] Norma Hodgson, 'Sarah Baker (1736/7-1816): "Governess-General of the Kentish Drama"', *Studies in English Theatre History* (London: Society for Theatre Research, 1952), p. 65.

[14] Thomas Dibdin, *The Reminiscences of Thomas Dibdin*, 2 vols. (London: Colburn, 1827, 1: 95.

[15] J. S. Bratton, 'Sarah Baker: The Making of a "Character"', Foulkes, pp. 46, 47.

[16] Thomas Dibdin, 1: 95–96.

> concerned. Mr. Wilson's benefit-bill of Edinburgh, 1793, would cover the *bed of Ware*.[17]

For the remainder of the eighteenth century, and throughout the nineteenth, playbill authorship in both London and the counties continuously broadened to include the contributions, not only of actors, but of various other practitioners connected with the attendant theatrical production.

The Nineteenth and Early-Twentieth Centuries

The financing of playbill publication in the nineteenth century changed dramatically during the 1850s, as theatres seemed suddenly to respond to the advice contained in a 'motto addressed to managers':

> Honour and shame from no condition rise,
> Cast well your plays, and then go advertise[18]

—and commercial notices began to appear regularly in bills of the play. The growth of this most obvious form of sponsorship coincided almost directly with the physical evolution of the artefacts from single sheets, printed on one side only, into folded, multi-paged documents, printed front and back. As early as 1855 the Haymarket playbills alerted their readers to 'the Best Refreshments to be had in the Saloons at very moderate Charges';[19] and extravaganza bills at the Royal Olympic Theatre already contained numerous commercial announcements; but, as the concept of programme publicity was still relatively new, many of the earliest notices were those inserted by the theatres themselves—either to draw attention to their own amenities; or, even more self-referentially, precisely to advise prospective advertising clients of this novel promotional opportunity.[20] Such advertisements for advertisements generated the interest of numerous sponsors, one of the earliest of whom was the perfumer Eugene Rimmel who, in 1863, financed the Lyceum Theatre's publication,

---

[17] Tate Wilkinson, *The Wandering Patentee*, 4 vols. (York, 1795), 2: 104.
[18] 'Theatrical Pictorial Posters', *Theatre* ns 17 (1891), p. 285.
[19] *The Man of Many Friends*, by Stirling Coyne, playbill, Haymarket Theatre, 6 December 1855, *Scrapbook of Clippings and Playbills*, Haymarket Theatre, Harvard Theatre Collection: TS.318.1.5F, n.pag.
[20] Cavanagh, p. 5.

under Charles Fechter, of the oldest extant in-house programme to be produced for the legitimate drama—a document entirely distinct from the posted playbill, alongside which it coexisted.[21]

Rimmel was highly inventive in his exploitation of the trend of programme advertising. Having successfully displayed an aromatic fountain at the Great Exhibition of 1851, and having perfumed the entire Lyceum Theatre ten years later, he next chose to enhance the documents he sponsored with the fragrances of his trade. As a result, many productions of the 1860s and 1870s were accompanied by scented bills in which Rimmel further promoted his perfumed almanacs, Christmas cards, ornaments, handkerchief boxes, glove boxes, menus, guest cards and fans. In direct acknowledgement of this sponsorship some documents reserved their final line of type to announce the provenance of their commercial aroma: 'This Programme is Perfumed and Supplied by EUGENE RIMMEL', for example, appears at the bottom of the bill accompanying a pantomime entitled *Ali-Baba and the Forty Thieves*, performed at Covent Garden in 1868 (fig. 21).[22] But while Rimmel's ingenuity contributed to programmes which were both fragrant and attractive, the vast majority of his rival sponsors displayed no such creative flair in their bids for self-promotion.[23] Many bills of the play produced in the later-nineteenth century consisted almost entirely of commercial notices, announcing every conceivable item of industrial, household and personal use, such as John Hollingshead's double sheet of advertisements, produced at the Gaiety Theatre, in which a 'rivulet of theatrical information meandered through meadows of invitations to buy boots and shoes'.[24] In 1879 an anonymous critic lamented the profusion of these 'intruding advertisements, wherein the caste of the piece … surrounded by corn solvents and surgical

---

[21] The play in production was *The Duke's Motto*, and both the playbill and the programme are described in Babcock, pp. 94-95.

[22] *Ali-Baba and the Forty Thieves*, programme, Covent Garden, 1868, rpt. in Cavanagh, p. 59.

[23] Some opera playbills of the 1870s were scented with Napoleon Price's Opera Bouquet (a 'refreshing, lasting Perfume'), according to Rodney M. D. Bennett, 'Collecting Programmes and Playbills', *Opera* 11 (1960), p. 465.

[24] Percy Fitzgerald, 'Play-Bills, Old and New', *Theatre* ns 6 (1885), p. 10.

instruments … is of a second or third-rate consideration', and recommended that, in the future, sponsors of theatre programmes 'learn how, when, and where to advertise'.[25] But from a purely pragmatic point of view no lessons were needed: an examination of John Laurence Toole's ledger of performances in 1884, for example, indicates that advertising revenue could generate more than twelve percent of an evening's receipts—even when printing costs represented less than two percent of the total expenditure.[26]

On 1 February 1889 the practice of placing playbill advertisements 'on the borders of programmes' was officially patented.[27] A sardonic description of contemporary theatrical advertising published the following year emphasises the sizable gains realised by the theatres from this steadily increasing level of commercial bombardment:

> On the first page you are most likely informed where you can purchase coffins on the hire system, tooth powder, basinettes, and brandy; on the second, third, and fourth you are confronted with a perfect encyclopædia of toilette requisites, and are initiated into so many mysteries of feminine attire as makes you … positively blush and feel embarrassed. The cast of the play is supposed to be on it somewhere, but very few are equal to the task of discovering the exact spot. And for all these irritating advertisements, out of which the managements reap enormous profits, the unfortunate playgoer has to pay at least sixpence.[28]

By this time playbill advertising had become such big business that the 'managers of some theatres … renounce[d] their control over this department, and dispose[d] of the right of selling programmes to a contractor'.[29] This most official sponsorship arrangement, entrusted to an external agent, persisted through the last decade of the nineteenth century and into the early-twentieth, when post-Edwardian refreshment

---

[25] 'Playbills', *City Jackdaw* [Manchester] 19 December 1879, p. 47.

[26] Performances on 12 January 1884 of *Namesakes*; *Artful Cards* and *Stage Dora* generated total receipts of £454 13s. 2d. of which advertising accounted for £55 18s. 6d. On the same date £424 9s. 7d. was spent, from which only £5 12s. 6d. was allocated to printing, according to John Laurence Toole, *Ledgers* (1884–1892), Harvard Theatre Collection: fMS.Thr.303, n.pag.

[27] Terence Rees and David Wilmore, *British Theatrical Patents, 1801–1900* (London: Society for Theatre Research, 1996), p. 69, no. 1784.

[28] Fitz-Gerald, pp. 308–309.

[29] N. L. Parker, 'Playbills, Past and Present', *Theatre* ns 20 (1892), p. 13.

contractors—enjoying a beverage monopoly over thirsty playgoers during intervals—issued theatre programmes of a standard size until their production was curtailed by the outbreak of the first world war.[30]

Just as the sponsorship of playbills in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries expanded to include numerous additional sources of financial support, their authorship, too, during this period broadened to incorporate new editorial input from, among others, playwrights and even critics. Joint authorship in the early-nineteenth century sometimes entailed an appreciable lapse of time between the contributions of various writers. This is most evident in the case of the strolling companies carrying stock bills. A printed sheet, such as the *Douglas* playbill of 1819 from which the following quotation is extracted, was already partially completed before the tour began:

> _____ THEATRE … On _____ Evening _____ 1819, Will be performed Dr. Humes, admired Tragedy of 'Douglas, or the Scotch Shepherd'.[31]

Details particular to individual venues and dates were later hand-written onto the bills, as they became known.

Travelling players continued to compose their own benefit playbills in the Victorian era, openly appealing for the support of their acquaintances in an effort to secure a healthy return from the box office:

> Mr. Whimp with respect solicits his friends
> On whose sanctions and favour his best hope depends.
> And will ever a grateful sensation excite
> To have your support on his Benefit Night.[32]

Robert Wood describes the intriguing methodology employed by the itinerant performers in the creation of these announcements:

> Actors had their own way of making up a bill. They cut out the various acts and play titles from former bills and stuck them together,

---

[30] Enthoven, 'Playbill', p. 743.

[31] *Douglas*, by John Home, playbill, 1819, transcribed in Roy Plomley, 'Mr. Fraser's Company', *Theatre Notebook* 8 (1953–54), p. 47.

[32] This uncredited quatrain, while representative, may nevertheless be a pastiche, invented by Robert Wood, *Printer*, p. 14.

> frequently with stamp edging, and then handed over the result, which often looked more like the tail of a kite than a theatre bill, for the printer to follow as best he might.[33]

In Charles Dickens's *Nicholas Nickleby*, Vincent Crummles urges the title character to assume the task of authorship, saying 'Think what capital bills a man of your education could write for the shop-windows'.[34] Dickens himself sometimes drafted or completed his own bills of the play during the first half of the nineteenth century: an example of a printed bill whose cast list has been added in manuscript advertises a performance of *A Roland for an Oliver*, to be performed privately at the Queen's Theatre, Montreal, in 1842 (fig. 22);[35] while an example of a completely handwritten draft advertises a performance of Ben Jonson's *Every Man in His Humour*, to be enacted by the Amateur Company at the Theatre Royal, Liverpool, in 1847, for the benefit of Leigh Hunt (fig. 23).[36] The authorial contributions of some practitioners during this period, however, extended well beyond matters bearing directly on the play in production. In the early 1840s, for example, Mr. C. Freer, the leading tragedian at the Garrick Theatre, returned from a tour of America to discover that his wife had circulated insinuating statements against him in the public press. The slandered actor resorted to his theatre's playbills as a medium in which to offer a written response to the published attack.[37] By the middle of the century even those bills lacking such extraneous domestic material continued to expand, sometimes measuring in excess of four square feet;[38] and of particular interest to the subject of authorship are the playbills of Charles Kean, manager of the Princess's Theatre, who in the 1850s wrote lengthy historiographical essays for inclusion on his bills. Kean's playbill dissertations for his Shakespearean productions in 1856, expatiating on the

---

[33] Robert Wood, *Victorian Delights* (London: Evans, 1967), p. 29.
[34] Charles Dickens, *The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby* (London: Chapman, 1839), p. 213.
[35] *A Roland for an Oliver*, playbill, Queen's Theatre, Montreal, 25 May 1842, *Dickens and the Stage*, extra-illustrated, Harvard Theatre Collection: TS.933.15; and TS.M.394.56 Master Neg 18640, n.pag.
[36] *Every Man in His Humour*, by Ben Jonson, Theatre Royal, Liverpool, 28 July 1847, rpt. in Charles Dickens, *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. Graham Storey et al. 9 vols. to date (Oxford: Clarendon, 1965–), 5: frontispiece.
[37] Francis Edwards, p. 28.
[38] Enthoven, 'Playbill', p. 742.

plays, detailing his research and explaining his production choices, constitute some of the earliest programme notes to be found on a bill of the play.[39]

Although theatre managers in the second half of the nineteenth century remained almost invariably responsible for the issue of their own playbills, authorship continued to be undertaken by various people connected with the production in question. Following the example already established by the strolling companies, Benjamin Webster, manager of the New Adelphi Theatre, had, by 1862, conferred responsibility for the writing of each benefit bill on the person to whom the proceeds would be donated, presumably as an incentive to the beneficiary to devise the most alluring announcement possible.[40] With the advent of the multi-paged bill of the play even theatre critics occasionally participated, perhaps unwittingly, in the composition of the bills. An early example of this authorial implication occurred in 1863 when a lengthy extract from *The Times* was printed on the second page of Drury Lane's programme for Lord Byron's *Manfred!* (fig. 24).[41] Twenty-five years later Hall Caine and Wilson Barrett wrote a full-page '*Authors' Note*' for inclusion in the programme for their own five-act romantic drama of 1888, entitled *Ben-My-Chree* (fig. 25);[42] and before the century's close the 'most elaborate program' of any of George Bernard Shaw's plays—that for the copyright performance of *Cæsar and Cleopatra* in 1899—was 'prepared by Shaw himself and carries additional notes by him' (fig. 26).[43] With these publications, playwrights themselves were at last seen to contribute substantially to the authorship of the bills accompanying their own works. But through the remainder of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, notwithstanding the great variety of personnel who continued to participate in the writing of the

---

[39] Haill, 'Bill', p. 284.

[40] St. Vincent Troubridge, 'Adelphi Advertising in 1862', *Theatre Notebook* 4 (1949-50), p. 58.

[41] *Manfred!*, by George Gordon Byron, programme, Drury Lane Theatre, 7 December 1863, rpt. in Cavanagh, p. 44.

[42] *Ben-My-Chree*, by Hall Caine and Wilson Barrett, programme, 17 May 1888, rpt. in Cavanagh, p. 45.

[43] *Cæsar and Cleopatra*, by George Bernard Shaw, programme, Theatre Royal, Newcastle, 15 March 1899, rpt. in Archibald Henderson, *George Bernard Shaw: Man of the Century* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1956), pp. 554–555.

programme, playbill authorship was still primarily the domain of the theatrical manager ultimately responsible for the success or failure of the entire production.

The connection between sponsorship and authorship that has often characterised playbill publication is most readily explained by the fact that when people are paying for something they usually like to exert some influence over it. Through five centuries the ultimate financial responsibility for programme production has rested with the managements of individual theatres, as has the ultimate creative responsibility. But in the last 140 years advertising has generated so much revenue for these managements that contractors have often been hired to assume the funding role on their behalf. Perhaps it is no coincidence that, having already entrusted the sponsorship to someone else, theatres have seemed equally willing, in the twentieth century, to consign the authorship to specialised outsiders as well. In the British theatre, audience members who purchase bills of the play contribute significantly, albeit retroactively, to their sponsorship. Perhaps this entitles the same audience members to participate, albeit proactively, in their authorship as well.

Printing

While the link connecting the sponsorship of playbills to their authorship remained unbroken over the 350 years between 1564 and 1914, the relationship between their authorship and their printing fluctuated continuously. As noted above, the earliest bills of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries relied, for their variety, on the printer's creative use of type. But by the eighteenth century these documents had achieved a relative degree of consistency—particularly at the patent houses—not only in terms of the information they customarily included, but in terms of the typographical format they usually followed, and the artistic input of the printer diminished correspondingly. Numerous technical advances to the printing process in the nineteenth century, coupled with an exponential increase in the variety of available typefaces, restored the creative element to the playbill printer's role. But the

programme contractors of the early-twentieth century bestowed upon their product a uniformity indicative of the economic efficiency with which it was produced; and, in the final years of the period with which the present study concludes, many theatrical printers were once again deprived of the opportunity to contribute much more than their ink towards the publication of these documents. From a managerial point of view, however, it is perhaps of little consequence how a playbill is produced, by whom, and with what degree of artistic licence: it cannot be sold until it has been printed.

The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries

By the mid-sixteenth century 'the art of printing had become established, and was daily taking more and more work out of the hands of scribes'.[44] Nevertheless much ephemeral material continued to be written by hand; and the first documented reference to the printing of playbills dates from 30 October 1587, when the Stationers' Company Register records the granting of the following license:

> John Charlewoode. Lycenced to him by the whole consent of Th[e] assistantes, The onelye ympryntinge of *all manner of Billes for players*. PROUIDED yat yf any trouble aryse herebye then Charlwood to beare the charges.[45]

The successor to this privilege was James Roberts, who married Charlewood's widow in 1593, and who would later published some of William Shakespeare's quartos.[46] During this period playbills were printed on handmade laid rag paper, using a wooden hand-press.[47] Even in its earliest stages of development this was a more efficient means of production than handwriting; and towards the end of the century rivalry among the Elizabethan playhouses led to an increased issue of playbills, and hence to

---

[44] Sampson, pp. 52–53.

[45] Edward Arber, *A Transcript of the Registers of the Worshipful Company of Stationers of London, 1554–1640*, 5 vols. (London and Birmingham, 1875–1894), 2: 477.

[46] H. R. Plomer, 'The Printers of Shakespeare's Plays and Poems', *The Library* ns 7 (1906), p. 160.

[47] Haill, *Theatre Posters*, p. 3.

the expedience of printing. Nevertheless, for many years hand-written bills continued to exist alongside their printed equivalents.[48]

The connection between playbill printing and literary publishing continued into the seventeenth century; for, when Roberts relinquished his right to print the bills in 1604, he sold the privilege to William Jaggard,[49] who would later print the first folio of Shakespeare's plays. Fifteen years later, on 30 October 1619, James I issued a patent to Roger Wood and Thomas Symcock, giving them the right to print 'All Billes for Playes, pastimes, showes, Challenges, prizes, or sportes whatsoeuer'.[50] And in 1663 Charles II's order for a 'warrant for erecting the office of Surveyor of printing and printing presses' conferred a similar monopoly—along with numerous responsibilities—upon Roger L'Estrange:

> surveyor of all books and printed pictures, except those on law, state affairs, heraldry, divinity, physic, philosophy, and arts and sciences, or such for which the King's printers have a patent; also licensing him to print and publish all narratives not exceeding two sheets of paper, mercuries, diurnals, play-bills, quacksalvers' bills, &c. &c. With power to search for and seize all treasonable and schismatical books and papers, &c.[51]

Only two theatres were open for legitimate business following the Restoration, however; and the gradually increasing predictability of the billing format, coupled with the paucity of information usually offered, began to limit the creative component of playbill printing in the latest years of the seventeenth century.

The Eighteenth Century

Extant playhouse records from the early-eighteenth century only occasionally include a detailed breakdown of the various printing charges incurred; but from these

---

[48] Lawrence, *Playhouse*, 2: 60.

[49] William A. Jackson, *Records of the Court of the Stationers' Company, 1602–1640* (London: The Bibliographical Society, 1957), p. 6. The relevant entry is dated 2 April 1604.

[50] The 'Abstract of his Majesties Letters Patent granted, vnto ROGER WOOD and THOMAS SYMCOCKE, for the sole Printing of Paper and Parchment on the one side' is reprinted in W. W. Greg, *A Companion to Arber: Being a Calendar of Documents in Edward Arber's* Transcript of the Registers of the Company of Stationers of London, 1554–1640 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1967), pp. 165–167.

[51] *Cal. S.P. Dom.*, Chas. II, vol. 78, no. 96, p. 240 notes the entry of the order in Ent. Book 15, pp. 156–158, 15 August 1663.

Emmett L. Avery has extrapolated that the playbills for an entire season would have cost Drury Lane approximately one hundred pounds in 1715–1716—noting that, on at least one occasion when spelling mistakes were detected in the finished documents, five shillings was deducted from the printer's weekly payment. In the following decade Lincoln's Inn Fields paid 150 pounds for its bills during the 1724–1725 season.[52] The provincial theatres spent considerably less on their playbills during this period than the patent houses—though this is more likely due to lower volume than to lower rates. An itemised account produced in the 1730s by Thomas Keregan, proprietor of the New Theatre, York, indicates that the cost of his bills, even 'one day with another', amounted to only six shillings.[53]

Judith Milhous and Robert D. Hume's examination of a Drury Lane account book from the middle of the eighteenth century reveals that, by this time, the theatre not only made consistent payments to its regular handbill printer, Mr. Leach, but also furnished him with a share in the proceeds of a benefit performance—consideration deemed to be 'unique for an outsider' such as Leach.[54] This special treatment indicates the growing importance placed by the playhouses on the quality of their documentation—even at a time when the bills themselves displayed relatively little variation apart from their increasing length. Covent Garden, for example, retained the services of master printer Joseph Cooper at the cost of about thirty-seven pounds per month, while David Garrick paid a similar sum for the printing required by Drury Lane.[55] This enormous increase to the fees remitted in earlier decades is probably due largely to increased production. Nevertheless, the augmented expenditure acquired for the theatres not only the skills of the finest compositors, but additional editorial flexibility as well; for most bills of the play in the final decades of the eighteenth

---

[52] Emmett L. Avery, introduction, *The London Stage 1700-1729*, ed. Avery (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1960, pt. 2 of Van Lennep et al., p. xcii, lxvi.

[53] Thomas Keregan, 'The Case of Thomas Keregan, Proprietor of the Theatre, Humbly Addressed to the Quality, Gentry, and Citizens of York' (York: N.p., n.d.), transcribed in Wilkinson, *Patentee*, 2: 207.

[54] Judith Milhous and Robert D. Hume, 'A Drury Lane Account Book for 1745–46', *Theatre History Studies* 10 (1990), pp. 96, 101.

[55] Stone, p. lvi.

century were not printed until the very day of the performance, allowing managements the maximum length of time in which to make any last-minute alterations to their content before going to press.[56]

The Nineteenth and Early-Twentieth Centuries

By the early-nineteenth century the enormous impact of the Industrial Revolution on commercial printing was reflected not only in the development of new apparatus connected with the process itself, but also in the growth of the related technologies on which it relied:

> The gelatin roller, the iron press, and the Fourdrinier paper machine, along with other inventions and innovations within the industry, brought about a booming demand for type and printers supplies … Press manufacturers and type foundries mushroomed.[57]

The innovations to which Gordon Martin refers included Britain's introduction, at the very dawn of the century, to the process of lithography—a technique which would feature prominently in poster production during the later 1800s.[58] Meanwhile, during the early years, the foundries created numerous new faces and classes of type.[59] The second decade of the century, for example, witnessed the introduction of *Egyptian*—a class which, among other new inventions such as *Grotesque* and *Antique*, enjoyed perhaps the greatest popularity on bills of the nineteenth century. Individual faces on the playbills from this period, however, can prove difficult to identify positively; for, in addition to the bewildering array of novel founts developed at each foundry, 'typefounders copied each others' designs' as well.[60] In describing the 'force and richness' emanating from some of the 'less inhibited' specimens reproduced in Martin's book, *The Playbill*, an anonymous reviewer attributes these qualities to three

---

[56] Hogan, introduction, p. cxl.
[57] Gordon Martin, *The Playbill: The Development of Its Typographic Style* (Chicago: Institute of Design of the Illinois Institute of Technology, 1963), n.pag.
[58] Haill, *Theatre Posters*, p. 6.
[59] Gibbings, p. 74.
[60] Graham Hudson, Letter to the author, 23 July 1997.

sources—'layout … illustration … [and] lettering'—adding that, of these three, it was lettering upon which most bills of the play relied for their principal effect.[61]

In the earliest years of the nineteenth century such lettering resulted, as it always had, from work produced for the theatres at external, purpose-built printing houses; but by 1820 Drury Lane was printing its own bills on a private press 'set up in a room below the stage'.[62] A decidedly less convenient arrangement was endured by some of the travelling companies who conveyed their pre-printed, partially completed bills to a different printer in every town they visited; for by this time the production details particular to a specific date and location, instead of merely being hand-written within the blanks on the stock sheets, were often overprinted on a daily basis, the press yielding a more finished appearance than the pen. In 1826 the itinerant manager William Grossmith, publicising the performances of his young son, even carried his own wood-cut blocks on tours, since local printers might be required to produce entire playbills from scratch.[63] Some strolling players simply presented the printers with bills from past performances in other areas, to which 'suitable amendments could be made for the local venue'.[64] Other touring acts themselves managed to print their own bills, from start to finish, no matter how far from home, with the aid of a 'Dramatic Printing Apparatus' described in a contemporary account of 1827:

> The form of letter is placed on a flat support, having ledges at each side, that rise within about a thirteenth of an inch of the inked surface of the letter. The damped paper is laid upon the letter so disposed, and previously inked, and a roller, covered with woollen cloth, is passed along the ledges over its surface; the use of the ledges is to prevent the roller from rising in too obtuse an angle against the first letters, or going off too abruptly from the last, which would cause the paper to be cut, and the impression to be injured at the beginning and end of the sheet.[65]

---

[61] 'Vulgar Printing', rev. of *The Playbill*, by Gordon Martin, *Times Literary Supplement* 30 January 1964, p. 96.

[62] Will o' the Wisp, 1: 587.

[63] Forbes, 'Grossmiths', p. 72

[64] Tyne and Wear County Council Museums Service, *The Robert Wood Collection*, Theatre Museum: 'Programmes' file, n.pag.

[65] William Hone, *Every-Day Book*, 2 vols. (London: Hunt, 1826–1827), 2: 77.

In the 1830s even the more permanent venues which continued to send their bills to established printers occasionally varied their pattern of publication. The Theatre, Barnwell, for example, where many of the Garrick Club's productions were staged, alternated the printing of its bills between two different shops on a daily basis during the 1834–1835 season, presumably benefitting from competing rates.[66] This stands in marked contrast to the actual Garrick Theatre which, after reopening in 1854, issued no playbills whatsoever for almost seventeen years[67]—and to the Grassington Theatre in Yorkshire where, during the early 1800s, 'when the Duke of Devonshire or Earl of Thanet came … [the] playbills were written by hand' as a special gesture of respect.[68]

Printing technology continued to advance through the second half of the century, during which the development of aniline dyes in 1856 facilitated the use of various coloured inks and papers.[69] Playbills printed in colour sometimes attracted a 'small advance' from the playhouses on the total fee, 'according to size and quality', and prices often ranged considerably: a catalogue of theatrical engravings issued around 1865 offers one hundred 'announce bills' at between two and four shillings; one hundred 'full bills' at between three and five shillings; and one hundred posters at between five and eight shillings, promising the 'Largest Type in England for Posters of any dimensions'.[70] A 'Special Notice' printed on the title page of a similar document, issued about twenty-five years later, indicates the abuse these catalogues sometimes suffered at the hands of impatient and unscrupulous theatre managers during the final decades of the nineteenth century:

> In ordering Plates of Bills, do not destroy this Book by cutting it up, give the number of the Plate required as printed above it in the Book.[71]

---

[66] The printers were Hodson and Brown, Cambridge, and Hatfield, Cambridge. The alternation is reflected in numerous bills from the season preserved in the Garrick Club, *Scrapbook*, n.pag.

[67] Francis Edwards, p. 26.

[68] Sybil Rosenfeld, 'The Theatre at Grassington', Foulkes, p. 89.

[69] Forbes, 'Colour', p.41.

[70] *Descriptive Catalogue of Theatrical Wood Engravings for Posters, Board Bills, Slips* (London: Bath [c. 1865]), n.pag.

[71] William M'Call, *Catalogue of Plates for Theatrical Bills* (Liverpool: Steam Printing Works, [c. 1890]), n.pag.

Perhaps it was the fear of just such mutilation which inspired the publishers of some of these indexes to issue the available images in a separate volume from the corresponding descriptive list.

Although the art and technology peculiar to poster printing lie outside the scope of the present study, it should be noted briefly that the technique of colour lithography had been perfected by Jules Chéret in the 1870s.[72] Moreover, many of the most notable printing innovations from the early years of the twentieth century are related to this process—the development of zincography, for example, in which the lithographic stone was replaced by grained zinc or aluminum plates; the introduction of offset lithography; and the evolution of photolithography. Silkscreen printing, too, although very seldom used in the production of playbills and programmes, was patented in Britain during the first decade of the twentieth century.[73] Some of the most artistic bills of the play to be produced during this period were those illustrated by Charles Buchel, who frequently rendered scenes and portraits for Herbert Beerbohm Tree's productions at His Majesty's Theatre. Buchel's oil paintings (described in chapter six) were reproduced on flyers, postcards, posters, programmes and souvenirs, and were printed by Carl Hentschel using the 'Hentschel Colortype process'.[74] During this time souvenir programmes began to acquire the characteristics of more conventional printed texts, with covers, title pages, tables of contents and even acknowledgements; and it is perhaps significant that Hentschel, responsible for the technique by which they were printed, is specifically named, on the programmes themselves, as having 'produced and published' the documents.[75] Whereas printing had almost always been associated, to a greater or lesser degree, with the creation of a playbill, by the early-twentieth century it was being linked to the entire process of its

---

[72] Ellen Breitman, *Art and the Stage* (Cleveland: Cleveland Museum of Art, in cooperation with Indiana University Press, 1981), p. 33.

[73] Haill, *Theatre Posters*, pp. 10–11.

[74] This technique is identified, though not described, both on the bills themselves, and in Ashton, 'Buchel', p. 82.

[75] 'Produced and Published ... by Carl Hentschel'; 'Copyright'; 'Entered at Stationers' Hall'; and 'All rights reserved' appear on the inside front cover of the souvenir programme for the two hundredth performance of *The Admirable Crichton*, 1902.

publication; and even the threat of a missed print job was deemed 'NEARLY A TRAGEDY'—by the printer who stood to profit from it (fig. 27).[76]

The nature of the available historical information concerning playbill printing has evolved within the period under review—from the scant extant records of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries identifying the theatrical printers themselves; through the infrequent itemisation of their charges to the playhouses in the eighteenth century; to the more detailed accounts of their materials and techniques in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. It is in the appearance of the documents themselves, however, that the progress of their printing history over the centuries is best reflected. 'Experimenting in words and metal, both writer and printer participated' in the production of these texts;[77] but the abundance of extant specimens ensures that both reader and historian, too, may likewise participate in their reception.

Distribution and Sale

Before a playbill can exert any influence on, or serve any purpose to, its readers it must reach them. For centuries theatrical managements have attempted to keep bills of the play as conspicuous and accessible as possible to potential audience members—often in locations additional to the performance venue, and often well in advance of the scheduled entertainment. Consistent with this quest for widespread distribution, there is no evidence to suggest that the theatres attempted to secure money from the sale of playbills prior to the eighteenth century. Rather they were given out readily, sometimes even hand-delivered from door to door, especially when the intended recipients were either known, or judged likely, to be patrons of the stage. But, as bills of the play began to carry an increasing amount of desirable information bearing on the productions for which they were published, their acquisition was sought by a growing proportion of the audience and they were eventually vended,

---

[76] 'Nearly a Tragedy', advertisement, St. Clements Press, Carson, p. lxxiii.
[77] Gordon Martin, n.pag.

both inside and outside the theatres. By the late-nineteenth century the contentious issue of programme costs had divided the playhouses into factions defined by their willingness or refusal to charge for their bills. But the contractual consolidation of many of these documents in the early-twentieth century—notwithstanding the increasing homogeneity which resulted—introduced a measure of consistency to the pricing of theatre programmes, whose distribution and sale were by this time, as they have remained, relegated to the performance venue itself only shortly before showtime.

The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries

In spite of the fact that western Renaissance drama remained a direct descendant of the Medieval religious service, some of the theatre's most vehement opposition during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries originated in the Church; and many allusions to the distribution of playbills during this period resonate with an unwaveringly negative tone. The earliest documented reference, in English, to British billposting is contained in a letter written in 1564 by Edmund Grindal, the Bishop of London, addressed to the Queen's Secretary, Sir William Cecil.[78] Grindal's language conveys his distaste, not merely for the publicising of thespian endeavour, but for the very profession itself, as he identifies the targets of his complaint:

> these Histriones, common playours, who now daylye, butt speciallye on holydayes, sett up bylles, wherunto the youthe resorteth excessively.[79]

---

[78] An earlier reference, in translation, to playbill distribution in Elizabethan London is found in a letter written by 'Il Schifanoya' to Ottaviano Vivaldino, the Mantuan Ambassador, on 6 February 1559: 'There are yet many frivolous and foolish people who daily invent plays … and, by placards posted at the corners of the streets … they invite people to the taverns, to see these representations, taking money from their audience'. This letter is located in the Mantuan Archives, and is translated in the *Calendar of State Papers and Manuscripts, Relating to English Affairs, Existing in the Archives and Collections of Venice, and in Other Libraries of Northern Italy*, vol. 7, no. 18, p. 27.

[79] Edmund Grindal, letter to William Cecil, 22 February [1564], British Library: Lansdowne MS. 7 [Burghley Papers, 1563–1564], fol. 141. Abbreviations in this quotation have been expanded.

A more explicit reference to the objects on which playbills were placed occurs in the following description of London's actors, published in 1579 by John Northbrooke, the minister of Henbury near Bristol:

> they use to set up their billes upon postes … to admonish the people to make their resort unto their Theatres, that they maye thereby be the better furnished.[80]

The outcry surrounding this method of distribution reached its vitriolic apotheosis in 1587, when William Rankins declared that 'Players by sticking of their bils in Londó, defile the streets with their infectious filthiness'.[81] Whether this defilement remained the sole responsibility of the actors, or was by now entrusted to others as well, is unclear; but bills of the play continued to be distributed: before the century's end a play populated by personified theatrical genres included the following bitter complaint, delivered by Tragedie to Comedie, as the former whips the latter from the stage:

> T'is you have kept the Theatres so long,
> Painted in play-bils, upon euery poast,
> That I am scorned of the multitude.[82]

The second part of the *OED*'s first definition of the noun 'post' describes 'A stake, stout pole, column, or the like, that is set upright in or on the ground, for various purposes', including use as 'a stand for displaying public notices'; and the verb 'post', meaning 'To affix (a paper, etc.) to a post or in a prominent position; to stick *up* in a public place', is cited from as early as 1650: 'R. STAPYLTON *Strada's Low C.* Warres iii. 62 Divers bills posted up that threatened mischief to the Judges'. But the use of 'poster' as a noun, with the sense of 'A placard posted or displayed in a public place as an announcement or advertisement' is first cited only as recently as 1838: 'DICKENS *Nich. Nick.* xxx, We'll have posters out the first thing in the morning'. This late arrival of 'poster' as the noun for a placard serves as a reminder that news is

---

[80] John Northbrooke, *A Treatise wherein ... Vaine Plaies or Interludes ... are Reproached* (London, 1579), p. 36.
[81] William Rankins, *A Mirrour of Monsters* (London, 1587), p. 6.
[82] *A Warning for Fair Women*, 1599, rpt. in the Tudor Facsimile Texts, ed. John S. Farmer (N.p.: n.p., 1912), A3.

not necessarily 'posted' by being affixed to a post, but because it is being announced; for a 'poster', as early as 1605, was 'A messenger, a carrier of news': 'J. MELVILL *Diary* (Wodrow Soc.) 606 The noble poster of newis athort the world'.[83]

In the seventeenth century playbill distribution expanded to include, not only the posting of the documents, but their personal delivery as well, 'early in the morning', to the homes of the theatres' wealthier patrons.[84] Furthermore, bills of the play were displayed in shops, coffee-houses and inns, effectively achieving circulation by virtue of the continuous turnover in the clientele frequenting these establishments.[85] Even during the Interregnum, through the duration of which the theatres were supposed to have remained closed, plays were produced and bills circulated. On 6 October 1647, for example, a performance of Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher's *A King and No King* at the Salisbury Court Theatre was openly advertised with printed playbills posted by the actors themselves;[86] and the following year announcements for another work by the same playwrights were distributed 'by scattering bills in the coaches of the quality':

> *Tickets were thrown into Gentlemens Coaches, thus.* At the Bull this day you may have Wit without Money, meaning a Play.[87]

With the establishment of Oliver Cromwell's Protectorate in 1653 the overt display of these dramatic documents was more severely restricted, as reflected in Richard Flecknoe's contemporary account of 'passing on to Black-fryers, and seeing never a *Play-bil* on the Gate'.[88] But in the next decade Samuel Pepys's *Diary* contains numerous references to billposting during the early years of the Restoration, including the following entries:

> [24 March 1662] ... I went to see if any play was acted, and I find none upon the post, it being passion weeke. So home again.

---

[83] *OED.* 'post', *sb.*[1]. I.2.a, 'post', *v.*[2]. IV.4, 'poster'[2]. 2, 'poster'[1]. 2.
[84] Mander and Mitchenson, 'Story', p. 20.
[85] Haill, *Theatre Posters*, p. 4.
[86] Cecil V. Deane, *Dramatic Theory and the Rhymed Heroic Play*, 1931 (New York: Barnes, 1968), p. 39.
[87] *Perfect Occurrences*, 28 January–4 February 1647, British Library: Thomason Tracts E.520.32, p. 402.
[88] Richard Flecknoe, *Miscellania* (London, 1653), p.141.

> ...
> [28 July 1664] ... seeing *The Bondman* upon the posts, I consulted my oaths and find I may go safely this time without breaking it.
> ...
> [25 December 1666] ... walked alone on foot to Temple, it being a fine frost, thinking to have seen a play all alone; but there missing of any Bills, concluded there was none; and so back home.[89]

This self-confessed theatre addict's inference, from the absence of a playbill, of the absence of a play, regardless of the date, argues strongly for both the consistency and the accuracy of the posting system in place at the time.

The Eighteenth Century

While the Church had disparaged playbill distribution during the sixteenth century, local authority protested against it in the eighteenth, beginning in London in May 1700:

> The grand jury of this citty last week presented to the court at the Old Baily, that for any person to goe to playhouses was a publick nusance; and that the putting up bills in and about this citty for playes was an encouragement to vice and prophanesse; and prayed that none be suffered for the future.[90]

For a brief period between 1700 and 1703 the posting of playbills was sharply curtailed by a series of Court orders from the Lord Mayor, the earliest dating from June 1700:

> The Right Honourable the Lord Mayor and Court of Aldermen have ordered that no Play-house Bills be affix'd on any Post, &c., in this City; and the like Orders are resolved on in *Westminster*.[91]

This injunction not only precipitated the custom of theatrical newspaper advertising (discussed in chapter five), but also attracted a satirical response in the subsequent literary output of some contemporary playwrights. The epilogue to Susannah Centlivre's *The Perjur'd Husband*, for example, printed before the year had ended,

---

[89] Samuel Pepys, *Diary*, ed. Robert Latham and William Matthews, 11 vols. (London: Bell, 1970-1983), 3: 51, 5: 224, 7: 420–421.
[90] Narcissus Luttrell, *A Brief Historical Relation of State Affairs*, 6 vols. (Oxford: OUP, 1827), 4: 647.
[91] *Flying Post; or, The Post-Master* 22–25 June 1700, microfilm, British Library; Colindale Newspaper Library, reel 1188, n.pag.

includes the following reflection on the authorities responsible for the playbill prohibition:

> Let Magistrates consider 'tis but fitting,
> That as they take down Bills, they'd put down cheating.[92]

And in William Burnaby's *The Ladies Visiting Day*, published the following year, Sir Thrifty Gripe's self appraisal includes a reference to the moralising motivations behind the ban on billing:

> I live soberly, and mind the main Chance, I never spend a Penny but in Coffee; I sell by a Short Yard, and pull down the Play Bills, to shew my Aversion to the Wickedness that's practis'd there.[93]

But by 1703, the 'Play-House Bills … [were] again Posted up throughout the City';[94] and the prologue to John Oldmixon's tragedy, *The Governour of Cyprus*, performed at Lincoln's Inn Fields during that year, clearly indicates the extent to which the edict was by now ignored:

> Wide Folio Bills on ev'ry Post we place
> And huge Red Letters stare you in the Face.
> We Cram the Coffee-Houses with our Notes
> As Quacks for Cullies, and as Citts for Votes.[95]

In effecting such complete coverage, Drury Lane, by 1708, employed no fewer than four bill distributors.[96] Records from the first half of the century indicate that, at that theatre, 'Eighteen pence a Night each' remained the standard wage for 'those men that [stuck] … the large Bills about the Town', while the 'men that deliver[ed] Hand-Bills' earned 'one shilling each per night'.[97] Other arrangements were far less formal and involved the participation of personnel unconnected with the theatre. In the middle decades of the century, for example, both patent houses informally secured assistance from the porters at the Inns of Court towards the end of each December: in

---

[92] S. Carroll [Susannah Centlivre], *The Perjur'd Husband* (London, 1700), n.pag.
[93] *The Ladies Visiting Day* [by William Burnaby] (London, 1701), p. 10.
[94] *Post Man: and the Historical Account* 10–13 July 1703, microfilm, British Library; Colindale Newspaper Library, reel 1162, n.pag.
[95] [John] Oldmixon, *The Governour of Cyprus* (London, 1703), n.pag.
[96] W. J. Lawrence, 'Old Day-Bills', *The Stage* 23 May 1929, p. 23.
[97] John Powel, *Tit for Tat*, 1749, Harvard Theatre Collection: MS.TS1574.316, p. 33.

exchange for generous Christmas boxes, these officials would circulate the theatres' playbills among their young law students.[98]

Throughout the 1700s the actors themselves continued to assist in the delivery of playbills to private homes, taverns and coffee-houses[99]—both in London and on many of the travelling circuits. Tate Wilkinson recalls the provincial experience during the early 1760s:

> It was at that time not only the custom [at Norwich] … (and a horrid custom it certainly was), but also at York, Hull, &c. &c. for the performer, whether man or woman, to attend the playbill-man round the town, knock humbly at every door honoured with or without a rapper, and supinely and obediently stop at every shop and stall to leave a playbill, and request the favour of Mr. and Mrs. Griskin's company at the benefit.[100]

An anonymous coloured engraving capturing this routine depicts a strolling player announcing his 'first Appearance … in *Hamlet the Great Prince of Denmark*' to a surprised citizen (fig. 28).[101] But in the final years of the eighteenth century the patent houses relied less on cast and more on crew hired specifically for the purpose of posting; and at each theatre a single individual accepted responsibility for the supervision of the entire procedure:

> The bill inspector was in charge of the several bill-stickers whose duty it was to post every day in nearly two hundred different locations all over London the big bills.

In 1795 this extensive coverage cost Drury Lane about ten shillings per day—an increase of only one shilling on the rates paid more than fifty years earlier.[102]

The almost negligible increase to the expense of billsticking during the eighteenth century may be partially explained by the fact that, during this period, in addition to being posted, bills of the play also began to be sold. Because such sales were often conducted at the theatres themselves, distribution costs were virtually

---

[98] Stone, p. lxxvii.

[99] Arthur H. Scouten, introduction, *The London Stage 1729-1747*, ed. Scouten (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1961), pt. 3 of Van Lennep et al., p. cvii.

[100] Tate Wilkinson, *Memoirs of His Own Life*, 4 vols. (York, 1790), 3: 127–128.

[101] *Delivering Play Bills in the Country*, engraving, Harvard Theatre Collection, rpt. in Simon Trussler, *The Cambridge Illustrated History of British Theatre* (Cambridge: CUP, 1994), p. 159.

[102] Hogan, introduction, pp. clxiv, clxiv n. 220.

eliminated for those items travelling no further than the distance between printer and playhouse—sometimes literally next door. Furthermore, the ready availability of the documents at the venues whose productions they announced may have been perceived by management to limit the indispensability, and hence the wages, of placarding personnel. By the late 1720s playbills were being sold in the theatres by young women known as 'orange-girls', named after the citrus fruit they simultaneously vended throughout the playhouses;[103] and, although no 'record of the price charged for playbills in the eighteenth century seems to have survived', it is not believed to have exceeded two or three pennies.[104] An early reference to the patter of the 'fruit women', as they were also known, dates from the late 1740s, when Samuel Foote's imitations of popular contemporary actors included the portrayal of Peg Woffington—who, 'though beautiful to a degree had a most unpleasant squeaking pipe'—in the unlikely role of '*an Orange Woman to the Playhouse*':

> Would you have some oranges,—have some orange chips, ladies and gentlemen,—would you have some nonpareils,—would you have a bill of the play?[105]

This cry appears to have changed less in its content over the century than in the manner of its delivery: in describing his first childhood visit to the theatre in the 1780s, Charles Lamb recalls that the 'fashionable pronunciation of the theatrical fruiteresses then was, "Chase some oranges, chase some numparels, chase a bill of the play;"—chase *pro* chuse'.[106]

Just as the overall responsibility for the distribution of a theatre's playbills ultimately rested with a single individual in the final years of the century, the arrangements for their sale, too, were gradually assumed, both at Drury Lane and at Covent Garden, by a supervisor who purchased a concession from the management to sell fruit, playbills and songs from new musicals. In 1781 the playhouses charged sixty pounds per season for this arrangement; and the supervisor, having paid in full,

---

[103] Will o' the Wisp, 1: 587.
[104] Hogan, introduction, p. xlii n. 41.
[105] Qtd. in Wilkinson, *Memoirs*, 1: 25.
[106] Charles Lamb, 'My First Play', *Elia*, by Lamb (London: Taylor, 1823), p. 224.

was then entitled to sell the privilege to the actual vendors.[107] The sellers themselves frequently supplemented their earnings with gratuities exacted from audience members in exchange for better seats or faster service, provoking one writer to complain, in 1794, of the 'incessant nuisance and importunity of the orange-women and the bill of the play'.[108] Before the century's end Drury Lane attempted to discourage such extortion with the following declaration:

> A full compensation being made by the Proprietors to all the said Persons in lieu of such emoluments, no Benefit, Gift, or Perquisite will in future be permitted to the servants of this Theatre on any pretense whatever.[109]

Ironically, though appropriately, this very announcement was printed on the playbills themselves.

The Nineteenth and Early-Twentieth Centuries

At the dawn of the nineteenth century playbills were 'increasingly used as posters rather than as handbills to be delivered to the houses of the gentry'.[110] But they also continued to be both 'distributed about the town, and sold at the doors of the Theatre'.[111] A hand-coloured etching from 1804 depicts a woman dispensing bills and oranges from the portico of Drury Lane (fig. 29).[112] The first half of a ten line poem published in 1810 suggests that, notwithstanding this widespread circulation, the task of billposting itself had failed to attain exalted status in the Georgian era:

> What blind delusion or theatric rage,
> Can keep that gang upon our fallen stage,
> Of ragamuffins; who with scarcely brains

---

[107] Hogan, introduction, p. xli.

[108] Captain Project, 'A Proposal for Rendering Admission into Theatres, and Other Crowded Places of Public Amusement, Perfectly Safe and Commodious', *Gentleman's Magazine* 64 (1794), p. 123.

[109] Unspecified Drury Lane playbill, 19 September 1797, qtd. in Hogan, introduction, p. clxv.

[110] Adrian Wilson, rev. of *The Playbill*, by Gordon Martin, *Theatre Notebook* 18.4 (Summer 1964), p. 141.

[111] Thomas Dutton, *The Dramatic Censor*, vol. 2 (London, 1800), p. 114 n.

[112] *Buy a Bill of the Play*, etching, 1804, H. R. Beard Collection, Drury Lane, Theatre Museum postcard: TM.332.

> To stick the play-bills or to shift the scenes,
> Persist to fret and strut their night along.[113]

In the third decade of the century increased competition among rival billstickers eroded the goodwill formerly characterising the profession, and the practice of over-sticking—in which one bill was simply pasted on top of another—became common on the London hoardings. By 1834 almost every potential posting surface was exploited, with decidedly unsightly results:

> If a house by any chance becomes tenantless, on a given day, the next shall see its walls covered to the very chimney tops with posting bills, not a square foot unprofaned by paste.

However, despite the intense competition among bill-posters, a modicum of chivalry was preserved, for 'it was the custom of the trade never to cover another bill while it was still wet'.[114] John Parry's painting, *A London Street Scene*, affords a glimpse of this vertical distribution system operating in 1840 (fig. 30).[115]

As the paste dried under the posted documents, others were delivered by hand to all conceivable destinations. In *Nicholas Nickleby* Charles Dickens vividly narrates the exhaustive coverage achieved by every available means of playbill distribution during this period—as well as the danger inherent in assigning the task to the wrong person:

> bills of three feet long by nine inches wide, were dispersed in all directions, flung down all the areas, thrust under all the knockers, and developed in all the shops. They were placarded on all the walls too, though not with complete success, for an illiterate person having undertaken this office during the indisposition of the regular bill-sticker, a part were posted sideways, and the remainder upside down.[116]

Theatre bills comprised only one of at least three categories of announcement to be posted during the mid-nineteenth century, as Dickens himself discovered during a conversation with the self-proclaimed 'King of the Bill-Stickers'. The 'art and

---

[113] 'Maudlin Old Stagers', *The Prompter* 1810, qtd. in *The Faber Book of the Theatre*, ed. Ronald Harwood (London: Faber, 1993, 1994), p. 119.
[114] Nevett, pp. 53, 55, 56.
[115] John Parry, *A London Street Scene*, 1840, Alfred Dunhill, rpt. in Haill, *Theatre Posters*, front cover.
[116] Charles Dickens, *Nickleby*, p. 236.

mystery of bill-sticking' included 'auctioneer's bill-sticking, theatrical bill-sticking ... [and] general bill-sticking'. In 1851 there were 'about a hundred and fifty bill-stickers in London', posting an average of one hundred bills per day,[117] thereby generating a total of approximately ninety thousand new bills each week throughout the city; but it is uncertain how many of these documents were of the specifically theatrical variety. A popular song from the period playfully attempts to bestow a little status upon the swelling ranks of this lowly profession:

> I'm Sammy Slap the billsticker, and you must all agree, Sirs,
> I sticks to business like a trump while business sticks to me, Sirs,
> There's some folks call me plasterer, but they deserve a banging,
> 'Cause yer see, genteelly speaking, that my trade is paper hanging

—and in the third quarter of the century one individual, taking his trade very seriously indeed, declared himself to be the 'Champion Billposter', defying any rivals to challenge his claim.[118] This level of dedication contrasts favourably with the attitude expressed a few years later by the 'Bill-Poster' in August Strindberg's *A Dream Play*, who only once 'sticks up a poster' and who departs the stage forever with the emphatic, if oblique, 'My posters can go, but my fishing-net, never'.[119] A contemporary doggerel verse urges all advertisers to display somewhat more enthusiasm than that by increasing the intensity of their posting campaigns:

> Go forth in haste
> With bills and paste,
> Proclaim to all creation
> That men are wise
> Who advertise
> In this our generation.

By the 1890s, in addition to being affixed to stationary objects, certain very large bills had acquired a degree of mobility—and unexpected sartorial status—for the 'board man' now held a place on the payroll of some playhouses. A sort of walking playbill, the 'sandwich man', as he was also known, both wore his

---

[117] Charles Dickens, 'Bill-Sticking', *Household Words* [22 March 1851] 2 (1850–1851), 22 March 1851, pp. 602, 604, 605.
[118] Sampson, p. 26.
[119] August Strindberg, *A Dream Play*, 1901, *Plays—Volume Two*, by Strindberg, trans. Michael Meyer (London: Secker, 1975), pp. 575, 630.

announcement and simultaneously dispensed corresponding handbills to passersby.[120] On a daily basis a theatre's distribution costs during the final decade of the century could exceed eighteen pounds, representing over five percent of its total expenditure;[121] but the boardmen, 'condemned to trudge the street', typically received only eighteen pence—'Eighteen-pence and their board'.[122] Notwithstanding their meagre remuneration, these underpaid strollers must have been greatly appreciated by theatrical managements in the early years of the twentieth century when various decrees began to constrain the means and extent of permissible playbill distribution. In 1907, for example, the Advertisements Regulation Act allowed local authorities to specify limits both on the size of hoardings and on their proximity to buildings, additionally providing for the removal of unsightly announcements:

> Any local authority may make bylaws—
> (1) For the regulation and control of hoardings and similar structures used for the purpose of advertising when they exceed twelve feet in height:
> (2) for regulating, restricting, or preventing the exhibition of advertisements in such places and in such manner, or by such means, as to affect injuriously the amenities of a public park or pleasure promenade, or to disfigure the natural beauty of a landscape ...[123]

Aestheticism had replaced asceticism as the rationale informing playbill legislation; but, whether in reaction to profaneness or profusion, the circulation of these documents in the early-twentieth century was, as it had been in the early-eighteenth, regulated to some degree by local authority.

In addition to enjoying widespread distribution throughout the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, playbills continued to be sold as well, both inside and outside the theatres. Their indoor sale at the playhouses during the first half of the nineteenth century, no longer the province of lively young orange-girls, was instead

---

[120] 'Curiosities of Theatrical Advertising', *Theatre* ns 16 (1890), pp. 221, 222.
[121] On 9 April 1892, for example, £334 7s. 6d. was spent on the production of J. M. Barrie's *Walker London*, from which £18 19s. 6d. was allocated to 'Bill Posting, Boardmen, &c', according to Toole, n.pag.
[122] 'Curiosities', p. 222.
[123] Advertisements Regulation Act, 1907, 7 Edward VII, c. 27 [28 August 1907], s. 2 (1–2), *The Public General Acts Passed in the Seventh Year of the Reign of His Majesty King Edward the Seventh* (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1907).

conducted by 'staid married women, who [paid] … a weekly stipend to the box-lobby fruit-woman'.[124] In recalling his first visit to Drury Lane during this period, Clement Scott describes these subcontractors as a source of constant disturbance between the acts:

> women with huge and clumsy baskets filled with apples, oranges, nuts, ginger beer, bottled stout and bills of the play, which they offered to the public in shrill, discordant voices.[125]

Like their counterparts from the previous century, these playbill sellers often overcharged for their merchandise; and in an article published in 1830 Leigh Hunt mocks the extortions of the contemporary vendors, who, 'serious and elderly, dressed in clean linen, and renouncing the evil reputations of their predecessors, charge high for the honour they do you in being virtuous, and will fetch you a glass of water for a shilling'. Hunt nevertheless considered the bill of the play to be an indispensable ingredient in the overall theatrical experience, declaring, 'he that grudges his pence, cannot be a genuine play-goer':

> If the benches at the theatre could be imbued with the noble sentiments that abound on the stage [they would] eject the man who was too stingy to purchase a play-bill.

Hunt's objectivity in stressing the value of a playbill while criticising the existing arrangements for its sale may have been compromised somewhat by the fact that he was about to begin selling his own newspaper, *The Tatler*, at the theatres—as a playbill.[126]

In the second half of the century some theatres attempted to solve the problem of inflated pricing by dispensing altogether with fees for their bills and by prohibiting tipping. The following announcement, for example, appears on a Lyceum Theatre bill of 1867:

---

[124] Will o' the Wisp, 1: 587.

[125] Clement Scott, *The Drama of Yesterday and To-day*, 2 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1899), 1: 143.

[126] Leigh Hunt, 'The Play-Bills', *Tatler* 17 September 1830: 1: 45, rpt. in Leigh Hunt, *Dramatic Criticism, 1808–1831*, ed. Lawrence Huston Houtchens and Carolyn Washburn Houtchens (London: Cumberlege, 1950), pp. 232, 235.

