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**Schoolchildren or Citizen Shareholders?:**

**Provincial Repertory Audiences, Letters to the Editor, and Public Subscription**

[draft]

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Matthew Franks

When the Abbey Theatre installed a nightly police cordon to silence protesting playgoers during the 1907 run of Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World*, spectators voiced their objections in newsprint. Under pseudonyms like "A Western Girl," "A Commonplace Person," "A Much Interested Foreigner," and "A Lover of Liberty," correspondents sent letters to the *Dublin Evening Telegraph*, *Freeman's Journal*, and *Dublin Evening Mail*. "Vox Populi" wrote that the arrested protesters "showed an admirable public spirit, which in any other country would be highly honoured."<sup>1</sup> "Oryza" reported a conversation overheard from the stalls in which Synge had said that the audience's hissing was "quite legitimate."<sup>2</sup> After journalist and Galway MP Stephen Gwynn penned a letter supporting the Abbey, biographer D. J. O'Donoghue responded that "the vindictiveness which has been shown night after night in expelling and prosecuting people who ahve [*sic*], in their excitement, called out 'It's a libel' or 'shame,' or otherwise mildly protested, is a serious menace to the freedom of an audience." He referred to the furor as a "newspaper controversy"; others called it a "newspaper war."<sup>3</sup> In a public discussion at the Abbey after the play's run, Yeats quoted from the correspondence when defending his decision to call in the police. According to playwright William Boyle, the controversy boiled down to political representation. In a letter to the *Freeman's Journal*, he argued that protesters had not reacted "by staying away," as

some supporters had suggested they should, “because the ‘Abbey’ is a subsidised theatre, independent of the money taken at the door. Therefore . . . the public had no remedy, but the one resorted to.”<sup>4</sup> Private subsidy had muffled the democratic shuffling of playgoers’ pocketbooks; forced to shut their mouths inside the theatre, playgoers opened up to the newspapers that circulated around it.

The history of the British and Irish provincial repertory movement can be told through playgoers registering their right to representation, not just in the correspondence columns of local newspapers, but in the shift to not-for-profit funding models that were subsidized by the community rather than by a single wealthy individual. In 1904, tea heiress Annie Horniman purchased and refurbished the Abbey, which she continued to subsidize annually. In 1908, amid growing tensions over an Englishwoman financing an Irish theatre, Horniman established the first English repertory company at the Gaiety Theatre, Manchester. The following year, over two hundred “citizen shareholders” founded the Glasgow Repertory Theatre. Two years later, more than a thousand did the same for Liverpool. When Horniman withdrew her Abbey subsidy in 1910, the endowment to replace it was crowdfunded (as we might say today) by nearly a hundred small donors. Though these shareholder and donor schemes differed from each other, with only the former granting shares, all raised funds under the banner of “public subscription.” The money came from private individuals, but public subscription was considered “public” because it advertised in the public press and appealed to public interests—more like a widow’s mite than a gentleman’s club.

Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century reformers had financed libraries, schools, hospitals, and museums by public subscription before these institutions began receiving municipal aid, and turn-of-the-century repertory proponents, or “repertorists,” saw public subscription as an intermediary step toward the goal of public subsidy. Most surprising to us today, playgoers saw public subscription in civic terms that *exceeded* the representative authority of a

municipal theatre controlled by a democratically elected city council. Playgoers considered public-subscription repertory theatres to be “Citizens’ Theatres” and “public institutions,” even though the theatres technically were privately owned. Though repertory theatres were not the only theatres to be funded by public subscription, this essay charts the ways in which public subscription affected representations of English and Irish repertory theatre audiences in the years before the First World War, and focuses on letters from playgoers published in the provincial press.

In 1905, theatre critic Arthur Bingham Walkley declared: “[W]e are all for repertory theatres; everybody who is ambitious of becoming somebody in the theatrical world has a scheme (and blank form of subscription) for one at your service.”<sup>5</sup> Unlike most subscription services today, from magazines to Netflix, public-subscription payments were neither for recurring nor for fixed amounts; though the minimum usually was £1, some subscribed as little as six pence or as much as £1,000 or more. (The sum of £1 was approximately a quarter of a lower clerk or shopkeeper’s weekly income.)<sup>6</sup> In exchange, shareholders received potential dividends in the company, whereas benefactors saw their names in the local newspaper, as did other readers. Unlike the private subscription clubs that had flourished since the eighteenth century, public-subscription theatres were open to any member of the public who could pay, no referral necessary. And unlike the seasonal *abonnement* schemes popular with play and operagoers today, public subscription did not confer the right to attend the theatre, which was accessible to anyone who could afford to purchase tickets and therefore still subject to the Lord Chamberlain’s licensing.<sup>7</sup> However, subscribers sometimes received discount coupons or first dibs on prime seats. “[B]road-based upon the public will,” public subscription promised provincial audiences theatre that was more meaningful than the touring commercial fare imposed by London, and more democratic than the private subsidy imposed by a single wealthy patron.<sup>8</sup> Until the provincial repertory movement, playgoers

looking for professional alternatives to the commercial theatre had to visit the metropolis.<sup>9</sup> Now, the new theatre was compared to municipal services like gas, water, tramways, museums, and libraries, supplying a perceived public need, and seen as open—even belonging—to any playgoer, subscriber or not.

