



University  
of Glasgow

Heinrich, A. (2011) *Seriously Funny*. Pitlochry Festival Theatre 60th Anniversary Season Programme 2011 . pp. 36-37.

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/61184/>

Deposited on: 29<sup>th</sup> March 2012

## ***Trelawny of the 'Wells'* by Arthur Wing Pinero**

Programme note by Dr Anselm Heinrich, University of Glasgow

Arthur Wing Pinero (1855-1934) had to wait a long time before winning widespread recognition. He acted in supporting roles for years, adapted plays from the French, and generally served “a long and arduous apprenticeship”.<sup>1</sup> From the late 1870s onwards, however, Pinero became one of the most prolific playwrights of his generation and well-known not only for his comedies but also for his serious drama, which ridicules the social hypocrisy of late- Victorian society.

Taken at face value *Trelawney of the 'Wells'* (1898) is a comedy par excellence: theatre star gives up the stage for love, is unable to fit into conventional society, returns to theatre and is reunited with her sweetheart on stage who – unbeknown to her – has chosen the same career path. A closer look reveals a fascinating dramatic investigation into the contemporary theatre world. To start with there are many parallels between play and reality: the aspiring young playwright Tom Wrench is no other than Tom Robertson, the Barridge Wells Theatre only a thinly disguised Sadler's Wells Theatre, and the more realistic plays Rose encounters are nothing less than a celebration of the new realist drama produced at the Prince of Wales' Theatre in the 1860s – a drama, too, which Pinero seems to suggest was a precursor to his own playwriting of the 1890s. The fascinating links between play and real life also concern the audience as the play's fictional audience is criticised for the same moral double standards which the real audience of *Trelawney* almost certainly displayed, too.

*Trelawney of the 'Wells'* – from a historical perspective – is a particularly fascinating play as it dramatises an important moment in theatre history, the development from melodrama to more realist forms of staging, even preempting the advent of Naturalism. Crucially, however, Pinero does not present an either or situation here but – perhaps nostalgically – suggests that the sumptuous pantomimes and effective melodramas could coexist and complement the more realist drama by Tom Robertson, and that even the different theatres they were predominantly performed in and their audiences could be reconciled by a shared love for the stage.

More than other playwrights of his period Pinero managed to satisfy the demands of very different audiences and perhaps proved that his vision of a diversified but still united theatre was

---

<sup>1</sup> Rowell, *Victorian Theatre*, p. 112.

not too nostalgic after all. Pinero's witty comedies played to different audiences than his later social drama, some of which was incorporated into the repertoire of a future National Theatre as imagined by Harley Granville-Barker and William Archer – an undertaking large sections of Pinero's more traditional audiences must have rejected as intellectual and elitist.

Pinero's magic worked for a number of years, but in the end it was the larger than life actor-managers such as Herbert Beerbohm Tree and Henry Irving who stole the limelight from him. After all, it seems that it was Irving's magnificent Lyceum productions more than Pinero's playwriting which united audiences from different quarters and truly played to a national audience. From today's perspective it is unfortunate, however, that Pinero's plays so quickly got out of fashion and that they are rarely revised today. They certainly deserve better.