> The Public are entreated to take notice that No Charge is made either for Play Bills or for the safe keeping of Hats and Cloaks, and that the Attendants are forbidded to receive any Gratuities whatever.[127]

Where playbills continued to be sold the prices often varied considerably, even within the house, from as little as twopence to as much as sixpence. In 1872 an Olympic Theatre playgoer wrote the first in what became a series of five related letters to be printed in the *Times* over three consecutive days,[128] complaining of the 'abuse [of] … an excessive charge for playbills' at that venue:

> when I arrived at my seats the stall-keeper demanded 6d for a playbill, refusing to accept 3d which I offered him, saying the price was 6d.[129]

This letter was followed, the day after its appearance, by a reply from the Olympic's manager, promising to dismiss any 'subordinates' exacting gratuities for playbills.[130] On the following day the playbill seller himself wrote, denying any subordination to the manager and stating that he worked for a programme supplier who paid the manager for the 'privilege of supplying the visitors with programmes'.[131] The two additional letters printed that day echo the dissatisfaction expressed in the original complaint: one correspondent, arguing that the 'total abolition of fees should be the rule and not the exception', condemns the 'deliberate piece of dishonesty [by which] … the same playbill which is sold in the pit for 2d should be vended in other parts of the house for 6d;'[132] the other writer, bemoaning the 'petty exactions' of the Olympic, notes that at the Gaiety Theatre 'no charge is made for bills, and the attendants receive no gratuity at all'.[133] By the final decade of the century the distinction between the 'fee theatres'—those playhouses that charged for their bills—and the 'no fee', or 'free', theatres—those that did not—was unmistakable; but to render this opposition even more explicit an anonymous broadside entitled 'DOWN WITH The Fee System'

---

[127] Qtd. in Sybil Rosenfeld, 'Bills of the Play', *Notes and Queries* 196 (1951), p. 322.
[128] All five letters (individually cited in the immediately following notes) were subsequently republished together, the following week, under the title 'Theatrical Extortions', *The Era* 14 January 1872, p. 13.
[129] Playgoer, letter, *Times* 9 January 1872, p. 5.
[130] W. H. Liston, letter, *Times* 10 January 1872, p. 5.
[131] Charles Wheeler, letter, *Times* 11 January 1872, p. 4.
[132] Martin S. Skeffington, letter, *Times* 11 January 1872, p. 4.
[133] E. C. W., letter, *Times* 11 January 1872, p. 4.

was printed in the early 1890s, on which were named, in one list, the managers of the free theatres ('Heaven bless 'em') and, in a separate list, the 'Extortionists' (fig. 31).[134]

The argument favouring complimentary bills of the play is succinctly expressed in S. J. Adair Fitz-Gerald's menu analogy:

> One might just as well be charged for the honour of reading a menu prior to ordering a dinner, as be expected to pay for a programme[135]

—but in the early-twentieth century 'managers began to realise that a large revenue could be made from the sale of programmes and the traditional "no fees" system was gradually abolished'[136]—though not without incident. The Edwardian audiences at the Savoy Theatre, for example, did not appreciate having to pay for bills which already contained advertising; and they registered their displeasure in 1907, during Harley Granville-Barker's first appearance in George Bernard Shaw's *Arms and the Man*, with a 'jarring note introduced by a demonstration in the gallery [and] … a loud chorus of shouts of "No Fees!" hailing the young actor-manager'.[137]

Outdoor playbill sales during the nineteenth century were conducted along somewhat different lines from indoor sales—the essential distinction resulting from the fact that the vendors themselves often enjoyed no personal connection to the theatres. In reflecting on the earliest years of the century Leigh Hunt recalls a 'pleasant time of life, the play-going time in youth, when … no sound is so delightful as the cry of "Bill of the Play".[138] But by the 1820s the 'old cry about the streets, "Choice fruit, and a bill of the play—Drury-lane or Covent-garden" … [was] almost extinct'.[139] Playbills were still vended outdoors, and in all weather; but they were

---

[134] George Edwardes enjoyed membership in both categories—in the former, as manager of the Gaiety; and in the latter, as manager of the Opera Comique—'Down with the Fee System' [c. 1891–1895]. The dates given derive from internal evidence: George Alexander is named in conjunction with the St. James's Theatre, whose management he undertook in 1891; and John Hare is associated with the Garrick Theatre, whose management he relinquished in 1895.

[135] Fitz-Gerald, p. 309.

[136] Mander and Mitchenson, 'Story', p. 36.

[137] '*Arms and the Man* at the Savoy', *Pall Mall Gazette* 31 December 1907, p. 4.

[138] Leigh Hunt, *Autobiography*, 3 vols. (London: Smith, 1850), 1: 247.

[139] Will o' the Wisp, 1: 587.

now typically sold in front of the theatres whose particular entertainments they announced. Hunt sympathetically describes a playbill seller's battle with the elements during the winter of 1830:

> We asked one of them the other evening, who was standing against the corner of the theatre hopping on either foot and wrapping a bit of cloak about her, whether she was not cold. 'Sir', said she, looking us earnestly in the face, 'I am *downright* cold'. Her manner said as much as her simple words. She felt too much to exaggerate. How these people stand it, we can hardly think.[140]

This disturbing account offers little to recommend the profession—yet, according to Henry Mayhew's informative report on 'The Street Sellers of Play-Bills', by the middle of the century 'rather more than 200 people' sold playbills outdoors in London. Most were 'either old or young', with an approximately equal mix between the sexes. Some were virtually born into the trade; many were illiterate; most knew no other work; and almost all were 'among the poorest of the poor'. Mayhew describes the relentless, and often dangerous, pursuits of the more athletic vendors in search of custom:

> The boys often run recklessly alongside the cabs which are conveying persons to the theatre, and so offer their bills for sale. One of these youths said to me, when I spoke of the danger incurred, 'The cabman knows how to do it, sir, when I runs and patters; and so does his hoss'. An intelligent cabman, however, who was in the habit of driving parties to the Lyceum, told me that these lads clung to his cab as he drove down to Wellington-street in such a way, for they seemed never to look before them, that he was in constant fear lest they should be run over.

The rewards for such tenacious marketing usually amounted to about three shillings per week in profit, some of which would be invested in the purchase of the next batch of playbills. Unlike their indoor counterparts, the street sellers often 'purchase[d] their stock of the printer' directly, the cost of one hundred bills being three shillings, fourpence. But they also bore directly the losses on any unsold items. Although a total of sixty pounds was being spent each week on play-bills purchased in the streets

---

[140] Leigh Hunt, 'Christmas and the Theatre', Hunt, *Dramatic Criticism*, pp. 254–255, rpt. of 'The Play-Goer', *Tatler* 25 December 1830: 1: 387, p. 255.

of London, the trade in which the sellers themselves were engaged was 'exceedingly uncertain, and … little remunerative'.[141]

In the second half of the nineteenth century playbills continued to be sold outside many theatres, and a George Du Maurier *Punch* cartoon from 1862 indicates that twopence was the price asked (fig. 32).[142] But at the end of that decade several managements curtailed outdoor sales in an attempt to discourage pirating printers from selling imitations of their announcements.[143] This initial cessation lasted for only a year, as indicated by the following entry in *Notes and Queries* from November 1871:

> Play-bills are still sold both inside and outside of many London theatres. The practice of selling them outside was discontinued for some time on account of their falsification.[144]

Many outdoor playbill sellers during the final decades of the century 'were wont urgently to pursue every vehicle that seemed to them bound to the theatre, in the hope of disposing of their wares'. But by the end of the century many managers had again forbidden sales outside the playhouses;[145] and the custom does not appear to have been revived in the early years of the twentieth century.

Indirectly connected with both distribution and sale during the nineteenth century was the practice of placing playbills on or near the more expensive seats in the house prior to the beginning of a performance. In describing the theatregoing experience during the earliest years of the century, Leigh Hunt refers to a pleasant routine, in which the 'box is entered … shawls and smiles are adjusted, and the play-bill is … pinned to the cushion'.[146] And Percy Fitzgerald recalls that the 'fluttering tissues' of the middle decades 'lay on the red cushions of the boxes, and lent a special appearance to the auditory'.[147] But the most entertaining allusion is contained in an

---

[141] Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, 2 vols. (London: Woodfall, 1851), 1: 287–289.
[142] George Du Maurier, cartoon, *Punch* 26 April 1862, p. 170.
[143] Lawrence, *Playhouse*, 2: 91.
[144] 'Notices to Correspondents', *Notes and Queries* 4th ser. 8 (18 November 1871), p. 429.
[145] Cook, p. 61.
[146] Hunt, *Autobiography*, 1: 248.
[147] Fitzgerald, 'Growth', p. 545.

apocryphal account of the fate suffered by a solitary bill of the play, accidentally dropped by its owner just as the scheduled entertainment is about to begin:

> Perchance, while pit and gallery cry 'Hats off!'
> And awed Consumption checks his chided cough,
> Some giggling daughter of the Queen of Love
> Drops, reft of pin, her play-bill from above;
> Like Icarus, while laughing galleries clap,
> Soars, ducks, and dives in air the printed scrap;
> But, wiser far than he, combustion fears,
> And, as it flies, eludes the chandeliers;
> Till, sinking gradual, with repeated twirl,
> It settles, curling, on a fiddler's curl,
> Who from his powder'd pate the intruder strikes,
> And, for mere malice, sticks it on the spikes.[148]

The tragic hero of this Regency rime has essentially been re-distributed throughout the house—alas, to a reduced, not an increased, readership, and with no re-sale value whatever.

The connection between the distribution and sale of theatre playbills through the past three centuries may be understood in terms of a reciprocal popularity. As bills of the play became an increasingly familiar sight prior to a production, their desirability as acquisitions at the performance itself rose proportionally, and more were sold. And as the purchase of playbills became an increasingly familiar practice on such occasions, their iconic value as symbolic representatives of future entertainments likewise grew, and more were distributed. Ironically, the attempt to limit their dispersal in the eighteenth century ultimately led to the broadest coverage imaginable—publication in the daily newspapers—and the attempt to abolish their sale in the nineteenth century merely resulted in profit-minded contractors, rather than the theatres themselves, supervising their vending. Wherever playbills have remained in circulation, money has remained in circulation.

This chapter has been concerned with the series of events through which bills of the play have historically been brought before their readership. Greater emphasis has been placed on the process of this publication than on the texts themselves; and

---

[148] G[eorge] C[rabbe] [James Smith and Horace Smith], 'The Theatre', *Rejected Addresses*, by Smith and Smith (London: n.p., 1812), p. 118.

the numerous references to these non-fictional dramatic documents have seldom explicitly discriminated *playbills* from *programmes*, in most cases using the two words almost interchangeably. The functional considerations discussed in the final chapters of the present work only occasionally rely on precise differentiations between these variants, the principal focus remaining on their collective service to, and effect upon, their readership. And the historical considerations explored in the central chapters depend on detailed formal and thematic distinctions between playbills and programmes only on those occasions when both have existed simultaneously. Nevertheless, the very possibility of such coexistence implies the presence not only of at least two discrete items, but of a wide range of related documentation—the subject of the following chapter.

CHAPTER 3

RELATED DOCUMENTATION

Bills of the play distinguish themselves from many other printed records; for, while they chronicle and commemorate an ephemeral event—the theatrical production—they themselves typically enjoy only the briefest of life spans as well, readily succumbing to damage, decay, destruction and disregard. This chapter explores the relationship between the bill of the play and other examples of more or less volatile theatrical documentation.

Theatrical Memorabilia and the Stage

The ephemeral quality of stage performance remains one of the medium's defining characteristics. Live theatre has often been compared with other creative arts in terms of its finite duration—often with respect to the performer's craft:

> The poet, the painter, and the musician can be studied in their works through all ages, but the fire and force, the eloquence, the moving touch of nature pass with the actor[1]

—with respect to the performer's observers:

> The audiences that applauded him to the echo and hung on his every word, they too must join the majority, and thus the favourite of one generation becomes a shadow to the next[2]

—and, ultimately, with respect to the performer's legacy:

> The painter leaves behind him pictures to attest his power; the author leaves behind him books; the actor leaves only a tradition. The curtain falls—the artist is annihilated.[3]

But if dramatic production remains singularly deprived of the longevity enjoyed by its sister arts, this very immediacy may inspire its participants. In sharp contrast to the pensive tone of the Victorian views quoted above, the author of a twentieth-century

---

[1] Louis H. Brindley, 'Some Old Dublin Play Bills', *New Ireland Review* 5 (1896), p. 211.
[2] N. L. Parker, p. 14.
[3] George Henry Lewes, *On Actors and the Art of Acting*, 1875 (New York: Grove, 1957), p. 49.

study on the documentation of theatrical performance positively asserts that stage practitioners 'have traditionally accepted the ephemerality of the theatrical event as a condition of their art, finding in it indeed a fundamental quality of their creativity'. Here the very evanescence so often bemoaned is celebrated, as 'the performance itself, the physical experience, nightly renewed, the dangerous interaction with the living audience, all this belongs to the actor and cannot be recorded'.[4] Surely the audience, too, enjoys a share in the excitement that results from this unpreservable immediacy; and no document, however evocative, is likely to supersede the memory of a performance personally attended. The curator of an exhibition celebrating four centuries of British theatre acknowledges that the 'recollection of even one memorable evening in the theatre brings home the futility of any attempt to restore the past'.[5]

Taken to extremes, however, this romantic celebration of the impermanence endemic to dramatic performance can deprive all those absent from the event itself of even a glimpse of the proceedings. Joseph Roach observes that a 'wistful sense of incompletion ... seems to haunt theater historians generally ... because of the evanescence of performance itself ... the absence of the transcendental signified (call it performance) from the linguistic or pictorial residue of what historians optimistically call "sources"'.[6] Michael Billington bemoans the paucity even of such residual sources, asserting that 'the theatre, glorying in its ephemerality, has never been very good at keeping records'.[7] But this may be due in part to the fact that many theatrical documents—the very substance of such records—are themselves typically subject to a life span of no greater duration than the performances they serve. In

---

[4] Gay McAuley, 'Preserving the Traces: The Impossible Task of Recording and Documenting Theatrical Performance', *The Documentation and Notation of Theatrical Performance*, ed. McAuley, Working Papers 1.1 (Sydney: Sydney Association for Studies in Society and Culture, 1986), pp. 5, 23 n. 9.

[5] Ifan Kyrle Fletcher, *British Theatre, 1530-1900: An Exhibition of Books, Prints, Drawings, Manuscripts and Playbills* (Cambridge: CUP, 1950), p. 5.

[6] Joseph R. Roach, introduction, 'Theater History and Historiography', *Critical Theory and Performance*, ed. Janelle G. Reinelt and Joseph R. Roach (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), p. 293.

[7] Michael Billington, *The Guinness Book of Theatre Facts and Feats* (Enfield, Middlesex: Guinness Superlatives, 1982), p. 7.

keeping with their elusive, almost evasive, qualities, such volatile primary sources of stage history constitute a class appropriately known to cataloguers as 'fugitive material';[8] and, although the twentieth century has witnessed an increased appreciation of their value, theatrical documents have been described as 'very much the Cinderella among archives'.[9]

Printed Ephemera

Within performing arts collections, theatrical memorabilia comprises only one of many classes in the larger category of printed ephemera, which has been produced, consumed, destroyed and preserved throughout a half-millennium of printing history. Fifteenth-century indulgences; sixteenth-century proclamations; seventeenth-century decrees; eighteenth-century edicts; nineteenth-century election notices; and innumerable certificates, police bulletins, reward posters, booksellers' lists, for-sale signs, travel advertisements, sporting announcements, menus, wine lists, trade cards and invitations to all manner of events, including ship launchings, expeditions, exhibitions, festivals and even funerals (by which 'you are desired to accompany the corps' of the deceased) are but a few examples of the sorts of historical ephemera which continue to be collected, sorted, traded and displayed by many printing enthusiasts.[10] Among those documents advertising performances of one sort or another, theatre bills are joined by a host of near relatives. Conjuring acts have been announced in print since at least 1795, when the Sieur Boaz promised to discover playing cards in a 'Roasted LEG of MUTTON' (fig. 33),[11] while anthologies of such magic posters continue to be published retrospectively.[12] The French ballet was

---

[8] Rosamond Gilder, introduction, *Theatre Collections in Libraries and Museums*, by Rosamond Gilder and George Freedly (London: Stevens, 1936), p. 1.

[9] Muriel St. Clare Byrne, 'Theatrical Records', *Archives* 3 (1957-1958), p. 1.

[10] Images of many of these documents are reproduced on various pages of John Lewis's *Printed Ephemera*, and of John Lewis's *Printed Ephemera: The Changing Use of Type and Letterforms in English and American Printing* (London: Faber, 1969).

[11] *The Sieur Boaz*, playbill, Rose and Crown, Kew Green, 30 July 1795, rpt. in James B. Findlay, *International Guide to Posters and Playbills* (Shanklin, Isle of Wight: Findlay, 1972), pl. 1.

[12] Charles Reynolds and Regina Reynolds, *100 Years of Magic Posters* (London: Hart-Davis, 1976).

producing printed leaflets as early as 1607, when a performance of *L'Accouchement de la Foire* at the Louvre was accompanied by a synopsis prepared for the Court audience;[13] but from their very inception British ballet programmes have been regarded as inferior to those of Continental and American houses.[14] Concerts and recitals, too, have generated their share of printed ephemera, though among the 'fugitive material of music, programmes are notoriously elusive';[15] and the opera bills of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries so greatly resemble those of the straight drama during the same period that they are often indistinguishable. Understanding *performance* in its widest sense, still other entertainments have been chronicled through documentation: the announcement in 1821 of *A Public Dinner* to be 'given to 300 Old People and Children', celebrating the coronation of George IV, promises 'A JUMPING MATCH ... *A Grinning Match* ... A SPINNING MATCH ... A BOBBING MATCH ... *A Jingling Match* ... A CLIMBING MATCH ... [and] *A WHEELBARROW RACE*' (fig. 34);[16] additionally, 'fireworks, wax museums and magic lantern shows have their mementoes, and the collector has a huge range to choose from';[17] and extant cinema bills date back to 1896, the year in which films were first shown commercially in London.[18] The broadsheet—the format in which many of these announcements were made—is perhaps the closest relative of the first printed playbills; and yet, while its earliest variants date from more than five hundred years ago, its traditional function as a source of information or a warning concerning behaviour can still be seen operating in such contemporary examples as notices regarding planning permission and smoking regulations.[19]

---

[13] W. J. Lawrence, 'Early Programmes', *The Stage* 27 July 1933, p. 16.
[14] Alan Jefferson, 'A Kind of Elegance: Fifty Years of Ballet Programmes', *Ballet Annual* 15, ed. Arnold L. Haskell and Mary Clarke (London: Black, 1961), p. 121.
[15] A. Hyatt King, 'A Collection of Musical Programmes', *British Museum Quarterly* 33 (1968-1969), p. 91.
[16] *A Public Dinner*, broadside, Woodbridge Festival, 19 July 1821, rpt. in John Lewis, *Printed Ephemera*, p. 101.
[17] Maurice Rickards, *Collecting Printed Ephemera* (Oxford: Phaidon-Christie's, 1988), p. 198.
[18] Tyne and Wear, n.pag.
[19] Makepeace, pp. 65, 66.

While playbills have both informed and warned their readers since at least 1564, their expected duration has seldom exceeded that of a few days, and it is often their inextricable link to the impermanence of their subject which accounts for the abbreviated life span of these 'frail and evanescent but most interesting memorials'.[20] Before the advent in the later-nineteenth century of the extended run, almost every change of date amounted to a change of dramatic material and, hence, to a change of bill, so the 'play-bill was assumed to live precariously, "for that night only"—by midnight it was dead, not worth preserving, while another came into being on the next night'.[21] But, while a run may prolong the duration of a production by months and even years, more often it is a matter of mere days or, at most, weeks before the playbills and posters announcing it are 'either torn down when they are replaced or pasted over with new ones'.[22] Replacement is only one of several fates to which these vulnerable documents may be subjected. The natural elements, too, can wreak havoc on such announcements when posted outdoors, arousing an almost emotional response from one writer in the following declaration:

> We are moved by their physical weakness and defencelessness when they fight their futile battle with the weather on street corners; we are moved by this evident contradiction between the care and inventiveness with which they were created and their flighting futility.[23]

A sheltered indoor existence is no guarantee against inevitable destruction either; for, as it was remarked at the turn of the present century, even within the theatre itself 'we can see the floor and seats of the pit and stalls strewn with these abandoned sheets of paper'.[24]

Those playbills which survived not only the entire performance but also the return journey to the playgoer's abode sometimes enjoyed a more interesting, if no

---

[20] Fitzgerald, 'Old and New', p. 11.
[21] Fitzgerald, 'Growth', p. 535.
[22] Makepeace, p. 70.
[23] From an uncredited English translation of the original Czech essay, in Evžen Turnovský, 'The Eloquence of Posters', *Český Divadelní Plakát*, na přelomu 19 a 20 století (Prague: Divadelni-ústav, 1973), Bodleian Library: 247927c.102, n.pag.
[24] Fitzgerald, 'Growth', p. 531.

less certain, demise. Here they might be put to use as a hairdressing aid, since their 'wiry, unyielding texture admirably adapted them as curl-papers at a period when ladies wore their hair in ringlets'.[25] During his visit to Miss Snevelicci's apartment the eponymous hero of Charles Dickens's *Nicholas Nickleby* notices a 'scattered litter of curl-papers … together with a confused heap of play-bills' lying on the sofa, though it is unclear whether the actress has actually employed her own theatrical notices in such service.[26] The fragile tissue material from which the bills so adapted were often made was known as 'silver paper';[27] while 'spill' was the term used to describe yet another manifestation in which the temporarily preserved playbill might finally, and fatally, be practically applied to everyday life—as a lighter of fires.[28]

Not all bills of the play, however, are blown by the wind, soaked by the rain, torn by their successors, discarded by their masters, curled by their mistresses and burned in the family fire. Millions have survived. Largely due to the 'collecting instinct that afflicts a sizable portion of humanity, and also, perhaps, to some elusive, indestructible quality of their own', many of these documents outlast the performances they chronicle.[29] And, vulnerability and evanescence notwithstanding, it has nevertheless been argued that 'the playbill … is one of the most enduring artifacts of any theatrical production'.[30] Before examining playbills and programmes in greater detail, it may prove useful to distinguish these documents in relation to numerous other publications from the stage—those produced for audiences; and those produced for performers.

---

[25] W. J. Lawrence, 'Old Playbills', *The Connoisseur* 18 (1907), p. 221.
[26] Dickens, *Nickleby*, p. 231.
[27] Fitzgerald, 'Growth', p. 529.
[28] Fitzgerald, 'Origin', p. 375.
[29] Mary C. Henderson, *Broadway Ballyhoo: The American Theater Seen in Posters, Photographs, Magazines, Caricatures, and Programs* (New York: Abrams, 1989), p. 153.
[30] David J. Skal, *Graphic Communications for the Performing Arts* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1981), p. 121.

Dramatic Documents

In addition to playbills, posters, programmes and their innumerable variants (discussed in chapter one) several additional documents have been published for theatre audiences over the centuries. Even before the establishment of the first purpose-built playhouses in the late-sixteenth century, the wandering players of Tudor interludes were selling ballads to their spectators in the form of broadsides.[31] By the late-seventeenth century such broadsides also reproduced the prologues and epilogues from the plays currently in production, and were sold outside the theatres.[32] The same period witnessed the emergence of the book of words—typically a libretto—beginning in 1674, when a French opera performed at Drury Lane was accompanied by two publications, one containing the original text, the other an English translation. With the introduction of Italian opera in the eighteenth century these printed libretti were produced in single volumes, the original and the translation appearing on opposite pages of the same document. Song books, too, proved a popular adjunct to performance, and Drury Lane began its sale of such documents in 1677 in conjunction with Charles Davenant's opera *Circe*. Some of these publications were clearly intended as souvenirs, such as the full text of John Dryden's musical allegory, *Albion and Albanius*, unavailable at the doors of Covent Garden until days after its 1685 production. Others, including the book of *Rinaldo and Armida*, staged at the Queen's Theatre in 1711, could be purchased a few days before the performance and included a 'cast of characters and exponents', but often were not sold at the theatres themselves.[33] By the late-eighteenth century books of songs contained full cast lists for new musicals and were available at the theatre on opening nights.[34] As theatrical documents to be read either before or after the staged event, ballads, prologues, epilogues, libretti and song books bear some resemblance to playbills and

---

[31] Trussler, p. 58.
[32] Lawrence, *Playhouse*, 2: 79.
[33] Lawrence, 'Book', p. 15.
[34] Hogan, introduction, p. cxxxviii.

programmes. But their subject matter is by definition limited to a single aspect of the entertainment; and they often contain relatively little practical information by which playgoers might either discover or remember the production details of a particular performance.

Tickets comprise another category of document produced essentially for audiences, and have existed in the British theatre since at least 1660, when William Davenant 'introduced a system of admission whereby a metal ticket check, purchased at the door, was presented at the entrance to the pit, box, or gallery'.[35] Tickets printed on card, bearing a greater resemblance to those of the present day, have been in use since at least the early-eighteenth century, when they were issued on special occasions. The oldest extant example—a voucher securing admission to the boxes at Lincoln's Inn Fields for a performance of William Congreve's first play *The Old Bachelor*—dates from 5 June 1716, and announces that the performance is for the 'Benefit of LOVELACE and WHITE, Box-Keepers' (fig. 35).[36] Season tickets have been produced in a variety of sizes and contours—round, square, oval and pear-shaped.[37] Various organic materials, including bone and ivory, have been employed in the manufacture of these special passes, some of which permitted entry to the theatre for as many as one hundred years; and metal long remained a popular medium, tickets being fashioned from brass, copper and even silver in the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Like playbills and programmes tickets often carry a certain amount of factual information about the productions for which they were printed, including the name of the venue, and further particulars specific to the very performances to which they allowed admission—such as the date and time and, on occasion, details of the beneficiaries, who sometimes authenticated these diminutive documents with their signatures.[38] Somewhat more rarely they can even

---

[35] Haill, 'Programmes', no. 86.

[36] *The Old Batchelor*, by William Congreve, ticket, Lincoln's Inn Fields, 5 June 1716, Harvard Theatre Collection: TS.1690.120.

[37] Thomas F. Kilfoil, 'The Brander Matthews Dramatic Museum', *Restoration and Eighteenth Century Theatre Research* 4.1 (1965), p. 12.

[38] Haill, 'Programmes', no. 86.

provide an insight into the social atmosphere of the theatres from which they were issued, as in the late-nineteenth century when George Alexander's complimentary tickets from the St. James's Theatre took the form of 'special cards reminding the bearer that evening dress was imperative for admission', and Henry Irving's from the Lyceum included the 'notice on the ticket, "Evening Dress Indispensable"'.[39] But bills of the play had been redressing their audiences since at least 1853, the simple phrase stipulating 'EVENING DRESS' appearing at the bottom of a document advertising the performance of William Shakespeare's *Othello* at the Royal Soho Theatre (fig. 36).[40] With the exception of season passes and specially issued ornate variants, tickets enjoy an even shorter life expectancy than bills, the former often being discarded or surrendered as the latter are acquired, upon their holders' entry to the auditorium; and even those that do survive seldom evoke to any great extent the atmosphere of the actual performances they preceded.

Theatrical portraiture constitutes yet another class of publication directed towards the playgoer. As early as 1709 the frontispieces in Nicholas Rowe's edition of William Shakespeare's works were 'ADORN'D with CUTS' depicting familiar scenes from the plays, such as King Lear on the heath, Romeo and Juliet in the tomb and Othello standing over the murdered Desdemona.[41] Far more commemorative of specific productions, however, are the engraved frontispieces found in the 1733 edition of William Congreve's *Dramatic Works*, in which Elizabeth Barry, Thomas Betterton, Anne Bracegirdle, Thomas Doggett and Cave Underhill are preserved, both pictorially and in the cast lists accompanying the plays.[42] Though already established in Paris by the late-seventeenth century, hand-decorated prints reached the height of their popularity in Britain more than one hundred years later, peaking in the fourth

---

[39] Dennis Kennedy, 'The New Drama and the New Audience', *The Edwardian Theatre: Essays on Performance and the Stage*, ed. Michael R. Booth and Joel H. Kaplan (Cambridge: CUP, 1996), p. 143.

[40] *Othello*, by William Shakespeare, playbill, Royal Soho Theatre, 17 February 1853, rpt. in Cavanagh, p. 7.

[41] N[icholas] Rowe, *The Works of Mr. William Shakespeare*, 6 vols. (London, 1709).

[42] William Congreve, *The Dramatic Works* (London, 1733).

and fifth decades of the nineteenth century.[43] During these years thousands of portraits of popular actors and actresses in costume were produced, selling, in what became a familiar phrase, for a 'penny plain twopence coloured'[44]—the title given to at least two reflective essays on the subject, including one authored by Robert Louis Stevenson.[45] Gordon Roe distinguishes the *tinsel print* from the *dressed print*:

> a Tinsel Print is one enriched with tinsel or coloured paper; whereas a Dressed Print is decorated with pieces of fabric, generally substituted for parts of the design which have been cut away.[46]

The prints themselves, usually measuring around eight to ten inches in height and six to eight inches in width, were 'cheap things at best—hastily engraved and color-washed depictions aimed to capture the pennies of the multitude'.[47] But children, their principal decorators, were apparently too fond of cutting and pasting their idols to be deterred by the inferior quality of the medium;[48] and the nineteenth century had almost concluded before their popularity was reduced by the continually improving art of photography. In 1894 the development of the rotary press, and the half-tone engraving process led to the introduction of the mass-produced photographic postcard[49]—the collecting of which remained popular throughout the Edwardian years of the early-twentieth century.[50] The most obvious connection between portraiture and playbills is the addition to the bills of various forms of illustration, beginning very sporadically in the early 1800s, and developing throughout the nineteenth century with technical improvements to the processes of both creating and reproducing visual imagery. Additionally, many of the hand-decorated prints, so popular in the early-Victorian era, are captioned with the name of the performer and the role depicted,

---

[43] F. Gordon Roe, 'Prints and Tinsel', *The Connoisseur* 89 (1932), pp. 302, 303.
[44] W. Courthope Forman, '"Penny Plain—Twopence Coloured"', *Notes and Queries* 162 (1932), p. 150.
[45] Robert Louis Stevenson, 'A Penny Plain and Twopence Coloured', *Magazine of Art* October 1884: 227–232.
[46] Roe, p. 303.
[47] Mary Hirschfeld, 'Collection of Tinseled Prints', *Antiques* July 1932, p. 21.
[48] Sumaya Partner, 'An Hour upon the Stage …', *Antique Collector* December 1990, p. 53.
[49] Vivian Gardner and David Mayer, 'A Brief Chronology of Victorian Theatrical Photography and Photographic Postcards', tabled at the Picturing Performance conference, University of Kent at Canterbury, 3–5 July 1997, p. 2.
[50] Richard Bonynge, *A Collector's Guide to Theatrical Postcards* (London: Batsford, 1988), p. 7.

effectively recreating single entries from cast lists of the past. Very seldom, however, is the name of the play included; and indications of the theatre and date of performance are rarer still, suggesting that portraiture was not intended to reflect specific productions, but rather was 'conceived in terms of illusion, and portrayed the players as the public wished to see them'.[51]

Numerous theatrical documents published for audience consumption, such as those outlined above, reflect various qualities of the playbill in terms of their appearance, their ingredients and their use. Other texts, initially created for the producers of staged drama, may also be seen to resemble bills of the play, though along somewhat different lines. Prompt books and acting editions, for example, incorporate elements of billing in their design, which usually includes both the title and author of the play concerned; in their subsequent annotation, which frequently notes the casts of various productions; and in their ultimate service, while they survive, as records of past performances. The earliest extant prompt books—printed play texts modified during rehearsals—date from some time after 1608, the year in which an edition of Thomas Middleton's *A Tricke to catch the Old One* was published. Following its initial printing this document was altered 'with textual emendations and stage directions in a contemporary hand', providing numerous clues to the seventeenth-century staging of this early citizen comedy. A 1652 edition of James Shirley's *The Sisters*, similarly adapted to the rehearsal process, is additionally 'annotated with the names of the actors' in Thomas Killigrew's company.[52] As neither performers nor playwrights are known to have been credited on the actual playbills before the closing years of the seventeenth century, this Restoration prompt book's inclusion of a hand-written cast list anticipates, rather than reflects, a feature common to the billing format. But even before the eighteenth century, when the inclusion of the *dramatis personae* on playbills became standard practice, play texts

---

[51] Roe, p. 302.

[52] Caroline Kimbell, publisher's note, *Drama on the World Stage: Prompt Books and Performance Records*, ed. Kimbell, series one: The Folger Shakespeare Library (Reading: Research Publications, 1989), p. vii.

often included printed cast lists of their own, naming the actors from the inaugural production. Some of these documents, such as the 1764 edition of Arthur Murphy's *The Apprentice*, have been further enriched and enlarged over the years of their repeated use by the hand-written addition of subsequent casts and dates, and by the interleaving of additional pages of annotation.[53] This textual accretion has been effectively summarised in figurative terms:

> The history of prompt-books is itself an archaeology of repetition and gradual evolution, the layers of notes indicating the genealogy of a production over generations.[54]

Alan Read's extended metaphor nicely underscores the contrast between the ephemerality of a single performance and the permanent record afforded by the preservation of its attendant documentation.

The distinction between prompt books and acting editions is by no means obvious; but, according to Marilouise Michel, the former preceded and inspired the latter:

> The history of the acting edition can be traced to the early-nineteenth century, when the term was applied to a version of a play marked with stage business and directions from performances at the Theatres Royal. It was based on the prompt copy of a production and contained all the details of the setting, the handling of the props, and the movement of the actors.

If 'marked' is taken to mean that the stage business and directions from an existing prompt book are incorporated into, and printed as part of, the resulting acting edition—not merely added by hand subsequent to publishing—then the difficulty in differentiating between these two forms of documentation is partially resolved: a *prompt book* begins its life as a regular play text, becoming a prompt book only when incorporated into the rehearsal process, during which it is annotated by hand; an *acting edition* begins its life as an acting edition, reflecting in print the annotations in the prompt book from which it derives. Perhaps some of the confusion results from

---

[53] James Laver, 'Gabrielle Enthoven and the Enthoven Theatre Collection', *Studies*, p. 7.

[54] Alan Read, *Theatre and Everyday Life: An Ethics of Performance*, 1993 (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 202–203.

the fact that many acting editions, based on prompt books of the past, are themselves published to serve as prompt books of the future! Certainly this was the case with Dunscombe's *Acting Edition of the British Theatre*; with Webster's *Acting National Drama*; with Thomas Hailes Lacy's *Acting Edition of Plays*, which absorbed both Dunscombe and Webster, and which was first published in the mid-nineteenth century; and with the editions of Samuel French who, in 1872, took over from Lacy, and whose business, Samuel French Limited, remains the 'oldest and largest publisher and supplier of theatrical plays in the world'.[55] The blurred and shifting distinction between prompt books and acting editions is exemplified in the anthologising of an undated edition of William Shakespeare's *Love's Labour's Lost*: although printed 'from the Acting Copy' and published in Cumberland's series of 'Acting Plays', this text is one of many forming a republished collection of 'Prompt Books'. Indeed it qualifies as both: for, as an acting edition, it includes not only numerous printed stage directions but a printed retrospective inventory of the 'Costume and Cast of Characters' for a performance at Covent Garden on 30 September 1839; and, as a prompt book, it contains several hand-written cuts to lines of dialogue (fig. 37).[56]

A third variation on the standard play text is embodied in the twenty volumes of John Bell's *British Theatre*, published between 1776 and 1778. Like prompt books, the individual works in this extensive collection of tragedies, comedies and operas reflect changes to the dialogue made for the production, indicating the 'passages *omitted* at the Theatres' and 'those which are *added* in the performance'; like the nineteenth-century acting editions they predate, they have been 'Regulated from the Prompt-Book' and include printed cast lists corresponding with productions at one, or both, of the Theatres Royal; and like many nineteenth-century playbills, they are illustrated. But, unlike most prompt books, Bell's editions directly

---

[55] Marilouise Michel, 'Samuel French, Limited', *British Literary Publishing Houses, 1820-1880*, ed. Patricia J. Anderson and Jonathan Rose (Detroit: Gale, 1991), vol. 106 of *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, 186 vols. to date, 1978– , pp. 138–139.

[56] *Love's Labour's Lost*, by William Shakespeare, prompt book/acting edition, ed. G[eorge] D[aniel], Cumberland's Acting Plays (London: Davidson, n.d.), *Prompt Books from the Harvard Theatre Collection*, part one, series two of *Shakespeare and the Stage* (Reading, Berkshire: Research Publications, 1988), microfilm, Harvard Theatre Collection: TS.Film.6.2 Reel 16, no. 177.

incorporate the stylistic alterations into the published document, not as hand-written notes, but in print—deletions 'distinguished by inverted Commas', additions 'printed in Italics'; unlike most acting editions, these texts were produced as consecutive units within an organised sequence, 'published every Saturday, till the whole [was] … completed'; and, unlike most playbills—typically decorated, if at all, with coarse woodcuts—these records are copiously illustrated with fine line engravings, many of which bear captions identifying the character, the scene depicted and even the dialogue exchanged. Bell's *British Theatre* was published for 'classical, theatrical, and general readers', not stage performers—nor necessarily even playgoers—and as such belongs in a class by itself.[57]

Almost all dramatic documents published for actors, audiences and readers share at least some characteristics in common with playbills and programmes. Yet they have all been designed to fulfil their own independent objectives, as detailed above, reflecting their diversity more than their similarity. Moreover, since the bill of the play has existed alongside each of the additional texts discussed thus far, the complete duplication of its form and content in a separate artefact would be pointless. The remainder of this chapter explores some of the less tangible qualities of the theatre bill which distinguish it among the vast array of theatrical documentation, noting several alternative means by which its principal functions have historically been fulfilled, and the extent to which the terminology associated specifically with billing has been figuratively incorporated into a variety of related environments.

The Special Case of Playbills and Programmes

It has been suggested that certain properties common to playbills and programmes are reflected in numerous other texts concerned with the stage and its practitioners. These similarities may involve the format in which such documents appear, the broadside ballads of the sixteenth century providing an early example.

---

[57] John Bell, *Bell's British Theatre*, 20 vols. (London, 1776–78), 1: 3.

Alternatively the resemblance may turn on the information carried, such as the cast lists typically found in prompt books from the seventeenth century onwards. But if contrast, rather than comparison, is sought, perhaps the most profitable approach to differentiating bills of the play from other performance records involves the functions they are intended to serve—for it is here that playbills distinguish themselves from all other stage memorabilia. Some documents produced for theatregoers are primarily concerned with the period leading up to the commencement of the performance. These include flyers, newspaper advertisements and reviews. Other texts fulfil their principal function at the venue itself. Examples from this group include tickets, questionnaires and printed announcements displayed within and without the playhouse. Still other objects assume their greatest responsibility after the curtain has dropped. These are usually items expressly designed to be retained by their owners, such as the photographic theatrical souvenir albums which first appeared in the late-nineteenth century.[58] But, while each of the theatrical documents discussed in this chapter corresponds with one, or even two, of the temporal categories outlined above—before, during and after the performance—playbills, and playbills alone, hold legitimate membership in all three. Even posters, which usually remain unseen during the performance, and programmes, which are seldom viewed before it, cannot claim such ubiquity in their utility.

Functional Application

In anticipation of future performances, playbills allure and inform potential audiences of the wonders awaiting them, advising them where and when to see what featuring whom. In conjunction with ongoing performances, they apprise their readers both of spatial and temporal settings and of character identification, simultaneously crediting the technical achievements realised on stage and detailing the amenities of the theatre. And in reflection on past performances, they rekindle in

---

[58] Gardner and Mayer, p. 2.

their owners the pleasure of a former evening's entertainment each time they are looked upon. Extending its service from the past through the present and into the future, the bill of the play is therefore called upon to do triple duty. In the final section of the present work, chapters seven through nine comprise a detailed analysis of the playbill's tripartite functional correlation with the future, the present and the past. Each of these duties is of vital importance to the overall success of a production. In fact, even in the absence of the playbill itself, which incorporates and executes all three tasks within a single document, elements of anticipation, conjunction and reflection—which might, for the present purpose, collectively be designated the *playbill function*—are continually operative before, during and after the theatrical event.

The pre-performance component of the playbill function has for centuries been assumed by a variety of alternative devices, dating back at least as far as the City Dionysia theatre festivals of ancient Athens in the fifth century BCE. During the *proagon*—the ceremony before the contest—a herald introduced, for public inspection, the poet, the sponsor, the actors and the chorus of each play; and by the same means the audience also learned the names of the plays to be performed and the order of their appearance.[59] The Roman theatre, too, employed heralds known as *praecones* to broadcast the title and author of the dramatic works to be performed.[60] These were the same professional criers who announced the public funerals of distinguished persons.[61] In Medieval Britain '*vexillatores* or bearers of bannerols' announced, in 'galloping rhymes' the staging of miracle plays throughout the countryside.[62] The recitation of these rehearsed verses was often accompanied by the playing of minstrels, creating small performances of their own, as a 'procession of management, costumed actors, and musicians … paraded the streets bearing

---

[59] Roy C. Flickinger, *The Greek Theater and Its Drama*, 4th ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1936), pp. 204–205.
[60] James Turney Allen, *Stage Antiquities of the Greeks and Romans and Their Influence* (London: Harrap, 1927), pp. 59–60.
[61] John Edwin Sandys, *A Companion to Latin Studies*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: CUP, 1943), p. 180.
[62] Summers, p. 1.

banners'.[63] For some productions, such as *The Castle of Perseverance*, enacted in the fifteenth century, the vexillators appear to have visited the intended performance site one week in advance, attracting public attention with their metrical advertisements for the play.[64] These vocal announcements persisted through the Renaissance, during which they were augmented by the 'throb of the drum'; and in the later Elizabethan period they were joined by visual indicators, from the theatres themselves, when 'an hour or two before a performance a flag was hoisted to announce to the public that it was an acting-day'.[65] Long after playbills were employed in the advertising of future productions, oral announcements continued to fulfil the same function, remaining a popular alternative, particularly among the illiterati.[66] The versings of a Jacobean playbill crier are suggested in the third to tenth lines of the following quotation from the anonymous *Notes from Blackfriars*, written in 1617:

> Pr'ythee, what's the play?
> The first I visited this twelve-month day.
> They say, 'A new-invented boy of purle,
> That jeoparded his neck to steale a girl
> Of twelve; and lying fast impounded for't,
> Has hither sent his bearde to act his part,
> Against all those in open malice bent
> That would not freely to the theft consent:
> Faines all to's wish, and in the epilogue
> Goes out applauded for a famous—rogue'.
> Now hang me if I did not look at first
> For some such stuff by the fond people's thirst.[67]

From the Restoration until well in to the nineteenth century verbal proclamations 'concerning the play to be given on the following day' were delivered from the stage

---

[63] Fowler, n.pag.

[64] 'SECUNDUS VEXILLATOR' announces, 'Grace if god wyl graunte us of hys mykyl myth / …[th]ese parcell in propyrtes we purpose us to playe / …[th]is day seuenenyt be fore … [y]ou in syth / At [ ] on … [th]e grene in ryal a ray', on lines 131–134 of *The Castle of Perseverance*, *The Macro Plays: A Facsimile Edition with Facing Transcriptions*, ed. David Bevington (New York: Johnson Reprint Corporation; Washington, DC: The Folger Shakespeare Library, 1972), p. 6.

[65] Summers, pp. 2, 3.

[66] W. J. Lawrence, *Old Theatre Days and Ways* (London: Harrap, 1935), p. 11.

[67] Qtd. in Fitz-Gerald, p. 305.

itself, 'at the end of a performance'.[68] By the late-nineteenth century some of the emphasis had shifted, in America at least, from the verbal to the vehicular:

> When 'Pinafore' was being played at New York, a full-rigged frigate, at least eight feet long, was carted through the principle [*sic*] avenues of traffic as a counterfeit presentment of that famous vessel; when 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' was revived at the Grand Opera House in the same city, a large truck was seen in the streets with a little log hut built upon it, and out of the window an old negro with white hair was peering.[69]

In the twentieth century Britain, too, has mounted theatrical appeals on wheels, in the form of a 'mobile box office, a brightly decorated van … [driven] out to industrial and housing estates, to offer the people working and living there the opportunity to find out more about what goes on in the arts, and to buy tickets to a play'.[70] Drums, trumpets, flags and automobiles do not accompany playgoers directly to their seats; nor are they saved in scrapbooks; but their function before—if not during and after—the theatrical event, complementing the verbal announcements they have so often supported, echoes precisely the playbill's first task of alerting its readership to the performances of the future.

The con-performance aspect of the playbill function has likewise been fulfilled throughout the ages, both in the absence and in the presence of the textual documents themselves, through a range of dramatic and theatrical devices. In the enormous outdoor theatres of ancient Greece, the masks worn by the actors greatly assisted the spectators in their recognition of the *dramatis personae*. This must have been particularly welcome in the case of tragedies—during which several roles were assumed by only three actors—as each mask indicated the 'age, standing and sex of the character'.[71] Roy Flickinger refers to the 'playbill value' of the Greek masks, arguing that their greatest benefits were bestowed upon conventionalised New

---

[68] Emmett L. Avery and Arthur H. Scouten, introduction, *The London Stage 1660-1700*, ed. William Van Lennep (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1965), pt. 1 of Van Lennep et al., p. lxxvi.

[69] 'Curiosities', pp. 222–223.

[70] Jane McLoughlin, 'Tempting Them to the Theatre with a Roving Box-Office', *Daily Telegraph* 20 June 1975, p. 15.

[71] Phyllis Hartnoll, *The Theatre: A Concise History*, 1968, rev. ed. (London: Thames, 1985), p. 17.

Comedy, in which they 'enabled an ancient audience to identify [characters] much more easily than a playbill of the modern type would have done'.[72] But guides to the play can entreat as well as inform the guided, and in the Roman theatre Terence added a prologue to the third production of *The Mother-in-Law*, spoken by the actor-producer, requesting of his audience, on behalf of the author, a patient and attentive audition:

> this is my chance to present the play and your opportunity to do honour to the stage … Let me persuade you to give his case a hearing, and then listen in silence.[73]

As the play's first production had been abandoned by its noisy spectators upon their discovery of a nearby boxing match, and the second production had been similarly terminated in deference to a gladiatorial combat, the playwright's scripted appeal introducing the performance seems entirely reasonable. Medieval religious dramas often not only began, but also concluded, with similarly direct addresses to the audience made, in the case of the N-town pageants, by a 'figure called Contemplacio, who commands silence, does bits of linking narrative, and concludes the action by drawing a moral and blessing the public'.[74] Some of the mystery plays produced during this period were enhanced by the comments of a 'presenter':

> an extradramatic device to narrate what is not dramatized and to link the separate segments … the presenter emphasizes the chronological exposition of the dramatic action. He stands in for the authors … as he provides a context for a scene and explains its meaning.

This role apparently enjoyed considerable significance; for, when the presenter 'at times disappears from the stage … his part is assumed by God'.[75] Although bills of a sort are first known to have been produced during the Renaissance, they were not then intended to be brought in to the playhouse as accompaniments to the actual

---

[72] Flickinger, p. 213.

[73] Terence, 'Prologue to the Third Production', *The Mother-in-Law*, The Brothers *and Other Plays*, by Terence, trans. Betty Radice (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1965), p. 93.

[74] Simon Shepherd and Peter Womack, *English Drama: A Cultural History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), p. 7.

[75] Howard B. Norland, *Drama in Early Tudor Britain, 1485–1558* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), p. 21.

production. This function was fulfilled, in the private and public theatres of the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods, by title-boards and locality-boards—placards which were hung from the stage in full view of the audience, sometimes before the performance began, 'to acquaint the early-comer with what he was going to see'.[76] In subsequent centuries this convention has occasionally been revived, an example occurring in 1844 during Benjamin Webster's Elizabethan-style staging of *The Taming of the Shrew* at the Haymarket Theatre, which incorporated a 'rich crimson velvet hanging … on which, as the different scenes progressed, a card was pinned on to the inner curtain … "This is a street in Padua", "This is Petruchio's house"'.[77] In at least one theatre during the last century a similar guide was placed well above the stage. With the assistance of an accompanying illustration, William Smith describes the arrangement at Sadler's Wells:

> over the proscenium they had a shifting scroll announcing the performance of the evening, so that on entering you would see the title of the first piece—*John Bull*. At the end it would change to the *ballet* or *farce*, and then to the *pantomime*; and when the entire entertainment was over the scroll would again shift to GOOD NIGHT FRIENDS & PATRONS.[78]

The theatre of the twentieth century has, perhaps more than that of preceding ages, relied on the presence of the bills themselves to convey information concerning the fictional world of the play. Masks, narrators, locality-boards and curtains are linked almost exclusively to the actual performance, and are no more likely to be found advertising a production than to be taken home as keepsakes upon its conclusion. Nevertheless, their function during—if not before and after—the theatrical event, supplementing the dramatic exposition inherent in the play text, accurately replicates the playbill's second task of guiding its readership through the performances of the present.

---

[76] Lawrence, *Playhouse*, 1: 50, 2: 73.
[77] Henry H. Howe, letter, *The Theatre* February 1880, p. 73.
[78] William Smith, *Advertise: How? When? Where?* (London: Routledge, 1863), pp. 67–68.

The post-performance element of the playbill function during the period examined in the present work is, apart from human memory and inherited anecdote thence arising, confined almost uniquely to printed documentation of one sort or another. The bills themselves occupy the largest category; but they are joined by other publications, such as the photographic souvenir albums mentioned above, produced for playgoers as mementoes of the occasion. Perhaps it is not overly cynical to suggest that once the theatrical managements of the past had sold enough tickets before a production, and had sold enough food and drink during it, concerns with what happened to the audience after the event were accorded a negligibly low priority. A more cynical argument might posit that this omission was nothing more than a commercial oversight prior to the later-twentieth century—and that the accelerating sale of various merchandise currently commemorating some of the West End's more spectacular financial successes merely reflects a previously untapped market. The drums, trumpets and flags, and the masks and curtains—already acknowledged as, respectively, forerunners of, and concomitants to, theatrical performances of past centuries—do, where extant, also serve as memorabilia from the events they preceded or accompanied. But they were not designed to do so; several centuries often pass before they do so; and they usually do so only in the particularly historical context of a theatre museum. In fact it is the study of both theatre history and social history—not personal reminiscence—through which the playbill's retrospective function is most frequently fulfilled by additional artefacts, whether the objects in question were originally intended to be beaten, blown, flown, worn and drawn, or, as in most cases, merely read. The best examples from the latter category are the prompt books and acting editions discussed above, in which the 'practice of revising cast lists and adding dates of performances was a common one'.[79] Their function after—if not before and during—the theatrical event, supplying their newest owners with historical dates and names, and with descriptions of scenes and costumes long forgotten and

---

[79] Penelope Hicks, 'Filling in the Gaps: Further Comments on Two Performances of Nahum Tate's *King Lear* in 1701, Their Dates and Cast', *Theatre Notebook* 49 (1995), p. 5.

otherwise unrecorded, clearly mirrors the playbill's third task of reminding its readership of the performances of the past.

In anticipation of the future, in conjunction with the present and in reflection on the past, playbills—along with the host of variants outlined above, whose individual functions reflect those of the bills themselves—have for centuries assisted their readers with all aspects of theatrical attendance by alerting them to, guiding them through and reminding them of the performances for which they were published. The extraordinary degree of responsibility thus assumed by each and every printed bill establishes the importance of such texts to the theatres of yesterday, today and tomorrow. Another indication of the continuing utility and popularity of these ephemeral documents lies in the widespread appropriation of numerous phrases concerning bills of the play, often figuratively applied in a variety of theatrical and literary contexts. This chapter concludes with a representative sampling from among such expressions.

Figurative Appropriation

In 1995 Erika Fischer-Lichte declared that 'the dissemination of "theatre" not only as a metaphor, but as a specific cultural model in different disciplines has increased to such an extent that nowadays it seems to be the most widespread heuristic model in cultural studies'.[80] William Shakespeare may be credited with observing, near the turn of the seventeenth century, that 'All the world's a stage';[81] but the 'increase' to which Fischer-Lichte refers is more likely that begun in the present century with the publication, in 1956, of Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. In this famous sociological treatise, the 'perspective employed ... is that of the theatrical performance', and the individual is regarded as an actor, performing with, and for, other individuals, who serve both as fellow actors

---

[80] Erika Fischer-Lichte, 'Theatricality: A Key Concept in Theatre and Cultural Studies', *Theatre Research International* 20 (1995), p. 85.

[81] William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, *The Riverside Shakespeare* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974), II.vii.139.

and as the audience.[82] In the next major analytical work to adopt this performative approach, Kenneth Burke includes *act* and *scene* among the 'Five Key Terms of Dramatism' in *A Grammar of Motives*, attempting to explain what is involved 'when we say what people are doing and why they are doing it'.[83] But the appropriation of theatrical terminology is by no means confined to social, psychological and cultural studies; and the adopted expressions are not always as general as the examples just given. Numerous phrases associated specifically with bills and billing have for years been incorporated into a variety of additional environments—sometimes merely as borrowed words, through which the playbill's format is recalled; sometimes as metonymical referents, through which the playbill's content is reflected; and sometimes as metaphorical allusions, through which the playbill's function is suggested.

Words simply borrowed from the billing nomenclature are most frequently found in other literary contexts—dramatic, poetic and non-fictional—though they occasionally appear in less obviously related surroundings. The word *playbill* itself occurs in a variety of titles, including Terence Rattigan's double bill of two short plays—*The Browning Version* and *Harlequinade*—performed together as *Playbill* in 1948 and published together under the same name in the following year;[84] Pamela Brown's *Family Playbill*, a short novel for young readers about a travelling family troupe, first published in 1951;[85] Tim Kelly's *The Marvelous Playbill*, a 1967 adaptation of Miguel de Cervantes's one-act comedy, *El Retablo de las Maravillas*, satirising nationalism;[86] Alan Durband's *Playbill* series, begun in 1969, a collection of 'specially commissioned or adapted plays for use in schools', with an emphasis on

---

[82] Erving Goffman, preface, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, by Goffman (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Research Centre, 1956), n.pag.

[83] Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), p. xv.

[84] Terence Rattigan, *Playbill: Comprising* The Browning Version *and* Harlequinade (London: Hamilton, 1949).

[85] Pamela Brown, *Family Playbill*, 1951 (Aylesbury: Goodchild, 1986).

[86] Tim Kelly, *The Marvelous Playbill: A Comedy in One Act after Miguel Cervantes' 'El Retablo de las Maravillas'* (Woodstock, Illinois: Dramatic, 1967).