Though English and Irish repertory theatres first appeared in the twentieth century, collectively funded theatres in these same lands have a much longer history. Provincial Theatres Royal received patents as early as 1767 and were financed by local share capital. Unlike German and Scandinavian royal theatres, they were “strictly commercial concerns,” according to Tracy Davis. Apart from the Theatres Royal, share capital usually was not used for theatres until the 1860s Companies Acts enabled true limited liability. The new laws generated a wave of theatrical enterprises, but—until the repertory movement—none were not-for-profit. Even though some earlier provincial companies had viewed collective ownership in civic terms, they lacked the new movement’s commitment to original, artistically adventurous productions performed for short runs by a fixed company of local actors who preferred collaborative, versatile ensembles to the prevailing star-actor system.<sup>10</sup> “Short run” usually meant a week or two, in contrast to the hundreds of performances racked up by London’s long-running productions and carbon-copy provincial tours; rarely did repertory theatres adhere to the Continental model of “true repertory,” in which plays alternated nightly.<sup>11</sup> In general, the movement pursued a repertoire or library of plays by so-called new or modern dramatists such as Ibsen, Shaw, Synge, Chekhov, Masfield, and Galsworthy, give or take a helping of classics by Shakespeare and Sheridan, and a smattering of lesser-known or emergent local playwrights. The Abbey, however, performed only Irish plays—which coincidentally were the only “homegrown” provincial plays to enter Britain and Ireland’s modern drama canon. But repertoire was just one concern of a movement whose related and sometimes contradictory descriptors included city, civic, civilized, public,

ratepayers', citizens', people's, local, municipal, state, national, endowed, artistic, exemplary, organized, and subsidized. These names aside, the movement's central question was whether audiences could be trusted to determine how their theatres would operate.

This essay follows public subscription through the provincial press at the height of the repertory movement. The number of British and Irish newspapers reached historic proportions before the First World War; for so-called provincial cities like Dublin, Manchester, Glasgow, and Liverpool, the press transformed columns of newsprint into virtual extensions of repertory theatre buildings. In order to analyze the representation of repertory audiences, this essay contrasts *horizontal collectivism* (based on equality, such as between citizens) with *vertical collectivism* (based on inequality, such as between teacher and student). Leading articles in provincial newspapers quoted metropolitan repertorists who put playgoers on the receiving end of vertical collectives, comparing them to schoolchildren to be taught, patients to be nursed, and savages to be civilized. Public subscription challenged repertorists' analogies, representing playgoers in horizontal collectives as shareholders, patrons, and citizens. Writing letters to newspaper editors, playgoers took up pseudonyms representing their class, gender, and age, staking claim to the day-to-day running of the theatre, and setting themselves apart from the professional critics whose interests differed from their own. Since correspondents from the pit and gallery were accorded the same typographical treatment as those from the stalls and dress circles, their letters further challenged the class hierarchy of the physical theatre; however, because correspondence columns more often were filled by lower-middle-class patrons, these playgoers were perceived to be more influential in the provinces, whereas upper-middle-class patrons were seen as dominant in London. It turned out that repertorists were being literal when they claimed that the future of the movement was "in the hands" of the public: provincial theatregoers held more than their applause.

By spotlighting the leading articles, public appeals, and playgoer letters printed in the local presses of Dublin, Manchester, Glasgow, and Liverpool, this essay offers a representative sense of who constituted the repertory audience, extending Jim Davis and Victor Emeljanow's research chronologically to the First World War and geographically beyond the metropolis.<sup>12</sup> In methodological terms, it draws on provincial newspapers in order to engage with theories of spectatorship. Though Benedict Anderson famously imagined a community of citizens united by reading the daily paper, theatre scholars may not realize that the provincial press afforded extraordinary potential for what Christopher Balme calls "reciprocal resonance."<sup>13</sup> At the peak of repertory fever, newspapers like the *Dublin Evening Telegraph*, *Glasgow Herald*, and *Liverpool Courier* published dozens of playgoer letters daily. From our present vantage, these communications read like ancestors to theatrical discussion forums, live-tweeting, and blogging that Sarah Bay-Cheng more recently has urged us to count under the umbrella of performance.<sup>14</sup> Correspondents sang praises or voiced criticisms of performers and performances; they applauded or picked fights with the management and each other; they frankly stated what theatre meant to them and their families. Their published epistles fill in data missing from accounts written by professional theatre artists and critics as well as from playgoer memoirs and scrapbooks, all of which bend toward the metropolis.<sup>15</sup> More generally, such letters point to a gap in scholarship about audiences, scant as it is on responses from ordinary theatregoers. Helen Freshwater attributes our disciplinary deficit to suspicion rather than scarcity:

[W]hy, when there is so much to suggest that the responses of theatre audiences are rarely unified or stable, do theatre scholars seem to be more comfortable making strong assertions about theatre's unique influence and impact upon audiences than gathering and assessing the evidence which might support these claims? Why do they

appear to prefer discussing their own responses, or relaying the opinions of reviewers, to asking ‘ordinary’ theatre-goers—with no professional stake in the theatre—what they make of a performance? Could this apparent aversion to engaging with audience response be related to deep-seated suspicion of, and frustration with, audiences? And, if so, what are the grounds for this suspicion? Why are audiences apparently not to be trusted?<sup>16</sup>

As it assesses the responses of ordinary theatregoers, this essay hedges a bit on their professional stake: the entire point of public subscription was to make theatre the public’s business, literally. Public subscription looked backward to a more private model of subscription patronage that had financed Pope’s translations and Mozart’s concertos, and forward to the Internet-wide crowdfunding lately investigated by Alex Dault and others; for what it’s worth, a recent search of “theater” on Kickstarter yields nearly eleven thousand projects, which make newly relevant the idea of a collective arts subsidy that exists outside state or local government.<sup>17</sup> But if Freshwater’s critique fundamentally strikes home, then perhaps today’s theatre scholars have inherited our mistrust of audiences from last century’s repertorists. In his famous essay on the “Emancipated Spectator,” Jacques Rancière equalizes the relationship between scholar and spectator, and between schoolmaster and pupil, much as subscribers challenged repertorists’ patronizing collectives in the columns of the local press. Yet these subscribers question Rancière’s anticomunitarian claim that “[t]he collective power shared by spectators does not stem from the fact that they are members of a collective body.”<sup>18</sup> The materialized consent of the public-subscription phenomenon suggests that his claim applies as well to an audience as to a corporation or a democracy. Though a number of scholars have described theatregoing as a form of citizenship, this essay locates political



power in audience demands for representative theatre ownership and in managers' corresponding receptivity.<sup>19</sup>

Still, as Rancière observes, representative and representational are not synonyms—particularly in the theatre, where anyone can pretend to speak for someone else. The repertory playgoers who have received the most scholarly attention, such as the infamous rioters at the *Playboy* premiere, have been stereotyped by their bold gestures inside the playhouse.<sup>20</sup> One sometimes gets the sense that turn-of-the-century playgoers had only two options: to act out loudly and demonstratively, as had been common in the nineteenth century but was increasingly characterized as barbaric; or to sit quietly as polite consumers.<sup>21</sup> Public subscription argued that audiences should be able to speak for themselves in a democratic manner. As “Lover of Liberty” announced in the *Freeman's Journal*: “There is an effort, which anyone might have foreseen, to pretend that the condemnation of this play is only an illustration of the ‘ignorance,’ ‘provincialism,’ and ‘obscurantism’ of the Irish audience. ‘They have been so long intellectually and spiritually enslaved.’ ‘These are people who have no books in their houses.’” Yet the representational claims made by playgoers in newspaper columns raised different problems. The same correspondent concluded: “I give you my name, which you can tell anyone who may care to know it; but there are reasons—purely personal—why I do not wish to attach it to this public letter.”<sup>22</sup> This essay demonstrates that the question of whether we trust audiences to run theatres is easily entangled with whether we trust the newspaper letter writer behind the proverbial curtain. Like “Lover of Liberty,” many repertory correspondents sought anonymity. Though their reasons for taking pseudonyms often can only be guessed, from ensuring privacy to misleading deliberately, the overriding consequence was that correspondents seemed to speak on behalf of larger groups: of proud locals (“A Plain Liverpolitan”; “Lover of Ireland”); of specific sections (“Pittite”; “One of the Gods”); of diverse ages (“An Elderly Playgoer”; “A Gallery Boy”), occupations

(“A Docker”; “Undergraduate”), and reactions (“Interested”; “Non-receptive playgoer”). Some pseudonyms were witty (“An Enemy of the People”); others, literal (“A Shareholder”); but all created the impression of distinct affiliations desiring political representation. By the same token, giving one’s true name could have suggested a degree of misplaced self-importance, and indeed those who gave their names tended to be prominent members of the community. Another option was to use one’s initials, but unlike crafting a pseudonym, this tactic did not imply that the correspondent’s point of view might be representative.