'contemporary developments in the theatre and allied media';[87] and Steven Earl Edwards's *Monday Night Playbill*, written in 1993, in which August Strindberg's *Miss Julie* is juxtaposed with an American football game, the playwright having 'incorporated the guidelines of presenting a theatrical production with rules imposed upon a typical ... game'.[88] The phrase *book of the play* has also appeared in numerous published titles, including Dutton Cook's nineteenth-century volume, subtitled *Studies and Illustrations of Histrionic Story, Life, and Character*;[89] and R. Crompton Rhodes's amateur theatre handbook for 'boys and girls', published in 1924.[90] *Billboard* is just one of a host of related titles by which numerous entertainment journals in both Europe and North America (discussed in chapter seven) are known.[91] And the word *broadside* features in the name of at least one British theatre company currently active in the late-twentieth century.[92] But the most diverse popularity of all has been enjoyed by the relatively formal *dramatis personae*, which has given its name to, among other things, a handbook intended 'for the use of genealogists', the first volume of which was issued in 1916;[93] a collection of Robert Browning's poems, republished in 1969;[94] a review of an indexed listing of playbills from the late 1970s;[95] a lecture 'dedicated to the memory of John Malone', delivered in 1986;[96] and a booksellers, whose 1997 catalogue includes 185 items listed under such headings as 'Theatre, Drama, Conjuring, Circus, and Puppetry'.[97] These borrowed constructions all relate directly to the playbill and its variants in terms of

---

[87] Alan Durband, *Playbill One* (London: Hutchinson, 1969), frontispiece.

[88] Steven Earl Edwards, 'Three Original Plays', *Dissertation Abstracts International* 53 (1993): 2606A, Texas Tech University, 1992, Dissertation Abstracts Ondisc, CD-ROM, UMI-Proquest, 1994.

[89] Cook's fifth chapter, 'A Bill of the Play', had been published anonymously five years earlier in *All the Year Round* ns 6 (1871), pp. 606–610.

[90] R. Crompton Rhodes, *A Book of the Play: For Clubs and Schools* (Birmingham: n.p., 1924).

[91] Harrison, p. 30.

[92] Susan Brock, 'The Holdings of the Shakespeare Institute', Researching Theatre in the Nineties conference, University of Sheffield, 9 March 1996.

[93] *Dramatis Personae: For the Use of Genealogists*, vol. 1 (London: Sherwood, 1916).

[94] Robert Browning, *Dramatis Personae*, 1864, ed. F. B. Pinion (London: Collins, 1969).

[95] Sophie Cooper, 'Dramatis Personae', rev. of *Who's Who in the Theatre*, 17th ed., ed. Ian Herbert, *Times Literary Supplement* 4 June 1982: 617.

[96] Stewart Parker, *Dramatis Personae: A Lecture Dedicated to the Memory of John Malone*, 5 June 1986, Queen's University, Belfast (N.p.: John Malone Memorial Committee, 1986).

[97] 'Dramatis Personae—Booksellers', *FIRT/IFTR-SIBMAS Bulletin* 20.3 (1997), sec. D: no. 41.

their layout and display, attesting to the degree of influence exerted by the format of such documents, both within and without the theatre.

Other secondary applications of billing terminology convey a more metonymical quality in their usage, applying the words *bill*, *playbill* and *programme* to concepts larger and more general than the objects themselves. In such instances the mention of certain documents is understood to include the performances they have advertised. These descriptions often concern a single, though unspecific, evening's entertainment, such as Louis James's reference to the 'promiscuity of a music-hall bill' in the early-nineteenth century, with its nightly inclusion of burlesque, extravaganza, Shakespeare, melodrama, farce, song and dance;[98] and Michael R. Booth's reference to the 'truncation of the playbill from two, three or four pieces to only one' each evening, later in the same century.[99] On other occasions entire seasons may be figuratively represented through references to their billing. In describing the middle decades of the eighteenth century, for example, James Hall asserts that 'a quarter of the London theatrical programme was given over to … [Shakespeare's] plays'.[100] Often these seasonal references appear in the titles of theatrical listings, histories and reminiscences, such as Fred J. Beaman's *Pearls from Past Programs*, published in 1931;[101] Lynette Feasey's *On the Playbill in Old London*, from 1948;[102] Joan Bennett and Lois Kibbee's *The Bennett Playbill*, published in 1970, representing the 'chronicles of one family in the theater' over a two hundred year period in both Britain and America;[103] Harvey Crane's *Playbill: A History of the Theatre in the West Country*, published in 1980;[104] and Troy Segal's 'Playbill of Summer Theater', an entertainment guide produced by *Business Week* in 1988.[105] The distinction between

---

[98] Louis James, *Print and the People 1819-1851* (London: Lane-Penguin, 1976), p. 83.
[99] Michael R. Booth, *Theatre in the Victorian Age* (Cambridge: CUP, 1991), p. 10.
[100] James Hall, 'Getting in on the Act of Creation', *Guardian* 6 February 1996, sec. 2, p. 10.
[101] Fred J. Beaman, *Pearls from Past Programs* (Boston: Christopher, 1931).
[102] Lynette Feasey, *On the Playbill in Old London* (London: Harrap, 1948).
[103] Joan Bennett and Lois Kibbee, *The Bennett Playbill* (New York: Holt, 1970).
[104] Harvey Crane, *Playbill: A History of the Theatre in the West Country* (Estover, Plymouth: Macdonald, 1980).
[105] Troy Segal, 'A Playbill of Summer Theater', *Business Week* 20 June 1988: 165.

a pleasing figurative referent and its merely literal counterpart is illustrated in a review of Crane's book: when the author includes too many playbills in his *Playbill*, the work 'becomes tedious with a list of names from programmes of plays'.[106] This criticism notwithstanding, bills of the play have provided essential evidence for innumerable theatrical annals (discussed in chapter nine); and the abundance of metonymical references to nightly and seasonal repertoires underscores the inextricable link between the content of these documents and the productions they have served.

A final exploitation of the extended billing vocabulary involves metaphorical allusions to playbills in terms of their various functions—before, during and after a performance. As the playbill function was so consistently fulfilled in the theatres of ancient Greece, it is not surprising that some of the best examples of such functional tropes are to be found in discussions of classical literature. In anticipation of performances yet to occur, modern playbill readers have for centuries consulted actual cast lists for information regarding the *dramatis personae*. But Athenian audiences attending tragedies and comedies during the fifth century BCE, deprived of such documentation, relied more upon the physical appearance of the characters; and, as Oliver Taplin figuratively states, a 'complicated and important "cast-list" of masks was developed'. This metaphor is effectively repeated in a description of the 'cast-list of comic types' found in the New Comedy of the fourth century BCE, which includes 'angry old men, besotted old men, ingenious slaves, stupid slaves, slaves in a hurry, blimpish soldiers, unscrupulous tarts, tarts with hearts of gold, pimps, uncouth rustics, flamboyant caterers [and] … pseudo-scientific doctors'.[107] In conjunction with modern performances in progress, the very presence of a playbill or programme reminds its owner that the scenes and events beheld are imaginary. Moreover, numerous references in most bills to the performance venue itself, and to the

---

[106] Margaret Toms, rev. of *Playbill: A History of the Theatre in the West Country*, by Harvey Crane, *Theatre Notebook* 35.2 (1981), pp. 94–95.

[107] Oliver Taplin, 'Greek Theatre', *The Oxford Illustrated History of Theatre*, ed. John Russell Brown (Oxford: OUP, 1995), pp. 43, 44.

techniques of stage craft, further threaten the audience's tenuous suspension of disbelief. But such interruptions to the fictional action dramatised on stage have existed since at least the fifth century BCE; and in his 1994 translation of Carlo Ferdinando Russo's *Aristofane autore di teatro*, Kevin Wren figuratively describes the metatheatrical addresses to the audiences, found in the comedies of Aristophanes, as 'playbills'.[108] In her review of Wren's edition, Edith Hall not only incorporates the translator's allusion, but further enhances the value of the metaphor by emphasising the connection it reveals between the ancient and the contemporary theatre:

> the discussion illuminates Old Comedy's internal metatheatrical and programmatic 'playbills', in which actors shatter the dramatic illusion and meditate on theatre-going and the art/life boundary in a startlingly post-modern manner.[109]

In reflection on performances of the past, modern playgoers often consult the cast lists from their preserved theatre bills as reminders both of the *dramatis personae* and of the actors representing them. In *An Odyssey Round Odysseus*, published in 1989, Beaty Rubens and Oliver Taplin provide a similarly retrospective identification chart, entitled 'The Principal Homeric Characters and Places Mentioned', which they figuratively describe as a '"cast list" of all the important names in Homer'. This catalogue of personalities, featuring entries such as '*Eurymachus*—a particularly dastardly suitor', includes with its subjects a 'brief reminder of their place in the story of the *Iliad* and the events at Troy, or of the *Odyssey* and Odysseus' return home'—for this book, like any good playbill, is concerned not only with players and roles, but with temporal and spatial parameters as well, as suggested by its subtitle, *The Man and His Story Traced through Time and Place*.[110] Metaphorical allusions to bills and cast lists serving in various capacities before, during and after performances confirm the importance of the playbill's function as a perpetual link between a production and

---

[108] Kevin Wren, trans., *Aristophanes: An Author for the Stage*, by Carlo Ferdinando Russo (London: Routledge, 1994), trans. of *Aristofane autore di teatro* (Firenze: Sansoni, 1962), p. 1.

[109] Edith Hall, rev. of *Aristophanes: An Author for the Stage*, by Carlo Ferdinando Russo, trans. Kevin Wren, *Theatre Research International* 21 (1996), p. 171.

[110] Beaty Rubens and Oliver Taplin, *An Odyssey Round Odysseus: The Man and His Story Traced through Time and Place* (London: BBC, 1989), pp. 8, 171.

its audience. When considered in conjunction with the numerous borrowed phrases reflecting a bill's formal characteristics, and the various metonymical references to its ingredients, they form a class of figurative appropriations which argue convincingly for the enduring vitality of the bill of the play as a desirable adjunct to all manner of theatrical performance.

This chapter has been concerned as much with the absence of playbills and programmes as with their presence, continuing the description of their form, their content and their function in relation to a wide variety of alternative, and additional, documentation in order to isolate certain qualities unique to the objects under review. It is with regard to their overall function that bills of the play stand in greatest relief to all other forms of theatrical memorabilia, printed or otherwise; and chapters seven through nine in the final section of the present work are devoted to such functional considerations. With regard to their changing content over the centuries, playbills and programmes reflect in their ingredients the theatrical and social history of the periods in which they were produced. These historical considerations are undertaken in chapters four through six of the following section.

PART II

HISTORICAL CONSIDERATIONS

CHAPTER 4

THE SIXTEENTH AND SEVENTEENTH CENTURIES

Following the argument, in the three chapters of the previous section, for the consideration of theatre playbills and programmes as published texts, the present section offers an historical overview of the numerous developments which occurred, both in the physical appearance of British bills and in the information they contained, between 1564 and 1914. While it is entirely possible that bills of the play were in use prior to the so-called golden age of English drama, no solid evidence survives to confirm their pre-Renaissance existence. Henry Sampson suggests that the notices advertising gladiatorial combats in ancient Greece and Rome probably 'took the form of what is now generally known as "billing"', and that 'Rome must have often looked like a modern country town when the advent of a circus or other travelling company is first made known';[1] but savage fights unto bloody, violent deaths hardly qualify as dramatic entertainment. Roy C. Flickinger states that in the first century BCE posters were attached to the doors of the Greek theatres, depicting either characters or scenes;[2] but, in the absence of any written details advertising the corresponding performances, such pictorial materials cannot accurately be classified as bills. John Edwin Sandys claims that in the Roman theatres, supplemental to the public announcements made by heralds, 'Information as to the pieces to be played was given to the audience … by play-bills (*programmata*)';[3] but Sandys offers no support for this assertion and the word *programma* is not listed in the *Oxford Latin Dictionary*.[4] Nor, according to William Beare, were programmes—in the modern sense of a list of items in the order of performance—associated with the Roman stage.[5]

---

[1] Sampson, p. 2.
[2] Flickinger, p. 356.
[3] Sandys, p. 520.
[4] *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, ed. P. G. W. Glare (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977).
[5] W. Beare, *The Roman Stage*, 1950, 3rd ed. (London: Methuen, 1977), p. 170.

It was apparently 'customary, early in the Christian era, for a scroll to be exhibited when any of the Passion or other sacred plays were about to be performed'.[6] Moreover, religious drama supplies the most relevant surviving documentation from the medieval theatre. William Smith's confident affirmation that playbills 'were first issued in writing in the year 1268, at the performance of the Miracle plays at Chester' remains unsupported;[7] but two documents connected with the York Corpus Christi cycle—both the fifteenth-century Register, containing annotated scripts of the mystery plays, and the *Ordo Paginarum* of 1415, carrying summary descriptions of the pageants and their sequence—represent actual productions at specific locations.[8] Occasionally the latter text even lists the *dramatis personae* connected with the various episodes.[9] Nevertheless, these manuscripts were created as civic records, not as books of the play or cast lists, and it is generally accepted that programmes intended for use during performances were unknown to public audiences of the middle ages and the Renaissance.[10]

The fourteen accessions to the British monarchy during the 350-year period under review delimit useful temporal units of investigation, not least because with every royal expiration the playbills would have to be modified, replacing the initials of the departed sovereign on the coat of arms with those of the successor and adjusting the royal flourish—'*Vivat Rex*'; '*Vivat Regina*'; '*Vivant Rex et Regina*'—as appropriate. This chapter is primarily concerned with the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, beginning in 1564, shortly after Elizabeth I's late-Tudor accession, continuing through the Commonwealth and Restoration and terminating with the death of Queen Anne in 1714 at the end of the Stuart dynasty.

---

[6] Sampson, p. 19.
[7] Smith, p. 65.
[8] Clifford Davidson, rev. of *The York Play*, intro. Richard Beadle and Peter Meredith, *Comparative Drama* 18.2 (1984), p. 180.
[9] Richard Beadle, 'The York Cycle', *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, ed. Beadle (Cambridge: CUP, 1994), p. 95.
[10] W. J. Lawrence, *Pre-Restoration Stage Studies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1927), pp. 53–54.

Elizabethan, Jacobean, and Caroline Theatre

Throughout the first nine decades of their recorded existence, bills of the play were sharply differentiated as belonging either to the public or the private theatre. Formally they were readily distinguished by their size, the former variants being much smaller than their private counterparts. With regard to their content, the public bills carried only the most essential details concerning the productions they advertised, while the documents issued for private entertainments often provided textual material as lengthy and elaborate as the dramatisation itself—including the dramatisation itself. And from a functional perspective, the objects posted publicly were essentially *playbills*, primarily intended to serve as advertisements in anticipation of future performances; while the texts distributed at Court, and to other exclusively assembled audiences, acted more in the capacity of *programmes*, operating as guides in conjunction with ongoing performances. But whether published for a public or a private readership, these dramatic documents came increasingly to be relied upon through the later-sixteenth and early-seventeenth centuries, both by the performers whose livelihoods they promoted, and by the audiences whose attention they sought.

Elizabethan Theatre

The first fully documented reference, in English, to the existence of British playbills dates from the early Elizabethan period in 1564—coincidentally, the year in which both William Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe were born—and is contained in a letter from the Bishop of London to the Queen's Secretary, describing 'common playours … daylye … sett[ing] up bylles' (quoted at greater length in chapter two).[11] These playbills, posted outdoors, were almost certainly small, handwritten documents containing only the minimum of information required by a public audience desiring to know where and when to see what featuring whom.[12] It

---

[11] Grindal, fol. 141.
[12] Lawrence, *Playhouse*, 2: 60.

may further be assumed that they were frequently relied on, for in 1567 a story was published about a swindler named Qualitees who tricked an audience into anticipating an 'antycke plaie' by placing spurious bills 'upon postes aboute London'.[13] It may be entirely coincidental, but this was the very year in which John Brayne had attempted to erect a stage on the Red Lion farm—at which no performances are known to have occurred.[14] As no playbills have survived from even the latest decades of the sixteenth century, the extent to which James Burbage's Theatre bills of 1576 distinguished themselves from their predecessors, in announcing public performances at Britain's first purpose-built playhouse, is left to the imagination. In any event their function, prior to a performance, continued to be supported by the horn-blowing, drum-beating, flag-raising rituals described in chapter three. But for private performances at Court, documents resembling theatre programmes sometimes accompanied the royal entertainments and, according to W. J. Lawrence, 'It is on record that when, in 1579, a masque was given before Queen Elizabeth, the lady who made the introductory address ended by delivering to her "a table with writings"'.[15]

The oldest extant object connected with British theatrical billing dates from the penultimate year of Elizabeth's reign and advertises the performance of '*ENGLANDS JOY*. To be Playd at the Swan' Theatre on 6 November 1602 (fig. 38).[16] The play, 'a sort of political pageant', was probably written by Nicholas Breton,[17] and the broadside printed for its production, approximately thirteen inches in height and eight inches in width, is fully entitled 'THE PLOT OF THE PLAY, CALLED *ENGLANDS JOY*'. But this document differs from the other extant plots of the time in a number of ways. Such texts were usually 'in the nature of practical directions to the stage-manager or call-boy' for backstage use during performance,

---

[13] *Merry Tales, Wittie Questions and Quick Answeres* (1567), p. cxxxiii, qtd. in Summers, p. 4.
[14] Peter Thomson, 'English Renaissance and Restoration Theatre', John Russell Brown, p. 178.
[15] Lawrence, 'Programmes', p. 16.
[16] *Englands Joy* [by Nicholas Breton?], broadside, Swan Theatre, 6 November 1602, rpt. in Lawrence, *Playhouse*, opp. 2: 68.
[17] '"The Plot of the Play, Called *Englands Joy*. To be Playd at the Swan this 6 of Nov. 1602"', *Harleian Miscellany*, vol. 10 (London: White, 1813), p. 198.

and as such they often included the addition of 'incidental actors' names, as was sufficient to make the directions readily serviceable'.[18] Additionally, according to Walter Wilson Greg, they were 'written in two columns on paper mounted on pasteboard, and ha[d] … a hole cut near the top to enable their being hung on a peg in the playhouse'.[19] None of these distinguishing features is found on the *Englands Joy* broadside, leading to the plausible conclusion that it had been printed for the use of the public, either as a handbill to be distributed in advance of the performance or as a programme to be consulted during it—especially as its nine paragraphs are devoted almost entirely to an elaborate synopsis of the action. Moreover, it contains almost all the essential components found on every bill of the play, including the location, date and title of the proposed entertainment, with the royal coat of arms appearing just below these ingredients. Conspicuously absent from this document, however, is any mention of the personnel connected with the proposed production. But this omission may have been deliberate, if the performance of *Englands Joy* was never meant to occur. According to John Chamberlain, after collecting from the audience 'most part of the mony' at the door, Richard Vennar tried to escape on his mount:

> he wold have shewed them a faire paire of heeles, but he was not so nimble to get up on horsebacke, but that he was faine to forsake that course, and betake himselfe to the water, where he was pursued and taken.

Those members of Vennar's deluded audience not involved in his capture vandalised the interior of the Swan, 'reveng[ing] … themselves upon the hangings, curtains, chaires, stooles, walles, and whatsoever came in theire way, very outragiously, and made great spoile'.[20] Regrettably, the only surviving bill from the Elizabethan theatre is thoroughly atypical—by virtue of both its extended length and its fraudulent purpose.

---

[18] William Martin, 'An Elizabethan Theatre-Programme', *Selborne Magazine and Nature Notes* January 1913, pp. 16–17.

[19] W. W. Greg, *Henslowe Papers* (London: Bullen, 1907), p. 129.

[20] John Chamberlain, 'To Dudley Carleton', 19 November 1602, letter 56 of *Letters Written by John Chamberlain during the Reign of Queen Elizabeth*, ed. Sarah Williams (N.p.: Camden Society, 1861), p. 163.

Jacobean Theatre

The distinction between bills of the play corresponding to either public or private performances persisted through the Jacobean era, the former typically remaining tiny and succinct. These advertisements had to be small enough to be posted publicly, yet bold enough to attract attention.[21] Ivor Brown muses on the suitability of short titles to these documents:

> *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth* and *Lear* had only eight syllables between them. They were easy to remember and suitable for large lettering on the bills posted about the town which was all the publicity then available.[22]

In the anonymous *Histriomastix; or, The Player Whipt*, printed in 1610, an early stage direction alludes to this publicity, calling for Belch to enter 'setting uppe billes' which he describes as 'Text-billes for Playes'.[23] Four years later, fairground entertainments appear to have been similarly announced, judging from a scene from Ben Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair*, first staged in 1614, in which Sharkwell and Filcher enter with bills for a puppet play.[24] The conciseness typical of contemporary advertisements for public performances is exemplified in the following transcription of a specimen which was posted outside the White Horse Inn, Norwich, in April 1624, its text having been preserved among municipal records connected with the trial of an actor who had been prohibited from playing there—and who spent a month in jail as a result of his defiance:

> Here within this place at one of the clocke shalbe acted an excelent new comedy called 'The Spanish Contract', by the Princesse servants, *vivat Rex*.[25]

Notwithstanding its brevity, this announcement from the penultimate year of James's reign contains all the basic billing ingredients, adding nothing but the royal flourish,

---

[21] Lawrence, *Playhouse*, 2: 61.
[22] Ivor Brown, 'What's in a Name?', *Drama* 93 (1969), p. 43.
[23] *Histriomastix* (London, 1610), n.pag.
[24] Ben Jonson, *Bartholomew Fair*, 1614 (London, 1738), p. 93.
[25] Qtd. in Lawrence, 'Oldest', p. 24.

'*vivat Rex*', which, in its various permutations, frequently appeared at the bottom of playbills until the early-nineteenth century.[26]

No such concision was required of the dramatic documents produced for the Court, however, and Ben Jonson's masques written and performed in the early-seventeenth century were sometimes introduced by the playwright's presentation to the monarch of exhaustive programme material. Commemorating his first collaboration with Inigo Jones in 1605, in which the architect had designed *The Masque of Blackness*, Jonson offered the king a manuscript copy of the complete text, written in the present tense. Four years later, alerted perhaps to his majesty's desire to see the play as well as read it, Jonson limited the printed material accompanying *The Masque of Queens* in 1609 to a 'short descriptive analysis of the whole';[27] and in 1618 he provided a similar document in conjunction with *Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue*, described by Edward Sherburn as a 'little book' conveying the 'conceipt' of the royal entertainment.[28] A brief exchange in Thomas Middleton's *No Wit Like a Woman's* suggests that the distribution of explanatory programme texts in conjunction with a performance was a familiar practice, not only at Court, but at private theatricals generally, during the second decade of the seventeenth century: just before the performance of the masque-within-the-play, Mr. Beveril offers a document to Lady Goldenfleece, saying, 'Here is an abstract, Madam, of what's shown / Which I commend to your favour'.[29] Although no British playbills have survived from the Jacobean era, these literary allusions help to reveal the form, content and function of the documents produced for both the public and private theatres.

Caroline Theatre

One British playbill has survived from the reign of Charles I, and the earliest extant specimens from at least two other countries were published during this period

---

[26] Lawrence, *Playhouse*, 2: 61.
[27] Lawrence, 'Programmes', p. 16.
[28] Edward Sherburn, letter to Dudley Carleton, 1618, qtd. in Lawrence, 'Programmes', p. 16.
[29] Thomas Middleton, *No Wit Like a Woman's*, 1613 (London, 1657), p. 92.

as well, including the oldest French bill, printed in 1629 (fig. 39);[30] and the oldest German bill, printed about 1630 (fig. 40).[31] Furthermore, evidence, if not artefact, dates the earliest Irish bill to 'shortly after the erection of the first Dublin theatre in 1634'.[32] In Britain contemporary stage bills bore some resemblance to the title pages from printed plays;[33] and in a copy of the 1637 edition of Thomas Heywood's *The Royal King and the Loyal Subject*, a subsequent page listing the 'Drammatis Personæ' has effectively been transformed into a cast list through the handwritten addition of the names of various King's Company members beside the characters they portrayed (fig. 41).[34] At least two references in the dramatic literature of the era imply the continuing reliance of ordinary theatregoers on posted documents to convey information about public productions: the prologue to Lodowick Carlell's *Arviragus and Philicia*, published in 1639, begins with the acknowledgement, 'We promis'd you a new Play by our bill';[35] while the speaker of James Shirley's prologue to *The Cardinal*, performed in 1641, coyly alludes to the absence on the playbills of any reference to the genre of the piece:

> I will say nothing positive; you may
> Think what you please, we call it but a Play,
> Whether the comick Muse, or Ladies love,
> Romance, or a direfull Tragedy it prove,
> The Bill determines not; and would you be
> Perswaded, I would have't a Comedie,
> For all the purple in the name, and state
> Of him that owns it.[36]

---

[30] *Ligdamon et Lidias*, by Théophile de Scudéry, playbill, Hotel de Bourgogne, 1629, rpt. in Lawrence, 'Oldest', opp. p. 26.

[31] *Love's Sweetness Turned into Deaths Bitterness*, playbill, Fencing House, Nuremberg, 21 April [c. 1630], rpt. and trans. in Albert Cohn, *Shakespeare in Germany in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (London: Asher, 1865), pl. 2.

[32] Lawrence, 'Oldest', pp. 28–29.

[33] James Boaden, *Memoirs of Mrs. Siddons*, 2 vols. (London: Colburn, 1827), 1: 16–17.

[34] *The Royal King and the Loyal Subject*, by Thomas Heywood, '*Drammatis Personæ*', 1637, rpt. in Van Lennep, et al., btw. 1: 64–65.

[35] Lodowick Carlell, *Arviragus and Philicia* (London, 1639), n.pag.

[36] James Shirley, *The Cardinal, a Tragedie*, 1641 (London, 1652), n.pag.

The distinction between the literary text and the performance text is immediately appreciated when this account of purported generic ambivalence, rather than being heard in the house, is merely read in a script clearly subtitled *a Tragedie*.

At Court, too, interest in documentation connected with staged entertainments persisted, emphasising, as in previous decades, the explanatory function served by such texts during a performance. An exchange dramatised in the third act of John Ford's *The Lover's Melancholy*, printed in 1629, relies once again on the masque-within-the-play to introduce the subject. Just before the fictional presentation begins, a stage direction requires Corax to 'Enter … with a Paper-plot', which he hands to the Prince, saying, 'Pray my Lord / Hold and observe the plot, tis there exprest / In kind, what shall be now exprest in action'.[37] The following year, in conjunction with *Love's Triumph through Callipolis*, Ben Jonson produced another complete book of words which, in its introduction, conveys the playwright's desire 'to make the spectators understanders'.[38]

Notwithstanding the relatively protected status of these amateur theatricals, the next ten years appear to have witnessed little development in either private, or public, bills of the play. The publication of William Prynne's vehemently anti-dramatic *Histriomastix* in 1632, followed by an outbreak of plague in 1636 and the death of Ben Jonson the following year, an increasingly puritanical parliamentary presence, the onset of the first civil war and the subsequent order for the closure of the playhouses in 1642 understandably limited both the extent to which playbills and programmes were used and the freedom and enthusiasm with which they were designed and produced. Nevertheless, the private theatre remained a safer haven than the public; and in 1644, the year in which the Globe Theatre was demolished,[39] one of the earliest bills known to have been published during the Civil War announced a

---

[37] John Ford, *The Lovers Melancholy* (London, 1629), p. 49.
[38] Ben Jonson and Inigo Jones, *Love's Triumph through Callipolis* (London, 1630), p. 1.
[39] Trussler, p. 116.

school performance in Kilkenny of *Titus; or, the Palme of Christian Courage*, presented by the 'scholars of the Society of Jesus'.[40]

The only surviving playbill from the Caroline era advertises neither a public play, nor a private masque, but rather 'rare dancing on the Ropes, Acted by his Maiesties servants', a strolling company of youthful gymnasts (fig. 42).[41] The *Short-Title Catalogue, 1475–1640*, attributes this broadside, approximately eight inches in height and six inches in width, to Thomas Cotes, 'after 1630'.[42] Relying on a somewhat flexible interpretation of the criteria for classifying a *bill of the play*, this specimen may be said to qualify as such since it supplies details concerning the location, date, title and company involved in the performance. However, as an early instance of a stock bill, printed before a tour, onto which variable information was later added by hand, its references to some of these elements are atypical: the venue, the 'Rose in[n] in winestreet', appears in manuscript; the printed indication of the date unspecifically promises entertainment 'this present day'; and 'rare dancing on the Ropes' is no less prosaic a title than the 'Egges dancing upon a Staffe', following it half way down the page. These youthful performers have left to posterity the only extant British playbill from the Caroline theatre; but, like the Elizabethan broadside for *Englands Joy*, this sheet remains unrepresentative of the dramatic documentation more customarily produced for public performances—owing to both the length, and the acrobatic preoccupations, of its editorial matter.

In spite of occasional references, both fictional and historical, to British bills of the play from the Elizabethan, Jacobean and Caroline theatre, only two actual documents exist by which such descriptions might be supported or challenged. Moreover, neither of these surviving specimens is typical of its era: both contain far

---

[40] Susan Ward, p. 32.

[41] 'Rare Dancing on the Ropes', broadside, The Rose, Wine Street [after 1630], rpt. in Van Lennep, 'Playbills', p. 240.

[42] Listed at 21315.8 'Rope Dancing', in *A Short-Title Catalogue of Books Printed in England, Scotland, & Ireland and of English Books Printed Abroad, 1475–1640*, first compiled by A. W. Pollard and G. R. Redgrave, 2nd ed., revised and enlarged, begun by W. A. Jackson and F. S. Ferguson, completed by Katharine Pantzer, 3 vols. (London: The Bibliographical Society, 1976–1991), 2: 287.

more text than the common playbills normally issued for public theatrical performances. Nevertheless, the information essential to any playbill clearly appears on both items—except where names have been deleted to protect the guilty—and the accounts of the private materials published during this ninety-one-year period hint at the emergence, not only of the theatre programme, but of the book of the play as well. With basic underlying patterns now established for the layout and makeup of these dramatic documents, the later-seventeenth century proved instrumental to their growth and evolution, witnessing numerous important developments in both form and content through the duration of the Stuart dynasty, with which the remainder of this chapter is concerned.

Commonwealth and Restoration Theatre

Over the next four decades bills of the play gradually increased in size and, correspondingly, began typically to carry additional ingredients—including the royal arms and the royal flourish—with almost as great a consistency as their basic informational components. Furthermore, the distinction between public and private texts began to blur, with playbills occasionally used to advertise amateur performances in advance of the event, and programmes sometimes employed as guides in conjunction with popular productions. Even the allusions to billing in contemporary dramatic literature shifted slightly—from instances in which helpful documents are deliberately introduced to one character by another, to situations in which they are discovered, already in place, and even sought out, by a single individual—suggesting the increasingly familiar presence of playbills and programmes in the Commonwealth and Restoration theatre.

Commonwealth Theatre

Fallacious assumptions regarding the supposedly total cessation of dramatic activity during the eleven-year Puritan Interregnum which followed the execution of

Charles I have long been revised. Yet there is little support for an argument denying the essentially negative impact of two civil wars on dramatic activity in Britain. At the outset of the Commonwealth, in 1649, the theatres had officially been closed for over six years, many of their interiors dismantled; and the establishment of Oliver Cromwell's protectorate in 1653 did nothing to encourage the resumption of public playing. Although surreptitious performances continued to be privately advertised throughout the era,[43] no bills of the play bearing an Interregnum date have survived to the present.

Nevertheless, one extant document is believed to have been printed during this period. This is an undated fairground bill, approximately eight inches in height and six inches in width, whose unusual woodcut is described in chapter one, advertising performances of various puppet plays at John Harris's booth in Bartholomew Fair, including 'THe Court of *King Henry the Second* … the Death of Fair *Rosamond* … the merry Humours of *Punchinello* … the *Lancashire*-Witches … the famous History of *Bungy* and Frier *Bacon* … the merry Conceits of their Man *Miles* … [and] the brazen speaking Head' (see fig. 4).[44] William Van Lennep traces this artefact to the Interregnum, since the 'woodcut, paper, and typography place the broadside in the seventeenth century'; since, to his knowledge, no extant playbill posted during the reign of a British monarch prior to the nineteenth century includes 'neither the royal arms at the top nor the conventional flourish, "Vivat Rex"', both of which are missing on the specimen in question; and since the 'Puritans never banned Bartholomew Fair and the showing of puppets there'. Van Lennep further posits 1655 as the probable year of issue, based on a reference to 'Fair Rosamond' in 'An Ancient Song of Bartholomew Fair', which begins with the temporal reference, 'In Fifty-five …'.[45] As noted earlier, this playbill, which may have been printed by the puppeteer himself, is already unique among seventeenth-century dramatic documents by virtue of its

---

[43] Haill, *Theatre Posters*, p. 4.
[44] *The Court of King Henry the Second*, playbill, [1655?].
[45] Van Lennep, 'Playbill', pp. 383, 385.

elaborate illustration. Furthermore, it fails to include the dates of the performances, the phrase 'in Bartholomew Fair' offering the only allusion even to the season during which these entertainments might be enjoyed. Once again, the sole surviving relic of a particular era is less than exemplary of the period in which it originated—though it might reasonably be speculated that potentially incriminating references to specific locations, dates and personnel were often deliberately avoided on playbills printed during the Commonwealth's sustained theatrical prohibition. While 1655 was the very year in which Oliver Cromwell had re-established the Lord Mayor's Show, trying to be 'accommodating where he could find justification',[46] the general ban on public playing ostensibly persisted until the end of the protectorate in 1659.[47]

Charles II and Restoration Theatre

With the warrants issued by Charles II, in 1660, to Thomas Killigrew and William Davenant, providing the King's and Duke's companies, respectively, with exclusive permission to resume performing, bills of the play could again be freely printed and distributed—though only by the two royal patentees—and neither the Great Plague of 1665 nor the Great Fire of 1666 appear seriously to have impeded their development throughout the Restoration. The introduction to Samuel Tuke's *The Adventures of Five Hours*, performed at Lincoln's Inn Fields in 1662, reveals the pattern presumably typical of the documents from the early part of this period, as the 'Prologue Enters with a Play-Bill in his hand, and Reads':

> This Day being the 15th of December, shall be Acted a New Play, never Plai'd before, call'd *The Adventures of Five Hours*.[48]

Fifteen years later a similar posted claim to novelty is read in the prologue to William Chamberlayne's tragicomedy, *Wits Led by the Nose*, performed at Drury Lane in 1677, in which 'A Play Bill [is] discover'd upon the Door' by Sir Symon Credulous, who is made to 'Enter like a Country Gentleman':

---

[46] Thomson, 'Renaissance', p. 204.
[47] Trussler, p. 117.
[48] Samuel Tuke, *The Adventures of Five Hours* (London, 1663), n.pag.

> What's here? never Acted before, *Hey-day!*
> This certainly is some insipid Play.
> *Wits lead by the Nose*, I Gad I'de best retire,
> They'le find me out to be some Country Squire.[49]

This was the year in which the management of the King's Company had passed to Killigrew's son, Charles,[50] while the Duke's Company had been run, since Davenant's death in 1668, by his widow;[51] but a rivalry between the two patent houses persisted until the formation of the United Company in 1682, and is reflected in the preoccupation of playbills from both theatres with the novelty of the entertainment they offered.

During the later-seventeenth century, 'a play was usually in print a few days after it had been performed', and the layout of contemporary playbills continued to resemble the title pages of published dramatic texts, which often included the descriptive phrases 'as it is acted', 'as it was acted' and 'acted at'.[52] In fact, the title pages of many books regularly bore such similarity to bills of the play at this time that Andrew Marvell writes of a 'Lacquey that could not read, having been sent to take down the Play for the afternoon, [who] … by mistake brought away the Title of a new book of Theology'.[53] Such confusion would be less likely to occur with the playbill's inclusion of a cast list in the eighteenth century; but a wistful exchange between Lovewit and Truman in James Wright's *Historia Histrionica* reveals that it had been common, 'since the Restauration', to print the 'Actors Names over against the Parts they Acted' in published plays as well.[54] This concern to record the identity of the players not only anticipated the addition of a major billing ingredient in the following century, but was also applied retrospectively to other documents already printed: a hand-written cast list for a 1663 production of Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist*, for

---

[49] William Chamberlayne, *Wits Led by the Nose* (London, 1678), n.pag.
[50] Trussler, p. 120.
[51] Peter Holland, 'Davenant, William', *The Cambridge Guide to Theatre*, ed. Martin Banham, updated ed. (Cambridge: CUP, 1990), p. 281.
[52] Sybil Rosenfeld, 'Dramatic Advertisements in the Burney Newspapers, 1660–1700', *PMLA* 51 (1936), pp. 126, 127.
[53] Andrew Marvel[l], *The Rehearsall Transpros'd: The Second Part* (London, 1673), pp. 42–43.
[54] James Wright, *Historia Histrionica* (London: 1699), p. 3.

example, written on seventeenth-century paper, was bound into a copy of the 1616 folio of Jonson's *Workes*, and appears opposite the title page for the play.[55]

As usual most of the few surviving documents from the period do not accurately represent the bills typically distributed either before or during contemporary performances. The earliest example, printed in 1661, resembles a programme of scenery and is entitled *Description of the Great Machines of The Descent of Orpheus into Hell*. This twenty-two-page booklet accompanying the performance presented 'by the French Commedians at the Cock-pit in Drury-lane' informs its readers that the 'Argument' of the play has been 'Taken from out of the Tenth and Eleaventh Books of Ovids *Metamorphosis*', and lists, at the bottom of its fifth page, the *dramatis personae*, including Juno, Envy and The Sun, under the heading 'The Actors', though the names of the actual performers are not given. A synopsis of the action bears some resemblance to the programme notes of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, concluding with references to the play's sources and production history, avowing that the entertainment will effect a 'most powerful Charm'. The scenic descriptions occupying the sixth to tenth pages begin ambitiously with 'The first Scene of the First Act':

> A Theatre is presented to the Spectators on both sides of which are seen Rocks, and at the bottom a great Groto, from whence issues a flying Dragon, casting Fire out of his Mouth, and presently is heard the noyse of Thunder, accompanied with flashes of Lightening, and Windes, which trouble the Ayre; The Heaven opens, where *Juno* appears in her Chariot, drawn up and down the Ayre by two Eagles of Gold.[56]

These enticing promises of extraordinary stage illusions, both visual and aural, further prefigure the nineteenth-century bills, with their inexhaustible catalogues of splendid scenes and spectacular effects.

A briefer, less elaborate message is found on the next surviving specimen from the Restoration theatre. This bill, approximately nine inches in height and seven

---

[55] Kelli Wondra, 'A 1663 Cast List for *The Alchemist*', *Theatre Notebook* 49 (1995), p. 66.

[56] *Description of the Great Machines of The Descent of Orpheus into Hell*, adapted by de Chapoton, programme, Cockpit, Drury Lane, 1661 (London, 1661), Bodleian Library: Mal.250[5], n.pag.

inches in width, announcing daily performances 'AT the Booth at *Charing-Cross*', referred to in chapter one, dates from 1672 and contains all the basic ingredients, with the additional inclusion of the royal arms and the royal flourish, 'VIVAT REX'. Furthermore, this playbill is one of the oldest extant dramatic documents to include the precise starting times of the performance advertised, John Dryden's *The Dutch Cruelties at Amboyna* being scheduled to commence '*exactly at Two of the Clock in the Afternoon, and at Four*' (see fig. 3).[57] It does not, however, incorporate the use of red ink, although in the same year as its issue, John Dryden had written a new prologue for a revival of Lodowick Carlell's *Arviragus and Philicia* (1639), attributing this colourful printing innovation—and the posting of larger bills—to a visiting company of foreign actors:

> A Brisk *French* Troop is grown your dear delight,
> Who with broad bloody Bills call you each day,
> To laugh, and break your Buttons at their Play.[58]

The French company, with its attractive announcements, may have been perceived as an additional economic threat to members of the King's Company, whose Theatre Royal in Bridges Street had burned down in January, and who had been obliged since then to occupy Lincoln's Inn Fields—abandoned by the Duke's Company in the previous year for their new home in Dorset Garden—until the completion, in 1674, of the Theatre Royal in Drury Lane.

The final extant specimen from the era was issued in 1681, announcing an amateur production of Terence's *Eunuchus*, performed in Edinburgh by students of Kelso Grammar School (fig. 43).[59] This playbill distinguishes itself from more conventional fare in terms of its form, its content and its function: it is composed in Latin and is reverse printed, with white letters appearing on a dark background; it contains a lengthy description of the production and the first complete cast list,

---

[57] *The Dutch Cruelties at Amboyna*, playbill, 1672.

[58] John Dryden, prologue, *Arviragus and Philicia*, by Lodowick Carlell (1639), performed 1672, John Dryden, *The Works of John Dryden*, gen. eds. Edward Niles Hooker et al., 20 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1956–1989), 1: 145.

[59] *Eunuchus*, by Terence, playbill, Edinburgh, 1681, rpt. in Joseph Macleod, 'The Earliest Amateur Playbill', *Theatre Notebook* 9 (1954), pl. 1, opp. p. 14.

predating its earliest known professional counterpart by thirty-five years; and, advertising the revival of a successful production staged earlier in the year, it was posted fifty miles from the location of its original performance with the intention of attracting a largely new audience.[60] Whereas, in the early years of Charles II's reign, it had been customary to boast on bills that a play had never been acted before, two decades later the prior success of one performance was considered suitable grounds for its subsequent repetition.

James II

Although only one bill of the play survives from the brief and troubled reign of James II, it enjoys the distinction of being the oldest extant specimen to advertise a professional production, by living actors, of an established stage play, mounted indoors at a purpose-built theatre. This playbill, approximately nine inches in height and fourteen inches in width, repeatedly referred to in chapter one, announces the performance, by '[the]ir MAJESTIES SERVANTS' of Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher's *A King and No King* at Drury Lane on 22 February 1687, 'Beginning Exact[ly a]t Four of the Clock'. As well as the starting time, other ingredients additional to the basic billing elements include an enormous woodcut of the royal arms, spanning almost the entire printed width of the text, and the royal flourish, 'VIVAT REX' (see fig. 2).[61] But the most unusual feature of this bill is its lack of unusual features; and if it typifies the posted announcements of the late-seventeenth century, then one of the most obvious formal developments to have occurred in the dramatic documents of its penultimate decade concerns an appreciable increase in their size.

From the dateless, almost anonymous, bills of the Interregnum to the prototypical cast lists of the 1680s, and the regular inclusion of performance times, the thirty-nine years spanned by the Commonwealth and Restoration theatre

---

[60] Macleod, pp. 12, 14.
[61] *A King and No King*, playbill, 1687.

engendered significant changes in the form and content of the bill of the play. Concerns with the novelty and spectacle of the accompanying dramatisation are at times evident in both playbills and programmes, and the occasional inclusion of lengthy plot descriptions and production histories foreshadows by almost two hundred years the preoccupations of the equivalent texts published in the later-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. But the increasing number of attractions listed in these documents were eventually balanced by less captivating notices concerning audience behaviour, in an attempt to introduce a greater sense of decorum into the theatre of the late Stuart period, discussed in the following paragraphs.

Late Stuart Theatre

The three final decades of the Stuart dynasty witnessed accelerating changes to the form, content and function of British theatre bills. Their size continued to increase; they included additional information about the performers and the performances advertised; and they began to hint at the various regulatory policies of the venues themselves, advising potential audiences of what to expect behind the curtain, at the box office and in the house. Even as theatregoers in the late-seventeenth century were informed, in one line from their playbills, of which celebrated actors would be standing on the stage, they were simultaneously warned, in a following line, that they, as spectators, would not be standing on the stage.

William III and Mary II

Changes to the gradually expanding editorial matter printed on bills of the play in the final decade of the seventeenth century resulted from occasional attempts by the theatres to alert their audiences to various house rules, and to constrain certain behaviour considered by management to be inappropriate. Notwithstanding the gradually increasing size of the playbills which were posted publicly during this period, the handbills delivered to the homes of wealthier patrons and left in carriages

and coffee houses remained smaller variants of essentially similar documents, and four such artefacts survive from the early 1690s, containing both promotional and prescriptive announcements in addition to their basic information. The oldest extant British handbill dates from 1692, announcing a performance by 'their Majesties Servants' of John Bancroft and William Mountfort's *Henry the Second King of England* at Drury Lane. This specimen, approximately three inches in height and six inches in width, replaces the royal arms with a decorative border across its top, but retains the royal flourish—modified to '*Vivant Rex & Regina*'—on its final line. Furthermore, it affords the first glimpse of printed appeals to the audience's desire for novelty, averring not only that the entertainment advertised is a 'New Play', but also that it has been 'Never Acted but once'. The same bill, however, also carries the earliest surviving caution pertaining to activities within the playhouse, advising that 'No money [is] to be return'd after the curtain is drawn' (fig. 44).[62] The three additional handbills from this period correspond to productions staged at either Drury Lane or Dorset Garden—John Dryden's *The Indian Emperour*; Dryden's *All for Love*; and Nathaniel Lee's *Theodosius* (fig. 45).[63] Because the United Company had been performing at both of these theatres for more than a decade, all four documents share a virtually identical size and format, despite having been printed over a period of nineteen months between November 1692 and June 1694—during which Christopher Rich had assumed control of the United Company, and following which Thomas Betterton led the breakaway company to Lincoln's Inn Fields.[64]

The posted bills issued from Betterton's new venue, following his arrival there with the rebels in 1695, carry similar notices regarding non-refundable admission fees. They also contain the earliest surviving admonitory warnings concerning the behaviour of audience members. A playbill dating from 1697, announcing a revival of Robert Howard's *The Committee*, is surrounded by a decorative wreath woodcut,

---

[62] *Henry the Second King of England*, handbill, 1692.
[63] *The Indian Emperour*, handbill, 1692; *All for Love*, handbill, 1694; *Theodosius*, handbill, 1694.
[64] Thomson, 'Renaissance', p. 217.

headed by the royal arms and completed with the royal flourish. Furthermore this uncharacteristically large bill, approximately twelve inches in height and sixteen inches in width, is the first extant document to identify the genre of its subject, Howard's comedy being described simply as 'A Comedy'. But the most distinctive feature on this specimen is the explicit directive, printed in large capitals directly below the title of the play, 'NO PERSON TO STAND ON THE STAGE' (fig. 46).[65] The breakaway company at Lincoln's Inn Fields had clearly established a formula for the printing of its daily announcements: the next day's bill, advertising John Dryden's *Troilus and Cressida*, is almost identical in its size and layout—including both warnings—but carries the additional promotional lure on its first line that the piece had been 'Not Acted these 16 Years' (fig. 47).[66] William Van Lennep refers to these two posters as the 'largest English playbills of the seventeenth century in existence';[67] and Thomas Brown, writing in 1699, implies that the size of the bills published by the patent houses continued to increase during the few remaining years of the century:

> some of their late *Bills* are so very *monstrous*, that neither we, nor our Fore-fathers, ever *knew* any thing like them. They are as *long* as the Title Pages to some of Mr. *Prin's Works*, nay, you may much sooner dispatch the *Gazette*, even when it is most crowded with Advertisements.[68]

The one extant bill probably dating from the year of Brown's letter, however, is neither monstrous nor even particularly long. The final specimen to survive William's reign, following the death of Mary, advertises another Bartholomew Fair booth performance, a 'New DROLL, called, FRYAR BACON: OR, THE COUNTRY JUSTICE' (see fig. 5).[69] This document, approximately seven inches in height and five inches in width, is unique among the public bills of the period in two respects: it

---

[65] *The Committee*, by Robert Howard, playbill, New Theatre, Little Lincoln's Inn Fields,.27 October 1697, tipped into *Woffington: A Tribute to the Actress and the Woman*, by Augustin Daly, largest-paper ed., 2 vols., extra-illustrated (Philadelphia: n.p., 1888), Harvard Theatre Collection: TS.953.10.-PF., 2: 172–173.

[66] *Troilus and Cressida*, by John Dryden, playbill, New Theatre, Little Lincoln's Inn Fields, 28 October 1697, rpt. in Fletcher, 'Playbills', opp. p. 50.

[67] Van Lennep, 'Playbills', p. 236.

[68] Thomas Brown, 'To George Moult', 12 September 1699, letter in *The Works of Mr. Thomas Brown*, vol. 1 (London, 1707, 4 vols., 1707–1709), 'Epigrams, Poems, and Satyrs', p. 112.

[69] *Fryar Bacon*, playbill [1699?].

refers to various aspects of the attendant spectacle, promising a 'Variety of Scenes, Machines, Songs and Dances'; and it names one of the performers, announcing that the part of Ralph will be 'Acted by Mr. [Thomas] DOGGETT', the comedian who, according to John Downes, wore a 'Farce in his Face'.[70] A brief observation in *Historia Histrionica* reveals the contemporary fascination with both scenery and stars, reflecting on the greater appeal enjoyed by the latter over the former, especially when the talent is imported:

> the present Plays with all that shew, can hardly draw an Audience, unless there be the additional Invitation of a *Signior Fideli*, a *Monsieur L'abbe*, or some such Foreign Regale exprest in the bottom of the Bill.[71]

In their efforts to draw an audience, bills of the play were becoming increasingly descriptive and alluring, as well as instructive and admonitory; but their distribution was soon to be temporarily constrained by an outright ban on their public posting.

Around the turn of the eighteenth century, four events followed each other in such rapid succession that causal relationships between at least some of them seem almost certain. In 1698 Jeremy Collier published *A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage*, subjecting William Congreve's *The Double Dealer*, among other works, to a particularly scathing attack.[72] The following year, on 4 March 1699, Congreve's name was the first ever to appear on an English playbill, as reported by John Dryden in a letter to Elizabeth Creed Steward:

> This Day was playd a reviv'd Comedy of Mr Congreve's calld the *Double Dealer*, which was never very takeing; in the play bill was printed,—Written by Mr Congreve; with Severall Expressions omitted: What kind of Expressions those were you may easily ghess; if you have seen the Monday's *Gazette*, wherein is the Kings Order, for the reformation of the Stage: but the printing an Authours name, in a Play bill, is a new manner of proceeding, at least in England.[73]

---

[70] John Downes, *Roscius Anglicanus* (London, 1708), p. 52.

[71] Wright, p. 6.

[72] Jeremy Collier, *A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage* (London, 1698). Congreve's second play is deemed a 'heavy piece of profaness', p. 64.

[73] John Dryden, 'To Mrs. Steward', 4 March 1699, letter 59 of *The Letters of John Dryden with Letters Addressed to Him*, ed. Charles E. Ward (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1942), pp. 112–113.

Whether Congreve's name was included in defiance of Collier or in compliance with the King, the free publicity generated by the vitriolic *Short View* must have increased the playwright's visibility, which would surely have been further enhanced by the ubiquitous public presence of the words 'Mr Congreve' on playbills all over London. The following year the posting of playbills in London was deemed an 'encouragement to vice and prophanesse' by the city's Grand Jury and prohibited by the Lord Mayor, as described in chapter two; and it is not unreasonable to speculate that the example of Congreve's popularity exerted some influence on the implementation of such harsh measures. But 'true downright Sense', as George Farquhar later observed, had not 'expell'd the City with the Play-house Bills',[74] and the posting ban had been in effect for less than one month before the theatres turned to print journalism as an alternative advertising medium. On 4 July 1700 the first British newspaper playbill was published in the *Flying Post*, announcing a production of *Don Quixote*, to be performed the following day at Lincoln's Inn Fields. This inaugural insertion contained over two hundred words, identifying the composers and performers of several songs and dances and describing a 'Gentleman in great distress; and … his Wife and Three Children' for whose benefit the drama was being staged.[75] If, temporarily, the breakaway company was unable to post the physically 'largest English playbills', it continued, for awhile, to issue the lengthiest.

Anne

Newspaper billing established its permanence in 1702, the year of Queen Anne's accession to the throne, with the founding of the 'first English daily paper … a single half-folio page' entitled the *Daily Courant*, which began carrying

---

[74] George Farquhar, 'A Discourse upon Comedy, in Reference to the English Stage', *Love and Business*, by Farquhar (London: Lintott, 1702), pp. 122–123.

[75] *Don Quixote*, playbill, Lincoln's Inn Fields, *Flying Post; or, The Post-Master* 2–4 July 1700, microfilm, British Library; Colindale Newspaper Library, reel 1188, n.pag.

performance notices within three months of its inception;[76] and, although theatrical advertising in many early-eighteenth-century papers 'remained for a time exceedingly spasmodic',[77] this publication was replicating playbills on a regular basis by 1705.[78] While print journalism remains a subject of study unto itself, newspapers and other periodicals number among the various additional media assisting bills of the play in the preparation of theatregoers for future performances, discussed in greater detail in chapter seven.

By 1703, the Court order banning playbill posting in London was largely ignored; and in John Oldmixon's *The Governour of Cyprus*, performed that year, the prologue, quoted at greater length in chapter two, alludes not only to the widespread disregard of the prohibition, but to the formal characteristics of the newly re-displayed documents as well:

> Wide Folio Bills on ev'ry Post we place
> And huge Red Letters stare you in the Face.[79]

More than thirty years after John Dryden's allusion to the 'broad bloody Bills' of a visiting French company, Drury Lane began to experiment with colour, if not with size, on its own documents: a rather small playbill issued in 1703, approximately six inches in height and five inches in width, announcing the production of John Vanbrugh's *The Relapse*, is the oldest extant specimen printed in both red and black ink (fig. 48).[80] But scarlet lettering did not suit everyone's taste, and the epilogue to Peter Motteux's pastoral opera, *The Temple of Love*, performed three years later, sarcastically refers back to the foreign influence of dyed type:

---

[76] Alfred Jackson, 'Play Notices from the Burney Newspapers, 1700–1703', *PMLA* 48 (1933), p. 815. The *Daily Courant* 'came into being' on 11 March 1702, printing an advertisement for Ben Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair* at Drury Lane, on 2 June 1702, p. 831.

[77] Allardyce Nicoll, *Early Eighteenth Century Drama*, 1925, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: CUP, 1952), vol. 2 of *A History of English Drama, 1660-1900*, 6 vols., 1923–1959, p. 293.

[78] Peter Thomson and Gāmini Salgādo, *The Everyman Companion to the Theatre* (London: Dent, 1985), p. 7.

[79] Oldmixon, n.pag.

[80] *The Relapse*, by John Vanbrugh, playbill, Drury Lane, 18 May 1703, tipped into *Their Majesties Servants*, by John Doran, 5 vols., extra-illustrated (1888), Harvard Theatre Collection: TS.934.5, 2: 336–337, rpt. in Alwin Thaler, *Shakspere to Sheridan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1922), pl. 33, opp. p. 262.

> Put out Red-Letter'd Bills, and raise your Price,
> You'll Lure a select Audience in a trice.[81]

In fact a modest increase to the charge for admission, although not likely attempted, might reasonably have been applied in connection with these colourful variants, as they were fifty percent more expensive to produce: Drury Lane's accounts from the early-eighteenth century indicate that red bills cost fifteen shillings per day, while their standard black counterparts cost only ten shillings.[82] In addition to its red letters, the *Relapse* advertisement further distinguishes itself as the first surviving British playbill to include an itemised list of the various admission prices, along with their corresponding locations in the theatre—'Boxes 5 sh. Pit 3 sh. First Gallery 2 sh. Upper Gallery 1 sh.'. This may be connected with the fact that it is also the oldest existing benefit bill, carrying the message across its top border that the production is being arranged 'At the Desire of Several Persons of Quality'—typically an indication of a 'bespeak' performance, often sponsored by wealthy socialites.[83] It is one in a series of four surviving Drury Lane bills, printed between 13 April 1703 and 15 February 1704, which adhere to a virtually identical formula, insomuch as the location, date, title, company, royal arms and royal flourish appear in exactly the same position on each document. There is some variation in their size and content, however: the handbill announcing Dick Estcourt's *The Fair Example* is smaller than the playbill just described and contains little more than the basic billing ingredients (fig. 49);[84] the advertisement for *Volpone*, on the other hand—printed four years after the Lincoln's Inn Fields bill for *The Double Dealer*, which included William Congreve's name—is the first extant specimen to identify the playwright of the work announced, 'the Famous *Ben. Johnson*' as orthography would have it, and additionally pledges that 'The parts in general will be perform'd to the best

---

[81] [Peter] Motteux, *The Temple of Love* (London, 1706), opp. p. 38.

[82] Haill, 'Bill', p. 282. As the figures quoted refer to the years 1712–1716, the price differential in 1703 may have been lower.

[83] Arnold Hare, 'Playbills in the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries', *Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural History Magazine* 58 (1961–1963), pp. 25–26.

[84] *The Fair Example*, by Dick Estcourt, handbill, Drury Lane, 13 April 1703, rpt. in Fletcher, 'Playbills', pl. 2, opp. p. 50.

Advantage' (see fig. 1);[85] and the document heralding the production of Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher's *The Maid's Tragedy* contains almost as much printed information concerning the attendant music and dancing as the wordy first British newspaper bill, published four years earlier by Thomas Betterton's breakaway company at Lincoln's Inn Fields (fig. 50).[86]

In 1705 Betterton's rebels moved to a new venue, the Queen's Theatre, under the joint management of John Vanbrugh and William Congreve. This playhouse was designed by Vanbrugh, whose own play, *The Confederacy*, was staged there in November 1705. The only surviving artefact to commemorate this event, however, is a 'fragment of a "great bill"' (fig. 51).[87] But when the companies again joined forces at Drury Lane in 1708, their reunion appears to have been marked by adjustments to the format of that theatre's playbills. On a document announcing the performance of *The Pilgrim* on 24 May 1708, the Drury Lane layout described in the preceding paragraph, consistent through previous years, has been modified: the royal arms, while still large, occupy somewhat less space, centred at the top of the sheet instead of spanning its entire width; the location of the company's name has shifted from the lower left-hand corner of the page to the top; and the very name of the company has itself evolved from 'Her Majesty's Servants' to 'Her Majesty's Company of Comedians', reflecting the new identity of the Drury Lane players (fig. 52).[88]

The final extant bill dating from the reign of Queen Anne announces the production of a military spectacle entitled *The Last Years Campaigne*, performed by puppets in 1710 at Punch's Theatre, St. Martin's Lane (see fig. 11).[89] The director of these '*Artificial Actors*', Martin Powell, has been described in terms of his 'genius for

---

[85] *Volpone*, playbill, 1703.

[86] *The Maid's Tragedy*, by Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher, playbill, Drury Lane, 15 February 1704, rpt. in Fletcher, 'Playbills', pl. 5, btw. pp. 50–51.

[87] *The Confederacy*, by John Vanbrugh, playbill [fragment], Queen's Theatre, Haymarket, 6 November 1705, rpt. in Fletcher, 'Playbills', pl. 6, btw. pp. 50–51.

[88] *The Pilgrim*, playbill, 1708. As no Drury Lane playbills from the years 1705–1707 are known to have survived, the link posited between the reuniting of the companies and the changes to the layout of the bills is speculative, based entirely on a few extant documents suffering a four-year interruption to their continuity.

[89] *The Last Years Campaigne*, handbill, 1710.

advertisement and publicity';[90] and this handbill is notable for its rare early woodcut, described in chapter one, depicting the 'Four Indian Kings', native North American Chiefs for whom the entertainment was offered. But the bill is additionally distinguished as only the second surviving artefact to include neither the royal arms nor the royal flourish among its ingredients, the earlier specimen being the playbill from John Harris's booth advertising *The Court of King Henry the Second* (see fig. 4)—another puppet show and another unusual illustration, described above—which, failing to include either regal reference, is ascribed, by William Van Lennep, to the Interregnum.[91] But George Speaight cites the very omission of '*Vivat Regina*' from the *Last Years Campaigne* bill in challenging Van Lennep's assertion that the royal flourish almost invariably appeared on public posters.[92] And the absence of the heraldic device may simply reflect the puppeteer's desire to appease the growing body of increasingly vocal moralists in the late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries who vehemently protested the use of 'Her Majesties Coat of Arms' on playbills,[93] bemoaning, with Jeremy Collier, the immorality and profaneness into which they were convinced the British stage had degenerated by the end of the Stuart era.

Over the twenty-five years following the deposition of James II, the popularity enjoyed by bills of the play seems to have grown at a greater rate than their gradually expanding size. Numerous individual artists were identified in print, accompanied, where appropriate, by details of the songs and dances they were to perform, preparing the way for the cast lists which would soon follow. Occasional descriptions of the scenery, coupled with helpful references to the cost of admission and other playhouse practices, further augmented the utility of these documents as sources of both allurement and information for potential audiences. Yet, even as the entertainments advertised on the bills were promoted in terms of their novelty, the objects themselves

---

[90] George Speaight, "Powell from the Bath": An Eighteenth-Century London Puppet Theatre', *Studies*, p. 50.
[91] Van Lennep, 'Playbill', p. 383.
[92] Speaight, 'Playbill', p. 34.
[93] *Observator* 1–5 January 1704, microfilm, British Library; Colindale Newspaper Library, reel 528, n.pag.

began to acquire an increasingly predictable structure, with relatively consistent layouts sometimes sustained over years at a single theatre, offering essentially the same basic, and supplemental, ingredients with almost every issue. Although the familiarity resulting from this formal constancy may have enhanced their value for many theatregoers, publicly displayed playbills failed to win universal approbation, briefly enduring mayoral proscription at the turn of the century. Yet this very sanction ultimately contributed to their growth and development, as the posting prohibition resulted, within days, in the advent of the newspaper bill—a powerful testament to the durability and vitality characterising these dramatic documents.

This chapter has been concerned with the first 150 years in the recorded history of British bills of the play, focusing on the numerous developments to their form, content and function occurring during the later-Tudor and Stuart dynasties. This relatively early period in their evolution is indeed characterised by *firsts*—in terms of the documents themselves: the first broadside; the first stock bill; the first fairground bill; the first puppet bill; the first programme of scenery; the first booth bill; the first amateur bill; the first professional bill; the first handbill; the first benefit bill; the first great bill; and the first newspaper bill—in terms of their ingredients: the first reference to performance times; the first appearance of illustrative material; the first appearance of an amateur cast list; the first reference to genre; the first appearance of a playwright's name; and the first reference to admission prices—and in terms of their intended effect upon the readership for whom they are published: the first hoax; the first offer of a plot synopsis; the first claim to absolute novelty; the first behavioural warning; and the first promise of spectacular scenic effects. And, in spite of W. J. Lawrence's assertion that, 'by the year 1714 the programme became an institution',[94] innumerable *firsts* continued to occur, formally, thematically and functionally, throughout the remaining periods under review in the present work. But theatregoers have always needed to know where and when to see what featuring

---

[94] Lawrence, 'Oldest', p. 27.

whom; and the almost invariable inclusion of four basic billing ingredients, specifying the location, date, title and performers of the advertised entertainment, as readily typifies the documents produced at the outset of Elizabeth's reign as those issued at the conclusion of Anne's, continuing to characterise the playbills and programmes of the eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries—the subject of the following chapter.

CHAPTER 5

THE EIGHTEENTH AND EARLY-NINETEENTH CENTURIES

This chapter continues the historical account begun in the previous chapter of developments to the form and content of theatre playbills and programmes in post-medieval Britain, and is entirely concerned with the Hanoverian theatre of the eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, commencing with the accession of George I in 1714 and concluding exactly midway through Queen Victoria's reign, in 1869, by which year many London theatres had begun to replace their large, inky playbills with smaller, folded versions, printed on card—by formal definition, the earliest theatre programmes.

Georgian Theatre

The increasingly consistent layout characterising bills of the play published by the patent houses in the early-eighteenth century in no way limited the development and variety of their content over the first twelve decades of the Hanoverian dynasty. The very fact that, throughout the 1700s, 'all London theatres operated on the repertory system', typically offering a different play every six nights in the week,[1] meant that new bills were usually issued each evening, ensuring a continually changing mixture of both fresh and familiar ingredients. Performances in repertory additionally led to a system of advance publicity, featuring a sort of playbill-within-the-playbill, advertising, near the foot of the document, productions to be staged in the near future. The diversity and flexibility characterising a nightly change of bill, however, simultaneously required managements to remain alert to even the smallest changes in the entertainments announced; and, notwithstanding their already brief life expectancy, bills of the play were often superseded on the day of performance by updated variants. The gradual but steady expansion of the Georgian playbill from a

---

[1] Hogan, introduction, p. xx.

scrap of notepaper to a folded page measuring almost three square feet reflected the increasing amount of informational and promotional material conveyed to the audience; while the typographical evolution from a single face of varying sizes to varying faces of numerous sizes, coupled with the more frequent use of coloured ink, mirrored the growing variety characterising the very entertainments advertised. By the middle of the eighteenth century most London bills, and many of their provincial counterparts, included every conceivable detail of practical use to their patrons regarding the purchase and acquisition of tickets and the rules and arrangements of the house. The next logical step was the intensified effort to promote both the plays in production and the theatregoing event itself. Editorial material was devoted to alluring descriptions of the sets and action, and to exhaustive plot synopses. Successful playwrights, performers and productions were explicitly billed as such and, on occasion, even the house itself was warmly reviewed, whether for its continuous burning of dehumidifying fires or for its installation of gas lighting. The hyperbole characterising these self-serving managerial praises culminated with the development of the theatrical *puff*, nowhere better exemplified than in the playbills issued by Robert William Elliston during his seven year management of Drury Lane—a tenure which concluded at the virtual end of the Georgian era.

George I

One of the most important developments in the content of eighteenth-century bills of the play—the inclusion of a cast list in connection with the public theatre—occurred near the very outset of the Hanoverian dynasty. The earliest preserved example of this inevitable and invaluable addition appears on a playbill dating from 1716, announcing the performance of John Crowne's comedy *The Country Wit* at Drury Lane, under the management of Richard Steele (see fig. 8).[2] The cast list printed on this document is transcribed fully in chapter one; but, as this is only the

---

[2] *The Country Wit*, playbill, 1716.

second extant bill on which the playwright is also identified, the additional descriptive phrase following Crowne's name, '*Author of Sir* Courtly Nice', represents yet another promotional innovation designed to attract the interest of playgoers by alluding to one of the writer's previous works—especially 'the only one to hold the stage'.[3] With the promises, however, came the provisos: another Drury Lane bill printed two years later for a production of Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher's *Rule a Wife and Have a Wife* pledges additional 'Entertainments of Singing and Dancing', but also warns that, '[By] His Majesties Command, No Persons are to be admitted behind the [Scenes]' (see fig. 13).[4] This specimen, however, includes no cast list, for although the bill of the play had been steadily expanding for more than a century, it seldom achieved, at this relatively early stage in its evolution, the 'monstrous' proportions decried by Thomas Brown at the turn of the century. Allowing for occasional exceptions, it customarily still amounted, according to Percy Fitzgerald, to little more than a 'small scrap about the size of a sheet of note-paper'.[5] Nevertheless, the *Rule a Wife and Have a Wife* playbill from 1718, approximately nine inches in height and seven inches in width, includes the first surviving reference to the larger 'Great Bille', discussed in chapter one, on which further particulars of the performance, including its participants, were to 'be Express'd' at a date nearer to the event.

The printer of an even smaller playbill, issued by Lincoln's Inn Fields in 1724, found room enough to include the cast, the playwright, the beneficiary, the singers and the dancers, as well as a reference to the 'Great Bill', filling some of the remaining space by expanding the title of a popular tragedy to 'The True and Ancient History OF KING LEAR AND His Three DAUGHTERS'. Maximum use is further made of the remaining printable surface, which includes, on the penultimate line, a clever hybrid of the promotional lure and the managerial warning, noting with an emphatic 'N.B.' that the date on which the entertainment is scheduled to occur will

---

[3] 'Crowne, John', Hartnoll, *Companion*, p. 195.
[4] *Rule a Wife and Have a Wife*, playbill, 1718.
[5] Fitzgerald, 'Growth', p. 544.

mark the '*last Time of Acting till* Easter Holy-days' (fig. 53).[6] Nevertheless, for all its detail this document, approximately nine inches in height and six inches in width, withholds important information: although '*Shakespear*' was in no greater need of introduction then than now, the production announced is actually based on Nahum Tate's adaptation in which, as William Van Lennep notes, the 'part of the Gentleman Usher, listed in the cast ... first appears'. But in the 'advertisements of performance', such as this one, Tate's name 'was invariably omitted, the play being credited to Shakespeare'.[7] Van Lennep's observation, dependent in this case on the presence of the cast list, serves as an excellent example of the valuable function fulfilled by bills of the play as primary sources in the study of theatre history, the subject of further discussion in chapter nine. As the number and range of staged entertainments steadily increased, the bills reflected their variety, serving as the main resource of information pertaining to the sequences of singing, dancing and musicianship often preceding, accompanying and following the performances of the plays themselves.

George II

By the fourth decade of the eighteenth century, Percy Fitzgerald allows, the bill of the play had expanded from mere 'note-paper' to a 'square of letter-paper size'.[8] Henry Giffard, however, managing Goodman's Fields Theatre in 1734, produced a 'printed Manifesto' for his playhouse which was 'daily posted' and measured 'at least four feet in length'.[9] Ironically, it was Giffard who three years later offered the script of the scurrilous *Golden Rump* to Robert Walpole, precipitating the passing of the Licensing Act in 1737,[10] for with the production of legitimate drama thereafter ostensibly limited to the patent houses, the publication of playbills at

---

[6] *King Lear*, playbill, 1724.
[7] Van Lennep, 'Playbills', pp. 238, 238 n. 12.
[8] Fitzgerald, 'Growth', p. 544.
[9] 'The Present State of the Theatrical War in the British Dominions', *Grubstreet Journal* [No. 218] 28 February 1734, rpt. in *London Magazine* March 1734, p. 105.
[10] Peter Holland and Michael Patterson, 'Eighteenth-Century Theatre', John Russell Brown, pp. 259–260.

Goodman's Fields and the other minor theatres was sharply restricted—while, within months of their renewed monopoly, Drury Lane and Covent Garden began on a regular basis to 'provide separate playbills, with the full cast printed thereon'.[11] A content-oriented *programme* definition based solely on the document's inclusion of this important ingredient would therefore imply the evolution of this variant from its *playbill* predecessor to have occurred in 1737. A benefit bill from that year announcing a royal command performance of William Congreve's only tragedy, *The Mourning Bride*, contains a number of interesting details, in addition to a cast list, concerning both the physical arrangement of the house, and patrons' access to it—information which began to appear on playbills with increasing frequency in the eighteenth century, particularly on fundraising occasions at which larger crowds than usual were often anticipated:

> *The Pit and Front Boxes will be laid together at 5* s. *And none will be admitted without Printed Tickets, which may be had at* Mr. Moor*'s*, Box-Book-keeper *in the Playhouse Passage*, and at the Offices at the Theatre. … Servants will be allow'd to keep Places on the Stage, Side-Boxes, and the Two Corner Front-boxes on each Side the Stage, and the Ladies are desir'd to send them by Three o' Clock (fig. 54).[12]

Furthermore, at the very foot of the bill, below even the royal flourish, a promotional announcement for a forthcoming performance advises readers that 'On *Saturday* next will be presented, The COMMITTEE'. The theatres frequently concluded their playbills with such advance publicity well into the nineteenth century, for as long as the repertory system remained in place.

Changes also occurred at the very top of the bill. As noted in chapter one, the confidence gained by the patent houses following the passing of the Licensing Act resulted in an alteration to the content of their playbills, whereby the royal coat of arms, deemed almost superfluous, was gradually excluded from regular usage by the Theatres Royal after 1737. A document exemplifying this revised format announces a

---

[11] Babcock, pp. 96–97 n. 1.

[12] *The Mourning Bride*, by William Congreve, playbill, Drury Lane, 24 February 1737, rpt. in Thaler, pl. 25, opp. p. 182.

performance of John Vanbrugh's *The City Wives Confederacy* at Covent Garden in 1745. The heraldic device is absent at the head of the specimen, and the first line of text, rather than identifying the theatre, names 'Mr. LEVERIDGE' as the beneficiary of the evening's proceeds (fig. 55).[13] Even with the cast list established as a regular ingredient, such explicit identification of a performer was, on certain occasions, considered undesirable. When David Garrick made his first professional stage appearance at Ipswich in 1741, for example, he was falsely billed as 'Mr. LYDDALL',[14] hoping, perhaps, to avoid unwanted publicity in the event of failure;[15] and the playbill connected with Garrick's more famous debut, at Goodman's Fields in 1741, announces that 'The Part of King Richard' will be played simply 'by a GENTLEMAN (Who never appeared on any Stage)'.[16] N. L. Parker explains this strategy of discretion:

> anonymously, many a novice made his or her *débût*. If … they 'fetched' the public, their identity was soon revealed, and no longer nameless, they rushed into popularity, while if, on the contrary, their histrionic efforts failed to please, they retired from the footlights with much less mortification than would have been felt had they appeared without this friendly concealment.[17]

Clearly Garrick fetched. In 1747, six years after his first London performance, he joined James Lacy in the management of Drury Lane, and Garrick's design for the playbill issued by that theatre over the next thirty years has been praised as 'his own conception':

> It is a dignified-looking thing, handy, convenient in shape, well printed, and when the paper was new and clean must have looked exceedingly well.[18]

Percy Fitzgerald's flattering description of the 'Garrick bill, as we may call it', is reflected in a specimen from 1770, announcing a performance of Ben Jonson's *Every*

---

[13] *The City Wives Confederacy*, by John Vanbrugh, playbill, Covent Garden, 24 April 1745, rpt. in Lawrence, *Playhouse*, opp. 2: 88.

[14] *The Inconstant*, playbill, Playhouse in Tankard Street, Ipswich, 21 July 1741, transcribed in Fitzgerald, 'Growth', pp. 534–535.

[15] Francis Turnpenny, 'Top of the Bill', *Everybody's* 1 January 1955, p. 35.

[16] *The Life and Death of King Richard the Third*, playbill, 1741.

[17] N. L. Parker, p. 12.

[18] Fitzgerald, 'Growth', p. 537.

Man in His Humour, for which 'Those Ladies and Gentlemen who have taken Places in the Pit, are desired to come early, that they may get to them with greater Conveniency' (fig. 56).[19] But a comparison of this document with the advertisement described above, heralding *The City Wives Confederacy* in 1745, reveals that two years before Garrick's managerial debut at Drury Lane, the layout and typography employed by the patent theatres for many decades to come already characterised the bills issued by Covent Garden. Additional announcements from the latter venue—including those produced for *Romeo and Juliet* in 1753, while John Rich was still manager, and for John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* in 1767, ten years after Rich's death—bear a remarkable resemblance, both to each other and to their contemporary counterparts from Drury Lane (fig. 57).[20]

Formally the mid-eighteenth-century bills averaged approximately ten inches in height and six inches in width;[21] and in terms of their content they typically included—in addition to the basic identification of the theatre, date, title and cast—information concerning the entr'acte entertainments and the afterpiece, performance times, ticket prices and acquisition, seating arrangements, house rules, beneficiaries where applicable, apologies for deferments or substitutions if necessary, and 'special information concerning pressures upon the managers', such as a performance 'By the Command' of royalty, or a bespeak 'By the Particular Desire' of certain benefactors.[22] Dougald MacMillan notes one exception to the conventional cast list on Drury Lane's documents between 1747 and 1776, observing that the 'playbills seldom record the names of characters during the first season of a new play, giving only the names of performers'.[23] One colourful exception to the formal consistency of the posted sheets

---

[19] *Every Man in His Humour*, by Ben Jonson, playbill, Drury Lane, 24 May 1770, rpt. in Thaler, pl. 13, opp. p. 99.

[20] *Romeo and Juliet*, by William Shakespeare, playbill, Covent Garden, 10 October 1753, rpt. in Kevin Stephens, 'Shakespeare in Opera', *Theatrephile* 1.2 (March 1984), p. 67; *The Beggar's Opera*, by John Gay, playbill, Covent Garden, 16 May 1767, rpt. in Speaight, *Memorabilia*, p. 12.

[21] Fitzgerald, 'Origin', p. 376.

[22] Stone, pp. lxxii–lxxiii.

[23] Dougald MacMillan, *Drury Lane Calendar 1747–1776* (Oxford: Clarendon, in cooperation with the Huntington Library, 1938), p. vi.

on public display was occasioned by the use of red ink. In an anonymous letter to the *Adventurer* in 1753, fifty years after the publication of the double-hued *Relapse* bill described in the previous chapter, a rural writer recalls another close encounter with a bi-coloured playbill:

> When I turned into the inn-yard, the first thing that caught my attention was a large sheet of paper, printed in characters that differed not only in size but colour, some being red and others black. By this perusal of the pompous page, I learned that a comedy and a pantomime were to be performed at the theatre in the evening.[24]

The city or town in which this discovery occurred is never mentioned, but in any event the pompous page fulfilled its function, both alerting and directing its reader to the entertainments advertised.

London's increasingly consistent billing format during the later-eighteenth century could seldom be expected to include the personal touches found on the more idiosyncratic documents produced for provincial venues, such as the advertisement issued by the Old Theatre in East Grinstead, during the antepenultimate year of George II's reign, in which patrons planning to attend the performance of Nathaniel Lee's *Theodosius* were assured of an uninterrupted audition:

> The great yard dog, that made so much noise on Thursday night, during the last act of King Richard the Third, will be sent to a neighbour's over the way.[25]

In fact, from as early as the 1730s, when the patent playbill began regularly to include a cast list, 'very little alteration or extension of its characteristics took place for over a century'.[26]

George III

Another feature distinguishing the bills of the Theatres Royal was their customary failure to identify the year within their dates. As early as 1737 the oldest

---

[24] 'To *The Adventurer*', letter, *Adventurer* 27 January 1753, p. 140.
[25] *Theodosius*, by Nathaniel Lee, playbill, Old Theatre, East Grinstead, May 1758, transcribed in 'Curious Play Bill', Hone, *Table Book*, 1: 137.
[26] Lawrence, *Playhouse*, 2: 87.

extant Irish playbill, announcing a performance of *The Sharper* at Dublin's Smock Alley Theatre, had included this useful information (fig. 58);[27] but another thirty years passed before Drury Lane and Covent Garden adopted the practice on a regular basis: according to a *Notes and Queries* correspondent, 'it is notorious to all who are familiar with old play-bills, that it was not usual for them to bear the date of the year until as late as 1767'.[28] The patent houses were also far less inclined than the minor theatres to include 'synopses of the action to be presented':

> It was, generally speaking, an article of faith … that a play must tell its own story and develop its plot with such clarity that the lord in the box, critic in the pit, citizen in the gallery, and footman in the upper gallery, could follow it with pleasure.[29]

But the provincial managers sometimes 'treated the public as big children, requiring to be told in the playbill about the plot and merit of the piece to be acted'.[30] This is exhaustively demonstrated in a document issued by James Augustus Whitley's 'Servants of the Public', announcing a performance in 1774 of *King Henry II* at the George Yard Theatre, Wakefield. The text declares the play to be 'so well known … that it is totally needless to comment further upon it'—and continues with six lines of blank verse from William Shakespeare's *King John*, invoked as a meditation on the superfluity of further comment:

> To gild refined gold, or paint the lily,
> To shed a perfume on the violet,
> To smooth the ice, or add another hue
> Unto the rainbow; or with taper light
> To seek the beauteous eye of heaven to garnish,
> Is wasteful and ridiculous excess.

These appropriately self-reflexive musings are followed by yet further comment on how 'wasteful and ridiculous it would be to say any thing in its praise, when presenting the world with such beauties as are rarely met with'.[31] Three years later, a

---

[27] *The Sharper*, playbill, 1737.
[28] F. L., letter, *Notes and Queries* 1st ser. 10 (1854), p. 99.
[29] Stone, pp. lvi, lxxix.
[30] 'A Bundle of Old Playbills', p. 64.
[31] *King Henry the Second*, playbill, George Yard Theatre, Wakefield, 1774, transcribed in Wilkinson, *Patentee*, 1: 201.

bill announcing the performance of *Edward and Eleanora* at the New Theatre, Lancaster, in 1777, protests no such brevity, offering a detailed account of 'Edward I's invidious stabbing by a desperate assassin before the very gates of the Holy Land and his wife's brave and selfless attempt to save him at the threatened expense of her own life'.[32] The lengthy paragraph appearing near the top of the document concludes with suggestions for an appropriate response by the audience to the tragedy, which 'at once demands … admiration and esteem':

> Human nature is too much interested in passions like these, to leave the shadow of a doubt that the piece must make its proper impressions on all susceptible minds (fig. 59).[33]

Presumably minds susceptible to rhetorical coercion were particularly impressed as a result of this intimidating hyperbole.

A far more jocular use of promotional phrasing was employed the following year by Samuel Foote in connection with his own anti-sentimental farce, *Piety in Pattens*. The play was to be performed in 1778, as an afterpiece to Isaac Bickerstaffe's *Love in a Village*, at the Haymarket Theatre—for which Foote himself had acquired a personal patent just two years earlier[34]—and is playfully described, directly above its title, as a 'Modern Operatical, Sentimental, Crying COMEDY' (fig. 60).[35] In addition to such generic classifications, ambiguous and otherwise, a title might also be accompanied by an abbreviated production history, especially in the case of a show on tour. In 1778, for example, two years after Richard Brinsley Sheridan had assumed control at Drury Lane, the phenomenal success of his own comedy, *The School for Scandal*, which had premiered there during the second year of his management, was exploited in conjunction with its production at the

---

[32] Susan Ward, p. 34.
[33] *Edward and Eleanora*, playbill, 1777.
[34] Holland and Patterson, p. 260.
[35] *Love in a Village*, by Isaac Bickerstaffe, playbill, Haymarket Theatre, 29 May 1778, rpt. in Samuel N. Bogorad and Robert Gale Noyes, 'Samuel Foote's Primitive Puppet-Shew', *Theatre Survey* 14 (1973), p. 120.

Wolverhampton Theatre, billed, below its title, as the play to have been '*performed Seventy Nights at the Theatre-Royal, Drury-Lane*' (fig. 61).[36]

Over the final decades of the eighteenth century the bill of the play grew almost two inches in both directions, expanding to an average size of approximately twelve inches in height and eight inches in width.[37] Red ink was by now employed with greater frequency, sometimes printed on alternating lines with black, as exemplified on a very large playbill, approximately twenty-four inches in height and eighteen inches in width, announcing the performance of William Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* at Covent Garden in 1779 (fig. 62).[38] Gordon Martin describes the typography employed on many bills of this period as 'traditional or classic', in which one 'typeface was used throughout and lines were carefully centred'.[39] Even with the extra room, bills announcing new plays customarily omitted the playwright's name, presumably as a precaution against undesirable recognition in the event of a poor reception. But brief descriptions of the *mise en scène* began to appear, and *The Chelsea Pensioner*, a 'New Musical Piece, (never performed)', is promoted at the bottom of the *Cymbeline* bill in terms of its 'new Scenes, Dresses, and Decorations'. On the documents published by the patent houses much of the additional space was eventually devoted, in the case of pantomime, to lengthy descriptions of the sets and the action,[40] and to advertisements for additional documentation relating to these Christmas spectacles, including 'Books of the Songs, with an Explanation of the Pageants', as offered at the bottom of an announcement for *Harlequin Free-Mason*, the afterpiece to Charles Macklin's comedy *The Man of the World*, staged at Covent

---

[36] *The School for Scandal*, by Richard Brinsley Sheridan, playbill, Wolverhampton Theatre, 5 June 1778, rpt. in Gerald Poynton Mander, *Early Wolverhampton Books and Printers* (Wolverhampton: Whitehead, 1922), btw. pp. 36–37.

[37] Hogan, introduction, p. cxxxvii.

[38] *Cymbeline*, by William Shakespeare, playbill, Covent Garden, 5 May 1779, rpt. in Haill, *Theatre Posters*, pl. 1, p. 14.

[39] Gordon Martin, n.pag.

[40] Hogan, introduction, pp. cxxxvii, cxxxix.

Garden in 1781 (fig. 63).[41] An especially prolix example of the pantomime bill was issued by Covent Garden in the following decade to announce *The Town Before You*, together with a '*New Grand Pantomimic Spectacle (in two parts) called* HERCULES and OMPHALE'. This specimen, approximately twelve inches in height and seven inches in width, includes elaborate accounts of numerous settings, entrances, discoveries and processions—and well over seven hundred words (fig. 64).[42] Tate Wilkinson, who '*do*[*es*] *not approve*, either in town or country, what is termed the making a good bill, where the intended delusive part is as ridiculous by the explanatory as the bombastical', condemns the *Town Before You* document as 'ludicrous, ignorant, and contemptible':

> good God! it is a dangerous innovation and a bad example. Why may not so magnificent, so expensive, so delightful a spectacle … speak unanswerably for itself.[43]

Wilkinson's patience was obviously exhausted by the scribe responsible for Covent Garden's interminable tome. Indeed, the successful appeal of this advertisement, and of others regularly announcing at least three pieces interspersed with various musical numbers, might well have been limited without the reassuring inclusion, not only of starting times, but of concluding times as well. A Carmarthen Theatre playbill from 1794, for example, advertising *The Rival Loyalists*, and listing among other entertainments a burletta, a comedy and a farce, pledges on its final line that 'every Exertion will be made Use of to finish the Performance by Eleven' (fig. 65).[44] The bill of the play now indicated not merely the variety of entertainments on offer, and the sequence of their enactment, but their anticipated duration as well. Moreover, bulletins were sometimes inserted, below the price lists, informing potential audiences of the luxury in which they might enjoy the evening, warm and dry:

---

[41] *The Man of the World*, by Charles Macklin, playbill, Covent Garden, 5 October 1781, *Michael R. Booth Theatre Collection*, online, Internet, 28 March 1997, available http://www.newcastle.edu.au/-department/dm/booth/rplay1.htm.

[42] *The Town Before You*, playbill, Covent Garden, 16 January 1795, rpt. in Gordon Martin, pl. 1.

[43] Wilkinson, *Patentee*, 3: 170, 4: 138.

[44] *The Rival Loyalists*, by Mr. Merchant, playbill, Carmarthen Theatre, 26 May 1794, rpt. in Cecil Price, 'Eighteenth Century Playbills of the English Theatre in Wales', *National Library of Wales Journal* 6 (1949–50): 260–272, pl. VI.10.

> *Good Fires have been constantly kept on in every part of the Theatre for Two Months past, and every attention paid to the different parts of the House, to render the whole as comfortable and complete as possible.*

This bill from 1798, announcing Thomas Morton's *A Cure for the Heart Ache* at the Howard Street Theatre, North Shields, further advises patrons sufficiently impressed with these amenities of their opportunity to enrol in a twelve-night subscription to the playhouse, '*at a* GUINEA *the Boxes, and* TWELVE SHILLINGS *the Pit*' (fig. 66).[45] Some theatres had by this time initiated the practice of listing the following week's entertainment, in miniature, near the foot of the page.[46] With this inclusion of a playbill-within-the-playbill it seemed there was little left to add—in terms of either promotional allure or practical information—and in the final decade of the century some artefacts had even begun to credit their own manufacture, the names of printers occasionally appearing beside the cities of publication at the very bottom of the documents, as seen on the playbill announcing Thomas Holcroft's *The Road to Ruin*, issued in 'CARDIFF: PRINTED BY J. BIRD; BOOKSELLER, BINDER, &C' (fig. 67).[47] With the passing of the Seditious Societies Act in 1799, such identification became mandatory:

> ... every Person who shall print any Paper or Book whatsoever, which shall be meant or intended to be published or dispersed, whether the same shall be sold or given away, shall print upon the Front of every such Paper, if the same shall be printed on one Side only, and upon the first and last Leaves of every Paper or Book which shall consist of more than one Leaf, in legible Characters, his, or her Name, and the Name of the City, Town, Parish, or Place, and also the Name (if any) of the Square, Street, Lane, Court, or Place, in which his or her Dwelling House or usual Place of Abode shall be ...[48]

---

[45] *A Cure for the Heart Ache*, by Thomas Morton, playbill, Howard Street Theatre, North Shields, 3 January 1798, rpt. in Robert King, *North Shields Theatres* (Gateshead on Tyne: Northumberland, 1948), p. 37.

[46] *A Collection of Old Engraved Portraits of the Most Eminent Actors, Actresses and Singers of the British Stage, 1660–1850*, 2 vols., Harvard Theatre Collection: *95T-57, n.pag.

[47] *The Road to Ruin*, by Thomas Holcroft, playbill, Theatre Cardiff, 15 March 1793, rpt. in Price, 'Eighteenth Century Playbills', pl. VI.9.

[48] Seditious Societies Act, 1799, 39 George III, c. 79 [12 July 1799], s. 27, *The Statutes at Large, From the Thirty-ninth Year of the Reign of King George the Third, To the End of the Fifth and Concluding Session of the Eighteenth and last Parliament of Great Britain, held in the Forty-first Year of the Reign of King George the Third* (London, 1800), p. 151.

Formally the playbills of the early-nineteenth century averaged approximately thirteen inches in height and eight inches in width,[49] and were printed on thin paper, growing lengthier and thinner still over the next several decades. Thematically they reflected a growing preoccupation with spectacle and stardom, revealing a proprietary awareness of their function as advertisements:

> managers had found out that unless they fell into raptures over what they had prepared, and were lost in astonishment in the bill itself, the public would not be roused.[50]

Such self-congratulation is capably demonstrated in a Belfast Theatre *Zara* playbill of 1803 announcing the debut performance of Master William Henry West Betty, 'the Young Roscius', in which the manager, Mr. Atkins, indulgently reminds the 'Ladies and Gentlemen of Belfast', of his 'willing[ness] to bring forward every Novelty in his power' in order to ensure their '*wonder* and *admiration*' (fig. 68).[51] Public appeal in turn dictated the entertainment provided which, as Arnold Hare notes, reciprocally influenced the very format, content and tone of the announcements:

> as the quality of the audience declines and the melodrama and extravaganza replace the comedy of manners, bills become more and more hortatory; the hands are those of the programme-builder, but the voice is that of the publicity man. This greatly increases the size of nineteenth century bills, and they begin to contain what often amounts to a synopsis of both plot and scenic attractions.[52]

Adrian Wilson observes that even the typography employed in the publication of the swelling artefacts reflected the presentations advertised:

> It was the gradual introduction by typefounders, beginning about 1800, of a dazzling repertoire of types which contributed to the breakdown of the traditional, bookish style. Theatre managers and printers seized upon these novelties because of the nature of the 'variety' theatre of the time.[53]

---

[49] Forbes, 'Colour', p. 30.

[50] Fitzgerald, 'Origin', pp. 380–381.

[51] *Zara*, by Voltaire, adapted by Aaron Hill, playbill, Belfast Theatre, 19 August 1803, rpt. in Lawrence, 'Old Playbills', p. 221.

[52] Hare, p. 27.

[53] Adrian Wilson, rev. of *The Playbill*, p. 141.

The diversity of founts now employed in the production of these less austere bills mirrored the wide-ranging nature of accessible entertainments with which managements hoped to lure potential audiences into their theatres. The bill of the play was becoming 'the manager's rather than the actor's bill',[54] and cast lists were often omitted from documents announcing new plays during the entire first season of their production.[55] The names of playwrights, however, were excluded only until a new play had been established as a success, according to Allan Wade:

> the author's name is omitted from a first-night bill but printed on subsequent bills in the course of a few days (if the play has survived its first night).[56]

But the direct managerial appeals to the audience, which sometimes superseded both cast lists and scenic descriptions, addressed not only the drama on stage, but issues connected with the venue as well, a notable example appearing on the Covent Garden bill published by John Philip Kemble in 1809, one week before his rebuilt theatre was scheduled to open with a performance of William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, following the previous year's disastrous fire. On this document the 'PROPRIETORS … beg leave respectfully to state to the Publick the absolute necessity that compels them to … advance … the prices of admission', an ingratiating introduction followed by a much lengthier paragraph praising the speed, efficiency and quality of their own renovations, and obsequiously appealing to the 'worth … of British Spectators' who, representing an 'enlightened and liberal Publick', will, it is trusted, accept the new prices (fig. 69).[57] The Old Price Riots resulting from this announcement were staged over sixty-six consecutive nights, beginning on 18 September 1809;[58] and the caption to an engraving by Isaac and George Cruikshank, depicting '*ACTING MAGISTRATES commiting themselves*' to reading the Riot Act under the Covent Garden proscenium

---

[54] Fitzgerald, 'Origin', p. 381.
[55] Dutton, p. 114 n.
[56] Allan Wade, 'Early XIXth Century Plays', *Theatre Notebook* 1 (1946–47), p. 27.
[57] *Macbeth*, by William Shakespeare, playbill, Covent Garden, 18 September 1809, rpt. in Thaler, pl. 21, opp. p. 145.
[58] Trussler, p. 208.

arch on that date, even parodies a conventional billing phrase, it '*being their first appearance on this stage*' (fig. 70).[59]

Regency theatre bills continued to expand as descriptive and promotional phrases were included in the identification of an increasing number of actors and acts. By 1814 the playbill-within-the-playbill announcing the performances of the following week had become a regular feature of the documents issued by the patent houses, often occupying the entire lower third of the sheet. An advertisement for John O'Keeffe's *Wild Oats* at Drury Lane, staged mere days after Edmund Kean's first London appearance, repeatedly names the new star in this sub-section devoted to advance publicity:

> Owing to the unprecedented demand for Boxes and Places for Mr. KEAN's next Performances, the Tragedy of KING RICHARD THE THIRD will be repeated *To-morrow*, and on *Monday*, *Thursday*, and *Saturday*, in next Week. … *To-morrow*, Mr. KEAN will make his 2d appearance in *Richard* (fig. 71).[60]

Following two additional references to Kean as Richard III, a subsequent line of text near the bottom of the bill assures readers that 'Due Notice will be given of Mr. KEAN's next Performance of *Shylock*'—the role in which he had made his triumphant debut the previous month.[61] Later that year a playbill announcing Thomas Otway's *Venice Preserv'd* similarly promoted Covent Garden's latest discovery, Eliza O'Neill, an Irish actress who had recently made her London debut as Juliet, and who was considered by some to be a second Sarah Siddons:[62]

> The following arrangements have been made to meet, in some degree, the unprecedented applications for the performances of Miss O'NEILL, *this Evening* she will act the character of BELVIDERA—on *Wednesday*, she will appear for the FIRST TIME in the character of *Mrs. Beverley* in the Tragedy of The GAMESTER—on *Friday*, ISABELLA—and JULIET on *Monday* next.[63]

---

[59] Isaac Cruikshank and George Cruikshank, engraving ['Acting Magistrates commiting themselves'], 1809, rpt. in Trussler, p. 209.

[60] *Wild Oats*, by John O'Keeffe, playbill, Drury Lane, 18 February 1814, rpt. in Gordon Martin, pl. 9.

[61] Peter Thomson, 'Kean, Edmund', Banham, p. 592.

[62] Peter Thomson, 'O'Neill, Eliza', Banham, p. 819.

[63] *Venice Preserved*, by Thomas Otway, playbill, Covent Garden, 12 December 1814, rpt. in Byram, p. 556.

A Drury Lane playbill issued the following year embellishes the names of its performers and performances with numerous descriptive and promotional phrases. In *The World*, for example, the part of Lady Bloomfield is credited to Mrs. Davison, '*Being Her First Appearance in that Character*'; the part of Walter in *The Children in the Wood* is to be played by John Bannister, '*Being His Last Appearance upon any Stage*'; *The Children in the Wood*, a musical, is being produced 'by permission of the Proprietors of the Theatre Royal, Hay-Market'; an afterpiece called *Honesty's the Best Policy* was, on the previous night, '*received with unanimous approbation*'; and *King Richard the Third* is soon to be performed for the '*las*[*t*] *time this season*' (fig. 72).[64] William Charles Macready's debut at Covent Garden in 1816 was decidedly less celebrated—both on the stage and on the bills—for he achieved relatively little recognition there before rivalling Kean's Richard III three years into his engagement.[65] In a somewhat more subdued document than the three described immediately above, Thomas Morton's 'New Musical Drama' *The Slave*, to be performed for the '17th time', includes Macready in the title role, but mentions him nowhere else, the majority of the typographical attention still being devoted to Eliza O'Neill—even when, '*On account of a Domestick Affliction which has befallen*' her, 'She will not be able to perform till Monday next' (fig. 73).[66] The actress's absences during her five successful seasons at Covent Garden resulted in a number of alterations to the theatre's playbills. In 1817, for example, another bill for *The Slave*, now staged for its '30th time', advises readers that a new tragedy called 'THE APOSTATE *Is unfortunately arrested in its successful run, by the Indisposition of MISS O'NEILL*', still displaying the names of both the play and its star in large capitals, the former emboldened, the latter italicised.[67] A few months later the

---

[64] *The World*, playbill, Drury Lane, 1 June 1815, tipped into *London Theatres*, by S. T. Arnold, vol. 1 of *Collections Illustrating the Theatre*, 4 vols., Harvard Theatre Collection: TS.999.8, n.pag.

[65] Peter Thomson, 'Macready, W(illiam) C(harles)', Banham, p. 662.

[66] *The Slave*, by Thomas Morton, playbill, Covent Garden, 18 December 1816, rpt. in Nevett, p. 39.

[67] *The Slave*, by Thomas Morton, playbill, Covent Garden, 18 May 1817, *Michael R. Booth Theatre Collection*, online, Internet, 28 March 1997, available http://www.newcastle.edu.au/department/dm/-booth/rplay.

introduction of gas lighting to the interiors of Drury Lane, Covent Garden and the Lyceum was celebrated in the playbills of all three theatres; yet, in musing on the documents issued by the latter venue, Leigh Hunt appears more intrigued by Samuel James Arnold's managerial promotion of his vegetation than his illumination:

> he ought not to puff so, and make so many pompous announcements. The shrubbery for instance, about which he so repeatedly flourished his trumpets, is in fact nothing more than some ranges of shrubs in pots on each side the saloon.[68]

According to Hunt, 'readers of the play-bill are kept in attractive suspense' far too often, receiving incommensurably little reward for their patience in the vast majority of cases.

George IV

During the 1820s playbills continued to enlarge, owing in no small degree to the management of Drury Lane by Robert William Elliston, for 'No ordinary bill could be sufficient to contain his flourishings. It accordingly expanded in length and often ran over into a second page'.[69] Such 'double bills' often consisted of a single sheet, measuring approximately twenty inches in both directions, which was folded vertically down the middle.[70] Elliston's Drury Lane documents were further characterised by a 'lavish use of red';[71] but the decade also witnessed the introduction of additional colours, green and blue inks occasionally being employed, especially in the printing of variety bills.[72] While playbills of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries were already concerned to an extent with alluring, as well as merely informing, their readership, Elliston has nevertheless been credited as the 'founder of the puffing and sensational play-bill', for he 'considered it necessary to go into raptures over the preparations made, the scenery, machinery, and dresses'.[73] In

---

[68] Leigh Hunt, 'Drury-Lane Redecorated', Hunt, *Dramatic Criticism*, pp. 153–156, rpt. of 'Theatrical Examiner', *Examiner* 7 September 1817: 570–571, p. 155.
[69] Fitzgerald, 'Origin', p. 381.
[70] Enthoven, 'Playbill', p. 742.
[71] Speaight, *Memorabilia*, p. 13.
[72] Forbes, 'Colour', p. 28.
[73] Schlesinger, p. 36.

'The Play Bill: Its Origin and Development', published in the *Gentleman's Magazine* in 1888, Percy Fitzgerald reproduces a sample of increasingly lengthy, increasingly exuberant puffs from a series of Elliston's bills published by Drury Lane in connection with Edmund Kean's performance in 1820 of the title role in William Shakespeare's *King Lear*:

> nothing on the British stage has been *more powerful*: reiterated peals of applause accompanied the whole performance
> ...
> The public opinion seems to have decided, that his ... delineation of the aged monarch is his masterpiece; the pit was again filled in ten minutes, and the boxes are now taking rapidly for the next twenty nights
> ...
> The enthusiasm which has attended Mr. Kean's performances seemed, yesterday evening, if possible to be increased. The pit and gallery overflowed before the rising of the curtain, and the boxes displayed nearly the whole of the fashionable part of the town. The applause at the conclusion was so tumultuous, that the proprietor was authorised to repeat it this evening.[74]

As if to balance such partisan 'reviews' supplied by the house, an Irish entrepreneur began, the following year, to publish transcriptions of the bills issued in Dublin, supplementing his copy of each advertisement with three pages of criticism. Five volumes of these prototypical magazine programmes were later collected and bound; and a handwritten note found on the fly-leaf of the first volume reveals their creator's purpose as well as his success:

> In the year 1821 ... Charles Oliver Johnston being in Dublin and being much disgusted with the common playbills of that time, the printing ink of which always dirtied hands and gloves, conceived the idea of selling at the door what would now be called programmes, but which he named *Theatrical Observer*. At that time, no such thing existed in England or Ireland. It succeeded and was very profitable. But with the changeableness and extravagance that were ultimately his ruin he gave it up, or sold it for next to nothing at the end of six months.[75]

The *Theatrical Observer* was printed six days a week, and was 'served, *at an early hour*, *each morning*, at the houses' of subscribers who had paid in advance for such

---

[74] Fitzgerald, 'Origin', p. 382.

[75] Qtd. in Raphael King, *Catalogue of Rare Books*, no. 36 (London: King, 1941), *Catalogues*, Houghton Library: Booksellers' Catalogues: 'Raphael King Ltd.' (5–36), n.pag.

delivery—as well as at the theatre itself—making it one of the first *periodical listings*, as defined in chapter one, to appear in Britain. The value of objective criticism is exemplified in the entry for 2 February 1821, on which date an extract is reprinted from a playbill-within-the-playbill stating, 'The Play of *Twelfth Night* having been received with the *warmest applause*, will be repeated on Saturday'. The *Theatrical Observer*'s rejoinder to this managerial puff attributes a modicum of bias to the proprietor:

> Those persons who witnessed either of the representations of the above piece will agree with us (at least if they sat in the Pit) that this is a very *facetious* announcement upon the part of the Manager. 'Tis too much in the present state of the House to joke us about the *warmth* of it, and as to the applause, we are quite certain that many parts of this play were only *not hissed* because it is impossible to *hiss* and *yawn* at the same time.[76]

But these sardonic theatrical observations exerted no obvious restraining effect on the hyperbole characterising many documents from both the major and the minor houses, and three years later a playbill issued by an unspecified 'Theatre Royal', located at '*Lamb's Conduit Street*', advertising a production of John Home's *Douglas*, devotes its lower third to the extended, barely credible puff of a previous evening's entertainment:

> The last New Musical Drama of The CHEVALIER, or the HAUNTED INN, was received with unqualified delight by an audience at once superlatively brilliant and overflowing—scarcely a scene but received three distinct rounds of applause, and at the close, the Whole House, as if electrified, rose, and with shouts rent not only the Air, but unfortunately the walls of the Theatre, which the Managers have not yet been able to repair; and are therefore prevented announcing a repetition of the piece (fig. 74).[77]

But if bringing the house down was an expensive proposition, dressing it up could prove equally demanding. The '"learned" playbill' announcing Charles Kemble's revival of William Shakespeare's *King John* in 1823, for which the costumes had been designed by James Robinson Planché, 'quotes an impressive list of authorities':

---

[76] *Theatrical Observer* 2 February 1821 [Dublin: Nolan, 1821], pp. 51, 60.

[77] *Douglas*, by John Home, playbill, Theatre Royal, Lamb's Conduit Street, 27 April 1824, rpt. in Susan Ward, p. 31.

> King John's effigy in Worcester Cathedral, and his great seals; Queen Elinor's effigy in the Abbey of Fonteveraud; effigy of the Earl of Salisbury in Salisbury Cathedral; effigy of the Earl of Pembroke in the Temple Church, London; King John's silver cup, in the possession of the Corporation of King's Lynn, Norfolk; illuminated MSS. in the British Museum, Bodleian, and Bennett College Libraries; and the works of Camden, Montfaucon, Sandford, Strutt, Gough, Stothard, Meyrick.[78]

Kemble's historical production was a success, disproving Charles Caleb Colton's assertion that a 'thorough paced Antiquarian not only remembers what all other people have thought proper to forget, but … also forgets what all other people think it proper to remember'.[79] In fact the extensive research informing *King John* predates by almost three decades the forensic scrutiny to which Charles Kean, F.R.S.A., would subject every detail of his own Shakespearean revivals around the middle of the century.

Whether emphasising practical arrangements, puffing successful entertainments or endorsing authentic reconstructions, the playbills published over 116 years of Georgian rule reflect a growing managerial awareness of their function as advertisements for, and as guides to, the performance events. Old distinctions between public and private announcements had collapsed almost completely, yielding to a new alternation differentiating provincial bills from those produced by the minor theatres and those issuing from the patent houses. On the former documents theatrical proprietors often addressed their audiences in a friendly, personal voice, earnestly, though often playfully, soliciting their support; understandably, less was heard from London's minor theatres following the passing of the Licensing Act in 1737; and the Theatres Royal, throughout the period, withheld explanatory notes concerning the dramatised action on all but their pantomime bills, maintaining the primacy of the spoken expository word over its printed equivalent yet furnishing exhaustive descriptions of every cast member and afterpiece. But managements, both in London

---

[78] Qtd. in Ernest Reynolds, *Early Victorian Drama, 1830–1870* (Cambridge: Heffer, 1936), p. 39 n. 1.
[79] Charles Caleb Colton, *Lacon: or, Many Things in Few Words*, 2 vols. (London: Longman, 1820–1822), 2: 21.

and elsewhere, learned that the playbill's influence was subject to certain limitations: for all the flattery employed in his playbill appeal of 1809, John Philip Kemble could not persuade the Covent Garden patrons to accept an increase in the cost of admission; and the Dublin theatre puffing its own productions in 1821 must have been sobered by the objective corrections offered the following day in the *Theatrical Observer*. Nevertheless, the inextricable link connecting the form and content of these documents—both to each other and to the actions on stage—steadily intensified, and throughout the Georgian era the 'bills are so determined that the play-goer will have a luscious foretaste' of the entertainments they proclaim.[80]

Early-Victorian Theatre

During the four decades leading up to the mid-point of Victoria's reign, bills of the play reflected, more accurately than ever, both the nature of the performances they advertised and the atmosphere of the theatres in which they were produced. As a typical evening at the playhouse grew longer, so did the bills. If the entertainment relied on humour and wordplay, the bills did too. When several pieces of varying genres were mounted together on the same stage with apparently little artistic sophistication, several founts of varying sizes were printed together on the same page with as little typographical coherence. And on those melodramatic occasions when the dramatised action purported to enrich its audience through moral instruction, the bills spelled it all out in plot summaries and parables, often adding illustrations for the benefit of the young and the visually oriented. Even the research informing certain historical productions was revealed in advance, explicitly documented on the corresponding printed announcements; and as the enormous casts participating in these archaeological re-creations crowded the stage almost beyond capacity, they were credited on the largest playbills published in the history of the British theatre. Less than a decade after the passing of the Theatres Act in 1843, an alternative to playbills

---

[80] Fleming, p. 39.

measuring in excess of four square feet was introduced, in which a reduced version of the daybill, containing the cast list, was neatly printed on a small folded card. Theatre 'programmes', as these convenient new variants increasingly came to be called, gradually replaced their more cumbersome predecessors altogether, surviving the remainder of the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries through to the present day.

William IV

The brief period preceding Victoria's accession witnessed the continuing development of the dramatic documents under review, and the typical playbill of the 1830s consisted of a 'long strip of tissue paper marked with large broad letters'.[81] The size and typography to which Percy Fitzgerald refers are reflected in a specimen issued by the Olympic Theatre in 1831, the year after Lucia Elizabetta Bartolozzi assumed its management. The 'SOLE LESSEE of the above Establishment' announces its opening with James Robinson Planché's 'Grand Allegorical Burlesque Burletta', *Olympic Revels*. As the Licensing Act was still in effect, the success of Madame Vestris's managerial bid had depended on the special indulgence of royal authority, and the first words printed on the document allude to this dispensation, stating that her very proprietorship exists 'By Permission of the Lord Chamberlain' (fig. 75).[82] Vestris's bills number among the most playful of the century, recalling the topical puns and allusions heard in the burlettas themselves. Harley Granville-Barker wonders how such jokes were conveyed at other houses, 'even by the most glib-tongued actor to the sharpest-eared audience … without the help of a note on the programme'.[83] Even with such assistance, some of Vestris's humour remained cryptically self-referential. The employment of an overused set piece in the staging of

---

[81] Fitzgerald, 'Growth', p. 544.

[82] *Olympic Revels*, by James Robinson Planché, playbill, Royal Olympic Theatre, 3 January 1831, rpt. in Clifford John Williams, *Madame Vestris: A Theatrical Biography* (London: Sidgwick, 1973), p. 103.

[83] Harley Granville-Barker, 'Exit Planché—Enter Gilbert', *London Mercury* April 1932, p. 564.

Olympic Revels, for example, is obliquely acknowledged on the bill.[84] Planché himself explains the reference to 'A STREET, ON EARTH, (as unlike Regent Street as possible)':

> Time and other circumstances prevented the scenery from being in accordance with the dresses. It was limited to a few clouds, the interior of a cottage, and a well-used modern street, which was made a joke of in the bill to anticipate criticism.[85]

Contemporary working-class audiences frequently preferred an entertaining, over a challenging, evening at the theatre, and Ernest Reynolds notes the special importance of theatrical fantasy during the exhausting reality of the Industrial Revolution:

> A new uneducated public was growing up which demanded pageantry and brilliant exhibitions of stagecraft to relieve the drabness of industrial life. Theatres became so large that subtleties of acting were lost and the drama proper was subordinated to spectacular finery.[86]

With fifteen London theatres competing for business by 1832,[87] the patent theatres were no less prepared than the minor houses to cater to these demands, and occasionally the corresponding playbills became so large that subtleties of printing were lost and the document proper was subordinated to typographical frippery. A Covent Garden double bill published in 1833 to announce *Puss in Boots*, approximately thirteen inches in height and seventeen inches in width, is somewhat disparagingly appraised by Gordon Martin in terms of the 'smudged and uneven inking with usually too much impression, the crowded feeling with wholehearted disregard for legibility, poor placement on the sheet, and the crookedly cut sheet itself'—all of which, nevertheless, 'gave these old playbills an unquestionable charm that somehow carried with it the excitement and fervor that one associates with the early nineteenth century theatre'.[88] This enormous inky advertisement lists a '*GRAND BALLET* ... After which ... a New ORIGINAL COMIC DRAMA ... With ... a

---

[84] William W. Appleton, *Madame Vestris and the London Stage* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974), p. 207.
[85] J. R. Planché, *Extravaganzas*, ed. T. F. Dillon Croker and Stephen Tucker, vol. 1 (London: French, 1879), p. 41.
[86] Reynolds, p. 1.
[87] James, p. 83.
[88] Gordon Martin, with pl. 22.

New Grand Comic, and Melo-Dramatic PANTOMIME' (fig. 76).[89] Leigh Hunt speculates on the wording of a future playbill, should the typical evening's itinerary continue to lengthen:

> By and by, we suppose, we shall have 'to be further concluded' by a fifth, 'subsequent to which' a sixth, 'to be followed' by a seventh, and 'the whole to be wound up' with an eighth. 'N.B.: Night-caps and breakfast in the lobbies'.[90]

As suggested in chapter two, Hunt's particular interest in, and observations on, these contemporary documents likely stemmed from a recent project in which he had undertaken the printing of the daily playbills in his own publication, the *Tatler*, beginning in January 1831[91]—another early example of the *periodical listing* in a magazine programme sold outside the theatres, following Charles Oliver Johnston's *Theatrical Observer* by exactly ten years.

A number of illustrated bills have survived from this period as well, in addition to the documents announcing performances of the juvenile William Grossmith, described in chapter one. Astley's Amphitheatre, for example, producing George Gordon Byron's *Mazeppa and the Wild Horse* in 1833, issued an arresting advertisement, containing not only a dramatic woodcut of Andrew Ducrow in action, bound to the back of a river-fording charger, but an elaborate decorative border surrounding the image as well, and at least a dozen different typefaces conveying the numerous additional entertainments offered. This document presumably served primarily as a displayed poster, for its penultimate line advises readers interested in further details concerning the 'CHARACTERS, SCENERY, &c. [to] SEE BILLS OF THE DAY' (fig. 77).[92] Later that year the Theatre Royal, Edinburgh, announced its production of Edward Fitzball's *Jonathan Bradford* with an illustrated playbill depicting the 'FRONT SECTION OF THE GEORGE INN, DIVIDED INTO FOUR

---

[89] *Puss in Boots*, playbill, Covent Garden, 10 January 1833, rpt. in Gordon Martin, pl. 22.

[90] Leigh Hunt, 'Late Hours at the Theatre', Hunt, *Dramatic Criticism*, pp. 280–282, rpt. of 'The Play-Goer', *Tatler* 7 July 1831, p. 281.

[91] Leigh Hunt, 'Performances for This Evening', *Tatler* 10 January 1831: 2: 440, rpt. in *Dramatic Criticism*, pp. 236–241.

[92] *Mazeppa and the Wild Horse*, by George Gordon Byron, playbill, Astley's, 5 August 1833, rpt. in Speaight, *Memorabilia*, p. 14.

APARTMENTS'. The description of this unique rendering is found in a list, contained within the top half of the document, entitled simply 'PROGRAMME OF THE PRINCIPAL SCENERY AND INCIDENTS', while the woodcut itself represents Fitzball's innovative multiple stage setting affording, simultaneously, four separate playing areas. Viewed clockwise from the upper-left, these comprise a first-storey double bedroom; a first-storey single bedroom; a ground-floor tavern; and a ground-floor parlour. Based on a sensational contemporary crime, the play is further promoted in a lengthy paragraph near the top of the bill detailing the 'singular Trial of JONATHAN BRADFORD, who was Executed at Oxford, upon Presumptive Evidence, for the Murder of CHRISTOPHER HAYES' (fig. 78).[93]

Not all illustrative material printed for theatre audiences in connection with a performance was contained on the same page as the principal advertisement. In 1834, midway through his three-year managerial duopoly at Drury Lane and Covent Garden, Alfred Bunn published a playbill to announce the upcoming presentation of William Shakespeare's *Henry IV, Part 2*. The bill itself affords a representative sample of contemporary typographical variety, its numerous musical headings—expressed in several founts and sizes—arranged in a somewhat more restrained layout than that employed on the Covent Garden double bill described above. The *Henry IV* bill, however, is distinguished by a small notice appearing near its lower edge concerning certain alterations to the house:

> As the Band, which will be on the most extensive Scale ever attempted in this Theatre, will be arranged on the Stage, the ordinary Theatrical Orchestra will be let off to the Public (fig. 79)[94]

—and, in addition to the playbill itself, Bunn also issued a printed 'PLAN OF THE ORCHESTRA & DISPOSITION OF THE BAND', depicting to the last detail the

---

[93] *Jonathan Bradford*, by Edward Fitzball, playbill, Theatre Royal, Edinburgh, 3 December 1833, rpt. in Muriel St. Clare Byrne, 'Early Multiple Settings in England', *Theatre Notebook* 8.4 (1953–1954), opp. p. 84.

[94] *King Henry IV, Part the Second*, by William Shakespeare, playbill, Drury Lane, 14 May 1834, rpt. in 'A Great Occasion', *Musical Times* 92 (1951), p. 304.

arrangement of the seating (fig. 80).[95] This supplementary document may have been distributed with the corresponding playbill: they are reproduced together in an anonymous *Musical Times* article from 1951 entitled 'A Great Occasion', in which the author, referring to the obvious emphasis placed on the score over the script, wryly speculates on the 'long, long interval that must have elapsed' as the 'ENTRANCE TO WESTMINSTER ABBEY' was transformed into the 'INTERIOR OF WESTMINSTER ABBEY', following the '*SPLENDID PROCESSION*'—and in the same article Bunn is chided, with regard to the additional page, for his 'prodigality in advertising'.[96] Seating plans, expository documents and other printed accessories number among the various additional media assisting bills of the play in the guidance of theatregoers during performances in progress, discussed at greater length in chapter eight.

Early-Victorian Theatre

During the middle decades of the nineteenth century bills of the play continued to expand, and to cover their increasing area with a rapidly growing variety of type faces, decorative effects and illustrations. The employment of these printed embellishments was more often motivated by commercial viability than by aesthetic sensibility, however, and early-Victorian playbills are described by W. J. Lawrence as having 'many of the characteristics of early Victorian furniture. Spacious and clumsy, both served their purpose without betraying any glimmering of the art instinct'.[97] The distinction between provincial bills and those issued in London persisted, the former tending to be smaller,[98] while Drury Lane's documents, approximately twenty inches in height and sixteen inches in width, were often 'folded face up in the middle lengthwise'.[99] Use of the double bill—a full sheet printed in two columns—was by

---

[95] 'Plan of the Orchestra and Disposition of the Band', seating plan, Drury Lane, 14 May 1834, rpt. in 'A Great Occasion', p. 305.
[96] 'A Great Occasion', p. 303.
[97] Lawrence, 'Old Playbills', p. 220.
[98] Gibbings, p. 74.
[99] Babcock, p. 94.

this time becoming quite common; but an Edinburgh theatre manager saved a little paper, ink and money by simply turning the page over and printing on the back as well.[100] Given the translucency of the paper from which virtually all the artefacts were manufactured, and the opacity of the ink with which they were printed, this experiment in 'work and turn' printing may have considerably strained the vision of its readers.

Sybil Rosenfeld, while acknowledging that the 'paper is thin and fragile' on the early-Victorian bills, nevertheless considers their printing to be 'bold and striking', emphasising the value of the information they convey: 'details of the plays are given, and the scenery described, with a fulness now unknown'.[101] The contrastive typography and elaborate narratives to which Rosenfeld alludes are both readily perceived on a bill from the Theatre Royal, Edinburgh, advertising a production of Walter Scott's *Rob Roy* in 1839. The announcement of the afterpiece, entitled *The Birthday of the Bard*, is supported by eight paragraphs outlining the various Shakespearean scenes to be presented in this 'GRAND PAGEANT' (fig. 81).[102]

The thoroughness with which every set piece or technical achievement was often acknowledged on the playbills during this period reflects the extraordinary talents of contributors from numerous disciplines connected with the contemporary theatre:

> the scene-painter in the greatest age of English scene-painting … the stage machinist, carpenter and lighting man at a time when technological developments in stage machinery, trapdoors, sets, the controlled use of gas, limelight and stage fire, all contributed to a visual excitement, a mechanical ingenuity and a sense of theatrical effect not known on the English stage before or since.[103]

---

[100] Forbes, 'Colour', p. 30.

[101] Rosenfeld, 'Bills', p. 321.

[102] *Rob Roy*, by Walter Scott, playbill, Theatre Royal, Edinburgh, 2 May 1839, rpt. in Engel, fig. 2, p. 30.

[103] Michael R. Booth, 'The Theatre and Its Audience', *The Revels History of Drama in English*, 8 vols. (London: Methuen, 1975–1983), 6: 8.

Credits to some of the artists and artisans Michael Booth describes are found on a Haymarket playbill from 1839, announcing the opening night of Edward Bulwer Lytton's *The Sea-Captain*, which attributes the scenery to 'Mr. Phillips, Mr. Morris, and Assistants', the dresses to 'Mr. Barnett and Miss Smith' and the 'appointments' to 'Mr. T. Ireland'.[104] But the potential for a theatre bill to promote itself, as well as the artistic and technical accomplishments enhancing the entertainment for which it was published, is perhaps better exemplified in the specimen heralding the '*Last Three Weeks of the* Unrivalled "Jack Sheppard," & Grand Spectacle' at the Theatre Royal, Adelphi, in 1839. This large and intriguing bill of the play, approximately twenty-six inches in height and sixteen inches in width, contains twelve woodcut illustrations revealing some of the new 'Scenery, Dresses, Properties and Decorations' designed for the melodrama, including images of 'THE LOFT', 'The STORM' and 'The WELL-HOLE' (fig. 82).[105] As Catherine Haill observes of this document, 'Even the scenes in the afterpiece … are listed in far larger typeface than the names of the characters or actors',[106] indicating the current preoccupation with artifice over art.

From a functional perspective also, the dramatic documents produced at this time can be appreciated in the context of their contemporary social climate. On a Stockton Theatre bill from 1841, announcing a production of *Revenge*, Ira Aldridge, 'the AFRICAN ROSCIUS', is proclaimed the 'only Actor of Colour that was ever known, and probably the only instance that will ever occur'. As though to confirm Aldridge's merit as a 'histrionic talent of the highest order', the top quarter of the document is devoted to a printed list of his British supporters, including over one hundred names culled from the 'Nobility and Gentry of ENGLAND, SCOTLAND, and IRELAND', by whose 'Permission', and under whose 'immediate Patronage', the performance had been arranged. This shortlist of sponsors is followed by a 'Sketch' of Aldridge's life, beginning before the beginning:

---

[104] Charles H. Shattuck, *Bulwer and Macready: A Chronicle of the Early Victorian Theatre* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1958), p. 143.
[105] *Jack Sheppard*, playbill, Theatre Royal, Adelphi, 2 December 1839, rpt. in Haill, 'Bill', p. 282.
[106] Haill, 'Bill', p. 283.

> The African, down to the Grandfather of the subject of this memoir, were Princes of the Foulah tribe, whose dominions were Senegal, on the Banks of the Gambia. … Three day's after his [father's] departure … an insurrection broke out among the tribe, arising chiefly from a wish on the part of the King to exchange prisoners taken in battle, instead of adopting the usual barbarous custom of selling them for slaves.

As a prototypical programme biography, this enthralling account, continuing with several additional sentences, sets an almost impossibly high standard for its successors with regard to history, if not brevity. But the playbill's identification of Ira Aldridge as the 'African', the 'Roscius' or the 'African Roscius' on eleven occasions, and as 'IRA F. ALDRIDGE' only once, betrays perhaps a fascination with the merely exotic (fig. 83).[107]

In the theatre, according to Robert Wood, 'Life was interpreted as the Victorians thought it ought to be rather than as it was … virtue always triumphed … [and m]oral comments were frequently added to the playbills'. Wood continues, quoting from a bill announcing the production of *Twenty Years of a Gambler's Life*, a melodrama which, according to its own advertisement, can 'claim exemption from general censure … solely on account of its utility', for it 'holds forth a lesson of deep importance' involving the 'progress of the dreadful infatuation … [and] the various gradations of crime through which it passes till it arrives at robbery and ends in murder'.[108] The document's divulgence of the play's conclusion must have significantly undercut the suspense which might otherwise have been generated during performance.

Morality was again an issue, albeit indirectly, in the passing of the Theatres Act in 1843, for it reinforced the Lord Chamberlain's powers of censorship over new plays intended for performance. A significant development in the theatre history of the nineteenth century, the Act's most immediate effect was the abolition of the putative monopoly the patent houses had enjoyed over performances of spoken drama

---

[107] *Revenge*, playbill, Stockton Theatre, 24 August 1841, rpt. in Robert Wood, *Entertainments, 1800–1900* (London: Evans, 1971), pl. 25.
[108] Robert Wood, *Printer*, p. 13.

for almost two centuries.[109] London's thirty-two playhouses,[110] no longer differentiated by the presence or absence of royal sanction, were now all at liberty to produce—and advertise—stage plays, freed from the constraints of the five-song *burletta* rule, by which the unlicensed venues had evaded prosecution prior to the passing of the Act.[111] With its summer patent, secured in the previous century by Samuel Foote, the Theatre Royal Haymarket, as it was rightfully known, had less cause than the minor houses to celebrate the end of the monopoly. Nevertheless, three years later, in 1846, its playbills were still headed with the slogan 'Legitimate Comedy! Native Talent!!'.[112] Soon even the tavern theatres were producing elaborate bills of the play, a crowded inky example issuing from London's Bower Saloon in connection with a production of *The Maniac Father*, an adaptation of William Thomas Moncrieff's *The Lear of Private Life*. The large document announcing this performance, approximately twenty-six inches in height and nineteen inches in width, contains numerous detailed descriptions of its scenes and action—including a 'Wild Forest and Snow Storm'—as well as those of its equally cheerful companion piece, *The Drunkard's Children*, promising the interior of a 'GIN PALACE', a 'SUICIDE' and 'LEAPS FROM THE BRIDGE' (fig. 84).[113]

If maniacs and drunkards are not subjects 'that all children who have behaved well during the past year … should be indulged with a sight of', surely 'THE PRINCESS, THE PERI, AND THE TROUBADOUR' are. These fictitious individuals collectively form the subtitle of *Lalla Rookh*, a pantomime produced at the Theatre Royal, Greenock, towards the middle of the century (fig. 85).[114] The management, 'stimulated to fresh exertion' by the 'million-tongued approval of

---

[109] Hartnoll, *The Theatre*, p. 189.

[110] James, p. 83.

[111] 'Burletta', Hartnoll, *Companion*, p. 119.

[112] *Look before You Leap*, playbill, Haymarket Theatre, 4 December 1846, Haymarket, n.pag.

[113] *The Maniac Father*, playbill, Bower Saloon, London, 5 August 1850, *Michael R. Booth Theatre Collection*, online, Internet, 28 March 1997, available http://www.newcastle.edu.au/department/dm/-booth/rpost16.htm.

[114] *Lalla Rookh*, playbill, Theatre Royal, Greenock, c. 1850, rpt. in Robert Wood, *Entertainments*, pl. 30.

former years', clearly felt at liberty to include on the playbills helpful hints to parents regarding the rewarding of their offspring, such as the one quoted above which appears at the bottom of the document. Formally this bill is particularly interesting for its extraordinary variety of founts and sizes. Adrian Wilson once again relates the layout of such documents to their content, denying that 'thirty-two different type-faces' on one bill represents a high point in the history of printing:

> it seems more obviously related to the tasteless and chaotic theatre it advertised, a theatre in which truncated and garbled adaptations of Shakespeare appeared on the same evening as a live horse act, a *pas de deux* and a pantomime in a stage reconstruction of the Birmingham Railway Station.[115]

As the century approached its midpoint, even a document measuring well over three square feet, such as the *Maniac Father* bill described above, often barely contained the promotional material intended to attract its audience.

With virtually every stage in London now regularly providing dramatic entertainment of one sort or another, a new magazine programme was published to guide potential playgoers to the city's various venues, listing the fare supplied and the cost of tickets. Preceded both by Charles Oliver Johnston's *Theatrical Observer* in the 1820s and by Leigh Hunt's *Tatler* in the 1830s, the *Theatrical Programme and Entr'Acte*, another *periodical listing*, appeared in 1849. 'Entered at Stationers' Hall' and selling for twopence, this booklet contains seven pages of playbills, announcing productions at many houses which had already enjoyed a substantial measure of patronage before the passing of the Theatres Act six years earlier, including Her Majesty's Theatre, the Haymarket, Drury Lane, the Theatre Royal Adelphi, the St. John's, the Royal Lyceum, the Royal Marylebone, the Princess's and the Royal Surrey. The bills are then followed by nine pages of stage news; by two pages of 'The Stranger's Friend', comprising a list of 'Hackney Coach and Cabriolet Stands' with fares to various exhibitions and theatres; and by a page called 'The Visitor's Guide',

---

[115] Adrian Wilson, rev. of *The Playbill*, p. 141.

listing the opening times and admission prices of numerous London attractions.[116] After being issued weekly for just under two months, the *Theatrical Programme and Entr'Acte* was continued as the *Theatrical Mirror and Playgoers' Companion*, which was 'Sold by all Booksellers and Newsmen', and which, like its predecessor, was 'entered at Stationers' Hall'.[117] But while this relatively new billing format assisted admirably in the planning of an evening's theatre, it often lacked the more personal voice of an *in-house* magazine programme, which remained unheard of in Britain for another twenty years.

If, based solely on its content, the *programme* is seen to have evolved from the *playbill* by 1737 with the regular inclusion of a cast list, a more formalistic approach towards the classification of this principal variant of the *bill of the play* suggests that the programme emerged more than one hundred years later, in the 1850s, by which time the content of playbills averaging approximately twenty-six inches in height and seventeen inches in width was reformatted and printed in small format impositions. Although folding machines appeared in 1850, they were for many years uneconomic, so these early programmes had to be folded by hand. Small leaflets had been distributed in the opera houses as early as 1840;[118] and music programmes containing extensive notes were produced for the concert halls in the following year;[119] but at the playhouses patrons were still obliged to consult 'long sheets of thinnish paper, vilely printed with bad ink which never seemed to dry, and that soiled the fingers and was ruination to gloves',[120] for the 'long silver-paper bill, with its rich lamp-black, which came off so invariably on the white kid glove, continued in vogue until the middle of the ... [nineteenth] century'. Percy Fitzgerald continues, citing physical changes in the seating arrangements of the house as a possible cause of the playbill's demise:

---

[116] *Theatrical Programme and Entr'Acte* 4 June 1849 [London: Baker, 1849], Bodleian Library: M.-adds.128e.2.
[117] *Theatrical Mirror and Playgoers' Companion* 27 August 1849, British Library: 1344e.23.
[118] This assertion is attributed to Raymond Mander in Babcock, p. 93.
[119] Hugo Cole, 'Notes without Music', *Country Life* 15 January 1976, p. 118.
[120] Clement Scott, 1: 143.

> It may be said to have gone out when the stalls came in. The old tissue bill reposed conveniently on the cushion of the box, but the stall was embarrassed what to do with this long shred of paper, so the tissue bill gave place to a neatly printed sheet of note paper.

While the material format of contemporary playbills had become increasingly predictable, the emerging variant amounted to 'quite a new development, embracing every fantastic variation of size, shape, and colour'.[121] The author of 'Playbills', an anonymous letter to the editor of Manchester's *City Jackdaw* in 1879, praises the functional superiority of the new variants:

> When the flimsy, yard-long, lamp-black playbills, which were doubtless necessary during the candle and oil lamp lighted playhouses of our forefathers, came to an end some few years back, and were replaced by a neat-printed, good-paper one in lieu thereof, every true lover of the theatre was pleased, as they were pleasanter to look at, cleaner to handle, easier to refer to, and better to keep.[122]

Early examples of the variants alluded to were published in 1850 by the Olympic Theatre, where a version of its regular playbill, reduced to approximately twelve inches in height and nine inches in width, was printed on one side of a quarto sheet and folded in the middle. The following year the Haymarket offered a similar programme, but both venues continued to produce the flimsier, longer variants as well.[123] In 1853, for example, the Haymarket was still announcing the opening of its new season on large playbills, advising readers that, 'During the Recess, the Interior has undergone thorough Repair and Re-embellishment', with the addition of a 'New Stage and Machinery, with the Latest Improvements for producing the best Scenic effects … Decorative Paintings … [and] A New Drop Scene'.[124] It might reasonably be conjectured that these larger variants were retained as posters, outdoors, while the smaller bills functioned as programmes within the theatre.

For all their elegance and convenience, the smaller, folded, more neatly-printed programmes were not even introduced at some venues for several more years.

---

[121] Fitzgerald, 'Origin', p. 384.
[122] 'Playbills', p. 47.
[123] Enthoven, 'Playbill', p. 742.
[124] Haymarket Theatre playbill, 9 November 1853, Haymarket, n.pag.

In fact the playbill was still growing. Charles Kean, who had begun his management at the Princess's Theatre in 1850, stubbornly adhered to the old format and may be credited with the introduction to the British theatre of triple bills in 1856. The measurements of these colossal documents exceeded four square feet: approximately twenty inches in height and thirty inches in width, they were folded twice vertically, forming three adjacent columns of text. A specimen from 1858, announcing Kean's painstakingly researched staging of William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, includes a lengthy essay expatiating on the play itself and on numerous aspects of the production's *mise en scène*.[125] From at least as early as 1854 Kean had been including detailed archaeological notes on his playbills, often citing the authorities consulted for his historic re-creations,[126] and his efforts frequently earned the admiration of a very select audience:

> The Queen loved strong emotional contrasts and spectacular effects, and in Kean's grand-opera productions of Shakespeare she could indulge that appetite in the assurance that Mr. Kean's researches at the British Museum, as pointed out in his programme notes, meant that each gorgeous tableau was scrupulously faithful to historical truth. If the soul of Catherine of Aragon was not in fact transported by angels to heaven then it surely ought to have been.[127]

While formally Kean's 'lecture-programme' was still a *playbill*, from a functional perspective it served as a *programme*, for only with the assistance of its cast list could the audience identify the 'hundreds of glittering figures' with whom the actor-manager had 'crowd[ed] the stage'.[128]

The contemporary pantomime produced equally wordy bills during this period. A titanic specimen from 1856, announcing a production of Nelson Lee's *The Fox and the Grapes* at London's Norton Folgate Theatre, warns its diminutive readers that there are only 'SIX MORE … JUVENILE NIGHTS THIS SEASON' in which to

---

[125] *The Merchant of Venice*, by William Shakespeare, playbill, Princess's Theatre, 14 June 1858, Theatre Museum: 'Princess's Theatre'.
[126] John William Cole, *The Life and Theatrical Times of Charles Kean, F.S.A.*, 2 vols. (London: Bentley, 1859), 2: 102.
[127] Anthony Jenkins, *The Making of Victorian Drama* (Cambridge: CUP, 1991), p. 7.
[128] Reynolds, pp. 39–40.

partake of the 'OVERPOWERING … SUCCESS ATTENDING the PRESENT ENTERTAINMENTS' (app. A).[129] The playbill, approximately twenty-two inches in height and thirteen inches in width, lists no fewer than thirty 'APPEARANCE[S] … CHANGE[S] … DISCOVER[IES] … TRANSITION[S and] … TRANSFORMATION[S]' on its lower half which, unlike the top portion, is formatted as a double bill. As though aware of its own tiny type's virtual illegibility, this section of the artefact is over-stamped, in large stencilled letters, with the phrase, 'THIS IS THE PANTOMIME'. Given the apparent length of the entertainment to be produced at this 'Emporium of Delight', some comfort was presumably derived from the 'NOTICE', near the bottom of the document, proclaiming the availability of 'LATE TRAINS BY ALL THE RAILROADS'. There appear to be almost as many styles and sizes of lettering on this page as there were foundries producing founts; but such displays were by no means limited to pantomime bills and minor houses for, as Adrian Wilson concedes, 'Even bills of the most elegant and traditional theatres were afflicted at the time with the craze for shock typography'.[130]

As noted in chapter two, the oldest extant programme to have been published simultaneously with a corresponding playbill dates from 10 January 1863 and announces a production of *The Duke's Motto* at Charles Fechter's Lyceum Theatre. This four-page leaflet, approximately seven inches in height and five inches in width, bears the play's title on its front cover; the cast list on the second page; a description of the acts and scenes on the third page; and a functioning advertisement for its fragrant sponsor, Eugene Rimmel, on the back.[131] The perfumer was responsible for both scenting and sending similar programmes to a number of London theatres during the 1860s and 1870s, and Walter Gordon credits him with the very invention of this modern variant, stressing a requisite adjustment to the existing terminology:

---

[129] *The Fox and the Grapes*, by Nelson Lee, playbill, Norton Folgate Theatre, London, 28 January 1856, rpt. in Robert Wood, *Entertainments*, pl. 30.
[130] Adrian Wilson, rev. of *The Playbill*, p. 141.
[131] Babcock, p. 95.

> Mr. Rimmel … waved his magician's wand, and brought about a new state of things. He gave us a dainty bill, neatly printed, perfumed with all the sweet scents of Arabia, not larger than a sheet of note paper, the edges thereof serrated or embossed—a bill anyone would be pleased to accept. The public endorsed it freely, but it was a bill no longer, a programme now.[132]

Distinguished from one another as readily now by form as by content or by function, playbills and programmes continued to coexist for a few more years. In 1867 and 1868, for example, they were found together at both the St. James's Theatre and the Haymarket, where the latter variants were 'miniature reproductions' of the former.[133] Yet during the very same years, programmes remained unheard of at other venues. Dublin's Theatre Royal, for example, still required the daybills to perform a 'double duty':

> They were delivered to shopkeepers for display in the morning and collected in the afternoon to be sold as programmes.[134]

But as early as the 1850s the pictorial element of the single-sheeted playbills had been partially appropriated by illustrated posters;[135] and by the end of the following decade the textual component from the older variants was more often to be located on small folded leaflets, printed on both sides of the page. In 1869, midway through Victoria's reign, 'the era of the playbill was passing'.[136]

It is difficult to imagine the playbills, in their final incarnation, having progressed much further in the direction they had travelled for thirty-nine years following the Georgian era. Formally, with virtually every line of text displaying a change of fount, foundries and printers had exhausted their potential as specimen sheets for the display of new typefaces. In terms of their content, there was simply no room left to carry more information: the technological advances in stagecraft resulting from the Industrial Revolution had been promoted with steadily growing frequency and emphasis throughout the period, and as the quest for spectacle had generated an

---

[132] Gordon, p. 145.
[133] Rosenfeld, 'Bills', p. 322.
[134] Lawrence, 'Old Day-Bills', p. 23.
[135] Speaight, *Memorabilia*, p. 21.
[136] Gordon Martin, n.pag.

increasingly lavish *mise en scène*, the names of its various creators had crowded the advertisements, often appearing more prominently than those of the playwright or performers. From a functional perspective the bills had grown to a size which rendered their use in the playhouse almost impractical; and even before the emergence of the smaller variants, which more efficiently guided their readers through ongoing performances, magazine programmes unaffiliated with particular venues had been published, in a similarly more manageable format, to assist prospective playgoers with decisions to be made in advance of their attendance. While the introduction of the theatre programme may seem, in retrospect, to represent an inevitable development in the evolution of these cumbersome old documents, the decades preceding their formal metamorphosis produced some of the most interesting specimens ever published. Indeed, the early-Victorian era has been declared the 'Golden Age' of the playbill.[137]

This chapter has been concerned with 155 years of modification to the form, content and function of British bills of the play, from the dawn of the Hanoverian dynasty to the middle of Victoria's unprecedentedly lengthy reign, during which time the dramatic documents under review shifted their emphasis from the mere announcement of a performance to its wholesale promotion. With the enormous increase in the quantity of typographical and pictorial material appearing on the bills, their capacity both to inform and to allure potential theatregoers was similarly enlarged. Moreover, as vehicles for managerial expression, they simultaneously began to acquire something resembling a personality, reflecting the strengths and concerns of the venues responsible for their publication. This is most obvious in cases where performers and producers directly addressed their audiences on the bills; but it can also be sensed in the presence and absence of various elements—the almost coy exclusion at various points during the eighteenth century, for example, of the *dramatis personae*, the cast list or the playwright's name, by which fragile reputations

---

[137] Gibbings, p. 74.

were often temporarily safeguarded; or the self-referential jests and allusions of the nineteenth century, with which the theatres sometimes drew attention to their own limitations. Even the playhouses themselves became an increasingly visible presence, with every renovation and redecoration documented at length within a few decades of Victoria's accession. The distinction between the patent houses and the minor theatres—reflected to some extent in their respective playbills—collapsed with the passing of the Theatres Act in 1843. Yet almost immediately a new opposition was established: managers wishing to serve food and drink on their premises could do so only in a *music hall*, and the license required to operate such an establishment prohibited the staging of straight plays—the exclusive property of the *theatre*.[138] Differentiated both formally and thematically from regular Victorian theatre programmes, the variety bills published by purpose-built music halls reflect the separate identity of these popular institutions during the later-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries—the subject of the following chapter.

---

[138] Trussler, p. 225.

CHAPTER 6

THE LATER-NINETEENTH AND EARLY-TWENTIETH CENTURIES

In concluding the historical survey begun in chapter four, covering 350 years in the evolution of form and content in British theatre playbills and programmes, this chapter is concerned with the Victorian, Edwardian and post-Edwardian theatre of the later-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, starting in 1869 with the inception of the first in-house magazine programme to be issued by a British theatre and ending in 1914 with the onset of the first world war.

Later-Victorian Theatre

If the theatre bills produced during the first half of Victoria's reign had begun to acquire 'personality', reflecting not only the performances advertised and the managements responsible but the very theatre buildings themselves, this intimate connection between page and stage was further strengthened midway through the popular queen's lengthy rule when, on 16 October 1869, the St. James's Theatre, under the management of Mrs. John Wood, published volume one, number one of the first in-house magazine programme in Britain, entitled the *Bill of the Play*. A single sheet printed on both sides and folded once to form four pages, approximately twelve inches in height and nine inches in width when closed, this document bears its cast list on the cover and could therefore be held and read as a playbill before the contents of its interior were perused. The first *Bill of the Play* accompanied a production of Oliver Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer*; and the playbill-within-the-programme, approximately ten inches in height and five inches in width, listing the characters, the actors, the scenery, the times and the prices, is bordered on the left and right by columns of text. As the date of publication coincided with the re-opening of the venue under Mrs. Wood's management, it is not surprising that more of the document is devoted to the theatre itself than to the unique format of the programme in which it

is described. The column to the right of the bill includes the following dramatisation, entitled 'QUERY ANSWERED', which indicates the variety of potential customers to whom the playhouse hoped to appeal:

> STRANGER.—Where is the St. James's Theatre?
> DIRECTORY.—King-st., Pall Mall.
> CLUBBIST.—Close to our best clubs.
> MERCHANT.—Near the London and Westminster Bank.
> NURSEMAID.—Just where them lovely soldiers play their music every mornin' at eleven.
> OLD LONDONER.—By the old St. James's Palace.
> CABMAN.—Vy, near to Blockey's.
> ARTIST.—Back of the Society of Painters in Water-colours.
> NOBLEMAN.—Aw, close to Lord Derby's!
> MR. BUCKSTONE.—Directly in front of the Haymarket Theatre, through Charles-street—I say, through Charles-street.
> A FRENCHMAN.—Ah, vere Mdlle. Schneider play.
> FASHIONABLE.—A few doors from Willis's-rooms.
> H.R.H. THE PRINCE OF WALES.—Opposite where I live.
> STRANGER.—Thank you. I'll go and book my places.
> OMNES.—Welcome! We have all been and booked.

The same column also contains a short paragraph figuratively stating the theatre's policy regarding programme fees:

> How absurd is the old custom of demanding payment for a Bill of the Play! It is like charging for a Bill of Fare.

But cover space is also reserved for the reproduction of a satirical *Punch* article, in which 'Our lively and genial contemporary thus discourses upon theatrical architecture':

> THE object of all internal arrangements is in modern times to *keep the fiddlers out of sight*, and to make the audience forget that it is in a theatre.
>
> Miss Marie Wilton (who has lately issued her queen-like manifesto) has commenced it, and several new theatres, already projected, are being built upon a similar plan.
>
> The audience will no longer sit in old-fashioned 'Boxes', but on sides of mountains, the seats being partitioned off by heather, and overshadowed by foliage.
>
> These, at their bases, will converge so as to form a valley, where on hillocks (apparently hillocks), in delightful daisy meadows, the Stall audience will sit.
>
> The Pit will represent mushroom-beds: but this is uncertain.
>
> The Orchestra will be over the roof (to represent the Music of the Spheres) and round the sunlight.

> A river of scented waters will run in front of the stage, wherein swans and ducks will swim, and the front row of Stalls alone, for extra payment, will be allowed to fish during the *entr'actes*.
>
> The Gallery will be made to represent clouds, so as really to keep up the Olympian notion of gods being there seated.
>
> The Upper Boxes will represent fir-plantations.
>
> The Dress Circle of red sandstone rocks, with dark-green moss, the back being a vivarium.
>
> The Boxkeepers and Officials will be in pastoral costume; the Refreshment Room will be a Swiss Cottage; the Ladies' Cloak-room a Châlet in the valley; and the Gentlemen's Reading, Waiting, and Smoking-room a cool grot, where they will be waited upon by faylike forms.
>
> Flowers will be everywhere; also real ants, grasshoppers, earwigs, and butterflies, only to be let out during the *entre actes*, with strings to their legs.
>
> In summer the theatre will be iced.
>
> In winter it will be warmed, and still retain in appearance all the characteristics of summer.

Notwithstanding the playfully sarcastic tone characterising these front-page allusions to Marie Wilton's successful refurbishment of the Prince of Wales's Theatre, the second and third pages of the *Bill of the Play* contain a number of lengthier—and decidedly less punchy—essays concerning Mrs. Wood's corresponding venture at the St. James's. The 'accuracy' and 'perfection' of the *mise en scène* are attributed to the antiquarian authority of James Robinson Planché, with specific scenic acknowledgements reserved for the contributions of famous set painters such as Thomas Grieve, John O'Connor and Frederick Lloyds. Composers, choreographers and decorators are credited for their assistance with music, dance and design; the architecture of the theatre, past and present, is reviewed in painstaking detail; and well over two thousand words are devoted to 'IMPROVEMENTS AND DECORATIONS', 'THE ACT-DROP' and 'THE SCENERY AND COSTUMES'. But the invariably self-congratulatory tone of this promotional thesis renders its contents as exhausting as they are exhaustive; and Charles Kean's historiographical triple bills from the Princess's Theatre in the previous decade begin to resemble lighthearted memoranda in comparison to the humourless paragraphs issuing from the St. James's. Wood's essay resorts to citing 'David Ritchie's *Treatise on Hair*, 1770, and other works of that period', and acquires an uncomfortable similarity to the

parody on its own cover page in announcing that the 'front of the gallery tier is panelled with wreaths of raised and coloured flowers, alternating with small panels of gilded Cupids'. But lest the 'attraction of novelty' characterising Mrs. John Wood's playhouse be confused with the renovated dust hole presided over by Mrs. Squire Bancroft, it is firmly asserted that, at the St. James's Theatre, 'No attempt has been made to conceal the Orchestra' (app. B).[1] Mercifully, the final page of the *Bill of the Play* is relinquished to the American humorist Samuel Langhorne Clemens, writing in this initial edition about a visit to the Canadian side of Niagara Falls; and while the four-page format of this prototypical in-house magazine programme remained virtually unchanged through the life of the publication, pages two and three soon began to devote more column space to topics of theatrical interest outside the venue as well as within, and subsequent articles concern the contemporary drama performed in numerous additional London theatres.

The St. James's *Bill of the Play* served more importantly as a source of information and entertainment than of allurement to its readership for at least two related reasons: first, like most programmes it was distributed at the venue itself, shortly before performances, to theatregoers attending the play—a virtually captive audience who had already surrendered the price of their admission, and who were therefore unlikely to abandon the playhouse simply because a free newssheet failed to stimulate them visually; and second, such visual stimulation was by this time more typically effected through the increasing presence of artistic, as well as typographical, posters mounted in advance of the productions they advertised. New founts continued to appear, and the simultaneous employment of multiple typefaces persisted on objects such as Leicester's Theatre Royal bill announcing the production of *Frou Frou* in 1870 (fig. 86).[2] But the emphasis in most advance publicity was gradually shifting from the verbal to the visual, and one of the first wholly pictorial posters

---

[1] *Bill of the Play* 1.1, magazine programme, St. James's Theatre, 16 October 1869, Theatre Museum: 'St. James's Theatre'.

[2] *Frou Frou*, playbill, Theatre Royal, Leicester, 17 June 1870, rpt. in Gordon Martin pl. 42.

created for the theatre was designed by Frederick Walker the very next year to promote the staging of Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* at the Olympic Theatre in 1871 (fig. 87).[3] This large woodcut was realised in black and white, but later in the 1870s the technique of lithographic printing in successive colours was perfected,[4] and postering soon became so popular a means of publicity that the undertaking of lucrative hoardings was overtaken by zealous contractors.[5]

The diminishing verbosity characterising theatre posters publicly displayed during the later-nineteenth century was not complemented by a proportional decline in the amount of visual material adorning contemporary bills of the play distributed at the venues themselves. Nevertheless, owing perhaps to the additional time and effort required for their execution, illustrations now more commonly appeared on programmes intended to serve through a run of several performances than on playbills designed for a more limited range of specific dates. The cover of a Royal Court programme accompanying the staging of Falconer's *Extremes* in 1872, for example, is framed by twelve individual caricatures of the costumed actors (fig. 88);[6] while a double playbill printed the same year, announcing the performance of William Shakespeare's *Henry V* at Manchester's Prince's Theatre remains entirely textual, devoting a considerable portion of its first column to the production's critical reception in a lengthy section entitled 'Opinions of the Press' (fig. 89).[7] This incorporation of the review-within-the-bill represents a major development, begun at least nine years earlier with the *Times* extract printed in the programme for Lord Byron's *Manfred!*, discussed in chapter two (see fig. 24). Playbills, too, still sometimes bore depictions of the dramas they heralded, and the document promoting Fred Cooke's 'Beautiful Irish Drama' *Maureen* at the Cambridge Theatre, Spennymoor, in 1876 hints at the action awaiting its spectators with a single

---

[3] *The Woman in White*, by Wilkie Collins, poster, Olympic Theatre, 1871, rpt. in Sheldon, p. 73.
[4] Breitman, p. 33.
[5] Haill, 'Programmes', no. 85.
[6] *Extremes*, by Falconer, programme, Royal Court Theatre, 1872, rpt. in Cavanagh, p. 8.
[7] *Henry V*, by William Shakespeare, playbill, Prince's Theatre, Manchester, 16 September 1872, rpt. in Elizabeth Leach, 'Playbills and Programmes', *Manchester Review* 11 (Spring–Summer 1966), p. 10.

engraving simultaneously depicting various images of disaster, including a fire, a fall from a bridge and at least two lifeless bodies (app. C).[8]

Following the example set by the St. James's Theatre in the preceding decade, the Criterion Theatre issued its own in-house magazine programme in 1876, entitled the *Fire Fly*. Exactly twice as long as the *Bill of the Play*, it immediately distinguishes itself from its predecessor by its levity. The cover page contains numerous short jokes. Pages two and three contain nothing else. The fourth and fifth pages are devoted to the bills of the play for the coming week, with complete cast lists, production credits, prices and summaries of the acts, scenes and sets. The final pages, six through eight, contain a variety of advertisements as well as information about the venue, including descriptions of its numerous rooms, columns of theatrical news, gossip and speculation and a railway timetable to assist audiences leaving the theatre.[9] This latter innovation was adopted by many subsequent magazine programmes of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, such as the twelve-page *General Theatrical Programme* and its immediate successor, the *Theatrical Programme*.[10] But for those Criterion patrons to whom eight pages of editorial material proved less promising than threatening, the option of acquiring the theatre's regular bill of the play remained unaffected by the publication of this new, lengthier, variant. Just as playbills and programmes continued to be simultaneously issued by some managements, magazine programmes and more conventional programmes now also existed side by side at certain houses; and in 1877 'highly respectable audiences' could enhance their appreciation of James Albery's *Pink Dominoes* by reading about it extensively in the literary *Fire Fly*, or celebrate its 'IMMENSE SUCCESS'

---

[8] *Maureen*, by Fred Cooke, playbill, Cambridge Theatre, Spennymoor, 6 March 1876, rpt. in Robert Wood, *Entertainments*, pl. 28.

[9] *Fire Fly Evening Paper and Programme* 1.1, magazine programme, Criterion Theatre, 15 April 1876, Bodleian Library: Per.M.adds.129d.8.

[10] *General Theatrical Programme: A Weekly Newspaper and Guide to Theatres, Public Entertainments, & c.*, 15 December 1883, microfilm, British Library: Mic.A.2566; *Theatrical Programme*, 13 December 1884, microfilm, British Library: Mic.A.2567.

effortlessly by enjoying the drawings on the cover of the pictorial programme (fig. 90).[11]

During their earliest years illustrated theatre programmes not only resembled the larger posters from which they were now formally distinguished, but also retained several characteristics of the playbills from which they had evolved. The cover of a programme accompanying 'W[illiam] G[orman] WILLS' Great Play JANE SHORE' at the Princess's Theatre in 1877, for example, is almost wholly occupied by a sentimental rendering of the drama's eponymous heroine, suffering bare-armed in the snow; yet, even with three additional pages remaining at the editorial disposal of the document's author, the same cover also carries a great deal of text, both informative and promotional, in the style of the older single sheets: the production will run 'FOR FOUR WEEKS ONLY'; 'MISS HEATH WILL RE-APPEAR'; there will be 'No Fees for Booking or Cloak Rooms'; bonnets will be 'allowed in [the] Dress Circle'; and the box office will be 'Open Daily from 10 till 5 o'clock'. Even the title of the opening act, a farce entitled *Out to Nurse*, is included on the cover; and its position above the main entertainment, with starting times given for both pieces, further emulates the familiar play-billing layout (fig. 91).[12] The following year actually witnessed a brief return to the older format:

> about the year 1878 a printer of programmes, named Aubert, 'farmed' all the theatres in London, and every bill was of the same pattern, an embossed sheet of paper, highly scented.

But there was a 'monotony' in this monopoly, the homogeneous stock from which 'speedily vanished in favour of other forms', such as the 'elegant … buff-toned paper' on which Henry Irving produced his bills later that year during his inaugural season of management at the Lyceum Theatre, or the 'grey folding card' employed by the Royal Court.[13]

---

[11] 'The *Pink Dominoes*', *Fire Fly Evening Paper and Programme* 9 April 1877, rpt. in Cavanagh, p. 15; *Pink Dominoes*, by James Albery, programme, Criterion Theatre, 1877, rpt. in Cavanagh, p. 17.

[12] *Jane Shore*, by William Gorman Wills, programme, Princess's Theatre, 1877, rpt. in Cavanagh, p. 17.

[13] Fitzgerald, 'Origin', p. 384.

The St. James's and the Criterion had broken new ground with their magazine formats; the Princess's had proven equally innovative with its inclusion of programme illustrations; and the Lyceum and the Royal Court had initiated the use of unusual media in the printing of their bills. Nevertheless, the artefacts issued by many London theatres through most of the 1870s had remained comparatively simple documents consisting of single sheets which were given free to the audience. But at the end of the decade their economic potential began to be more fully explored by managers such as John Hollingshead, whose Gaiety Theatre bills subsequently expanded from one page to two; and then from two pages to four, approximately nineteen inches in height and ten inches in width; and finally from four pages to eight, the second, third, sixth, seventh and eighth sides being devoted entirely to advertisements.[14] Even as the dramatic documents published by some houses began to serve as vehicles for artistic expression, their capacity to remunerate was being exploited at others. Through the remaining years of the nineteenth century commercial viability often prevailed over aesthetic considerations, and the anonymous contemporary correspondent to the *City Jackdaw*, quoted at length in chapters two and five, repeatedly bemoans the 'hideousness of our present playbills', each one swelling with promotional announcements into a 'monstrosity of about a foot square'.[15]

By the 1880s all London theatres, and most provincial playhouses, were issuing programmes.[16] The technique of lithography, already employed in the production of pictorial posters, was now frequently applied to bills of the play as well, and managerial portraits soon became regular ingredients in the illustrated documents of some London theatres. Under the direction of Augustus Harris, for example, many Drury Lane programmes contained a 'coloured picture of the leading scene, and often a portrait in character, of the lessee himself'.[17] An early example, accompanying the

---

[14] Enthoven, 'Playbill', p. 743.
[15] 'Playbills', p. 47.
[16] Cavanagh, p. 2.
[17] Fitzgerald, 'Growth', p. 549.

staging of William Shakespeare's *Henry V*, dates from the first year of Harris's management at the end of the preceding decade and features a large lifelike rendering of the play's adaptor, the 'Sub-Lessee for the Autumn Season ... Mr. George Rignold as Henry V'. A few years later 'Lessee and Manager ... MR. CHARLES WYNDHAM' was similarly depicted on the cover of the Criterion's programmes (fig. 92).[18]

As stated in chapter one, some theatres retained a single familiar image on their programme covers through many seasons, creating an easily identified house style for their documents. A bill published by Drury Lane in 1880, for example, to accompany the production of *The World*, by Paul Meritt, Henry Pettitt and Augustus Harris, is pictorially framed with images of various fictional characters, such as Mother Goose, and an assortment of cherubs; the next year the cover of the programme for *Youth*, by Meritt and Harris, is surrounded by an identical border; and, as Barbara Cavanagh observes in *The Century of the Programme*, the raft located in the upper-left corner on both specimens, evidently a 'favourite "stock" effect', appears yet again, three years later, on yet another bill for yet another production of *The World* (fig. 93).[19] Augustus Harris displayed far greater consistency in the layout of his programmes than in their pricing, however: the first specimen cited sold for 'TWOPENCE'; the second cost '6d.'; and the third was given 'FREE'.

While the penultimate decade of the nineteenth century produced an enormous range of programme styles and sizes, the folding-card format already introduced at the Royal Court and the St. James's was adopted and modified by a number of additional theatres, and colour lithography was soon applied to the manufacture of elegant three-panelled artefacts. Approximately ten inches in height and four inches in width when folded twice, these bills were printed on both sides and often included familiar

---

[18] *Henry V*, by William Shakespeare, adapted by George Rignold, programme, Drury Lane, 1879, rpt. in Cavanagh, p. 26; Criterion Theatre, programme, 1884, rpt. in Cavanagh, p. 26.

[19] *The World*, by Paul Meritt, Henry Pettitt and Augustus Harris, programme, Drury Lane, 1880, rpt. in Speaight, *Memorabilia*, p. 18; *Youth*, by Paul Meritt and Augustus Harris, programme, Drury Lane, 1881, rpt. in Cavanagh, p. 18; *The World*, by Paul Meritt, Henry Pettitt and Augustus Harris, programme, Drury Lane, 1884, rpt. in Cavanagh, p. 19.

decorated covers, again effectively creating visual trademarks for the playhouses from which they originated.[20] With or without pictorial embellishment the relatively novel employment of sturdy chromatic stock was warmly reviewed by Walter Gordon in his contemporary account of 'Old and New Playbills', exploiting yet again the analogy to a bill of fare:

> On we go again, and yet another change. A card—the correct card—aesthetic in colour; it might be called the menu of the evening in lieu of the programme. This is the last thing out.[21]

But it was by no means the only thing out, and at some theatres the simultaneous alternation between thick and thin media persisted. At the Haymarket, for example, during the final two decades of the century, cardboard programmes were produced for the stalls and dress circle, while paper versions were issued to the pit and gallery.[22]

On card and on paper, illustrated and otherwise, bills of the play continued to provide audiences with descriptive information pertaining both to plays and their production and to theatres and their management. Scenes were still entitled and summarised in great detail, especially on documents connected with the staging of pantomime. In 1880, for example, the 'CELEBRATED VOKES FAMILY' was engaged by Covent Garden for the performance of *Valentine and Orson*, and the entire third page of the programme is devoted to lengthy phrasal abstracts of the play's ten settings, each headed in a different typeface. The final paragraphs indicate the extent to which the action, and even the dialogue, were revealed to the reader:

> Scene 9. ENCAMPMENT OF THE GREEN KNIGHT.
> Florimunda his new captive—The Genius of the Shield—The arrival of the strong minded ladies—The Green Knight undertakes to dispose of both—Valentine to the rescue—One down, t'other come on—Orson comes on—The legend of the Shield—Orson seizes it—Triumph of the Good People, defeat of the Bad—'Who are we?'—To answer this question, Pacolet takes the party to
> Scene 10. THE SARACEN'S HEAD.
> 'I am Sir Oracle'—He speaks—the head joins the tail—And then shuts

---

[20] Enthoven, 'Playbill', p. 743.

[21] Gordon, p. 145. Some of the earliest folded cardboard programmes to include decoration and illustration were in fact printed for the Edwardes Menu Company.

[22] Enthoven, 'Playbill', p. 743.

> up for ever—Valentine marries Eglantine—Orson in love at first sight with Florimunda makes her Mrs. Orson—Everyone delighted—Pacolet gets the reward of Genius—And there being nothing more to be said or done, it is now time for the TRANSFORMATION—Valentine's VALENTINE (fig. 94).[23]

Twenty-four years after the death of Madame Vestris, the wordplay and self-conscious humour which had characterised her playbills at the Olympic Theatre, Covent Garden and the Lyceum remained popular ingredients in dramatic documents such as the programme quoted above. The cast list continued to provide ample opportunity for a variety of puns associated with the *dramatis personae*: after enumerating the 'BAD LOT' the *Valentine and Orson* bill identifies the 'GOOD PEOPLE', such as 'TRANIA … a *fairy nice* little person'; and, '*Leaving Bad and Good People … come*[*s*] *to* "MIXED PEOPLE"', including 'KING PIPPIN (who lives very un-*apple*-ly)' and 'AGATHA (a waiting maid, *made* to wait …)'. The descriptions of the sets, meanwhile, remained the most likely forum for the occasional private theatrical joke: the transformation from the 'NEW FOREST' to 'KING PIPPIN'S PALACE', this programme declares, will be effected 'by Prompter's Magic Whistle'—a playful allusion aimed at a very select audience, as identified by Barbara Cavanagh:

> the reference to the 'Prompter's Magic Whistle' could only be understood by actors and stage staff—the traditional signal for a change of scene, but unheard by and unknown to the audience.[24]

During the 1880s particularly creative cast lists were sometimes devised for programmes marking special occasions within the run of a production—including its first performance. Early in the decade George Augustus Conquest and Paul Meritt, joint lessees and managers of the Royal Surrey Theatre, published an amusing variation on the usual *dramatis personae* for the opening night of their own play, *Mankind*. Entitled simply 'SCHEDULE OF CHARACTERS IN "MANKIND"', this document lists fictional 'SURNAMES' down the leftmost of seven columns, the

---

[23] *Valentine and Orson*, programme, Covent Garden, 1880, rpt. in Cavanagh, p. 60.
[24] Cavanagh, p. 60.

seventh of which, 'BY WHOM REPRESENTED', names the actors and the sixth of which, 'WHAT KIND OF PERSON', is devoted to a single descriptive adjective for each character, such as 'Bumptious', 'Cheeky' and 'Humbugging'. The remaining columns contain 'CHRISTENED NAMES', 'AGE', 'OCCUPATION OR CONDITION' and 'PLACE OF ABODE' (fig. 95).[25]

Still other first-night programmes accompanied the inauguration of an entirely new playhouse, or a new management, though not necessarily a new play. On 10 October 1881, for example, Richard D'Oyly Carte's Savoy Theatre opened with William Schwenck Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan's *Patience*, already established as a successful production, which simply transferred to the new venue from the Opera Comique.[26] The bills published to mark this occasion are particularly noteworthy for their reference to the novel form of interior illumination by which the Savoy immediately established its uniqueness:

> The entire Auditorium of the Theatre is lighted by Electric Light, by which the purity and coolness of the air are preserved. The Swan Incandescent Lamps used emit a soft yellow light, and there is no unpleasant glare. In a few days this light will be applied also on the stage (fig. 96).[27]

Two years later the '*entire Theatre, Stage and Auditorium* [were lit] ... *by Electricity*', and the Savoy programme accompanying Gilbert and Sullivan's *Iolanthe* in 1883 further alludes to additional special effects, such as the '*Electric Stars ... on the Fairies' heads*' (fig. 97).[28]

In 1885 the Savoy opera of the year was Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado*; and the programme published in conjunction with this production furnishes an impressive early example of a full-colour representational rendering on a bill of the play, depicting five characters in full costume grouped under the hand-lettered title of

---

[25] *Mankind*, by George Augustus Conquest and Paul Meritt, programme, Royal Surrey Theatre, 1883, rpt. in Cavanagh, p. 11.
[26] 'Savoy Theatre', Hartnoll, *Companion*, p. 734.
[27] *Patience*, by William Schwenck Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan, programme, Savoy Theatre, 1881, rpt. in Cavanagh, p. 27.
[28] *Iolanthe*, by William Schwenck Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan, programme, Savoy Theatre, 1883, rpt. in Cavanagh, p. 27.

the opera (fig. 98).[29] Percy Fitzgerald describes D'Oyly Carte as 'One of the first, if not the first, to adopt … "the pictorial bill" … printed, coloured and enamelled'; and the 'oblong booklet shape', by which this *Mikado* artefact further distinguishes itself, is also deemed 'original'.[30]

Notwithstanding the melodic quality of its legendary repertoire, the Savoy technically remained a *theatre*, by virtue of both its ability to produce conventional drama and its inability to serve food and liquor in the house. Meanwhile, although straight plays were not to be mounted in *music halls*, the numbers performed at these establishments were by no means exclusively tonal, and the sound of scripted dialogue could at times be heard over rattling dishes and clinking glasses. But, whether the differences separating these two forums related more to the activities on stage or in the auditorium, the music hall bills of the later-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries often differed from contemporary theatre programmes in terms of both their form and their content. Physically, they retained for longer the familiar old format of single sheets printed on one side only, while the information they carried almost invariably identified only the performers, not the performances, the names of individuals, partnerships and families often forming long lists down the entire length of the page, their letters expanding where necessary in order to span its entire width as well.

Even within this identifiable sub-class of document, items produced only months apart exhibit great typographical variation. A York music hall bill dating from February 1886, for example, announcing the benefit of D. J. McCarthy, employs at least six typefaces in a wide range of sizes, emboldened and italicised, along with the occasional decorative device, yet is described by Maurice Rickards as 'appear[ing] … in traditional guise'; and indeed, the layout of the York specimen does appear somewhat conservative when compared with a Gaiety variety bill from Oldham,

---

[29] *The Mikado*, by William Schwenck Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan, programme, Savoy Theatre, 1885, rpt. in Billington, p. 145.
[30] Fitzgerald, 'Growth', p. 548.

published the following year in February 1887, incorporating at least twice as many founts and printed in a much more congested arrangement on orange paper; yet this document, too, is declared, by Sarah Gibbings, to be a 'typical and quite common … Music Hall bill' (fig. 99).[31] During the same year, as though compensating for the customary absence of titles on most variety bills, Covent Garden printed the name of its 'Grand Christmas Pantomime', *Jack and the Bean-Stalk*, twice on the cover of its illustrated programmes, with alternate subtitles: 'OR THE SEVEN CHAMPIONS' corresponded to a hyphenated 'BEAN-STALK'; while 'AND THE SEVEN CHAMPIONS' followed the single word 'BEANSTALK'. An examination of the credits found in this programme suggests that no one even remotely connected with the production or the playhouse remained uncommemorated: acknowledgements are provided for the '*New and Magnificent Scenery … Dresses … Feathers and Flowers … Magnificent Armour … Properties … Machinery … Limelight Effects …* [and] *The Magnificent Stud of Horses*', as well as for the arrangement of the ballets and the composition, selection, arrangement, direction and conducting of the music. The playwrights, who created their drama 'expressly for this Theatre', are identified, as is the producer, as are the Lessees and Managers of the building; and before the page concludes special attention is even paid to the individual responsible for the 'Improved Opera Glasses' (fig. 100).[32] Yet the text itself is neatly printed in sanserif italics, balanced by the vertical illustration on its left and the larger assorted typefaces, forming the play's selection of titles, above it; and the lengthy complaint registered by Godfrey Turner the following year is directed less towards the verbosity of such contemporary bills than towards the inadequate light in which they were supposed to be read:

> whether a playbill be called a program or a programme, it ought in either case to be legible; and I declare I can no more read these artistic bits of pasteboard or paper than I can tell the time by a turret-clock to

---

[31] York Music Hall, playbill, 26 February 1886, rpt. in Rickards, p. 204; Gaiety Theatre of Varieties, Oldham, playbill, 28 February 1887, rpt. in Gibbings, p. 73.

[32] *Jack and the Bean-Stalk*, by Henry Hersee and Horace Lennard, programme, Covent Garden, 1887, rpt. in Cavanagh, p. 62.

> which I have to look up from an angle of seventy-five degrees, the dial moreover being covered with Gothic tracery … We must have … more light, ere we shall be able to make out the names of *dramatis personae*, or of the ladies and gentlemen by whom these are represented. … so long as the present system of subdued lighting obtains, in theatres, as at dinner-tables, it will be equally difficult to decipher a program and a *menu* … The train oil and the tallow, with the clumsy cotton wicks that assisted them, are happily despatched; as are the great, clumsy playbills, printed with abominable greasy ink that left its filthy mark on your fingers; but surely there may be something between a glare and a gloom—between a bill of the play, such as used to be thrust in the face of the public entering a theatre, and a gracefully designed, elegantly printed program, which nobody can read by the uncertain light that glimmers on the stalls.[33]

Even when the increasing price of admission to those very stalls reached 'a guinea and a half' a few years later, theatre patrons in the 1890s were no more able to read their bills during the middle of a performance than theatre patrons today. Nevertheless, programmes are cited by Andrew Davies, along with 'reservations, an eight o'clock start, evening dress … carpets, and fixed, upholstered and numbered seats' as 'innovations introduced throughout London's more "up market" theatres in the last decade of the Victorian period'.[34] Meanwhile, throughout London's less up market theatres, adequate house light by which to read the programme was essential; for another difference in the content of the variety bills, directly reflecting the nature of the establishments from which they issued, concerns their frequent inclusion of a drinks list identifying the numerous intoxicating beverages vended on the premises. Just as High Holborn's Royal Music Hall bill, cited in chapter one, was 'SUBJECT TO ALTERATION', so perhaps were some of its readers after partaking of the 'MALT LIQUORS … PALE ALE … SPIRITS … WINES … [and] CHAMPAGNES' advertised near the bottom of the document (fig. 101);[35] and the phrase 'wines and spirits' is still sometimes applied to the less familiar actors listed on playbills and programmes, whose names often appear no more prominently than those of the drinks

---

[33] Godfrey Turner, 'Of "Programs"', *Theatre* ns 12 (1888), pp. 182, 183, 184.
[34] Andrew Davies, *Other Theatres* (London: Macmillan, 1987), p. 26.
[35] The Royal Music Hall, programme, c. 1890.

sold throughout their performances.[36] 'CIGARS of the FINEST BRANDS', too, were announced, along with the 'Prices of Admission', on late-nineteenth-century music hall bills such as the document published by the Royal Holborn Theatre of Varieties in which 'MINERAL WATERS' constitute the entire class of unfortified refreshment on offer (fig. 102).[37]

While actors risked being overshadowed by alcohol on some music hall bills, advertising posed a similar threat on many contemporary theatre programmes. Writing in 1890, S. J. Adair Fitz-Gerald expresses his disdain for the profusion of commercial announcements characterising most bills of the play at the time:

> they all seem to have one object in view, viz., how to give the greatest trouble to the luckless wight who foolishly desires to find out the name of the play, whom it is by, and who the actors are. It is a maze worse than Hampton Court, for you have no guide at all.[38]

Yet during that very year the Criterion Theatre produced an elegant version of the three-panelled, colour-lithographed cardboard programme, developed in the previous decade, to accompany the run of Dionysius Boucicault's *London Assurance*. Its decorated cover stylistically depicts a variety of flora and fauna in subdued earth tones; and, while the two remaining outer panels and the entirety of the interior do contain a large number of advertisements, the name of the play is displayed in much larger type than that used elsewhere in the document, and the cast list is legibly printed directly below it (app. D).[39] Terry's Theatre published a similar programme the following year in conjunction with the production of Arthur Wing Pinero's *The Times* (app. E);[40] and in 1892, shortly after embarking upon his management of the St. James's Theatre, George Alexander issued a more representational variation for Oscar Wilde's *Lady Windermere's Fan*, containing on its cover the colour rendering of a London beefeater which soon established itself as the venue's popular trademark

---

[36] This information was kindly supplied by Michael Ostler of the Society for Theatre Research.
[37] Royal Holborn Theatre of Varieties, programme, 1897, rpt. in Haill, 'Bill', p. 285.
[38] Fitz-Gerald, p. 308.
[39] *London Assurance*, by Dionysius Boucicault, programme [facsimile], Criterion Theatre, 27 November 1890 (Wem, Shropshire: Halcyon Cards, n.d.).
[40] *The Times*, by Arthur Wing Pinero, programme [facsimile], Terry's Theatre, 24 October 1891 (Wem, Shropshire: Halcyon Cards, n.d.).

(app. F).[41] Advertising and illustration were by no means incompatible, and images enhance many of the promotions listed in programmes from the early 1890s. The Criterion bill, for example, depicts the 'Marvellously Cheap' Inverness Cape; the Terry's Theatre specimen reproduces the 'scientifically perfect' Morris Circulating Water Filter; and the St. James's document offers a privileged view of the Harness Electric Corset, an 'invaluable adjunct of attire for DELICATE WOMEN'. In 1892 John Laurence Toole advertised himself in the programme for James Matthew Barrie's *Walker, London*, produced at Toole's Theatre by inserting a captioned card bearing his own colour-lithographed image (fig. 103).[42] Many of these documents were clearly very attractive, even if the printed promise of 'Fascinatingly pretty ladies in galore' was seldom supported by pictorial evidence.[43] Fitz-Gerald's dismal report, quoted above, is balanced by the more positive account offered in 1892 by N. L. Parker:

> Those [bills] of to-day are elaborate productions, scented and gilt, occasionally illustrated with scenes from the piece to be represented, or embellished with portraits of the principal performers.[44]

In addition to sets and actors, a third subject of study in pictorial programmes issued during the final years of the century was provided by the interior and exterior architecture of the buildings themselves—both the regular theatres and the increasingly popular music halls. The cover panel of the New Olympic's twice-folded bills from the early 1890s, for example, displays a view of the proscenium arch, stage, curtain and three tiers of side boxes, as seen from the stalls (app. G);[45] while the documents printed by the Palace Theatre of Varieties in 1894 not only include a similar interior view of the house, and of the lobby's 'Grand Staircase', proudly

---

[41] *Lady Windermere's Fan*, by Oscar Wilde, programme [facsimile], St. James's Theatre, 20 February 1892 (Wem, Shropshire: Halcyon Cards, n.d.).

[42] *Walker, London*, by James Matthew Barrie, programme insert, Toole's Theatre, 1892, rpt. in Cavanagh, p. 26.

[43] This phrase, appearing on a bill from the Comedy Theatre, Manchester, dated 4 April 1892, is quoted in Leach, p. 20.

[44] N. L. Parker, p. 8.

[45] *The Acrobat*, by Wilson Barrett, programme [facsimile], New Olympic Theatre [c. 1891] (Wem, Shropshire: Halcyon Cards, n.d.).

announcing the presence of 'ELEGANTLY APPOINTED SMOKING SALOONS on Every Floor', but also depict the exterior of this massive venue, with the assurance that the 'Handsomest Music Hall in Europe [remains] OPEN ALL THE YEAR ROUND' (fig. 104).[46] As the century drew to a close architectural renderings continued to provide visual material for numerous bills of the play, with exterior views of the Avenue Theatre and of Daly's Theatre appearing on programme covers in 1896 and 1898, respectively (fig. 105).[47] The variety bill created for the inaugural performance at the 'PALATIAL ESTABLISHMENT' to be known as the New Cross Empire features a detailed interior representation of the music hall as seen from the first gallery, and further distinguishes itself by listing the 'CREDENTIALS OF [its] ORGANIZERS', the sterling value of the 'properties … [they] control' and their 'PRESENT MARKET VALUE' directly above the attractive rendering of the house (fig. 106).[48]

Acknowledgements pertaining to the design and execution of new playhouses remained a popular ingredient in dramatic documents towards the end of the century when more theatres were being built than at any time before or since.[49] In 1898, for example, the year after opening Her Majesty's Theatre, Herbert Beerbohm Tree included in his programme for William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* credits for the 'superintendence' of the venue's construction; for the design of its interior decorations; for the painting of its act drop and the creation of the tapestry from which it had been copied; for the painting of the ceiling panels, 'representing Dawn, Sunrise, Morning, Noon, Afternoon, Sunset, Twilight, and Night'; for the installation and supervision of the 'Electric Light … on the stage and in the auditorium'; and for the manufacture of the 'Furniture, Upholstery and Draperies'.[50]

The following year in Newcastle the inaugural performance of George Bernard Shaw's own *Cæsar and Cleopatra* was accompanied by a document designed by the

---

[46] Palace Theatre of Varieties, programme, 1894, rpt. in Rickards, pp. 198–199.
[47] Avenue Theatre, programme, 1896, rpt. in Cavanagh, p. 23; Daly's Theatre, programme, 1898, rpt. in Cavanagh, p. 23.
[48] New Cross Empire, playbill, 31 July 1899, rpt. in Trussler, p. 255.
[49] Cavanagh, p. 3.
[50] Qtd. in Cavanagh, p. 28.

playwright himself, briefly noted in chapter two, offering a rather cerebral variation on such programme acknowledgements more reminiscent of Charles Kemble in the 1820s and Charles Kean in the 1850s—a 'list of authorities' which Shaw, 'more or less with tongue in cheek', recommended to his readers:[51]

> THE PLAY follows history as closely as stage exigencies permit. Critics should consult Manetho and the Egyptian Monuments, Herodotus, Diodorus, Strabo (Book 17), Plutarch, Pomponius Mela, Pliny, Tacitus, Appian of Alexandria, and, perhaps, Ammianus Marcellinus.

The remainder of Shaw's citations offer little relief, despite their ostensible appeal to 'Ordinary spectators' who, 'if unfamiliar with the ancient tongues, may refer to Mommsen, Warde-Fowler, Mr. St. George Stock's Introduction to the 1898 Clarendon Press edition of Cæsar's Gallic Wars, and Murray's Handbook for Egypt'. Only theatregoers resilient enough to complete the entire entry were permitted to share in the joke:

> Many of these authorities have consulted their imaginations, more or less. The author has done the same.

In spite of the fact that Shaw's new play was intended for only one performance at Newcastle's Theatre Royal before opening in London, both a playbill—or *daybill* as such posted documents were sometimes known—and a programme were created for the occasion. A comparison between the two artefacts reveals the differences in their respective functions. The playbill, designed to arouse the interest of a potential audience in advance of the event, is headed by an attractive decorated banner proclaiming the identity of the venue; this is followed, after the date and time of performance, by the broad, emboldened name of 'MRS. PATRICK CAMPBELL', whose 'LONDON COMPANY' was to perform the play; the title of the work itself, appearing in the largest letters of all, is printed in an elongated fount; and intimidating

---

[51] Gordon W. Couchman, 'The First Playbill of "Cæsar": Shaw's List of Authorities', *Shaw Review* 13 (1970), p. 79.

references to ancient literature are altogether absent on this posted variant (fig. 107).[52] The programme already quoted, on the other hand, far less concerned with alluring than informing its readers, appears relatively conservative in both the styles and size ranges of the typography employed in its execution (see fig. 26).[53] In a cartoon entitled 'The RSC programmes Shaw to mock Shakespeare', Shaw is caricatured in the company of several theatre posters playfully blending the titles of his own plays with those of William Shakespeare (fig. 108).[54]

Shaw's intellectual discursions represent the exception not the rule to most programme notes of the late-nineteenth century; and a typical bill of the play at the close of the Victorian era is described, in terms of its editorial content, as a 'coarse, earthy, and tradesmanlike affair' in a contemporary account by Percy Fitzgerald:

> It is all one grand puff … It has arisen from the complete triumph of the earthy element, the showmanship in the drama'.[55]

Yet the format in which these documents now appeared had evolved significantly over the thirty-two years marking the second half of Queen Victoria's lengthy reign, from monolithic inky tissues to neatly printed folding cards. In terms of their content many programmes were beginning to acquire, in their pictorial element, a prominence and quality they have retained ever since. And from a functional perspective the increasing presence of architectural renderings on these dramatic documents linked them even more intimately than before with the playhouses from which they were issued. An elegant example of these advancements to form, content and function is embodied in the Palace Theatre bill of 1894, described above, colour-printed on card and bearing illustrations of the venue's interior and exterior (see fig. 104). Maurice Rickards equates the publication of this specimen with a 'high point in the ephemera

---

[52] *Cæsar and Cleopatra*, by George Bernard Shaw, playbill, Theatre Royal, Newcastle, 15 March 1899, rpt. in Mander and Mitchenson, *Theatrical Companion to Shaw* (London: Rockliff, 1954), p. 65.

[53] *Cæsar and Cleopatra*, programme, 1899.

[54] 'The RSC programmes Shaw to mock Shakespeare', cartoon, 'Stage Struck', *Economist* 12 September 1992, p. 126.

[55] Fitzgerald, 'Growth', p. 538.

of entertainment', for its 'chromolitho extravagance … brings showbiz out of the age of the throwaway handbill, into the dawn of the coming century'.[56]

Edwardian and Post-Edwardian Theatre

As stated in chapter one, the final years under review in the present work have been credited with providing the 'best' theatre programmes in British history—'sumptuous productions from the period between 1900 up to the First World War'—often in connection with special occasions for which numerous souvenir bills were published to commemorate new plays, new venues, gala events and anniversary performances.[57] Virtually all of these items feature illustrations, and one explanation for the improved quality of the documents issued during the early-twentieth century lies in the number of contemporary advances made in the technology of colour printing. The lithographic stone, for example, was replaced by zinc or aluminium plates; four-colour overprinting was perfected; and photolithography, incorporating the development of a plate image from a half-tone photograph, improved the existing half-tone engraving process first developed in the final decade of the previous century.[58] Even the regular programmes published at this time were frequently illustrated and therefore benefitted equally from these technical refinements, with pamphlets and folding cards enjoying far greater popularity than single sheets throughout, and following, the Edwardian era.[59]

Edwardian Theatre

Some of the most artistically accomplished programmes produced during the first ten years of the twentieth century were the illustrated booklets issued by Herbert Beerbohm Tree at the venue known through the greater part of the decade as His

---

[56] Rickards, p. 198.
[57] Curtis, p. 421.
[58] Haill, *Theatre Posters*, pp. 9–10, 11.
[59] Haill, 'Programmes', no. 90.

Majesty's Theatre. These souvenir bills often featured reproductions of paintings executed by Charles Buchel, who worked in both oils and watercolours, on both board and canvas. The first bill of the play on which Buchel collaborated celebrated Tree's opening of William Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* in 1901; and, in addition to nine character portraits, the artist depicted three of the production's elaborate sets, including *Olivia's Garden*, designed by Hawes Craven for the second and third acts (fig. 109).[60] The following year Buchel helped to commemorate Tree's sixtieth performance of Stephen Phillips's *Ulysses*, painting ten portraits of the principal characters for the souvenir programme, among them a study in oils of the actress Nancy Price as Calypso (fig. 110).[61] And in 1903 Tree's production of William Shakespeare's *Richard II* was immortalised in a processional image of the main characters, reproduced from an enormous rendering by Buchel onto a long sheet of imitation parchment, with the cast list and other details printed on the back—an example of the 'scroll' variations referred to in chapter one (fig. 111).[62]

For a few years the quality of many regular programmes continued to improve as well; and, while John Hollingshead had demonstrated at the Gaiety Theatre two decades earlier that additional pages could translate simply into additional advertisements, under George Edwardes's management the same venue now produced brightly coloured bills on folding cardboard with a 'fanciful cover design that changed each year'.[63] The 1903 edition of this inoffensively representational house style is reproduced on the front of a specimen accompanying the production of James T. Ross's *The Orchid*; but the remaining five panels of the programme recall the more mercantile preoccupations of its forerunners, containing no fewer than twenty-three separate announcements, 'Not[ing] … Shell Fish' on one side and 'REMEDY[ing] …

---

60 Charles Buchel, *Olivia's Garden*, Theatre Museum, London, *Twelfth Night*, by William Shakespeare, programme, Her Majesty's Theatre, 5 February 1901, rpt. in Ashton, 'Buchel', fig. 1, p. 80.

61 Charles Buchel, [Nancy Price as Calypso] Theatre Museum, London, *Ulysses*, by Stephen Phillips, programme, His Majesty's Theatre, 1902, rpt. in Ashton, 'Buchel', fig. 2, p. 81.

62 *Richard II*, by William Shakespeare, programme, His Majesty's Theatre, 1903, rpt. in Ashton, 'Buchel', fig. 3, p. 82.

63 Speaight, *Memorabilia*, p. 18.

FLATULENCE' on the other (app. H).[64] This commercial profusion was as common outside of London as within, and the following year, in a programme accompanying a six-night Shakespearean engagement, Henry Irving found himself surrounded by the merchants of Birmingham while appearing there as Shylock in October (fig. 112).[65] Two months earlier Ellen Terry, touring with the same play, had performed as Portia at the Grand Theatre, Margate; but the bill commemorating her appearance there, illustrated with a detailed rendering of the venue, includes no hint of such commercial interference—at least on its cover (fig. 113).[66]

Longer documents, too, often carried an abundance of advertising. The book of words published in conjunction with the staging of Frank Dix's 'Operatic Pantomime' *Aladdin*, performed at the Kennington Theatre in 1904, stretches the limits of the content-oriented *programme* definition advanced in chapter one: strictly speaking it contains no cast list. Although the *dramatis personae* are listed they are not accompanied by the corresponding names of the actors; and, while many of the performers are credited below their photographs, these captions do not identify the characters they represent. Nevertheless, commercial notices appear on every second page of the *Aladdin* booklet, though parents growing weary of the adventures of Pi-Krust and No-Fang may have been revived by continual references to—if not indulgences in—Longenek Brandy, 'the only bottled Brandy sold at the Bars of this Theatre'.[67]

Even the in-house magazine programme enjoyed a brief revival during the Edwardian era. In 1907 Drury Lane began publishing the *Drury Lane Gazette*, continuing a tradition established in the previous century by the St. James's *Bill of the*

---

64 *The Orchid*, by James T. Tanner, programme [facsimile], Gaiety Theatre, 1903 (Wem, Shropshire: Halcyon Cards, n.d.).

65 *The Merchant of Venice*, by William Shakespeare, programme, Prince of Wales Theatre, Birmingham, 3–8 October 1904, rpt. in 'Theatre History Obscurities', *Theatre History Studies* 1 (1981), pp. 86–87.

66 *The Merchant of Venice*, by William Shakespeare, programme, Grand Theatre, Margate, 18 August 1904, rpt. in Penny Ward, 'Margate Hippodrome', *Theatrephile* 2.7 (Summer 1985), p. 47.

67 *Aladdin*, by Frank Dix, book of words, Kennington Theatre, London, December 1904, personal collection.

Play and the Criterion's *Fire Fly*. Among its many novel features this unconventional theatre programme contained a scene-by-scene account, written by 'Lizzie Stiggins, the Orfis Boy's Girl', of the production currently running. The second act of *The Sins of Society* is summarised in volume one, number two of the *Gazette*:

> The nex' scene was a loverly back parlour, and a deer old gentleman in tight boots and white whiskers was playin' wiv a cardboard box (Fuller's chocklates they must hav' bin) wich he was goin' to giv' to his little boy if he was good and went ter bed, but the little boy wouldn't go ter bed wivout his father, so he he didn't git 'em. This little boy was played by Mr. Howard Russell, who looked it, tho' a party nex ter me said he wasn't reely a little boy, but a grown up young feller getting on fer thirty. (Lor, wot paint and powder do do to be sure).[68]

Like later issues of the *Fire Fly*, the *Drury Lane Gazette* contained several columns of theatre news and gossip. It also included a number of puzzles and contests which, along with complete cast lists, may have occupied playgoers during breaks between the various entertainments on stage.

By the middle of the new century's first decade most venues had succumbed to the temptation to sponsor the publication of their own bills of the play, books of the play and even magazine programmes by charging for them while still including copious advertisements. But the prevailing influence of late-Victorian dramatic movements such as Jacob Thomas Grein's Independent Theatre and Frederick Whelan's Incorporated Stage Society distinguished the policies of at least one Edwardian playhouse from those of its contemporaries. Dennis Kennedy describes the unique documents issued by the Royal Court in 1907 at the conclusion of the legendary association there between John Eugene Vedrenne and Harley Granville-Barker:

> At the socialist Court the programmes, beautifully printed in red and black ink on heavy linen paper, were single-fold pages that contained no advertisements or other distractions. Like the Stage Society programmes, they suggested seriousness of purpose; they contextualized the performances with an uncluttered elegance of

---

[68] *Drury Lane Gazette: A Try Weekly*, magazine programme, 19 October 1907, Bodleian Library: M.-adds.129d.24, p. 2.

> design and a complete absence of commercialism. In most of them a large notice was printed in red, announcing there were 'No Fees' at the Court.[69]

Yet when the Vedrenne-Barker collaboration resumed later that year at the Savoy, the programmes published in conjunction with their first production appeared to reflect a somewhat diluted idealism: the new bills carried not only advertisements but a charge as well, resulting in the vocal protest of the audience described in chapter two.

During the final years of the decade souvenirs and publicity pamphlets remained the last bastions of commercial-free playbilling, and in *The Lyle Price Guide to Printed Collectibles* Tony Curtis reproduces several of the 'sumptuous' programmes published at this time, commemorating such occasions as the one hundredth performance of Hubert Henry Davies's *Captain Drew on Leave* at Wyndham's Theatre in 1906; the opening of The Playhouse under Cyril Maude's management in 1907; the first anniversary of *The Merry Widow* at Daly's Theatre, later that year; and the 250th performance of *Lady Frederick* at the Criterion Theatre in 1908 (fig. 114).[70] At His Majesty's Theatre Charles Buchel was still painting for Herbert Beerbohm Tree, and in 1910 three large oil portraits of characters from William Shakespeare's *Henry VIII*, including that of Tree as Cardinal Wolsey, were reduced to form a small triptych announcing the production (fig. 115).[71] But these elaborate and often artistic creations are in no way representative of the programmes, laden with advertisements, typically sold before performances in the early-twentieth century; and, according to W. J. Lawrence, long before the close of the Edwardian decade, the 'era of rank commercialism … had dawned in the theatre'.[72]

---

[69] Dennis Kennedy, p. 142.

[70] *Captain Drew on Leave*, by Hubert Henry Davies, programme, Wyndham's Theatre, 29 January 1906; The Playhouse, programme, The Playhouse, 28 January 1907; *The Merry Widow*, programme, Daly's Theatre, 8 June 1907; *Lady Frederick*, programme, Criterion Theatre, 3 June 1908, rpt. in Curtis, pp. 421, 423.

[71] *Henry VIII*, by William Shakespeare, pamphlet, His Majesty's Theatre, 1910, rpt. in Ashton, 'Buchel', p. 84.

[72] Lawrence, *Playhouse*, 2: 91.

George V and Post-Edwardian Theatre

The commercial element so prominent in Edwardian bills of the play expanded further still during the following decade, for many programmes produced over the few years preceding the outbreak of the first world war were issued by refreshment contractors eager to sell as many advertisements as possible whilst extolling their own libations in printed announcements on the artefacts themselves. As a result of this promotional syndication, documents representing an enormous range of entertainment at a great variety of theatres acquired an increasing degree of formal similarity between 1910 and 1914, typically measuring approximately nine inches in length and six inches in width.[73]

Nevertheless, bills of the play continued to announce, and reflect, the performances for which they were published as well as the sources of their sponsorship; and some theatre managers and directors declined to surrender the design of their attendant publications to a contractor, preferring instead to establish or retain their own house style. Harley Granville-Barker, for example, despite having condescended to the inclusion of programme advertisements at the outset of his tenure at the Savoy Theatre, remained as innovative in the creation of his dramatic documents as in the direction of his stage productions at that venue. Influenced as much during these years by William Poel's Elizabethan Stage Society as by the Incorporated Stage Society, Granville-Barker directly imported scenic elements from his famous Shakespearean productions of 1912 into the printed artefacts commemorating them: the programme cover for *The Winter's Tale* was rendered by the costume designer Albert Rothenstein (fig. 116);[74] while a reproduction of Norman Wilkinson's design for Viola's costume appears on the front of the *Twelfth Night* bill (fig. 117).[75]

---

[73] Enthoven, 'Playbill', p. 743.

[74] *The Winter's Tale*, by William Shakespeare, programme, Savoy Theatre, 1912, rpt. in Cavanagh, p. 20.

[75] *Twelfth Night*, by William Shakespeare, programme, Savoy Theatre, 1912, rpt. in Cavanagh, p. 21.

Barbara Cavanagh has observed that in the early 1900s the 'cinema quickly accustomed people to expect "close-up[s]" … of the stars';[76] and by the second decade of the century photographic portraits were appearing in programmes with increasing frequency: a bill accompanying the performance of *Sylvia Greer* at the Queen's Theatre in 1912, for example, includes cameo shots of even the minor players in the cast (fig. 118).[77] Yet within two years of this publication the production of British theatre programmes was sharply curtailed by paper rationing connected with the first world war; for, as Stanley Unwin observes in recalling the search for stationery on which to print after 1914, 'paper was Priority No. 1'.[78] During the inter-war years refreshment contractors resumed their virtual monopoly over syndicated bills of the play, which were typically issued as magazine programmes containing a 'good deal of light reading matter and a certain amount of information about the play and the cast, including photographs of the players'[79]—along with an almost limitless supply of advertisements, as indicated by the *Daily Mirror* cartoon reprinted in a Criterion bill (fig. 119).[80] And in the late-twentieth century programmes exhibit a tremendous range of form, content and function—from free single sheets containing cast lists intended for consultation within the theatre, to expensive bound volumes, lavishly illustrated, which are invariably saved as souvenirs—provoking an equally broad assortment of reactions from contemporary critics: formally, the bill of the play has been declared both an 'art-form'[81] and an 'anorexic pamphlet';[82] its content summarised as both 'elaborate data'[83] and 'Polyfilla';[84] and its function expressed in

---

[76] Cavanagh, p. 25.
[77] *Sylvia Greer*, programme, Queen's Theatre, 1912, rpt. in Cavanagh, p. 25.
[78] Stanley Unwin, *The Truth about a Publisher* (London: Allen, 1960), p. 141.
[79] 'Playbill, Poster, Programme', p. 421.
[80] William Kerridge Haseldon, 'Sixpence for a Programme at the Theatre', cartoon, *The Cat's Cradle*, programme, Criterion Theatre, 1926, Bodleian Library: John Johnson Collection; Criterion Theatre 2.
[81] Roy Strong, 'Stage Directions—for the Audience', *Times* 28 July 1984, p. 8.
[82] Neil Norman, 'Casting around for a Really Dull Read', *Evening Standard* 21 February 1989, p. 30.
[83] Mariana Net, 'Semiotics and Interfictionality in a Postmodern Age: The Case of the Playbill', *Semiotica* 97.3–4 (1993), p. 317.
[84] Nightingale, p. 31.

terms of both 'direct[ing] an audience's reception'[85] and 'giv[ing] … them something to read on the way home'.[86] But in 1914 the British theatre programme was reduced, as it would again be during the second world war, to the 'smallest and flimsiest piece of paper'[87]—tinier, perhaps, even than its documentary ancestors, the Elizabethan playbills, announcing where and when to see what featuring whom, which had been first publicly posted at least 350 years earlier.

This chapter has been concerned with the forty-five-year period preceding the first world war, during which time the form, content and function of British playbills and programmes were perhaps most obviously affected by the technology producing them; and during which time these dramatic documents, in turn, most noticeably reflected the environments for which they had been created. Both of these influences are immediately detected through the enormous increase in the proportion of illustrated bills published during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries: not only did the quality of the reproductions improve, but their subject matter often involved the theatres themselves. Even in the absence of pictorial embellishment managements appeared more determined than ever to boast in their bills of the splendour characterising both the interior and exterior architecture of their playhouses; and a greater concern for the ease and comfort of their patrons was now demonstrated with the inclusion, in numerous magazine programmes, of various schedules pertaining to both public and private methods of transportation to and from the venues, and lengthy descriptions of numerous amenities to be found within the buildings. Even in the absence of text itself, the superior materials used in the manufacture of the documents—including thicker, and often coloured, stock—increased their visibility and, ultimately, that of the theatres from which they issued. It might reasonably be suggested that, with the growing number of playhouses being built towards the end of the Victorian era, these visual and verbal modifications to the

---

[85] Ann Wilson, 'A Theatre Program and Its Audience', *Canadian Theatre Review* 71 (1992), p. 49.
[86] This statement is attributed to an unnamed representative of the Royal National Theatre in 'Stage Struck', p. 126.
[87] Haill, 'Bill', p. 285.

existing billing format reflected little more than the need to compete in an increasingly crowded market; and indeed the prominent display of liquor lists on the variety bills published by the music halls did little to discourage custom, just as the trademark programme covers employed by such houses as the Criterion, Terry's, the St. James's, the New Olympic and the Gaiety were clearly designed to assist audiences with the ready identification of a favourite venue. Yet George Bernard Shaw's antiquarian playbill parodies, Harley Granville-Barker's incorporation of the *mise en scène* into his programmes and Charles Buchel's arresting oil portraits exceeded all expectations for, respectively, the literary, theatrical and iconographic potential of the contemporary bill of the play; and the general trend, following the extraordinary contributions of these individuals, returned to the more pragmatic concern of profiting on the objects by advertising in them. But if generating income for their sponsors has traditionally been seen, from a managerial perspective, as the primary responsibility of these dramatic documents, their more interesting role, in relationship to their audiences, concerns their function before, during and after the performance event—considerations developed in the final section of the present study.

PART III

FUNCTIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

CHAPTER 7

IN ANTICIPATION OF THE FUTURE

Following the historical account, in the three chapters of the previous section, detailing the changes to the form and content of theatre playbills and programmes from the mid-sixteenth through the early-twentieth centuries, the present section examines their functional role—before, during and after a production—as advertisements for, as guides to, and as records of, an evening spent at the theatre. Additionally, the relationships obtaining between bills of the play and numerous other documents are explored—in advance of, in concurrence with, and retrospective to, the performance event. This chapter is concerned with the role of the playbill in anticipation of the future, as a source of both allure and information for the potential playgoer.

Allure

During every century from which playbills have survived their contribution to the success of a production has been stressed in terms of their power to attract attention and to influence attendance. In 1681, the epilogue to Aphra Behn's *The Second Part of the Rover* observed the drawing power of these dramatic documents, directly addressing the seventeenth-century audience:

> Poets are Kings of Wit, and you appear
> A Parliament, by Play-Bill summon'd here.[1]

Reflecting on the 'temptations' of a provincial playbill printed in 1758, over which 'human hearts … beat high with hope' in the eighteenth century, James Boaden asserted, seventy years after its publication, that 'such, or similar artifices, must be constantly used, to awaken the curiosity and secure the support of uncultivated audiences'.[2] In 1839 Charles Dickens wryly concluded of the nineteenth-century

---

[1] A[phra] Behn, *The Second Part of The Rover* (London, 1681), n.pag.
[2] Boaden, 1: 16.

stage that 'it is a hopeless endeavour to attract people to a theatre unless they can be first brought to believe that they will never get into it', implying that the mere suggestion of success on a playbill can amount to a self-fulfilling prophecy.[3] And in 1991 Seamus Heaney attributed a 'unique kind of force' to the 'very fact of a play touring, with bills being posted' to herald productions in the twentieth century.[4]

The especial importance of effectively promoting live drama is underscored by the impermanence of the theatrical event itself. As noted in chapter three, the ephemerality of the stage is often discussed in terms of the past; but the performance text of which the audience partakes is no less elusive before the first curtain than after the last, lending an element of risk to the very act of purchasing a seat:

> A play is incomplete until it is performed to an audience. It is one of the few products which has to be sold before the public actually sees what it is getting—buying a ticket is very different from buying something as tangible as a car, a book, or a radio.[5]

The uncertainty captured in Esmé Crampton's mercantile analogy is perhaps mitigated somewhat by Richard Eyre's claim that, in his experience, the 'theatre is the *only* business that delivers its goods exactly on time and at the advertised price'.[6] But the task remains to sell those goods; and playbills assisted in this process for over three hundred years. According to Eric Shorter, 'It used to be so simple. Outside your theatre you stuck up posters … and bingo! The crowds rolled up'.[7] But as competition increased among a growing number of venues, in both London and the provinces, rather more effort was necessarily employed in the creation of proclamations designed to maximise the appeal of both the play and the playhouse.

Audiences seem always to have been as interested in performers as in performances, with the result that a large proportion of the enticing editorial material included in playbills of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries concerns the

---

[3] Charles Dickens, *Nickleby*, p. 297.
[4] Qtd. in Michael Coveney, 'Across the Road Blocks to the Grass Roots', *Observer* 31 March 1991, p. 51.
[5] Esmé Crampton, *A Handbook of the Theatre*, 1964 (London: Heinemann Educational, 1973), p. 195.
[6] Richard Eyre, 'The Quality of Life', edited version of a speech given at National Arts Advocacy Day 1989, *Insider* 6 (Winter 1990), p. 4.
[7] Eric Shorter, 'A Call to the Country', *Daily Telegraph* 23 January 1978, p. 8.

engagement of the actors participating in the productions. Numerous examples have been cited, in various chapters of the present work, drawing attention to the first, last, limited and successful appearances of celebrated thespians. A playbill advertising Charles Dibdin's brief visit to Harrogate in 1800 effectively incorporates all four conditions in publicising a single show:

> Mr. Dibdin respectfully announces that he cannot possibly perform more than One Night at Harrogate, his tour being so completely arranged as to employ his whole Time.[8]

But the interest generated by the suggestion of a limited engagement was on some occasions exploited, as Nicholas Nickleby realises after confirming with Vincent Crummles that he is to make 'three last appearances', according to the bills. The manager regrets that even 'three is not enough, and it's very bungling and irregular not to have more'.[9] Some of Robert William Elliston's lengthy and exuberant playbills puffing Edmund Kean are cited in chapter five, and were rivalled for sheer extravagance only by the unrelenting hyperbole characterising contemporary parodies such as the following 'English … grand burlesque', reprinted by an American newspaper in 1816:

> Yesterday Mrs. ———, about whom all the world has been talking, exposed her beautiful, adamantine, soft and lovely person, for the first time, in the Theatre Royal, in the bewitching, melting, and all tearful character of Isabella. The house was crowded with hundreds more than it could hold, with thousands of admiring spectators, that went away without a sight. — This extraordinary phenomenon of tragic excellence, this star of Melpomene, this comet of the stage, this sun in the firmament of the muses, this moon of blank verses, this queen and princess of tears, this despot of the poisoned bowl, this empress Rusty Fusty of the pistol and dagger, exceeded expectation, went beyond belief, and soared above all description. She was nature; she was the most exquisite work of art; she was the very daisy, primrose, tuberose, wall flower, and cauliflower too, sweet brier, furze blossom, gillyflower, and rosemary. In short, she was the very boquet of Parnassus. Several fainted before the curtain drew up—the very

---

[8] *Tom Wilkins*, playbill, The Theatre, Harrogate, 23 July 1800, Charles Dibdin, *A Collection of Over One Hundred Letters, Portraits, Manuscripts and Playbills, Relating to Charles Dibdin and His Family*, comp. Henry Phillips, Julian Marshall and J. Alex Symington, *Papers of the Dibdin Family, 1776–1831*, 3 boxes, purchased from Alan Keene, London, 1945, Harvard Theatre Collection: bMS.-Thr.198, p. 67.

[9] Charles Dickens, *Nickleby*, p. 289.

> fiddlers in the orchestra, blubbered like hungry children for their bread and butter; 109 ladies fainted; 46 went into fits, and 95 had strong hysterics. The world will hardily credit the assertion, that fourteen children, five old women, a one handed sailor, and six common council men were actually drowned in the inundation of tears, that flowed from the galleries and boxes, to increase the briney flood in the pit. The water was three feet deep, and the people that were obliged to stand upon the benches, were, in that situation, up to their ancles in tears. Nature, surely, in one of her human leisure hours, in one of her smiling days, in one of her weeping months and in one of her sorrowing years, made this human lump of clayey perfection.[10]

George Henry Lewes asserts that the 'sight of a playbill always sends a quiet, pleasurable shock' through an old playgoer's nervous system, 'awakening semi-desires, which only prudence (aided by a well-founded suspicion that the promise of a playbill is a snare) suppress before they become complete desires'. Yet, even with this defence mechanism in place, a document containing unfamiliar names becomes the 'herald of a new delight':

> All its promises are credible. The leading performers are by a plastic imagination transfigured into representatives of the ideal. The lover has *not* pink eyelids and heterogeneous legs. The interesting heroine is neither mincing nor impudent. The light comedian is airy, the low comedian humorous.[11]

In addition to the quality of its cast, the attributes of the drama itself were similarly promoted on bills of the play in terms of first, last, limited, successful and even pending productions—from the seventeenth-century declaration that *Henry the Second King of England*, a 'New Play', had been 'Never Acted but once' (quoted at greater length in chapter four),[12] to the nineteenth-century promise, 'after long preparation', of a forthcoming 'anomalous, multiloquacious, ludicro-magico, absurdo-ratiocinatico, pantomimical Entertainment' entitled *Doctor Hocus-Pocus*.[13] During the later-eighteenth century references to the responses of previous audiences were increasingly included, especially on items heralding touring productions. The

---

[10] 'Theatre Puffing', *Country Courier* [New York] 26 September 1816, pp. 512–513, *American Periodicals, 1800–1825* (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms, 1949), reel 100.

[11] Lewes, pp. 199–200.

[12] *Henry the Second King of England*, handbill, 1692.

[13] This announcement is found at the bottom of a playbill advertising *Who Wants a Guinea*, Haymarket Theatre, 4 August 1814, Haymarket, n.pag.

Edward and Eleanora playbill from 1777, described in chapter five, for example, recalls the '*universal Applause*' with which the play had already been met at Covent Garden.[14] By the early-nineteenth century this practice was as frequently applied to documents issuing from London's theatres, such as the Drury Lane specimen advertising *The World* in 1815, also described in chapter five, on which the '*unanimous approbation*' following past performances of an afterpiece is duly noted (see fig. 72).[15] Charles Dickens, however, once again challenges the integrity underlying certain managerial claims: in *Nicholas Nickleby* the 'unbounded favour and unprecedented applause' of the audience are reported on the 'bills for next day, which had been printed an hour or two before' the commencement of the performance they purport to describe.[16] Leigh Hunt offers his own definition of '*Unbounded and universal applause*':

> applause mixed with the hisses of the pit only. This phrase is frequently to be found at the bottom of the play house bills in declaring the reception a new piece has met with. The plays announced in these bills are generally printed in red ink, an emblem, no doubt, of the modesty with which they speak of themselves.[17]

Almost two hundred years later similar 'managerial shenanigans' were still in operation at London's Lyric Theatre, where the programme accompanying R. D. Macdonald's *Summit Conference* in 1982 included a variety of complimentary quotations extracted from the reviews of prominent critics. The production was, apparently, 'A masterpiece' and 'Dazzling', according to the *Times*; 'Stunning', in the words of the *Observer*; 'Impressive', as the *Guardian* had it; and again 'Stunning', as reported in the *Sunday Express*. When read in the context of the critiques from which they were lifted, however, these apparently positive phrases acquire an altogether different meaning. John Barber reveals that the *Times*, like the *Guardian* and the *Sunday Express*, were referring merely to the play's impressive set, which '"seems to

---

[14] *Edward and Eleanora*, playbill, 1777.
[15] *The World*, playbill, 1815.
[16] Charles Dickens, *Nickleby*, p. 299.
[17] Leigh Hunt, 'Rules for the Theatrical Critic of a Newspaper', *The News* 26 May 1806: 430, rpt. in Leigh Hunt, appendix, *Critical Essays on the Performers of the London Theatres*, by Hunt (London: Hunt, 1807), p. 20.

herald a masterpiece"', in reviews which subsequently 'rejected the play emphatically'. 'Dazzling' originated elsewhere:

> The word was used by [the *Times*] ... when a second-string critic was writing of the same play, but in another theatre, in another town, with another cast, four years ago.

And 'Stunning', in the *Observer*, was 'used ironically, to describe the banality of the author's "insight"'.[18] Other dramatists, however, have been more deservingly praised in print, as Alexander Pope reveals in an eighteenth-century reference to 'Shakespear (whom you and ev'ry Play-house bill / Style the divine, the matchless, what you will)'.[19]

The most popular strategies of allurement seem almost invariably to have concerned the *mise en scène* and various elements of stagecraft contributing towards it. Long before glowing descriptions of the Victorian theatre's technical innovations dominated the enlarging playbills of the nineteenth century, spectacular effects were announced on documents designed to pique the curiosity of prospective audiences. As early as 1661 the bill produced for *The Descent of Orpheus into Hell*, described in chapter four, promised a 'flying Dragon, casting Fire out of his Mouth, and ... flashes of Lightening'.[20] An early performance by Sarah Kemble in the following century, playing alongside her future husband, William Siddons, was advertised on a playbill for *The Tempest*, which boasts a 'tempestuous sea (in perpetual agitation) and ... a beautiful shower of fire'.[21] The final tableau, avowedly featuring 'Neptune ... in a chariot drawn by sea horses', recalls the *Orpheus* bill's pledge to present '*Juno* ... in her chariot, drawn ... by two Eagles of Gold'. The extent to which such scenographic claims were satisfactorily realised remains a matter of speculation; but it may reasonably be assumed that a certain degree of hyperbole was not unknown in the dramatic documents published during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In

---

18 John Barber, 'Those "Stunning" Theatre Quotes', *Daily Telegraph* 14 June 1982, p. 11.
19 Alexander Pope, *The First Epistle of the Second Book of Horace, Imitated* (London, 1737), p. 5.
20 *Description of the Great Machines*, programme, 1661, n.pag.
21 *The Tempest*, by William Shakespeare, adapted by John Dryden and William Davenant, playbill, The Theatre, King's Head, Worcester, 16 April 1767, transcribed in Fitzgerald, 'Origin', p. 387.

1711 Joseph Addison, writing in an early volume of his influential *Spectator*, contrasts the reality of the Haymarket's staging of *Rinaldo and Armida* with the illusions promised in the book of words preceding its production, mentioned in chapter three:

> the undertakers of the Haymarket … very much disappointed their audience on the stage … The King of Jerusalem is obliged to come from the city on foot, instead of being drawn in a triumphant chariot by white horses, as my opera book had promised me; and thus, while I expected Armida's dragons should rush forward towards Argantes, I found the hero was obliged to go to Armida, and hand her out of her coach.[22]

Such disparities between page and stage persisted long into the following century, although properties and costumes had begun to acquire a comparative degree of verisimilitude. On a playbill published in 1809, heralding Edmund Kean's Swansea Theatre benefit performance in *Perouse*, Kean himself 'assures the public that neither pains nor expense have been spared to render this interesting spectacle worthy the attention of an enlightened Public' before announcing that he will play the chimpanzee;[23] and a late-Georgian bill foretelling the production in 1829 of a so-called crime drama entitled *The Red Barn*, based on a 'late Melancholy transaction', makes a particularly grim claim to authenticity:

> In the course of the piece the identical spectacles taken from William Corder on his apprehension and presented by Mr. Lee, the Officer, to Mr. Harding, will be made us of; as also the black silk Reticule belonging to Maria Martin, and which was the principal cause of Corder's conviction.[24]

Notwithstanding the morbid authority of this latter bulletin, many printed references to stage illusions remained less than convincing during the early decades of the Victorian era, as Ernest Reynolds observes:

> For many years … except at the two principal theatres, scenic effect remained of the most inadequate kind. A stock of conventional and

---

22 Joseph Addison, *Spectator* 14 (1711), qtd. in Lawrence, 'Book', p. 15.

23 *Perouse*, playbill, Swansea Theatre, 4 September 1809, listed in Price, 'Playbills of the English Theatre in Wales', p. 213.

24 *The Red Barn*, playbill, North Shields, 1829, qtd. in Robert King, '"Maria Martin"—A Note', *Theatre Notebook* 2 (1947–1948), pp. 78–79.

> usually battered forests, chambers, Gothic Halls, castle ramparts, and 'Turkish Villages', was made to do duty for plays of every age and setting. The 'new and splendid scenery' so often described on the playbills was frequently a mere re-arrangement of old flats forgotten by the audience.[25]

Nor did the mastery of numerous special effects during subsequent decades curtail the managerial predilection for exaggeration. As noted in chapter five, a steadily increasing level of sophistication characterised the stage machinery of the mid-nineteenth century:

> Elaborate traps, star, vamp, and ghost, with clever counterpoises where necessary, are found. Transparencies, even transparent actors with the aid of mirrors and lighting, were used effectively with flashes of light, noises off and flawless timing from the performers to perfect illusion.

Yet, as Elizabeth Leach continues, 'Even given this advanced technique playbills often made fraudulent claims'.[26] Such deceptions regarding the rarity of an actor's appearance, the grandeur of the scenery and the novelty of the machinery were often effected through the intentionally misleading use of large capitals in the printing of crucially connotative words and phrases. Robert Wood cites an example of the dangers awaiting speed readers around the middle of the nineteenth century:

> It was a wise patron who read his theatre bill carefully and made sure that what appeared in large type was in fact what would appear on the boards. The Brothers Davenport could be expected to top any music hall bill programme with their magic and revelations of the spiritualist phenomena which were so popular. It is therefore not surprising to see them in the most prominent position on the bill. It is still less surprising on re-reading it to find that they are not going to appear at all.[27]

Such typographical abuses were delightfully spoofed by Madame Vestris and Benjamin Webster on the bills accompanying James Robinson Planché's *The Golden Fleece*, produced by Vestris at the Haymarket Theatre under Webster's management in 1845. The parody begins immediately below the cast list, where Vestris's husband

---

[25] Reynolds, p. 34.
[26] Leach, p. 15.
[27] Robert Wood, *Delights*, p. 36.

is initially introduced as though an unusual, almost prodigal, acquisition—but immediately thereafter revealed to be of essential economic benefit to the house:

> The Public is respectfully informed that, in order to produce this Grand Classical Work in a style which may defy competition in any other establishment, the Lessee has, regardless of expense, engaged
>
> MR. CHARLES MATHEWS
>
> to represent the whole body of the Chorus, rendering at least fifty-nine male voices entirely unnecessary.

Capitals are again playfully misused in a description of the *mise en scène*, which was appreciated fully only when read to its conclusion:

> It is … requisite to observe that frequent change of scene being contrary to the usage of the ancient Greek Drama, several of the most
>
> SPLENDID PICTORIAL EFFECTS
>
> Will be left entirely to the imagination of the audience.[28]

Madame Vestris's lighthearted nod to authenticity constitutes just one example of yet another form of appeal generated in bills of the play designed to instill a sense of intimacy between performers and observers. For, in graphically alluding to the deceptions often practised in her own trade, the actor-manager implicitly distanced herself from such trickery, presumably strengthening the trust and goodwill of her supporters. In desperate times similarly personal connections between players and spectators were invoked in dramatic documentation, replacing the playbill's customary audience appeal with an actor's entreaty. On a specimen published in 1818, advertising a production of *The Mountaineers* at the Caernarvon Theatre, for example, 'Mrs. Smith … being left with her family destitute of any situation' declared that she was 'under the necessity of offering … an Evening's Amusement to enable her to quit the town in search of an engagement', relying for her survival on the beneficence of an established clientele.[29] On decidedly happier occasions, however, an even greater, more immediate, familiarity was attained when the names announced

---

[28] *The Golden Fleece*, by James Robinson Planché, playbill, Haymarket Theatre, 1845, transcribed in Clifford John Williams, p. 212.

[29] *The Mountaineers*, playbill, Caernarvon Theatre, 12 February 1818, listed in Price, 'Playbills of the English Theatre in Wales', p. 209.

on a playbill represented actual acquaintances of the projected audience. An amusing document published in 1802 before the production of *The Secret* at the New Theatre, Carmarthen, promises a unique variation on the usual entr'acte:

> between the play and farce, will be presented an entire new Local Phantasmagoria: or, the pleasing effect of poetical allusions. In which will be introduced the following great variety of characters; being the first and only appearance of all the *Landlords* and *Landladies*, of Carmarthen, with their appendages on this stage.

The festive proclamation continues, listing sixty-six innkeepers and their respective lodgings in no apparent order, and concludes with the understandable qualification that the assembly will occur 'positively for this night only'.[30] Such promotional lures were by no means always successful, however, and a mid-nineteenth-century epilogue by William Vernon reflects a provincial manager's disappointingly low ticket sales, as 'The gentry yet, have hardly shewn their faces … They take our bills … But never send for places'.[31] Yet even when the hyperbole, familiarity, flattery, levity, divulgence and supplication variously characterising playbills of the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries failed to produce a desirably large audience, theatrical managements continued to exploit their additional function as sources of basic information.

Information

A posted advertisement, no matter how alluring, is unlikely to secure the paid attendance of its observers unless it includes a certain amount of practical information concerning the event it announces; for 'if a play is to find its most suitable audience … then the public need to be clearly and reliably informed of what they are to see before they buy tickets'.[32] The most basic ingredients common to virtually every playbill, discussed at length in chapter one, concern the location, date, title and

---

[30] *The Secret*, playbill, New Theatre, Carmarthen, 9 June 1802, qtd. in Idwal Lewis, 'Playbills of the English Theatre in Wales', *National Library of Wales Journal* 13 (1963–64), pp. 203–204.
[31] William Vernon, 'An Occasional Epilogue, Spoken at Wolverhampton, June 26, 28, July 1, 1754', *Poems on Several Occasions* (London, 1758), p. 66.
[32] Eric Shorter, 'Unlabelled Packets', *Daily Telegraph* 3 July 1972, p. 9.

performers of the entertainment to be enacted, unambiguously revealing where and when to see what featuring whom. Between the mid-sixteenth and early-twentieth centuries these rudimentary components were continually augmented and enhanced by additional and more specific details, assisting playgoers in their preparation for a visit to the theatre. Yet, as observed in the three historical chapters of the preceding section, a solid core of indispensable information remained in place for over 350 years, attesting to the primacy of the four essential elements found on even the oldest surviving bills.

While the venue itself was typically identified at the top of the bill, additional details relating to the location of a performance usually occupied a less prominent position. Often these supplemental notes anticipated seating re-arrangements for the relevant evening. As early as 1732, for example, an advertisement for William Congreve's *The Way of the World*, at the opening of Covent Garden Theatre, advises its readers that, 'on Account of the great Demand for Places, the Pit and Boxes, by Desire, will be laid together'.[33] More than fifty years later the announcement that a 'Part of the PIT will be laid to the Boxes if required' was printed near the bottom of a silk playbill advertising Nicholas Rowe's tragedy *The Fair Penitent* at an unidentified Theatre Royal in 1788 (fig. 120).[34] Comparable notices appeared throughout the later-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries and, as Mark A. Howell notes, were 'usually accompanied by a change in the prices of boxes or pit'.[35] A memorably rural variation dating from 1758 advises that 'part of the stable will be laid into the boxes on one side, and the granary open for the same purpose on the other'.[36] One hundred years later the warning of a somewhat more drastic architectural adjustment was similarly conveyed by the Haymarket Theatre on a playbill advertising the production of *Sleeping Beauty* in 1858, which 'respectfully informed' its readership that the

---

[33] *The Way of the World*, by William Congreve, playbill, Covent Garden, 7 December 1732, transcribed in Van Lennep et al., 5: 253–254.

[34] *The Fair Penitent*, by Nicholas Rowe, playbill, Theatre Royal, 8 September 1788, Harvard Theatre Collection: HTC.P1.C04.05.05.

[35] Mark A. Howell, letter, *Theatre Notebook* 47.3 (1993), p. 173.

[36] *Theodosius*, playbill, 1758.

'Upper Gallery is abolished, and that there will be but one Gallery open, capable of containing Eight Hundred Persons'.[37] Much greater prominence was granted to such announcements when references to the location of the entertainment were intended to allure, as well as merely to inform, potential patrons: the entire upper-right quarter of a large double playbill heralding John Baldwin Buckstone's *Married Life* at the Haymarket in 1843 is devoted to an account of the 'Extensive Alterations' awaiting the audience:

> The Proscenium has been entirely remodelled! And the whole of the interior decorated in the Most Costly and Elegant Style. By a curtailment of the useless portion of the Stage in front of the Curtain, and advancing the Orchestra and Lights nearer the Actors and Scenic Effects, the Lessee has been enabled to appropriate the portion so obtained, to form a certain number of Orchestra Stalls Which can be retained for the parties taking them for the whole of the Evening. For the comfort of those visiting the Pit, Backs have been placed to all the Seats. Among the most important Improvements, is the introduction (for the first time) of Gas as the medium of light! A Brilliant centre chandelier Has been erected, and no expense spared to render this Establishment deserving its high character and the support of the Patrons of the Drama.

As though constituting a performance of its own this saga of renovation is followed by a sort of cast list, acknowledging the principal players:

> The Decorations under the superintendences of Mr. George Morris.
> The Alterations of Proscenium, &c. executed by Mr. Adams.
> The Gas Fittings, Ornamental and otherwise, and the Chandeliers furnished by H. Jones, & Co.[38]

Playgoers sufficiently intrigued by the report of these luxurious surroundings would next need to know when they were expected to arrive.

The earliest and most practical embellishment to the date found on almost all extant playbills was the additional inclusion in the later-seventeenth century of the performance's precise starting time—as early as '*Two of the Clock*' at the outdoor booths,[39] and 'Four of the Clock' at the indoor houses.[40] By the mid-eighteenth

---

[37] *Sleeping Beauty*, playbill, Haymarket Theatre, 1 January 1858, Haymarket, n.pag.
[38] *Married Life*, by John Baldwin Buckstone, playbill, Haymarket Theatre, 5 May 1843, Haymarket, n.pag.
[39] *The Dutch Cruelties at Amboyna*, playbill, 1672.
[40] *A King and No King*, playbill, 1687.

century 'Six o' Clock' was the hour usually specified on the bills, and this information was sometimes accompanied by additional notices concerning the acquisition of tickets and the time at which servants might be sent to the theatre in order to hold places for 'Ladies'—three hours in advance, in the case of the *Mourning Bride* royal command bill cited in chapter five (see fig. 54).[41] Montague Summers attributes the popularity of this custom to the French playbills paraphrased in translation by John Dryden in his prologue to Lodowick Carlell's *Arviragus and Philicia*, performed in 1672 (quoted at greater length in chapter four):

> And therefore, *Messieurs*, if you'l do us grace,
> Send Lacquies early to preserve your Place.[42]

Concerned perhaps to avoid any embarrassing confusion between the working classes and their masters, the theatres obliged even these placeholders to surrender the price of admission before entering the house. A playbill issued by York's Theatre Royal to announce *The Gamester* in 1796 plainly states, 'No SERVANTS admitted without Pay' (fig. 121).[43] But for those patrons in no financial position to employ menials the most important temporal reference found on playbills during the eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries completed the phrase 'Half-price at a quarter before nine'—for this was typically the hour at which theatregoers could enter the house at a reduced rate, just in time to see the farce with which the evening's schedule of events concluded.[44]

While the vast majority of playbill editorial matter concerning both the entertainment itself and the performers enacting it was decidedly more promotional than informative, the essential ingredients identifying the title of the drama and the relevant company remained in place from the very beginning, with the cast list incorporated as a regular component in the early-eighteenth century. With the exceptions of plot synopses and actors' biographies, however, very little additional

---

[41] *The Mourning Bride*, playbill, 1737. The performance is to begin 'exactly at Six o' Clock', and patrons are requested to send their servants 'by Three o' Clock'.
[42] John Dryden, prologue, *Arviragus*, 1: 145.
[43] *The Gamester*, playbill, Theatre Royal, York, 9 July 1796, rpt. in Speaight, *Memorabilia*, p. 13.
[44] Hare, p. 25.

information connected with what and who was to appear on stage escaped the hyperbole seemingly endemic to show business. 'Puffing', according to Leigh Hunt, remained the 'system of the day';[45] and many of the claims made on the playbills of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries might more appropriately be classified as *mis*-information—though, as Francis Edwards observes, most of the 'attractions thus heralded … failed to meet with the appreciation they no ways deserved'.[46] Even the literary provenance reported on Georgian and Victorian dramatic documents was at times subject to the whims of profit-minded managements. The authors of an unsigned *Theatre Notebook* editorial refer to York bills which attribute George Collier's *Zelima and Azor* to Richard Brinsley Sheridan and *The Alarm*, 'generally given as by J. M. Swiney', to Oliver Goldsmith, concluding that it was probably a 'temptation to managers to give the names of popular playwrights of the moment as those of the authors of their new pieces'.[47]

The inconsistencies characterising ostensibly informative descriptions of performers on bills of the play are most tellingly revealed in collections of successive artefacts. Derek Forbes's work on the pictorial advertisements of the travelling Grossmith brothers, for example, reveals their father's determination to capitalise on their youth for as long as possible during the 1830s. When William, the 'CELEBRATED YOUNG ROSCIUS', was first joined on tour by his 'YOUNGEST BROTHER' Benjamin in December 1831, the younger boy was 'but 5 Years and 4 months old'; two years later, in December 1833, he was '*but Six Years Old*'; and two years after that, in 1835, he was 'BUT SEVEN YEARS OLD'. Four years later, by which time 'Master B' must have been approaching adolescence, the tone in which his age was billed had altered, from promissory to cautionary. Audiences delighting in child performers were implicitly urged to hurry to *My Cousin Tom* at the Music

---

[45] Hunt, *Autobiography*, 1: 282.
[46] Francis Edwards, pp. 28–29.
[47] *Theatre Notebook* [editorial] 1.3 (Spring 1946), p. 21.

Hall in Warrington, for Benjamin was no longer 'but' anything: he was now 'NEARLY ELEVEN YEARS OLD' (fig. 122).[48]

Notwithstanding their frequently exaggerated—and even deceptive—content, playbills, throughout their history, constituted an invaluable source of pre-performance information for prospective audiences considering an evening at the theatre. As noted in chapter two, they were often delivered to the homes of wealthier theatre patrons during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and so were read on a regular basis by those whose lifestyles permitted such indulgences. On 11 March 1712 the *Spectator* printed a five-day diary, reputedly submitted by a correspondent 'who calls her self *Clarinda*', offering the 'Picture of a Life filled with a fashionable kind of Gaiety and Laziness'. Clarinda's mornings often began with 'two Dishes of Chocolate in Bed'; but after that almost anything could happen: on Friday, for example, she 'Broke [her] … Blue China Cup'; on Saturday she 'Shifted a patch for half an Hour … above [her] … Left Eyebrow'; on Wednesday she ate a 'slice of Bread and Butter'; and on Thursday morning, after preparing '*From Eight to Ten …* [with] Chocolate', she 'Read the Play Bills … [at her] Tea Table'.[49] In the following decade a clearly fictional representative of this leisure class was embodied in the character of the supposed 'Woman of Quality' in the second version of John Vanbrugh's *The Provok'd Wife*, performed in 1725. The disguised Sir John Brute claims to rise from bed some time after two each afternoon, employing the services of an assistant for the task of reviewing the day's entertainments:

> I sit—and yawn for my Breakfast—if it don't come presently, I lie down upon my Couch, to say my Prayers, while my Maid reads me the Play-Bills.[50]

---

[48] *The Seven Ages*, playbill, New Theatre, Bridgnorth, 9 December 1831; *Master B. Grossmith*, playbill, Theatre Royal, Aberdeen, 6 December 1833; *Travellers' Trials*, playbill, Shire Hall, Hertford, 15 October 1835; *My Cousin Tom*, playbill, Music Hall, Warrington, 22 March 1839, rpt. in Forbes, 'Grossmiths', pp. 75–78. Noting that 'Fun can be had in spotting the slowed-down ageing of the boys', Forbes observes a number of additional 'disingenuous' publicity stunts engineered by Grossmith, including repeated final performances and at least one planted review, p. 81.

[49] 'Clarinda's Journal', *Spectator* 11 March 1712, n.pag.

[50] John Vanbrugh, *The Provok'd Wife*, performed 1725 (Dublin, 1743), p. 57.

Displaying considerably more initiative, young Tate Wilkinson, at the age of eight, 'took great care to visit Mr. Page', Covent Garden's housekeeper, 'every morning for play bills' around the middle of the eighteenth century. Establishing himself in the eyes of the company as an intelligent and informed spectator through this diurnal perusal of the bill, he became a 'constant attendant by permission, at the morning rehearsals'. Two years later, 'at only ten years of age', the future circuit manager 'formed a mad idea thus early that [he] … was certainly a manager of a theatre' and began producing his own bills of the play:

> I fitted up a room in a theatrical manner; as a proof I have now several hundred of my play-bills, in full-sized paper, wrote in red and black, and could at this instant as easily tell what plays, farces, and pantomimes were performed at my theatre in the Savoy, with a knowledge of all other performers, whether married, single, old, or young, and what they played, as if all the vision had been realized.

This self-described 'theatrical influenza' reflects the playbill's capacity to charm even its own creator, while the author's inclusion of innumerable details, realised in at least two colours, underscores the inseparable link between the document's double function of both alluring and informing its readership. In the following decade, whilst delivering Harry Woodward's prologue to Susannah Centlivre's *The Busie Body* in Dublin, Wilkinson may have derived particular satisfaction from a couplet appearing near the end of his address—

> *Marplot*, to night—so says the *bill of fare*!
> Now waits your pleasure, with his *usual* air

—at which point he would point to a playbill mounted on an interior wall of the theatre.[51] This reference to one text, the playbill, within another, the prologue, within another, the script, hints at the relationships shared among various dramatic documents in advance of the productions for which they were created.

---

[51] Wilkinson, *Memoirs*, 1: 21–22, 1: 32–33, 3: 204.

Advance Documentation

The modulating criteria distinguishing *playbills* and *programmes*, discussed in chapter one, and the collective relationship of both variants to related documents such as broadsides, song books, tickets, portraits and acting editions, described in chapter three, indicate the extent to which bills of the play have always shared a variety of features with numerous additional texts. Whether naming the venue, specifying the date, identifying the entertainment or acknowledging the performers, these connected publications reflect aspects of the form, content and function of playbills and programmes while still retaining their own separate identities. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, for example, countless periodicals incorporating the words 'playbill' and 'programme' in their titles were issued in Britain, many containing the cast lists of shows yet to open.[52] And in the early-twentieth century the hoardings in both London and the provinces were often covered with posters designed by Charles Buchel, the artist responsible for illustrating many of Herbert Beerbohm Tree's souvenir programmes, described in the previous chapter. Although essentially pictorial, these objects included basic editorial information concerning the production and, according to Hesketh Pearson, the manager of His Majesty's Theatre was not wholly opposed to such publicity:

> 'It is difficult to live up to one's posters', said Tree, who loved gazing at them as he went through the streets ... 'and when I pass my name in such large letters I blush, but at the same time instinctively raise my hat'.[53]

Presumably these were not among the documents to which William Archer was referring when he declared in 1902 that a 'glance at the posters on the hoardings in

---

[52] A number of these publications are listed in Carl J. Stratman, *Britain's Theatrical Periodicals 1720–1967: A Bibliography* (New York: New York Public Library, 1972), including *The Programme and Dramatic Review* (1875), p. 42; two separate publications entitled *The Bill of the Play* (1882 and 1892), pp. 46-47, 54; *The Programme of Manchester Amusements* (1891), p. 54; *The Programme and Playbill* (1898), p. 60; *The Daily Programme and Playbill* (1899), p. 61; *The Programme* (1903), p. 65; and *The Playbill* (1913), p. 74.

[53] Hesketh Pearson, *Beerbohm Tree: His Life and Laughter*, 1956 (London: Columbus, 1988), p. 188.

any provincial town is enough to make one feel suicidal'. In a published conversation with George Alexander, Archer decries the 'hopeless vulgarity and blatant imbecility of nine-tenths of the theatrical fare that is offered to the provincial public';[54] but the quality of Tree's productions—and of the posters announcing them—would almost certainly have precluded such derision.

From 1700 onwards the documents most closely related to bills of the play were the newspaper advertisements which often merely duplicated the wording of their posted predecessors. The origin of these alternative announcements was unquestionably linked to the temporary ban on public playbill distribution imposed at the dawn of the eighteenth century, discussed in chapters two and four; and their sales appeal as popular additions to the *Flying Post* and the *Daily Courant* resulted in sums as high as two hundred pounds per year being paid to the theatres by the newspapers, during the final years of the Stuart dynasty, for the privilege of advertising their performances.[55] These announcements sometimes referred to the posting of more familiar playbills as well. Heralding a production of *Oroonoko* in 1703, for example, the *Daily Courant* promised 'several surprizing Entertainments, which will be express'd in the *Monday's Courant*, and in the large Bills that will be posted about the Town that Day'.[56] Towards the middle of the eighteenth century such traditional methods of distribution were occasionally reserved for the final hours before curtain. The *Daily Advertiser*, referring to Theophilus Cibber's *Romeo and Juliet* at the New Haymarket in 1744, states that the play will be 'advertised in the *Daily Post*, the *Daily Advertiser*, and the *General Advertiser*', cautioning that 'large Play Bills and Hand Play Bills will be posted and delivered out on the days of performance only'.[57] By 1763 the *Public Advertiser* was the only paper regularly carrying authentic announcements from the patent houses; but three years later this monopoly was

---

[54] William Archer, *Real Conversations* (London: Heinemann, 1904), p. 207.
[55] Alexander Andrews, *The History of British Journalism*, 2 vols. (London: Bentley, 1859), 1: 192.
[56] *Oroonoko*, by Aphra Behn, adapted by Thomas Southerne, playbill, *Daily Courant* 23 April 1703, microfilm, British Library; Colindale Newspaper Library, reel 53, n.pag.
[57] *Daily Advertiser* 6 October 1744, qtd. in Scouten, p. cii.

shared between two publications, both of which remunerated the theatres annually for the right to print their bills.[58] At the end of the century this exclusive coverage was still considered 'influential in promoting the circulation' of the papers, and a yearly subsidy securing the cooperation of the Theatres Royal continued to be paid.[59]

The nineteenth century witnessed the increasingly creative use of the newsprint medium, both in Britain and around the world. Comedian John Liston parodied the promotion of his own Covent Garden benefit in 1817, announcing his intention to 'display much feeling and discrim[in]ation, together with great taste in [his] … dresses and elegance in [his] … manners':

> The audience will be delighted with my exertions, and testify by rapturous applause their most decided approbation. When we consider, in addition to my professional merits, the *loveliness of my person* and *fascination of my face*, which are only equalled by the amiability of my professional character, having never pinched my children nor kicked my wife out of bed, there is no doubt but this *Puff* will not be inserted in vain.[60]

In 1829 an American theatre manager named H. J. Finn included five quatrains of deferential appeal, entitled 'Letters to the Public', with his opening-night announcement in a Boston paper:

> Dear Public, pray permit H J
> Finn, to address a D T
> To U, and make a slight S A,
> To influence the C T
>
> And N E faults you must X Q s,
> Nor B my N M E;
> If not instruct, I will M U s
> With all my N R G.
>
> The grateful warmth which I O U
> Exceeds T P D T;
> I cannot, tho' I have my Q,
> X-press my X T C.
>
> On Monday night, my Public D R,
> We shall X L, U C;

---

[58] Stone, pp. lvi, lxxii.
[59] Schlesinger, p. 33.
[60] Qtd. in 'Curiosities', p. 223.

To every call, I will give E R,
And answer, 'Here I B'.

Need I say Y, 't would give me E s,
A full house should I C;
But O! for P T, do not T s,
And make that house M T.[61]

And in Germany one of the most effective theatrical announcements ever issued bore almost no resemblance whatever to a conventional playbill. An actor whose benefit night was approaching placed an advertisement in the papers, ostensibly seeking a young man to inherit the business of a successful merchant and marry his wealthy young niece. On the day of the performance the hundreds of hopeful respondents to this hoax each received a note suggesting an informal meeting at Callenbach's Theatre that evening. The house was sold out, occupied in the main by a 'motley male public, got up in a style which is seldom seen at the Royal Opera itself'. As curtain time drew nearer, 'Glasses were levelled on all sides' in the direction of the box reputed to be occupied by the young niece, who of course never appeared. Not since this lucrative scam has Callenbach's been so well attended.[62]

Perhaps the most ambitious advertising campaign to have been launched during the period under review involved William Smith's promotion of *The Dead Heart* at Benjamin Webster's New Adelphi Theatre during the early 1860s. Having received a 'carte blanche for the printing' from Webster, Smith commissioned and distributed the following materials:

10,000,000 adhesive labels
30,000 small cuts of the Guillotine scene
5,000 reams of note-paper
110,000 business envelopes
60,000 pence envelopes
2000 six-sheet cuts of Bastille scene
5,000,000 hand-bills
1000 six-sheet posters
500 slips
1,000,000 cards, the shape of a heart

---

[61] Transcribed in A. Loewenberg, letter, *Sunday Times* 13 March 1938, p. 16.
[62] 'Curiosities', pp. 223–234.

> 100 twenty-eight sheets
> 20,000 folio cards for shop-windows.

Additionally, 'every Friday and Saturday 1,500 hand-bills [were] folded in the various papers that were sent all over the country'. But, while Smith's innovation and thoroughness may well have contributed to the extensive run of this popular play, his smallest, stickiest and most ubiquitous variation on the inoffensive playbill was not appreciated by everyone. Among many complaints raised over the adhesive labels, one woman spent 'full an hour … wash[ing] them off' her husband's coat and hat, while a cab driver vowed to 'punch the first person's head' he discovered further defacing his vehicle with the stickers. Smith clearly understood the benefits of visually linking the various documents simultaneously employed in the promotion of a single production, advising theatre managers to 'adapt [their] … bills and cards of advertising … [a]ccording to the style and title of a piece'. The heart-shaped *Dead Heart* cards, for example, were 'sent to the chief inns and taverns in all the principal towns'. But colour, as readily as contour, could be effectively manipulated under this policy:

> On the revival of 'The Green Bushes', all our extra posters, cards (with tape for the shop-windows), adhesive labels with the portrait of Miami, &c., were of the colour of the title (green). On envelopes and note paper I had the theatre and name of the drama embossed, and the full-length figure of Miami inside the envelope, with
>
> EVERY NIGHT, GREEN BUSHES.
>
> The pence envelopes (for shopkeepers to put the change for their customers in) were in the same style.[63]

Smith's determined efforts to instil a play's title and theme in the public consciousness, though perhaps appearing somewhat extreme, might nevertheless have been regarded in welcome relief to the equally relentless campaigns launched by purely commercial advertisers in the later-nineteenth century, described in chapters two and six, through which the playbill was transformed from a declaration of performance into an inventory of commodities. The growing appreciation of the benefits to be reaped from an astute marketing strategy is reflected in the fact that, by

---

[63] Smith, pp. 72–73.

1885, rather than receiving money from the newspapers merely for providing advance notice of their productions, managers now paid 'from one to two thousand [pounds] a year to the journals' for the insertion of their bills.[64] But imaginative combinations of size, shape, colour, weight, and even adhesion, applied to an enormous variety of media, established the limitless possibilities for textual variation on the standard bill of the play in anticipation of the performances of the future.

This chapter has been concerned with the variety of means by which bills of the play historically have both allured and informed their readership prior to the theatrical event for which they were created. As such the focus has usually remained on playbills rather than on programmes, since the latter variants—by formal and functional definitions—are typically distributed only at the venue itself and only just before the commencement of the entertainment. The ephemeral nature of these dramatic documents, reflecting the intangibility of the performances they heralded, in no way diminished their promotional importance, for they often constituted the first public announcement of the venue, date, title and cast connected with a production. All four of these essential billing ingredients were expressed as enticingly as possible in an attempt to attract the attention of every potential theatregoer: the house was frequently celebrated for its comforts; the run was often described in terms of its brevity or its imminent termination; the play itself was typically praised on the authority of popular approbation; and star performers were accorded an almost superhuman status as artists of unparalleled standing. Ideally this alluring information would render playbill readers desirous of tickets, information concerning the acquisition of which was duly printed near the bottom of the documents; and, still held in the hands of patrons now seated before the stage, the very same bills continued to serve as sources of information, no longer anticipating the future, but functioning instead in conjunction with the present—the subject of the following chapter.

---

[64] Fitzgerald, ' Old and New', p. 9.

CHAPTER 8

IN CONJUNCTION WITH THE PRESENT

Having successfully aroused the curiosity of their readers with an alluring advertisement, and having provided sufficient information concerning the production to ensure a punctual, remunerative attendance, theatre playbills and programmes embark upon the second of their three functional tasks—that of silently accompanying their owners throughout the entire performance event, from their arrival at the venue to their departure after the final curtain. This chapter is concerned with the role of the bill of the play in conjunction with the present, as a guide not only to the play and its production, but also to the theatre and its management.

The Play and Its Production

Bills of the play, complete with cast lists, had been on sale at London's theatres for about a century when Leigh Hunt declared, in 1830, that 'Without a play-bill, no true play-goer can be comfortable'. As noted in chapters two and five, Hunt's concern to promote the circulation of these dramatic documents probably stemmed from his intention to begin selling them himself a few months later. But this vested interest strengthens, rather than undermines, the validity of his claim, for his decision to vend the 'play-bills of the evening ... at the play-house doors' was motivated by the widespread popularity they already enjoyed.[1]

Even before plot summaries and scenic descriptions were routinely included on the bills, the printed identification of the actors scheduled to perform occupied the attentions of theatregoers awaiting the curtain. Hunt, for example, fondly remembers evenings spent with friends, 'sitting together in the pit ... seeing who is who in the play-bill, and hearing the delicious discord of the tuning of instruments'.[2] The

---

[1] Hunt, 'The Play-Bills', p. 232.

[2] Leigh Hunt, 'Going to the Play Again', *Selected Essays*, by Hunt (London: Dent, 1929), p. 111.

expectations generated by the appearance of a popular actor's name were on some occasions thwarted, though not always through any fault of the performer. Charles Lamb recalls the considerable disappointment of a 'knot of country people' visiting Drury Lane near the beginning of the nineteenth century:

> They seemed perfectly inattentive to all the best performers for the first act or two, though the piece was admirably played, but kept poring in the play-bill, and were evidently watching for the appearance of one, who was to be the source of supreme delight to them that night. At length the expected actor arrived, who happened to be in possession of a very insignificant part, not much above a mute. I saw their faint attempt at raising a clap on his appearance, and their disappointment at not being seconded by the audience in general. I saw them try to admire and to find out something very wonderful in him, and wondering all the while at the moderate sensation he produced. I saw their pleasure and their interest subside at last into flat mortification, when the riddle was at once unfolded by my recollecting that this performer bore the same name with an actor, then in the acme of his celebrity, at Covent-Garden, but who lately finished his theatrical and mortal career on the other side of the Atlantic. They had come to see Mr. C—, but had come to the wrong house.[3]

On other occasions such deceptions were intentionally effected through the insertion into the cast list of a fictitious exponent in order to disguise the identity of the real performer, the repetition of whose name, already linked to another role, would spoil a dramatic surprise for the audience. In Britain, for example, 'Walter Plinge' has been credited with more appearances, over more years, than mortally possible, and belongs to the 'theatrical branch of the dynasty headed by A. N. Other';[4] while in North America 'George Spelvin' and 'Georgina Spelvin' have similarly failed to materialise as such on as many occasions.[5] Elizabeth Burns notes that the 'world of the play' represents an 'alternative and frangible reality', resulting in a playwright's 'temptation to make play … with the shifting boundaries between the theatrical and the ordinary world'.[6] Playbills and programmes can compound this ambiguity with vital misinformation; but far more often they have served to clarify, not confuse,

---

[3] 'Play-House Memoranda' [by Charles Lamb], *Examiner* 19 December 1813: 811 (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms, n.d.), pub. no. 4250, reel 4 of 72.
[4] 'Cast Change', *Evening Standard* 6 July 1976, p. 14.
[5] Joann Green, *The Small Theatre Handbook* (Harvard: Common Press, 1981), p. 104.
[6] Elizabeth Burns, *Theatricality* (London: Longman, 1972), p. 19.

relationships among the *dramatis personae* and the identity of their representatives. Especially impressed by Benjamin Webster's portrayal of Sir Hugh Evans in a production of William Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor* in 1830, during which, 'by means of a falsetto', the actor disguised 'his hard manner and voice … into the light petulance of the Welsh tones', Leigh Hunt applauded Webster's transformation, confessing that he would 'not have guessed who it was, but for his name in the play-bills'.[7]

Evolving from mere cast lists with their inclusion, in the later-eighteenth century, of additional editorial matter concerning the entertainment enacted, bills of the play, consulted within the theatre, represented an increasingly valuable resource to their owners, often advising them of the sequence of imaginary events unfolding and of their temporal relationship to one another. These very revelations, however, might alternatively be viewed as a threat to the delicate balance inherent in the reciprocal production and reception of live drama. Francis Ferguson expresses the intangible connection between the stage and the house in terms of interpretation:

> Because drama is written to be played, it both offers and requires a peculiarly immediate understanding.[8]

Yet a playbill, however ephemeral, palpably exists for at least some time in the hands of its owner, potentially disrupting the continuity of audition: the description of a tragedy, for example, may be consulted during the performance of an introductory farce; while the merits of an entr'acte may be read as the evening's final afterpiece concludes. In discussing the 'sheer pleasure of the theatre', J. L. Styan refers to the 'skill and discipline required to enjoy a good play to the full'.[9] But playbills and programmes have for centuries helped their readers to 'interpret stage action, and … to fashion the play in the mind', demanding perhaps a less 'active enthusiasm' from audiences than that advocated by Styan.

---

[7] Leigh Hunt, 'Dowton as Falstaff', *Dramatic Essays*, by Hunt, ed. William Archer and Robert W. Lowe (London: Scott, 1894), rpt. of 'The Play-Goer', *Tatler* 4 October 1830: 1: 103–104, p. 146.
[8] Francis Fergusson, *The Idea of a Theater* (Garden City, NY: Anchor-Doubleday, 1949), p. 23.
[9] J. L. Styan, *The Elements of Drama* (Cambridge: CUP, 1960), p. 285.

Notwithstanding their inevitably mediating influence on the reception of a dramatic text in performance, bills of the play can hardly be condemned for having offered their readers a point of reference. Knowledge that a 'Lapse of Sixteen Years is Supposed to Take Place' between a pair of scenes, and that a 'Lapse of One Hundred Years' precedes the next, would be welcomed by most theatregoers—even during *Sleeping Beauty*.[10] Furthermore, with the inclusion of illustrative material, achieving widespread popularity in the 1830s, the bill of the play served, during the Victorian era, in a capacity it has retained ever since, as an 'introduction to the mood and intensity of the play … set[ting] the stage even before the curtain rose'.[11] Adrian Wilson's reflections on the value of his own printed documents are supported by David Skal's observation that, as the 'only form of graphic design with the potential to *directly* complement performance, the playbill can become a dynamic extension of the artistic event itself'.[12] And as a comparatively stable record of that event, it can also prolong and even enhance its beneficial effects. Michael MacOwan's attempt to identify the unconscious needs fulfilled by the theatrical experience can as readily be applied to playbills as to plays, for the yearning to 'see things as a whole … [and] to find significance and pattern in events' has to some degree been satisfied by printed and pictorial references in bills to entire sequences of dramatised actions—both before and after, as well as during, their momentary occurrence on stage.[13] Martin Esslin similarly refers to the audience's desire for the 'total picture', allowing that the 'spectator has to be alert to pick up the basic elements of the "exposition" and the subsequent concatenation of events':

> If the attention flags or is distracted, an essential link in the chain may be missed and the whole structure fails to cohere.[14]

---

[10] *Sleeping Beauty*, playbill, 1858.

[11] Adrian Wilson, introduction, *More Printing for the Theater: A Portfolio of Ephemera*, by Adrian Wilson and Joyce Lancaster (San Francisco: Linden, 1987), p. 5.

[12] Skal, p. 121.

[13] Michael MacOwan, 'Why the Theatre?', *Drama* 93 (1969), p. 38.

[14] Martin Esslin, *The Field of Drama* (London: Methuen, 1987), p. 129.

Through their replication of carefully chosen information, bills of the play, in Susan Bennett's view, have often provided 'points of entry' into, and an 'interpretive framework' around, a production,[15] undoubtedly strengthening the links in this chain while supporting, and further clarifying, the structure it represents.

At their most informative, bills of the play have been facetiously posited as satisfactory substitutes for actual attendance at a performance. In the first scene of Timberlake Wertenbaker's *The Grace of Mary Traverse*, for example, Mary begs to be included in her father's visit to the theatre, whereupon Giles proposes a more economic option:

> There's no need to see a play to talk about it. I'll bring you the play bill.[16]

Residing in a boarding house during the mid-eighteenth century, young Tate Wilkinson was obliged to resort to a similar strategy, his public school experience becoming 'every day more satisfactory', once his mother began to send him the 'play-bills of the week', along with less important 'luxuries, such as tea, sugar, nice chickens, bottles of wine [and] … pound cake'.[17] The bill of the play has even been proposed as the ideal site for an abridged dictionary of sorts: dismayed by John Philip Kemble's 'altogether unintelligible' articulation at Covent Garden in 1806, Leigh Hunt suggested including a 'Lexicon, so that every lady or gentleman, who should purchase a play-bill, might find a list of the performers on one side of it, and the means of understanding them on the other'. Hunt offered twenty-nine sample transcriptions of Kemble's 'orthöepy', beginning with

> aches, ——— aitches
> beard, ——— bird
> cheerful, ——— churful

and concluding with

---

[15] Susan Bennett, *Theatre Audiences* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 145.
[16] Timberlake Wertenbaker, *The Grace of Mary Traverse* (London: Faber, in association with the Royal Court Theatre, 1985), p. 3.
[17] Wilkinson, *Memoirs*, 1: 44–45.

> ye, ———— *jee*, after words ending with *d*, as *demanjee*, for *demand ye*: or *chee*, after words ending with *t*, *hurchee* for *hurt ye*.[18]

Notwithstanding its potentially instructive value, the abundance of printed information found in the playbills and programmes of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has sometimes corresponded to a paucity of dramatic exposition within the scripts themselves, and an ambivalence remains concerning the extent to which a bill of the play should be obliged, or even allowed, to mediate in an audience's reception of the performance text. Robert Butler, bemoaning the innumerable layers of impenetrable directorial 'interpretation' dominating many 'concept' productions of the later-twentieth century, claims that 'Ours is the first age in which you have to read the programme just to understand what's happening on stage'.[19] John Barber suggests that playwrights should 'write as if their audiences, like Shakespeare's, lacked the programme as a crutch'.[20] Even the necessity of the cast list has been questioned, Peter Burton and John Lane suggesting that 'Perhaps there is no need for names at all'.[21] Indeed, on some occasions these helpful and informative texts have been forsaken altogether. When asked why he visits the theatre without knowing what is to be staged, Mr. Lovel, in Francis Burney's *Evelina*, attributes his indifference to a busy social schedule:

> I have no time to read playbills; one merely comes to meet one's friends, and shew that one's alive.[22]

Yet this very preoccupation with 'mere' attendance as an event unto itself suggests an additional function fulfilled by the bill of the play, in conjunction with the present, as a guide to the venue in which the performance is taking place.

---

[18] Leigh Hunt, 'An Essay on Invention in Pronunciation', *The News* 29 December 1806: 678, rpt. in Hunt, Appendix, pp. 8, 10, 11.

[19] Robert Butler, 'Why Do Directors Feel Compelled to "Interpret" Shakespeare?', *Independent on Sunday* 31 March 1996, p. 21.

[20] John Barber, 'Time to Change the Format', *Daily Telegraph* 12 March 1984, p. 11.

[21] Peter Burton and John Lane, *New Directions* (London: MacGibbon, 1970), p. 322.

[22] Frances Burney, *Evelina*, vol. 1 (London, 1778), p. 135.

The Theatre and Its Management

If the priorities held by twentieth-century theatregoers reflect those of their Hanoverian counterparts, then for almost three centuries playbills and programmes may have served even more importantly as guides to the playhouse than as guides to the play; for, according to Janet Holmes à Court, 'What audiences care about is loos, bars and tickets'.[23] Although the day-long thespian marathons dominating the ancient Athenian festivals have been replicated only rarely in post-medieval Britain, promises of comfort, convenience, and even luxury, discussed in the previous chapter, have remained inducements to attendance, and descriptions of the surrounding facilities have frequently been included in bills of the play, ensuring the satisfaction of their readers and the profit of the house.

The availability of various refreshments, for example, has been announced on theatre bills since the nineteenth century, most notably in the form of drinks lists gracing the covers of many late-Victorian music hall programmes, discussed in chapter six. But lighter fare was on offer as well, especially during the pantomime season when the appetites of younger spectators could be exploited as their parents drank coffee. The programme accompanying Frank Green's *Little Red Riding Hood* at Her Majesty's Theatre in 1883 advises that '*Coffee and Ices may be had of the Attendants*' (fig. 123).[24] Chocolates enjoyed especial popularity during the early-twentieth century, and the inexplicable restriction on their sale during evening performances following the first world war provoked the creative wrath of at least one playgoing poet, whose lines were later reproduced in a programme accompanying *The Co-Optimists* at the Palace Theatre in 1924:

> On the Dominions of King George V, the sun never sets
> But in England you cannot buy a chocolate after 9.30

---

[23] Valerie Grove, '"What Audiences Care about is Loos, Bars and Tickets"', interview with Janet Holmes à Court, *Times* 4 November 1994, p. 19.

[24] *Little Red Riding Hood*, by Frank W. Green, programme, Her Majesty's Theatre, 1883, rpt. in Cavanagh, p. 61.

> His Majesty's morning drum beats round the world,
> but you are beaten yourself if you ask for a chocolate after 9.30.
> When the foot of a slave touches the soil of Britain
> He is free. But he is not free
> To buy a chocolate after 9.30.[25]

This restriction was pre-dated at some houses by similar rules concerning the consumption of nicotine, also printed in the bills of the play. The programme accompanying Eleonora Duse's performance in *La Dame aux Camelias* at Daly's Theatre in 1894 notes that, while the 'LADIES' FOYER is open at all times … Smoking [is] Strictly Prohibited' within it (fig. 124).[26] Ten years later, on the other hand, the Brighton Alhambra advertised a wide variety of cigars and cigarettes in its programmes. Selling for 'TWO PENCE', these documents were four times as expensive as a 'Straight-cut Virginia[n]'. They advised their readers that a 'fireproof curtain [would be] … lowered at the Conclusion of the Programme' and included the following additional assurance:

> Four Qualified Firemen, each with over 20 Years' Experience in the Local Fire Brigade, always in attendance on the Premises during the Performance (fig. 125).[27]

The Alhambra deserves credit for its circumspection in attempting to prevent fires of the sort which, over the centuries, have destroyed so many theatres.

Other announcements found in playbills and programmes, less concerned with merely marketing the intervals, addressed the audience's freedom of movement within the venue. Often these notices appeared in the form of injunctions forbidding various activities, numerous examples of which are noted in several chapters of the present work. But, while the inability to wander through the dressing room during act one, sit on the stage during act two and leave the theatre with a full refund during act three undoubtedly constrained the behaviour of some patrons, the enjoyment of the majority was presumably enhanced as a result.

---

[25] *The Co-Optimists*, programme, Palace Theatre, November 1924, qtd. in David Willmott, 'Programmes Price Six Pence', *The Lady* 4 June 1981, p. 1077.
[26] *La Dame aux Camelias*, programme, Daly's Theatre, 7 May 1894, rpt. in Cavanagh, p. 34.
[27] The Brighton Alhambra, playbill, 14 March 1904, rpt. in Cavanagh, p. 55.

Various articles of clothing, too, were occasionally subject to managerial censure or approval, as expressed in bills of the play throughout the Victorian, Edwardian and post-Edwardian periods, with headgear frequently singled out for special attention. Notwithstanding the tolerance of bonnets at the Princess's Theatre during the 1870s, noted in chapter six, the Gaiety took a polite but firm stand against the wearing of such accessories within the house during the early-twentieth century. Leigh Hunt would have approved, having expressed his exasperation with these 'great lumps of gauze and silk' almost one hundred years earlier: 'Even a head-dress, without the bonnet, shall force you to play at bo-peep with the stage half the evening; now extinguishing the face of some favourite actress, and now abolishing a general or a murder'; but the 'bonnet is the worst':

> If you sit right behind it, it shall swallow up the whole scene. It makes nothing of a regiment of soldiers, or a mountain, or a forest, or a rising sun; much less of a hero, or of so insignificant a thing as a cottage, and a peasant's family. You may sit at the theatre a whole evening, and not see the leading performer.[28]

Ensuring that Gaiety patrons saw, as well as heard, the actors on stage, the programme accompanying Fred Thompson's *The Kiss Call* in 1919 contained a printed note asking women to remove their hats 'in order not to obstruct the view of those sitting behind', while the unadorned feminine head gracing the document's cover may have served as a graphic reminder of this request (fig. 126).[29]

In acknowledging its potential as a vehicle for both self-expression and self-promotion, Percy Fitzgerald describes the bill of the play as the 'manager's trumpet':

> He imagines that everyone will read and admire the particulars he sets out about himself and his house.[30]

But the relationship between theatrical managements and their audiences often extended beyond the immediate comforts of the venue itself. Jane Moody's

---

[28] Leigh Hunt, 'Bonnets at the Theatre', Hunt, *Dramatic Criticism*, pp. 264–266, rpt. of 'The Play-Goer', *Tatler* 23 March 1831: 2: 687, p. 264.

[29] *The Kiss Call*, by Fred Thompson, programme, Gaiety Theatre, October 1919, qtd. and rpt. in Willmott, p. 1077.

[30] Fitzgerald, 'Growth', p. 546.

observation on the multiplicity of roles assumed by playbills during the nineteenth century acknowledges numerous variations on their form, content and function, stressing the ineluctable presence of the proprietary voice, both before and during a performance:

> The playbill was not simply a piece of advance publicity: it doubled as a programme, miniature review, forum for paper wars with other playhouses, and dramatic manifesto.[31]

Occasionally the inclusion of managerial addresses incited responses from theatregoers. In 1806, for example, the Sans Souci in Leicester Place devoted a section of the bills accompanying its production of *Douglas* to a defence of the juvenile cast in a short essay entitled 'Academic Theatre', which purported to demonstrate 'how far children, well-tutored, are capable of giving amusement while they derive essential benefit themselves'. But Leigh Hunt, distracted perhaps by the fact that the 'girls were twice as tall as the boys, and neither girls nor boys knew their parts', felt compelled to challenge these claims, publishing his rebuttal in the *News* a few days later.[32] At other times the theatrical policy statements printed on bills of the play rapidly descended into thinly disguised—and eventually undisguised—attacks on rival venues, provoking retaliation, not from the public, but from competing managements. In *The Victorian Provincial Printer and the Stage* Robert Wood recounts a lengthy editorial feud conducted between two provincial houses in 1864, which began when the manager of the Hartlepool Theatre, J. C. Hunter, printed a notice at the foot of his playbills, condemning a few rowdy individuals 'whose disreputable and blackguardly conduct in the Theatre led to the stopping of the performance on Saturday last', and offering a reward for their identification. The rival West Hartlepool Theatre Royal capitalised on the implications of this unusual announcement, immediately billing itself, on its own dramatic documents, as a '*Well Conducted Theatre*'. The next Hartlepool Theatre bills dismissed this rhetorical

---

[31] Jane Moody, 'Aspects of Cultural Politics in the London Minor Theatres of the Early Nineteenth Century', D.Phil. diss., University of Oxford, 1993.

[32] Leigh Hunt, 'Academic Theatre', *The News* 17 March 1806: 352, rpt. in Hunt, Appendix, pp. 34–35.

comparison as 'gaggery and puff', vowing to 'continue in the good old fashioned way of *doing* not *boasting*'. The West Hartlepool Theatre Royal presently reserved a prominent place on its playbills for the description of its competition as the 'something misnamed "Theatre", Old Hartlepool'. The retort issued on the following Hartlepool Theatre documents referred to Hunter's rival manager as a 'Toothless Imbecile', whereupon the West Hartlepool Theatre Royal attacked 'Poor Ikey' in its printed rejoinder. The Hartlepool Theatre then returned to a more rhetorical strategy, implicitly condemning the other house through the ostensible proclamation of its own mandate: 'No obtaining a License to the Theatre in another's name. No juggling with tradesmen's bills. No swindling actors'. With another reference to 'Ikey', the West Hartlepool Theatre Royal responded in a more personal tone: 'The Animal whose trail is Slimy (or Beery!) *was discharged* from the Theatre Royal, West Hartlepool, for *Drunkenness!*'. The Hartlepool Theatre answered this declaration with an interrogation: 'Who purchased a Booth for £100—paid £40—gave a bill for the balance, and then picked the receiver's pocket of the said bill?'. The next documents to be issued from the West Hartlepool Theatre Royal included the simple announcement that 'Legal Proceedings have been commenced'. The playbills themselves subsequently appeared before the Courts as exhibits in the resulting case.[33] Surrounded now by writs, torts, affidavits and contracts, these passionately dramatic documents temporarily acquired the status of legal evidence, constituting just one example of the complex relationships shared among bills of the play and innumerable additional texts.

Concurrent Documentation

Typically liaising between the extant written text, supplied by the playwright, and the ephemeral performance text, created each evening by the company, bills of the play exemplify their mediating qualities most obviously during the actual

---

[33] Robert Wood, *Printer*, pp. 25–29.

enactment of the drama. But this interactive potential is by no means confined to the printed script and its realisation on the stage. For centuries playbills and programmes have existed alongside a variety of other documents, both directly and indirectly connected with the performances in progress. Often these additional texts were merely referred to in the bills; sometimes they were distributed with the bills; and at other times they replaced the bills altogether.

From as early as the eighteenth century playbills encouraged their readers' acquisition within the theatre of song books and other items pertaining to the staged entertainment, discussed in chapter three. During the summer season of 1778, for example, the bills accompanying the performance of an operatic drama at the Haymarket advertised the availability of 'Songs of *The Spanish Barber* … at the Theatre'.[34] In the following century the same venue announced the sale of the script itself on the premises: the bills produced in conjunction with the staging of a play by James Robinson Planché informed spectators that '*Who's Your Friend?* … is published in Webster's National Acting Drama, and may be had in the Theatre'.[35] The optimal appreciation of classical drama in performance occasionally required the assistance of additional documentation, especially when a 'successful Tragedy … [had been] Freely Adapted from … [a] Translation of … [a] reproduction of … [an] imitation of EURIPIDES'. Playbill readers baffled by this introduction to *Medea; or, A Libel on the Lady of Colchis*, heading the second half of a double bill in 1856, may have been relieved to discover the following note below the cast list: 'For a Handbook to the Tragedy, see the Flyleaf of this Bill' (fig. 127).[36] Self-referentially a bill of the play might even allude to its own more elegant variants: the programme accompanying Henry Irving's visit to Birmingham in 1904, discussed in chapter six,

---

[34] *The Spanish Barber*, playbill, Haymarket Theatre, 1 August 1778, Charles Dibdin, p. 57.

[35] *Who's Your Friend?*, by James Robinson Planché, playbill, Haymarket Theatre, 23 September 1843, Haymarket, n.pag.

[36] *Like and Unlike*, by W. J. Sorrell and J. Langford, playbill, 24 July 1856, rpt. in John Lewis, *Printed Ephemera*, p. 105.

announces the availability of an 'ILLUSTRATED SOUVENIR OF "BECKET"', which could be 'obtained in the Theatre' (see fig. 112).[37]

Pausing occasionally in their promotion of the current entertainment, bills of the play have sometimes alluded to works entirely distinct from the drama on stage, alternately commenting on the nature of playacting, play production and playbilling itself. Almost 140 years after the publication of Jeremy Collier's *Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage*, the Garrick Club selectively reprinted one of the author's more positive assertions, heading the playbills accompanying Susannah Centlivre's *The Wonder* in 1837 with the following quotation:

> The wit of man cannot invent anything more conducive to virtue and destructive of vice than the Drama.[38]

Eighteen years later Charles Dickens, whose wholehearted endorsement of the stage, reflected in his avid participation in the mounting of amateur theatricals, remains perhaps more immediately apparent than Collier's, briefly revisited one of his own works: on the playbills accompanying the private performance of Wilkie Collins's *The Lighthouse*, performed in 1855 at Tavistock House—'THE SMALLEST THEATRE IN THE WORLD!'—Dickens, the 'LESSEE AND MANAGER', was identified as 'MR. CRUMMLES', the name of the actor-manager portrayed in *The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby*, who himself possesses a keen appreciation of the benefits to be reaped from an attractive bill of the play (fig. 128).[39] At their most self-indulgent moments, bills temporarily forwent both the production and its participants altogether, concentrating instead on the promotion of their own sponsorship: Drury Lane's illustrated programme cover for *The World* in 1884,

---

[37] *The Merchant of Venice*, programme, Birmingham, 1904.

[38] *The Wonder*, by Susannah Centlivre, playbill, Garrick Club, 22 November 1837, Garrick Club, n.pag.

[39] *The Lighthouse*, by Wilkie Collins, playbill, Tavistock House, 16 June 1855, rpt. in Charles Dickens, *Letters*, 7: 920. Dickens's own works were themselves frequently adapted for the stage without the permission of their author—before they had been completed—in imitations claimed by the playbills to have been 'founded on the celebrated "Papers" written by "Boz"', according to Joseph Grego, *Pictorial Pickwickiana*, 2 vols. (London: Chapman, 1899), p. 12.

discussed in chapter six, includes the announcement that 'Applications for Advertisements in this Programme [are] to be made to Alfred Gibbons' (see fig. 93).[40]

Regardless of their surface area, the size of their type and the quality of their illustrations, bills of the play cannot be expected to have contained every informational and promotional detail deemed worthy of sharing with their intended readership. As a result, supplemental documentation has for centuries been published in conjunction with, or at least simultaneous to, the distribution of playbills and programmes. An early example is often claimed to date from 1665 when John Dryden is reputed to have issued a small bill of his own for circulation within the Theatre Royal at the performance of *The Indian Emperour*. The playwright wished to explain the 'Connexion of the *Indian Emperour* to the *Indian Queen*', the former play representing a sequel to the latter, which Dryden had written with Robert Howard. In the following decade Buckingham's *The Rehearsal* appears to allude to this alleged innovation, as Bayes says to Johnson, 'I have printed above a hundred sheets of papyr, to insinuate the Plot into the Boxes'.[41] But, while Dryden's 'Connexion' does list '*The Names of the Persons Represented*', it includes no cast list,[42] and there is no conclusive evidence proving that it was distributed at the playhouse. A similar device was employed when Lord Orrery's *The Black Prince* was produced at the Theatre Royal in 1667. At the first performances various elements from the 'plot of the play' were re-articulated, near its conclusion, through the 'reading of a long letter' by one of the characters; but, according to Samuel Pepys, who attended on 19 October, to 'trouble [the audience] … with a letter of a quarter of an hour long was a most absurd thing', especially when 'everybody was weary of sitting and were already possessed with the effect of the whole letter' anyway. Four days later, on 23 October, when Pepys returned for a second audition, the document in question, no longer a stage property, was instead circulated in the manner of a playbill and, in the opinion of the

---

[40] *The World*, programme, 1884.
[41] *The Rehearsal* [by George Villiers, second Duke of Buckingham] (London, 1672), p. 8.
[42] John Dryden, *The Indian Emperour* (1665), Dryden, *Works*, 9: 27–28.

diarist, the production was 'mightily bettered by the long letter's being printed, and so delivered to every body at their going in'.[43] During the eighteenth century the sale of song books within the theatres acquired increasing popularity; but in the early decades such texts were occasionally distributed without charge to particular sections of the house. At Drury Lane in 1714, for example, at the performance of Colley Cibber's masque, *Venus and Adonis*, a 'Printed book' was to be 'given to each person who pa[id] … to the Pit or Boxes'.[44] Illustration was incorporated into such variants with greater frequency during the nineteenth century, when pictorial 'Concert-party cards … show[ing] the entire company' could be bought with the programme.[45] Other texts continued to be published with a reading audience in mind: in the closing years of the Victorian era, for example, Herbert Beerbohm Tree offered a non-theatrical newssheet, entitled *Topics of the Day*, to patrons attending performances at Her Majesty's Theatre.[46]

On somewhat rarer occasions documents either resembling or concerning bills of the play, in terms of their form, content or function, have been disseminated among the theatregoing population when playbills and programmes have not, though not necessarily at the venues themselves. In 1763, for example, a broadside entitled 'To the Frequenters of the THEATRES' was distributed among London's playgoers in an attempt to unite forces against the managements' abolition of half-price admission fees following the third act of a play. The method by which it was circulated remains somewhat unclear, since such a text would almost certainly be unwelcome in the theatres and since 'all Communication with the Public, by the Channel of the News Papers [had been] … cut off, thro' the Influence of *one of the Theatrical Managers*' (fig. 129).[47] Nevertheless its aims, as expressed by 'An Enemy to Imposition', appear to have been achieved: less than one month later the so-called *Artexerxes* Riot

---

[43] Pepys, 8: 488, 8: 498.
[44] Lawrence, *Playhouse*, 2: 87.
[45] Melling, p. 41.
[46] Cavanagh, p. 28.
[47] 'To the Frequenters of the Theatres', broadside, 25 January 1763, Van Lennep, et al., btw. 4: 880–881.

effectively demolished Covent Garden. Another broadside aimed at the habitual theatregoer was printed and distributed during the nineteenth century; but 'Why do you not go to the PLAY?' is concerned less with uniting the devoted masses than with converting them. The question posed by this document's boldly printed title is subsequently furnished with eight 'ANSWERS' printed in paragraphs of varying lengths, with a reference to '*God Almighty*' appearing in the seventh of these proscriptions:

> Turn to your Bible, my friend (and nobody need be without one in these days), and you will see that what I say is true. You will read there, 'Avoid profane and vain babblings'.—'Be not conformed to this world'.—'Abstain from all appearance of evil'.—'Evil communications corrupt good manners' …

This list of warnings continues at some length, ultimately invoking the 'day of judgment' for its conclusion (fig. 130).[48] While this tract was no more likely to have been welcomed within the theatres than the half-price protest pamphlet described above, it indirectly reflects the playbilling format by virtue of its determination to establish where and when *not* to see what featuring whom.

Some variations on British bills were intended for use on a different continent altogether. In the 1890s, for example, pictorial images resembling those found on the colour-lithographed covers of three-panelled music hall programmes were incorporated into the stationery promoting the *London Gaiety Girls*—'ORGANIZED IN ENGLAND' but based in Cincinnati, Ohio (fig. 131).[49] Lengthier documents, too, have often been destined for a widespread distribution, still recalling particular ingredients commonly found on bills of the play: Joann Green begins her *Small Theatre Handbook* with a dedication to three people, 'in order of appearance';[50] while Ian Bevan concludes *Royal Performances* with an appropriate flourish:

---

[48] 'Why do you not go to the Play?', broadside, printed and sold by E. Wallis, n.d., Theatre Museum: 'Programmes' file.

[49] *The London Gaiety Girls*, stationery, Cincinnati, Ohio, rpt. in Rickards, p. 202.

[50] Joann Green, n.pag.

> we finish with the words that once appeared at the end of every theatre's playbill, and is still the earnest prayer of every player: *Vivat Regina*.[51]

And on rarer occasions still, elements more commonly employed in the manufacture of playbills and programmes have surfaced in completely unrelated artefacts. Following a double slaying by Jack the Ripper in 1888, the publisher of a broadsheet reporting the crime appropriated a 'stock woodcut of a scene from a Victorian melodrama' to accompany the headline 'Two More Horrible Murders in the East-End' (fig. 132).[52]

In the later-eighteenth century one of the oldest extant quasi-dramatic documents to exploit the playbilling format was '*stuck up at Richmond* [Virginia], *on Saturday the 4th of June, 1774, close to the Play-Bill for that day*'. Complete in every detail, this parody scrupulously adheres to the layout of its '*dissipated and gay*' antecedents: *Where*?—'At the THEATRE of the UNIVERSE'; *When*?—'On the EVE OF TIME'; *What*?—'The GREAT ASSIZE, or DAY OF JUDGMENT'; *Who*?—'The Lord Jesus', 'his mighty Angels', a chorus of 'a thousand thousand' and 'ten thousand times ten thousand' supernumeraries. This 'performance' had been arranged by '*Command of the KING OF KINGS … and at the desire of all who love his appearing*'. The scenery would 'surpass every thing that has yet been seen'; and the theatre itself would be 'laid out after a new plan … consist[ing] of Pit and Gallery only':

> contrary to all others, the Gallery is fitted up for the reception of people of high (or *heavenly*) birth; … and the Pit for those of low (or *earthly*) rank … The Door which opens into the Gallery is very narrow, and the Steps up to it are somewhat difficult; for which reason there are seldom many people about it. … But the Door that gives entrance into the Pit is very wide and very commodious; which causes such numbers to flock to it that it is generally crowded.

The first act was to be 'OPENED BY AN ARCHANGEL, WITH THE TRUMP OF GOD'; the second act would consist of a 'PROCESSION of SAINTS in WHITE …

---

[51] Bevan, p. 266.

[52] 'Two More Horrible Murders in the East-End', woodcut, 1888, rpt. in Jennifer Jones, 'The Face of Villainy on the Victorian Stage', *Theatre Notebook* 50 (1996), p. 105.

with GOLDEN HARPS, accompanied with Shouts of Joy and Songs of Praise'; but the third act promised an 'Assemblage of all the UNREGENERATE', in which the 'Music will consist chiefly of Cries ... accompanied with Weeping, Wailing, Mourning, Lamentation and Woe'. The evening was to '*conclude with an Oration by the SON OF GOD*', following which 'the Curtain will drop' (fig. 133).[53] The author of this bill—thought to have been Rowland Hill, the 'first chairman of the committee of the Religious Tract Society'[54]—included additional information concerning reservations:

> TICKETS for the PIT, at the easy purchase of following the vain Pomps and Vanities of the fashionable World, and the Desires and Amusements of the Flesh. ... To be had at every flesh-pleasing Assembly.
>
> TICKETS for the GALLERY, at no less rate than being Converted ... forsaking all ... denying self, taking up the Cross ... and following Christ in the Regeneration. ... To be had no where but in the Word of God.

Playbill parodies were equally popular within the theatrical community itself. Some time between 1819 and 1826, during Robert William Elliston's management of Drury Lane, the notorious hyperbole characterising his own promotional announcements was satirised in the following mock-up:

> *PUFFIANA; or, EVERY GENTLEMAN HIS OWN TRUMPETER.*
> *Respectfully Enscribed, without Permission,*
> TO THAT PRINCE OF PUFFERS, AND PARAGON OF PERFORMERS,
> ROBERT WILLIAM ELLISTON, ESQ.
> *LESSEE AND EXHIBITOR*
> OF THE PATENT PUPPET SHOW, THEATRE ROYAL DRURY-LANE:
> CONTAINING
> SUNDRY SPECIMENS OF THE MOST APPROVED STYLES OF PUFFING,
> AS USED BY THE FIRST LOTTERY OFFICES,
> MEDICAL BOARDS, AND BLACKING WAREHOUSES, IN THE UNITED KINGDOM.
> BY GALE GULL'EM, Q.T.Z.
> MEMBER OF THE ROYAL COLLEGE OF COZENERS.[55]

Politicians, too, could expect to find themselves lampooned in a similar manner, especially during the campaigns preceding elections. In 1832 Whig

---

[53] *The Great Assize*, broadside, Theatre of the Universe, 4 June 1774, microfiche, Early American Imprints, 1st ser. (New York: Readex Microprint, 1985), no. 42603.

[54] 'Hill, Rowland', *Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. Leslie Stephen and Sidney Lee, 31 vols. to date (London: Smith, 1908–), 9: 862.

[55] *Puffiana*, by Gale Gull'em, broadside, c. 1819–1826, transcribed in Clifford John Williams, p. 225.

supporters devised an anti-Tory hustings poster with the layout of a pantomime playbill shortly before a Hertford election, targeting Viscount Ingestre, 'one of the two Tory candidates, massively and corruptly supported by the Marquess of Salisbury, local grandee'.[56] This sparingly illustrated document purports to announce a performance by the 'CELEBRATED CONJUROR, JACK TAR', who would—playing on the candidate's surname—'IN--JEST--TRY' to amuse the electors (fig. 134).[57] A similar squib printed by the Tories prior to an Ipswich election in the following decade claims to commemorate the performance of 'WHIG GRATITUDE: OR, A NEW WAY TO PAY OLD DEBTS' at the 'IPSWICH THEATRE' (fig. 135).[58]

Less controversially, though with equal relish, the playbilling format has been incorporated into various gastronomical documents connected with food and drink. Following its renovation in 1834, the Equestrian Coffee-House published an advertisement purporting to be a 'Surrey Theatre' bill, including a convincing insignia at the top. The venue was pronounced '*Open for the Season*', with the additional claim that 'many DISTINGUISHED FOREIGNERS' had been engaged (to supply liquor), along with an abundance of '*NATIONAL TALENT*' (to brew beer). The proprietor, Benjamin Smith Fairbrother, declared his pleasure in being able to announce a 'Succession of Entertainments highly conducive to the refreshment of the body', incorporating into the remainder of his text a series of phrases resembling the titles of popular contemporary entertainments, including 'BEFORE BREAKFAST', 'Too Late for Dinner!', 'WHERE SHALL I DINE?' and 'NO SONG, NO SUPPER!'. In concluding this clever pastiche, Fairbrother announced that the 'PRICES WILL REMAIN AS HERETOFORE'; that 'PRIVATE BOXES' will be available at no extra charge; and that the '*Doors open the first thing in the morning, and continue so till the finish of the Performances*'. Even the royal flourish, 'VIVANT REX ET

---

[56] Derek Forbes, letter to the author, 23 July 1997.
[57] *Jack Tar*, broadside, 2 August 1832, Hertford Museum.
[58] *Whig Gratitude*, broadside, Ipswich Theatre, 1845, rpt. in John Lewis, *Letterforms*, p. 28.

REGINA!' was included near the foot of the bill; but the very last word was appropriately reserved for the bottom line: 'No Money returned' (fig. 136).[59] Ten years later a Chelsea grocer published a similar document just before Christmas, putatively celebrating a 'NEW, GRAND, PORTABLE CHRISTMAS PANTOMIME ... ENTITLED HARLEQUIN PEEL; Or, Plum Pudding and the Young'uns Treat'. The 'performance' was to take place at Williams's Victoria Tea, Coffee, and Fruit Warehouse on 25 December 1844, and featured a cast list which included Mr. Raisin in the role of Old Father Valencia, who would 'tumble head over heels into the pudding pan'; Mr. Currant as Captain Patras, who would 'submit to be well ducked into three or four basins of water'; Miss Nutmeg Cinnamon taking the part of Lady Spice, who would 'try to hide ... by mixing herself in the batter'; and Mr. Orange Lemon impersonating Sir Sliding Peel, who would 'spring into the pudding-pan to follow the object of his affection, and rescue her'. The afterpiece, 'A SET OF QUADRILLES', included appearances by Captain Port, Lady Sherry, General Claret and the Marquis of Gunpowder. Fairbrother admirably confined the overtly commercial section of this advertisement to its final few lines, listing 'all the necessary Characters for the performance of the above Piece', together with their 'LOW PRICES' and the shop's address, at the very foot of the page (fig. 137).[60]

Folded programmes, too, have provided the formal template for seasonal parodies. An early-twentieth-century greeting card effectively borrowed the popular layout of its contemporary dramatic documents in order to announce a 'performance' at the House of Laughter, on Christmas Day, of 'HAPPY DAYS'. The *dramatis personae* reflect the positive tone of the title:

> Joy Endless
> C. Sunshine
> Felicity Bright
> Glory Great

---

[59] *Equestrian Coffee-House*, broadside, Surrey [1834?], rpt. in William G. Knight, *A Major London 'Minor'* (London: Society for Theatre Research, 1997), p. 148. '1834' appears, handwritten, near the top of the bill.

[60] *Harlequin Peel*, broadside, Williams's Victoria Tea, Coffee and Fruit Warehouse, Chelsea, 25 December 1844, Theatre Museum: 'Programmes' file.

B. Merry
'Rainbow' Hugh
Seymour Fun

The promised 'SCENES OF GLADNESS AND REVELRY', produced by Happy Mirth and Jolly Gambol, feature music by Exuberance with lyrics by Inspiration—all under the proprietorship of Sunny Face.[61]

The playful appropriation of the playbilling format extended into the later-twentieth century when in 1975 a friend of Tennessee Williams 'had a batch of stationery made out of an old play-bill for the original *Streetcar* prod[uction]'.[62] In Britain, however, it is perhaps best exemplified in a document produced on behalf of the Society for Theatre Research to honour Michael Booth when he retired after twenty-two years as an editor of *Theatre Notebook*. Composed by Frances Dann and designed and typeset by Leonie Forbes, it allegedly commemorates a performance of the '*Rival Editors* or, Sent to Coventry', and scrupulously adheres to a nineteenth-century layout. Separate cast lists for the 'Comick Opera', the '*favourite Burletta*' and the 'GRAND NEW PANTOMIME' are followed by numerous scenic descriptions; and the concluding line announces that 'Books of the Pantomime may be had … at the Opera House' (fig. 138).[63]

The extent to which the form, content and function of playbills and programmes have for centuries been incorporated into a number of related yet distinct additional texts hints at the significance bills of the play have historically enjoyed in contributing to the audience's complete experience of the unfolding performance event. The very consultation of the bill often amounts to a small but happy occasion unto itself, as noted at the beginning of this chapter; for, among a group of friends, the document's owner enjoys the 'glory of being able to lend it' while, to a solitary

---

[61] *Happy Days*, by Exuberance and Inspiration, greeting card, n.d., Theatre Museum: 'Programmes' file.

[62] Tennessee Williams, 'To Maria St. Just', 9 September 1975, *Five O'Clock Angel: Letters of Tennessee Williams to Maria St. Just* (London: Deutsch, 1991), p. 330. This letter was itself written on 'letterhead featuring the *Playbill* program of *A Streetcar Named Desire*'.

[63] *The Rival Editors*, broadside, Theatre Notebook, London, 14 May 1996 (Hertford: Blot, 1996), Derek Forbes's personal collection.

spectator, it represents a 'companion'.[64] To still other observers of the drama a bill of the play has provided the means to rather different ends: the artist in the theatre, Ellen Breitman notes, 'drawing and sketching not only the action on stage but also the full range of audience persona', enters the venue 'costumed in spectator clothes with program and pencil as props';[65] while yet another sort of patron has remained equally indifferent to the editorial content—though for different reasons, as explained by Henry Mayhew and one of his candid interviewees, discussing the Victoria Theatre in the nineteenth century:

> many go … who cannot read, or who can read but imperfectly, and they love to 'make-believe' they are 'good scholards' by parading the consulting of a play-bill.[66]

Almost everyone attending a performance stands to benefit in some way from the bill of the play. Ronald Bryden has declared that the 'importance of drama is that it is almost the last public art whose enjoyment depends on a shared, not a private, response'.[67] Playbills and programmes can contribute to this communal aspect of the theatrical experience by providing common points of reference to the entire house; and, as David J. Skal observes, a document incorporating numerous and varied texts represents an 'invaluable tool in strengthening an audience's … sense of involvement'.[68] Mariana Net suggests that playbills, programmes, posters, foyer exhibits and pre-show music initiate a form of communication, not merely among spectators, but between performers and observers:

> This complex 'text' is a vehicle of the would-be 'dialogue' between the Enunciator and the Enunciatee, enabling the audience to achieve a deeper understanding not only of the play, but also of the specific means employed in that particular production.[69]

---

[64] Hunt, 'The Play-Bills', p. 233.
[65] Breitman, p. 55.
[66] Mayhew's information was provided, on this occasion, by a 'person familiar with the theatres', 1: 288.
[67] Ronald Bryden, 'Why Theatres?', *Observer* 14 January 1968, p. 8.
[68] Skal, p. 121.
[69] Net, p. 317.

Bills of the play continue to contribute significantly to the development of an audience that 'understands what is taking place on the stage, not merely the action of the play but the spirit of the thing that is being created'.[70] It has been very difficult over the centuries, however, to please everybody: the grumpy theatregoer depicted in J. Bernard Partridge's Victorian illustration, for example, could not possibly have expected to benefit from his programme if he refused even to read it (fig. 139).[71]

This chapter has been concerned with the variety of means by which playbills and programmes have accompanied their owners through an entire evening at the theatre, helping to focus their attentions on various aspects of the play and its production and on various characteristics of the theatre and its management. While the location and date of the performance typically lose most of their importance following an audience's punctual arrival at the correct venue, the entertainment itself and the players enacting it simultaneously acquire a proportionally increased significance, and spectators almost invariably consult their bills, in the first instance, to discover what scenes feature whom. Temporal references to the relationships between acts often provide additional assistance in the navigation of the drama; yet their very presence in the bills—defying the imaginary time frame within which the play is set by existing before, during and after it—threatens to some degree the immediacy often felt to be desirable in the reception of a live performance. References to refreshment, however, have invariably escaped challenge; and numerous suggestions regarding the consumption of various commodities have been included in bills of the play since the nineteenth century. A few reasonable restrictions on movement within the house have often been listed in print as well, along with specific requests concerning the suitability of certain attire. But it is through their innumerable managerial addresses that playbills and programmes have most directly, most personally and most profoundly communicated to their audiences.

---

[70] Purdom, p. 179.

[71] J. Bernard Partridge, illustration, Jerome K. Jerome, *Stage-Land: Curious Habits and Customs of Its Inhabitants* (London: Chatto, 1890), n.pag.

And it is frequently these idiosyncratic editorials, not merely an endless supply of names and dates, which, long after the conclusion of a performance, serve to convey the atmosphere in which it was staged, the relevant bills no longer accompanying the present, but functioning instead in reflection on the past—the subject of the following and concluding chapter.

CHAPTER 9

IN REFLECTION ON THE PAST

Years, decades and even centuries after the conclusion of the productions they once announced and accompanied, theatre playbills and programmes continue to reveal information about the performance events with which they were connected. For historians these texts provide invaluable primary evidence, not only of the stage, but of the society in which it was situated. In the owners of bills from entertainments personally attended such documents invariably evoke nostalgic recollections of specific visits to the theatre, individual performers and particular plays. This final chapter is concerned with the role of the bill of the play in reflection on the past, as a chronicler of both theatre history and social history—collected, preserved, sorted, displayed, re-sold and even re-published, privately, commercially and institutionally.

Theatre History and Social History

Addressing the British Records Association in 1957, on behalf of the Society for Theatre Research, Muriel St. Clare Byrne declared that 'without the history of the theatre the history of the drama becomes academic and unreal'.[1] Yet, as noted in chapter three, an utterly comprehensive chronicle of the stage is precluded both by its very nature as an ephemeral medium and by the fact that documentation within the performing arts generally remains sporadic and disorganised. Moreover, as Max Harris observes, even the acknowledgement of a play's realisation in space and time merely contributes towards a more inclusive theatre history until it is enhanced by an awareness of the cultural and temporal relativism differentiating individual productions of a given work:

> The relationship between performance and audience has to be conceived not in terms of a constant text and a transhistorical

---

[1] Byrne, 'Records', p. 1.

> audience, but in terms of relationships between particular performances and local, historically embedded audiences.[2]

Bills of the play, often the only records commemorating productions of the past, assist significantly in the retrospective identification, diachronically, of the drama which has been staged from the Renaissance onwards. Furthermore, as texts which are invariably republished with each new production, they reveal, synchronically, the artistic and societal preoccupations of the practitioners whose efforts they immortalise. Facilitating both syntagmatic and paradigmatic approaches to the analysis of plays, players, playgoers and playhouses, these dramatic documents consistently fulfil what John Barber terms the historian's 'need for a record'.[3] W. J. Lawrence expresses his gratitude to the 'old bill-collector' for liberating theatrical scholarship from 'mendacious anecdote, turgid picturesqueness, and imaginative detail';[4] Adrian Wilson refers to the 'fascinating pageant of the theatre's development' embodied in the 'playbill … programme and poster';[5] and Mary C. Henderson situates these useful texts within the broadest possible context, not only acknowledging that 'they have become documents of the history of the theater', but opining that the 'larger history of civilization would be incomplete and duller without them'.[6]

Bills of the play have variously indicated 'how theatres were run, what was popular, how productions might have appeared, and even how audiences behaved'.[7] Describing playbills as a 'record of the languages in which a theatre presented itself to its public', Jane Moody notes that, in addition to 'providing important empirical details about performers, the price of seats, and managers', the very same documents have additionally been used to 'reconstruct performances of plays whose texts either remained unpublished or are no longer extant'.[8] Numerous operatic versions of

---

[2] Max Harris, *Theatre and Incarnation* (London: Macmillan, 1990), p. 62.
[3] John Barber, 'The Need for a Record', *Daily Telegraph* 4 October 1982, p. 13.
[4] Lawrence, 'Old Playbills', p. 221.
[5] Adrian Wilson, 'Early Playbills', *Theatre Notebook* 14 (1959–60), p. 142.
[6] Mary C. Henderson, p. 153.
[7] Haill, 'Bill', p. 280.
[8] Moody, pp. 14–15.

William Shakespeare's works, for example, are 'known of only through playbills' and other related ephemera;[9] and many pantomimes, 'written by … theatre management[s] and performed for only one season', owe their preservation to the 'programme [which] can provide the only record of what actually took place'.[10] Additionally, the popularity enjoyed by specific companies and venues is often implicitly charted through the appearance of benefit announcements inserted into the documents; for, as Arnold Hare observes, the 'number of bespeaks in a season is a useful guide to the amount of support the players are gaining from local society'.[11] And, in the absence of a permanent venue, the 'manuscript directions for the playbills, the proofs themselves, and the frequent letters received apologising for the non-payment of bills' often comprise the 'main source of information' about strolling provincial players.[12]

Bills of the play, however, can raise as many questions as they answer, especially when the information they contain is incomplete or inaccurate. Seeking to establish the identity of an unnamed theatre featured in a particular specimen from their extensive collection, Raymond Mander and Joe Mitchenson wrote to *Theatre Notebook* in 1947 requesting assistance.[13] Their curiosity was satisfied in the following issue, as Sybil Rosenfeld 'deduced from the local name of the ballet and from the street names given' on the document that the 'theatre to which this bill refers is Liverpool'.[14] Questions of a more theoretical nature have also been posed, retrospectively, concerning the relationship of the imagery employed in theatrical advertising, both to the stage it depicted and to the spectators it attracted. Lisa Cooper Warren's interrogative approach to the production of Victorian melodrama, as

---

[9] Stephens, p. 64.
[10] Cavanagh, p. 59.
[11] Hare, p. 26.
[12] Robert Wood, *Printer*, p. 3.
[13] Raymond Mander and Joe Mitchenson, 'Identification of Theatres', *Theatre Notebook* 2 (1947–1948), p. 20.
[14] Sybil Rosenfeld, 'Identification of Playbill', *Theatre Notebook* 2 (1947–1948), p. 40.

expressed in the abstract to her doctoral thesis, indicates the extent to which bills of the play can assist in endeavours to reconstruct the past:

> What do illustrations from posters, handbills, programs, and souvenir items reveal about the staging, blocking, special effects, costumes, and gesture seen onstage … ?
> …
> Do the illustrations accurately represent scenes as they looked … ?
> …
> What do the illustrations tell us about the audiences for whom they were intended … ?[15]

Warren's queries are particularly valuable for their versatility: they might as easily be applied to any period during which documentary iconography was exploited, or to any medium incorporating it. Most importantly, however, they confirm the infinitude of both labour and reward awaiting historians with the fortitude and vision to spend hours sifting through unsorted collections.

Numerous theatrical annals have relied heavily for their evidence on an abundance of printed ephemera connected with the billing of performances. An early example is embodied in John Downes's *Roscius Anglicanus; or, An Historical Review of the Stage*, representing an ambitious seventeenth-century dramatic catalogue:

> The Names of the Principal Actors and Actresses, who Perform'd in the Chiefest Plays in each House. With the Names of the most taking Plays; and Modern Poets … from 1660, to 1706.

As the 'Book-keeper' at Lincoln's Inn Fields, Downes was 'long Conversant with the Plays and Actors' at that venue. Furthermore, as the 'Prompter … [to] the Original Company, under the Patent of Sir *William Davenant*', he would almost certainly have been responsible for drafting the playbills, as described in chapter two. Like bills of the play, the entries in *Roscius Anglicanus* include the location, date, title and cast connected with the relevant entertainments. Although Downes's account contains a number of mistakes involving performances at Drury Lane, its essential accuracy is owed to the author's familiarity with 'all the Parts in each Play'; and, where Lincoln's

---

[15] Lisa Cooper Warren, 'Boucicault and Melodrama Onstage', *DAI* 45 (1984): 685A, University of Georgia, 1984, *Dissertation Abstracts Ondisc*, CD-ROM, UMI-Proquest, 1994.

Inn Fields and Dorset Garden are concerned, 'he is not very Erronious in his Relation'.[16] Drury Lane, during the period of David Garrick's management, has been similarly commemorated with the assistance of its bills: in 1938 the *Drury Lane Calendar 1747–1776* was 'compiled from the playbills' printed for that theatre over the thirty-year period specified in the title. In part one—a 'calendar of performances'—the titles of plays are 'given as they appear in the playbills, but without subtitles or explanatory phrases'; while in part two—an 'alphabetical list of plays'—the cast is 'given as fully as the information contained in the bills will allow, and subsequent changes are noted as they occur'.[17] Perhaps the most exhaustive ephemera-assisted chronology to have been attempted within the British theatre is that undertaken in *The London Stage 1660–1800: A Calendar of Plays, Entertainments and Afterpieces, Together with Casts, Box-Receipts and Contemporary Comment, Compiled from the Playbills, Newspapers and Theatrical Diaries of the Period.* Initiated by William Van Lennep and completed by four additional editors, this massive record comprises five chronological parts printed in eleven lengthy volumes; but, while the 'actual playbills for … performance[s] at Drury Lane, Covent Garden, and the Haymarket' provide much of the source material from which the *Calendar* was derived, the editors acknowledge that their 'regularized format, listing seriatim the mainpiece, afterpiece, entr'acte dancing, singing, specialty entertainment, and comment, precludes exact typographical reproduction of the playbill[s]' themselves.[18]

Various additional stage histories have benefited from frequent recourse to old bills of the play, notable among them John Genest's ten-volume *Account of the English Stage, from the Restoration in 1660 to 1830.* Referring to the years 1711 and 1712 in the second volume the author declares that 'All the bills for this season … are from the original numbers of the *Spectator* in my own possession'.[19] But, as Percy

---

[16] Downes, A2.

[17] MacMillan, pp. vi, 201.

[18] Van Lennep, et al., pp. 5: 3, 4: 2. Qualifications similar to that quoted from part four are found in parts two and three, 2: 2, 3: 2.

[19] John Genest, *Some Account of the English Stage*, 10 vols. (Bath: Carrington 1832), 2: 501.

Fitzgerald notes in declaring Genest to be the 'historian of the play-bills', newspaper advertisements alone were 'not enough for our Genest' since the play was frequently changed after their printing: an actual playhouse bill constituted a more reliable record.[20] Provincial stages, too, have been represented in chronicles such as Robert King's *North Shields Theatres: A History of the Theatres of North Shields and the Adjoining Village of Tynemouth from 1765, including an Account of the Travelling Booths, with Illustrations from Playbills*, published in 1948, the bibliography from which lists, among its twenty-five entries, simply, 'Playbills'.[21] Additionally, the activities of specific companies, venues and seasons have been similarly documented through their associated bills: the Incorporated Stage Society is celebrated in a monograph entitled *Ten Years: 1899–1909*, in which eighty-three pages are devoted to transcriptions of the 'Programmes [from] … Fifty Productions', including casts, credits and brief, itemised scene descriptions;[22] the legendary collaboration between John Eugene Vedrenne and Harley Granville-Barker is commemorated in James Desmond MacCarthy's *The Court Theatre 1904–1907*, which includes a Playbill Appendix containing 'exact reprints of all programmes'—thirty-two plays by seventeen authors, totalling 946 performances;[23] and J. C. Trewin's account of *The Edwardian Theatre*, published in 1976, was assisted by the 'gift of an invaluable pack of programmes', most 'provincial and a few from London'.[24]

Personal reminiscences of lives spent in the theatre frequently incorporate bills of the play into their narratives as points of reference, both for the author and for the reader. Near the end of the twentieth century, for example, John Gielgud published his own *Notes from the Gods*, 'culled from old programmes' dating from between 1917 and 1925 on which the author subsequently augmented the 'juvenile

---

[20] Fitzgerald, Growth and Evolution, pp. 530–531.
[21] Robert King, *North Shields Theatres*, p. 147.
[22] Incorporated Stage Society, *Ten Years: 1899–1909* (London: Chiswick, 1909), pp. 13–95.
[23] James Desmond MacCarthy, *The Court Theatre 1904–1907: A Commentary and Criticism* (London: Bullen, 1907).
[24] J. C. Trewin, *The Edwardian Theatre* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1976), pp. xiv, 7.

reminiscences of ... [his] boyhood' with additional annotation in 1993.[25] During the period under review in the present work, however, the greatest proponent of the playbill as an *aide memoire* remained Tate Wilkinson. In his preface to the *Memoirs of His Own Life*, Wilkinson confessed that 'genuine letters and ancient play-bills' were the only extant sources from which his first four-volume history had been compiled—and that, in the case of the latter items, only two printed before 1753 had survived: 'all the others are actually from memory'.[26] In *The Wandering Patentee*, Wilkinson acknowledged that his 'bills from 1766' onwards constituted a 'more regular assistant than memory, as to the material article of the dates' cited in his second four-volume history. Yet in the final lines on the last page of the ultimate volume the author addressed the following note to 'Gentlemen of Provincial Theatres':

> Mr. Wilkinson requests, that professors of the Sock and Buskin will not favour him with play-bills from the several theatres; for they prove truly expensive to Mr. Wilkinson, and must do so to every manager and performer troubled with such inclosures, which are really of no value.[27]

In spite of his life-long interest in bills of all description, the travelling circuit manager apparently eschewed unsolicited donations from strangers.

While providing an abundance of primary evidence towards the study of theatre history, playbills and programmes have inevitably reflected the social climate in which they were published since at least the seventeenth century. The very existence of the *Eunuchus* bill from 1681, described in chapter four, represents, in Joseph Macleod's opinion, 'one more proof dispelling the fallacy that the Calvinist church suppressed all theatrical endeavour in Scotland'.[28] A more explicit lenience was sometimes expressed on bills of the play in the eighteenth century when, for

---

[25] John Gielgud, letter to Richard Mangan, 15 June 1992, rpt. in *Notes from the Gods*, by John Gielgud, ed. Richard Mangan (London: Hern, 1994), n.pag.

[26] Wilkinson, *Memoirs*, 1: xii.

[27] Wilkinson, *Patentee*, 1: 15, 4: 268. Almost two centuries later Wilkinson's preservation of his own playbills proved additionally helpful to Charles Beecher Hogan in compiling *An Index to* The Wandering Patentee (London: Society for Theatre Research, 1973), p. 7.

[28] Macleod, p. 14.

example, military press gangs temporarily suspended their recruiting drives. The following announcement is reported to have appeared in 1794 on a bill announcing the performance of *Love in a Village* at the North Shields Theatre:

> Lieutenant Kelly, Lieutenant King and Lieutenant Bevis Pledge their word of Honour, that no Seaman whatever shall be molested by their People on Play Nights, from the Hour of Four in the Afternoon to Six the following Morning, after which time the Indulgence ceases.[29]

Keepers of the domestic peace were also invoked in warnings, printed on playbills during the nineteenth century, that 'Any Person throwing anything into the Pit or on the Stage, or using bad language, and whistling, or other unseemly noises, interruptions of the performance, and annoyance to the audience, will immediately be taken into custody by the Police Officers appointed for that purpose' (fig. 140).[30] Many Victorian bills bluntly directed their readers to pre-designated sections of the theatre according to their social standing, with the gallery often reserved 'for the Working Classes', as specified on the Warrington Music Hall specimen described in chapter seven (see fig. 122).[31] But in the post-Edwardian theatre programmes of the early-twentieth century equally pointed references to rank and affluence were just as often contained within the advertisements, such as that found in the document commemorating the production of *The Dollar Princess* at Daly's Theatre, placed by a Mr. William Pierreport:

> Inquiry Agent to the Nobility and Gentry, entrusted with divorce and delicate negotiations in all parts of the world. Go to him if BLACKMAILED or in difficulties. Telegraphic address: BULLSEYE: LONDON.[32]

While at the time of their initial inclusion such allusions to the prevailing social climate probably escaped especial attention, generations later they furnish some of the most interesting incidental information to be gleaned from playbills and programmes,

---

[29] This paraphrase is attributed to Mr. Fred Lee Cailer in Robert King, *North Shields Theatres*, p. 33.
[30] *The Pride of the Market*, playbill, Howard Street Theatre, North Shields, 8 November 1852, rpt. in Robert King, *North Shields Theatres*, p. 85.
[31] *My Cousin Tom*, playbill, 1839.
[32] Qtd. in Willmott, p. 1098.

helping to explain the vast quantities in which such documents remain preserved at innumerable collections and archives throughout the world.

Collections and Archives

As noted in chapter three, playbills and programmes form just one class of 'fugitive material' which, according to Louis A. Rachow, 'may be divided roughly into four main groups: clippings, photographs, playbills and programmes, and originals'.[33] Such materials are often available for consultation within private, commercial and institutional collections, many of which are listed in various directories—European, North American and international. Diana Howard's *Directory of Theatre Resources*, for example, contains information about several libraries and record offices in Britain, often specifying the number of playbills and programmes held and the chronological periods they represent.[34] Howard herself relied extensively on bills of the play whilst researching *London Theatres and Music Halls, 1850–1950*, which also includes a concise 'Directory of Collections'.[35]

The preservation, restoration, storage, retrieval and even destruction of various playbilling artefacts, 'in accordance with the varied aspects of their handling and use', remain the concerns of both archivists and scholars. Rachow states that filing materials such as mounting boards and papers should be acid free; that special collections should be housed in air-conditioned and humidified rooms; and that fragile specimens, or 'those in poor condition or of great age, may be mounted in loose-leaf scrapbooks or laminated or microfilmed'.[36] Other forms of preservation,

---

[33] Rachow, 'Care', p. 25.

[34] Diana Howard, *Directory of Theatre Resources*, 2nd ed. (N.p.: Library Association Information Services Group and Society for Theatre Research, 1968). American repositories are well documented in Lee Ash and William G. Miller, *Subject Collections*, 6th ed., vol. 2. (New York: Bowker, 1985); Canadian holdings are listed in Heather McCallum, *Theatre Resources in Canadian Collections*, Research Collections in Canadian Libraries 2 (Ottawa: National Library of Canada, 1973); and international archives are detailed in Barbara J. Pruett, *Popular Entertainment Research* (Metuchen, New Jersey: Scarecrow, 1992).

[35] Diana Howard, *London Theatres and Music Halls, 1850–1950* (London: Library Association, 1970), pp. 277–280.

[36] Rachow, 'Care', pp. 25, 27, 30.

less dependent on technology, have resulted from the sheer indifference of the original owners. Arnold Hare notes that occasionally a playbill 'falls out of the yellowing pages of an old book after serving as a long-forgotten book-marker', or is 'revealed by stripping layers of wallpaper from an old wall'.[37] The oldest extant American playbill commemorates a performance of Thomas Otway's *The Orphan* at the Theater in Nassau Street, New York, in 1750 (fig. 141).[38] George Parker Winship summarises the events contributing to this specimen's survival:

> the original bill … was saved by someone who pasted it on the back of an old mirror. A later owner protected it from further injury by covering it with varnish.[39]

To the 'sophisticated, perhaps overcritical, eye' of Edwin Wolf II, however, the 'type under the varnish appears so uniformly black and so regular that one cannot help but think it is a facsimile'.[40] On other occasions 'broadsheets, and posters, which have been pasted or painted directly on brickwork … appear when a building is being demolished and a gable wall exposed for the first time for many years'.[41]

Those more visibly betraying their age often require special restorative attention before they can be satisfactorily displayed. Elizabeth Leach recalls a 'finely woven pure silk' bill given to Manchester's Central Library which required steam-ironing at a high setting 'before it could be mounted because it was received crushed like a ball of tissue paper'.[42] The attention given to such resuscitation is described with almost passionate emphasis by Evžen Turnovský:

> The old ones enchant us most … They are dying under our hands, and we collect them and nurse them and repair them with the greatest care.[43]

---

[37] Hare, p. 25.

[38] *The Orphan*, by Thomas Otway, playbill, Nassau Street Theatre, New York, 26 March 1750, Harvard Theatre Collection: 'New York, Theatre in Nassau Street, Playbills'.

[39] George Parker Winship, *The First American Play-Bill Known to Be in Existence*, Harvard Theatre Collection: TS 272.5F, n.pag.

[40] Edwin Wolf II, 'Colonial American Playbills', *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 97 (1973), p. 101.

[41] Makepeace, p. 67.

[42] Leach, p. 10.

[43] Turnovský, n.pag.

The storage and retrieval of playbills and programmes, however well preserved, presents a different set of problems. Muriel St. Clare Byrne acknowledges that the theatre itself 'cannot be its own archivist in any comprehensive way', since most performance venues contain insufficient space for the housing of records.[44] Even when an appropriate location has been found the objects themselves prove difficult to contain, as the vast range of sizes and shapes published for every new production complicates their binding.[45] Nevertheless a degree of uniformity is sometimes attempted: playbills in the Kemble-Devonshire Collection, for example, housed in California's Huntington Library, are 'trimmed, mounted, and bound in quarto-size volumes of one season each'.[46] Folio-size specimens, presumably, are either folded or stored separately, and not 'trimmed' in half; yet the inadvertent bisection of folded documents mounted in scrapbooks remains another obstacle to satisfactory storage for, when 'opened up, they can break into several pieces along the line of the fold'.[47] This is precisely the fate which befell the *great bill* published in 1705 by the Queen's Theatre, a fragment of which is reproduced in chapter four (see fig. 51):

> The original of this is in the library of the Garrick Club, but it has been folded down the middle and sometime in the past the right-hand half got torn off and is now lost.[48]

Prior to this accident, a type-facsimile made '*From the original Play-bill, in the Possession of* JOHN NIXON, *Esq.*' had been undertaken and was printed in the *European Magazine and London Review* in 1807 (fig. 142).[49]

In the later-twentieth century, both microform and the World Wide Web have assisted in the replication and distribution of items from major collections of playbills and programmes, facilitating much more convenient arrangements for their storage

---

[44] Byrne, 'Records', p. 3.
[45] Fitz-Gerald, p. 309.
[46] MacMillan, p. v.
[47] Makepeace, p. 67.
[48] Speaight, *Memorabilia*, p. 17.
[49] *The Confederacy*, by John Vanbrugh, playbill [copy], Queen's Theatre, Haymarket, 6 November 1705, rpt. in 'Copy of a Play-bill of the Year 1705', *European Magazine and London Review* 52 (July–December 1807), pp. 108–109.

and retrieval. Many British playbills from the Harvard Theatre Collection, for example, have been preserved in this way: there are '100 reels of microfilm in the collection, separated theatre by theatre', representing fifteen playhouses.[50] The extensive collection at London's Theatre Museum is extremely well represented, with over 100,000 playbills from 250 theatres reproduced on 'archivally permanent silver microfiche', accompanied by a computerised database and index.[51] The Templeman Library at the University of Kent at Canterbury provides on-line listings of 'Provincial Playbills' from more than eighty theatres as part of the Theatre Collections section of its Special Collections.[52] And the Department of Drama at Australia's University of Newcastle posts, over the Internet, a series of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century playbills from the Michael R. Booth Theatre Collection.[53] It is perhaps uncertain whether, in the future, the originals themselves will even be kept by libraries and museums beyond the time required to reduce them to the one-dimensional plane. Speaking at a conference concerning theatre collections and resources in the 1990s, Susan Brock rhetorically asked whether the theatre programmes of the third millennium would merely be scanned into databases and thereby confined to a purely digital existence.[54]

In the material world even a damaged bill is better than no bill at all, and a great deal of information can still be gathered from documents which have been partially destroyed. In reprinting the lower portion of a playbill commemorating H. T. Craven's *Alonzo ye Brave*, touring Australia in 1855, John Earl describes it as 'decapitated'; yet, in spite of the missing details concerning the location and date of the production, the title and the identities of the performers remain intact, including a complete cast list of 'CHARACTERS—GOOD, BAD, AND INDIFFERENT' (fig.

---

[50] *Theatre Playbills from the Harvard Theatre Collection: A Guide to the Microfilm Collection* (Woodbridge, CT: Research Publications, 1982), p. v.

[51] Cross, p. 120.

[52] *Templeman Library Victorian and Edwardian Theatre Collections: A Selection of Web Pages* (Canterbury: University of Kent, 1997), n.pag.

[53] *Michael R. Booth Theatre Collection*, online, Internet, 28 March 1997, available http://www.-newcastle.edu.au/department/dm/booth.

[54] Brock, 9 March 1996.

143).[55] On other occasions the destruction of printed ephemera has been more completely and irreversibly effected: during the first world war, 10,000 theatrical prints collected by Jonathan King, the 'Christmas Card King of England', were vaporised when a bomb hit the warehouse in which they were stored, simultaneously obliterating 300,000 valentines and 1,000,000 yuletide greetings.[56]

The cataloguing and indexing of theatre playbills and programmes is typically arranged both geographically and chronologically, the former parameter typically enjoying precedence over the latter. The British Library's 'vast collection of playbills ... [is] mainly arranged by place'.[57] The Gabrielle Enthoven Collection, now housed in the Theatre Museum, was sorted in the first instance according to venue, and the resulting sub-sets of documentation were then stored in temporal sequence.[58] Similarly, the 5,000,000 playbills in the Harvard Theatre Collection are divided, first nationally, next by city and then according to venue, with a chronological arrangement following for each playhouse.[59] In highly specialised collections, however, an additional parameter is sometimes introduced at the top of the sorting hierarchy. Birmingham's Shakespeare Memorial Library, for example, contains fifty-two volumes of playbills pertaining exclusively to productions of Shakespearean drama.[60] Here they are arranged first by play, then by location and finally by date.[61]

As noted in chapters one and five, playbills customarily omitted the year from their dates until 1767. As a result archivists are often faced with the challenge of correctly identifying the exact age of the documents in their collections. Sometimes this task is facilitated through a bill's reference to a monarch or to historical events;

---

[55] *Alonzo ye Brave*, by H. T. Craven, playbill, Royal Victoria Theatre, Sydney, 6 December 1855, rpt. in John Earl, 'H. T. Craven and an Electro Biological "Alonzo"', *Theatrephile* 2.6 (Spring 1985), p. 5.

[56] Hirschfeld, p. 21.

[57] David Knott, 'Aspects of Research into English Provincial Printing', *Journal of the Printing Historical Society* 9 (1973–4), p. 8.

[58] George W. Nash, 'British Collections—I: The Enthoven Collection', *Theatre Notebook* 3 (1948–49), p. 4.

[59] This information was kindly supplied by Michael Dumas, Curatorial Assistant at the Harvard Theatre Collection.

[60] Niky Rathbone, 'The Birmingham Shakespeare Library', *Theatrephile* 1.2 (March 1984), p. 22.

[61] Waveney R. N. Payne, 'The Shakespeare Memorial Library, Birmingham', *Theatre Notebook* 3 (1948–49), p. 45.

on other occasions the life spans of actors and of printers may prove useful in narrowing the possibilities; a perpetual calendar can determine the day of the week on which an ordinal date fell; the established presence or absence of particular performers in the relevant city may prove of further assistance in reducing the options; and an apparent conflict with another production known to have taken place can further eliminate some of the remaining alternatives. But, according to Elizabeth Leach, when every available avenue has been explored and more than one plausible date remains, all possible years should be included in a description.[62] Incredibly the dramatic documents of the late-twentieth century still frequently omit this basic information, prompting George Speaight to offer the following words of advice to contemporary playgoers: 'Collectors are advised always to promptly write the date on a programme bought at a theatre when they intend to keep it'.[63]

Dated or otherwise, old playbills and programmes are not always filed away and forgotten until requested by historians: they are often publicly displayed, either as part of an exhibition or purely for their own appeal. In 1917 Gabrielle Enthoven contributed a 'splendid series of playbills' to Grafton Galleries' Shakespeare Tercentenary celebrations in aid of the British Red Cross.[64] At the British Theatre Exhibition, held at the National Book League in 1950, a copy was displayed of the oldest extant playbill advertising a professional indoor production—the *A King and No King* document from 1687, discussed in chapter one (see fig. 2).[65] And in the closing years of the twentieth century an exhibition was staged, 'as part of the centenary of cinema celebrations … to explore the relationship between British stage and screen', featuring a variety of media including 'programmes' and other 'ephemera'.[66] Some particularly inviting environments have become homes to more

---

[62] Leach, pp. 11–12.
[63] Speaight, *Memorabilia*, p. 21.
[64] Laver, p. 2.
[65] Speaight, 'Playbill', p. 35–36.
[66] 'Shadow and Substance', *FIRT/IFTR-SIBMAS Bulletin* 20.3 (1997), sec. E: no. 3.

permanent exhibits: the Nag's Head, an eighteenth-century pub in Covent Garden, is decorated with a vast collection of playbills, 'dating from the early 1700s'.[67]

Many large collections of theatre bills originated from the enthusiasm of individual playgoers, either keeping documentary records of performances personally attended or reconstructing seasons of the past. Tate Wilkinson, for example, 'carefully preserved his playbills from 1766 … for every performance in every one of his theatres', and this 'great collection' is now housed in the Minster Library, York.[68] Throughout the nineteenth century John Payne Collier, the 'great Elizabethan scholar … who besmirched a fine career by concocting many documents and falsifying others', collected seventeenth-century bills and broadsides.[69] Between 1874 and 1908 Albert Jessel amassed a collection consisting 'mostly of programmes of London productions' which was subsequently bound into eleven volumes.[70] The Melville Collection at Kent was 'acquired from a theatrical family … [and] spans a long period, from the second half of the nineteenth century to the mid twenties'.[71] Gabrielle Enthoven began her famous collection around 1893 with the 'chance purchase of some 200 playbills'.[72] At the dawn of the twentieth century Percy Fitzgerald was in possession of about 10,000 playbills.[73] And Hiram Stead has been described as the 'most omnivorous collector of playbills in the period immediately before, during and after the first World War'.[74] In subsequent decades of the twentieth century the tradition was continued by Raymond Mander and Joe Mitchenson, who began their collection in 1939 and who included a manifesto of sorts at the conclusion of their essay entitled 'The Story of the Theatre Programme':

> we … are doing our best to collect and preserve all [playbills and programmes] that come our way, both London and provincial, so that

---

[67] Susan Ward, p. 33.
[68] Hogan, *Index*, p. 7.
[69] W. J. Lawrence, 'A Spurious Old Playbill', *Bookman* October 1920, p. 16.
[70] 'Society for Theatre Research Bulletin No. 62', *Theatre Notebook* 18.2 (Winter 1963/4), p. 40.
[71] *Templeman Library*, n.pag.
[72] Laver, p. 2.
[73] Fitzgerald, 'Growth', p. 530.
[74] Ifan Kyrle Fletcher, 'Hiram Stead', *Theatre Notebook* 18 (1963–64), p. 125.

> students in the future will have a source of reference and playgoers a means of recalling happy hours in the theatre.[75]

Forty years into its existence the Mander and Mitchenson Collection was declared 'one of the notable private collections in the English-speaking world'.[76] Yet, unlike some of the larger institutional archives based within libraries, museums and universities, this collection has always retained an intensely personal atmosphere—perhaps by virtue of being housed in a residential dwelling for so many years—appealing not only to the scholarly predilection for research, but also to the more general instinct for collecting.

The acquisition of playbills and programmes with which to augment an existing compilation has occupied collectors throughout the centuries. But various factors have conspired to impede their progress. In 1893 Francis Edwards complained not only that certain managements 'were never over liberal in their use of printers' ink', but also that the 'native population is equally conspicuous for its neglect of the primary duty of preserving playbills', with the result that many desirable documents were 'exceptionally troublesome to acquire'.[77] Three years after S. J. Fitzgerald happily contemplated the mere 'existence' of a playbill commemorating David Garrick's debut performance, noting 'what a treasure it would be',[78] Edwards alternately grumbled and boasted about the effort employed in simply obtaining bills of the play from the Garrick *Theatre*:

> the amount of trouble it was necessary to expend … must have been experienced to be accurately appreciated. That opening *affiche* alone was acquired only by the exercise of the *flair* of a Vidocq, the patience of the Man of Uz, and the diplomacy of the Man of Iron.

Edwards described another quest in equally understated terms:

> There were times when the hunting of that needle through the hay pottle would seem an easier thing, and the passage of the camel

---

[75] Mander and Mitchenson, 'Story', p. 36.
[76] Louis A. Rachow, 'Historical Introduction and State of the Art', *Theatre and Performing Arts Collections*, ed. Rachow, Special Collections 1.1 (New York: Haworth, 1981), p. 3.
[77] Francis Edwards, pp. 21, 32.
[78] Fitz-Gerald, p. 307.

> through that needle's eye a likelier. But … the result may now be contemplated—one would fain hope, with respectful admiration.

Edwards even hoped to be thanked for an evidently thankless task:

> 'Tis not, to be sure, in Collections to command appreciation; but, hereabouts, this one does better, and deserves it.[79]

If gratitude was forthcoming it almost certainly did not originate with J. R. R. Tolkien who, in disputing 'any *essential* connexion between children and fairy-stories', observed by way of comparison that 'Adults are allowed to collect and study anything, even old theatre-programmes'.[80] But this implicitly disparaging attitude appears to represent a very small minority, defeated by overwhelming support for the more positive view reflected in Mary Fleming's assertion that 'Imaginative people who preserve the colourful things in life … open an enchanting world to their descendants'.[81] J. C. Trewin regarded the preservation of theatre bills as a defining characteristic of a respectable audience, declaring that 'Like all good playgoers [he] … collect[ed] programmes'.[82] Many professional and amateur archivists have ventured well beyond the theatre itself in search of theatrical memorabilia. Roy Plomley recalls conducting 'sorties into junk shops and second-hand bookshops' with Raymond Mander, emerging 'covered with dust and cobwebs and clutching … bundles of old programmes';[83] Harold Hobson can think of very few 'things connected with the theatre more delightful than rummaging about' in a theatrical store, 'fingering gingerly its old playbills, which almost fall to pieces in one's hands … [or] turning the leaves of collections of programmes';[84] from as far afield as Johannesburg, South Africa, having 'no means of acquiring … programmes, particularly souvenir programmes, of London theatrical productions', correspondents to *Notes and Queries* have sought the assistance of 'any person or agency which

---

[79] Francis Edwards, pp. 26, 33.
[80] J. R. R. Tolkien, 'On Fairy-Stories', *Tree and Leaf*, by Tolkien, 1964 (London: Grafton, 1992), p. 34.
[81] Fleming, p. 38.
[82] J. C. Trewin, *The English Theatre*, Life and Leisure 1 (London: Elek, 1948), p. 102.
[83] Attributed in 'Raymond Mander: An Appreciation', *Theatrephile* 1.2 (March 1984), p. 11.
[84] Harold Hobson, *Theatre* (London: Burke, 1953), p. 58.

might be able to help';[85] and Mary C. Henderson, former curator of the theatre collection at the Museum of the City of New York, 'continues to search through basements and attics for vast and undiscovered treasures still packed away in some old theatrical trunk'.[86] This enthusiastic compulsion indicates the 'tremendous fun to be had in making such a collection';[87] but it can also create a storage problem.

Observing that the 'habitual playgoer' tends to keep theatre bills 'as personal mementoes', Maurice Rickards accurately concludes that 'cupboards and boxes all over the world are full of them'.[88] As the nineteenth century drew to a close, the playbills 'housed in Mrs. [Gabrielle] Enthoven's London flat … grew too numerous', and their owner was 'forced to think about finding a new home for her work'.[89] In the early years of the twentieth century Hiram Stead 'amassed so many playbills at one time that his attic off Chancery Lane, London, was stacked with piles … 5 ft high and almost covering the floor'.[90] A few decades later, attempting to maintain their collection in its original home, a 'small Edwardian terraced house', Raymond Mander and Joe Mitchenson 'were suffocating'.[91] And in the later-twentieth century, possessed of what Susan Raven terms the 'hoarding instinct', conductor Richard Bonynge, who collects theatrical postcards, claims never to have thrown anything away. He and Joan Sutherland can scarcely claim to be short of space, owning an apartment in New York, a house and an apartment in Sydney and two houses in Switzerland; but, according to Bonynge, 'They're all full'.[92] The descendants of such avid collectors may regard Catherine Haill's observation on the legacy of many personal theatrical archives as a promise or a threat:

---

[85] R. F. Kennedy, 'Programmes', *Theatre Notebook* 2 (1947–1948), p. 20.
[86] Joseph Papp, rev. of *Broadway Ballyhoo*, by Mary C. Henderson, *New York Times Book Review* 3 December 1989, p. 45.
[87] John Lewis, 'In Pursuit of Ephemera', *Motif* 7 (Summer 1961), p. 89.
[88] Rickards, p. 198.
[89] Nash, 'Collections', p. 4.
[90] Speaight, *Memorabilia*, p. 11.
[91] Attributed to Mitchenson in Partner, p. 53.
[92] Attributed in Susan Raven, 'Wish You Were Lear', *Sunday Times Magazine* 25 September 1988, p. 78.

> objects associated with famous acts or actors have often been carefully handed down.[93]

In attempting to explain the widespread appeal of playbills and programmes in reflection on the past, Sarah Gibbings moves from the universal to the particular, noting not only that 'something of interest' can be found 'in any bill', but also that the 'choice is entirely up to the individual taste'.[94] Indeed, when the pursuit of 'cheap prints and old play-bills' repeatedly leads their collectors to 'dirty little shop[s] … kept by … rather grimy old gentlem[en]',[95] it may reasonably be suggested that the anticipatory allure by which bills of the play initially attract their readership often pales in comparison to the retrospective allure by which they, in their varied forms, retain it.

Retrospective Documentation

Many post-performance documents relating to, and deriving from, playbills and programmes have already been described at some length in previous chapters of the present work and in the preceding paragraphs. With some notable exceptions the performers credited by John Downes in *Roscius Anglicanus* in 1708, for example, displayed a 'high degree of conformity with the casts printed in quartos';[96] and the twenty volumes comprising John Bell's *British Theatre*, a late-eighteenth-century hybrid of the prompt book and the acting edition, discussed in chapter three, included cast lists from the performances they commemorated as well, simultaneously indicating textual alterations made to the scripts in performance.[97] But Dougald MacMillan, qualifying the extent to which ephemera printed before a production remain reliable after it, as a source of primary evidence, cautions that 'perfection

---

[93] Catherine Haill, preface, *The Theatre Museum, Victoria and Albert Museum*, comp. Alexander Schouvaloff (London: Scala, 1987), p. 4.
[94] Gibbings, p. 74.
[95] Forman, p. 151.
[96] Judith Milhous and Robert D. Hume, introduction, *Roscius Anglicanus*, by John Downes, 1708, ed. Milhous and Hume (London: Society for Theatre Research, 1987), p. xix.
[97] Bell, 1: 20.

cannot be achieved in a work based upon playbills';[98] and H. Philip Bolton acknowledges not only that 'cast-list[s] from the wrong performance[s]' were sometimes attached to nineteenth-century plays, but also that 'Playbills [were] ... sometimes mis-dated'.[99]

Nevertheless, the very fact that bills of the play represent just one of many varied forms in which an otherwise ephemeral production may be recorded means that their accuracy can often be verified through reference to other, complementary, records. Moreover, as Kathleen Schlesinger observes, bills of the play can be analysed in conjunction with these additional texts producing 'incontrovertible documentary evidence':

> By carefully studying these relics of our historic play-houses, so dear to the collector, together with the newspapers of the same date, many a link in a broken chain has been discovered, and many an error set right.[100]

It is perhaps in reflection on the past that the fullest appreciation is gained of the amount of related documentation typically published in connection with a performance; for it is usually only after a run has concluded that this entire range of material is collected and displayed as a whole. George W. Nash, while curator of the Gabrielle Enthoven Collection, referred to the benefits of a diversified archive:

> Around the central structure of dated programmes and early playbills, and linked with the appropriate date of performance, engravings, music-sheets, photographs and other illustrative material build up the core of facts into a living picture of the history of the ... stage. Newspaper cuttings, printed texts, autograph letters, books, biographies, magazines, tally sheets and legal documents extend the picture.[101]

Catherine Haill concurs, adding that every 'theatrical costume, design, or painting can be related to a production and its relevant playbill, programme or poster'.[102]

---

[98] MacMillan, p. vi.
[99] H. Philip Bolton, *Scott Dramatized*, Novels on Stage 2 (London: Mansell-Cassell, 1992), vii.
[100] Schlesinger, pp. 32–33.
[101] Nash, 'Collections', p. 3.
[102] Haill, 'Bill', p. 280.

Perhaps it is because of their comparatively easy acquisition, low price and manageable size that bills of the play so often comprise the 'central structure' referred to by Nash—whether in private, commercial or institutional holdings. In any event, George Speaight offers words of encouragement to collectors who may be hoping to profit from their memorabilia:

> In years to come the programme of the first play by a dramatist who later achieves fame will be a great deal rarer than the first edition of the printed text, and will become a highly prized item.

Unfortunately the very desirability of a dramatic document connected with an especially dramatic event has resulted in the execution of a number of forgeries based on playbills published years earlier. Artefacts purporting to commemorate David Garrick's debut performances in 1741, for example, both at Ipswich and at Goodman's Fields, have frequently been proven counterfeit, as have those claiming to record Ellen Terry's first appearance on the stage in 1856. Speaight notes that a 'somewhat unusually large number of these bills seem to have survived for what was—as far as anyone knew at the time—merely a routine' performance. When suspicious abundance alone has failed to establish the falsity of a dubious document, more advanced forensic examinations have been conducted by printing experts, their verdicts turning on typographical inconsistencies such as the 'incorrect form of the long s and … the anachronistic use of one form of the italic *a*'.[103]

On at least one occasion a playbill was forged without any particular interest in the location, date or title of the entertainment putatively advertised. Even the reported performers were significant only to the extent that their names appeared on it at all. During the early decades of the nineteenth century John Payne Collier sought to discredit Edmund Malone's contention that cast lists were not included on bills of the play prior to 1700 by simply creating a document dated '*Thursday, April 8th, 1663*' and including on it the *dramatis personae* and their exponents. The information contained in this intriguing specimen, allegedly announcing a

---

[103] Speaight, *Memorabilia*, p. 17.