Pseudonyms provided playgoers with the opportunity to express themselves publicly, even dramatically—and this at a time when managers were darkening auditoriums and proscribing effusive behavior with an arsenal of warnings in playbills, placards, etiquette manuals, and seatback notices. Such constraints were exacerbated in the provinces, where local stock actors had ruled the roost before railways introduced touring companies that crowded out the market with second-rate productions of West End commercial hits in the second half of the nineteenth century.<sup>23</sup> Provincial audiences thus felt doubly patronized by metropolitan managers of commercial and repertory persuasions, and pseudonyms empowered playgoers to talk back without fear of reprisal. Moreover, repertory managers actually began listening, and even penned letters of their own. Similar to online commenters today, anonymous correspondents spoke both more critically and more personally than they otherwise might have. Like masks for actors, pseudonyms gave audiences the freedom to perform, sometimes untruthfully. One of Liverpool’s especially irate playgoers, “Disgusted,” anticipated the legendary English correspondent “Disgusted of Tunbridge Wells,” who tellingly, if apocryphally, cropped up in the 1950s when a local paper’s editor asked his staff to fill empty correspondence columns.<sup>24</sup> In other words, correspondents may not have been who they claimed to be. Private records suggest that “A School-boy” listed by the local press as having subscribed six pence to the Abbey Theatre Endowment Fund might really have

been an Irish-Quaker schoolmaster named Arnold Marsh.<sup>25</sup> But that theatre researchers can never truly know a correspondent's identity or motives is less important than that newspaper readers could never have known either. Correspondents shaped readers' impressions of the repertory audience, whether readers visited theatres or not. In this way, public subscription showcases how print not only reflects but also conditions and imagines audience collectivity.

### **Patronizing the Patrons**

Even as the public-subscription initiatives at Glasgow, Dublin, and Liverpool were under way, ardent repertorists benevolently, if patronizingly, described playgoers as pupils to be taught, patients to be nursed, and savages to be civilized. These vertical collectives were the perhaps inevitable corollary of a project to convince municipalities that theatre was a public utility that deserved government funding, like a library or a gasworks. The provincial press reverberated with these characterizations as the repertory movement spread. In the words of the *Glasgow Herald*: "The first duty of any repertory theatre is to establish itself on a secure basis. . . . Then, unobtrusively but systematically, it must train its audience."<sup>26</sup> The *Yorkshire Telegraph* concurred: "All over the country . . . people are endeavouring to create the 'Perfect audience.'"<sup>27</sup>

One prevailing attitude was that this perfect audience would draw less on existing theatregoers than on the new "reading class," whose expansion repertorists attributed to the 1870 Elementary Education Act. Glasgow Rep producer Alfred Wareing observed that the repertory audience "was mostly not in the theatre. They were great readers, and the growth in the publication of 4s. 6d. novels, the extension of circulating libraries, together with the attraction of the feet on the fender . . . meant it was a herculean task to win these people back

to the theatre.”<sup>28</sup> The audiences who flocked to melodramas, music halls, and the new cinematographs were not part of “the public that reads,” in the words of Liverpool Rep chairman and university professor Charles Reilly.<sup>29</sup> Appealing to this reading class was key. Glasgow and Liverpool Reps added to their foyers bookstalls of published plays, available for sale or “inspection.” In Liverpool, repertory coupon books could be obtained from booksellers and libraries in addition to the theatre box office. The reading class was the demographic repertorists imagined would be most susceptible to the education from which the entire theatregoing public stood to benefit.

In this respect, “reading class” also was a pun: a classroom, as well as a social stratum. In a letter to the *Manchester Guardian*, Mancunian playwright W. A. Brabner quoted a correspondent who in a private letter had asked:

‘Will the Repertory Theatre (*sic*) be any good to me or is it only for cranks?’ (I regret to say he adds ‘like you,’ which is more personal than polite, and is not germane to the question.) To him, the Repertory Theatre may bring revision of orthography and a closer acquaintance with some good dictionary, both resulting in the ‘good’ of which he stands apparently in the greatest need.<sup>30</sup>

Like “reading class,” “good” had two meanings tottering between recreation and instruction; for more than a few observers, repertorists’ insistence on the latter meant they were “cranks” or “reformers”—pseudointellectuals who “admire, or pretend to admire, only the gloomy, morbid drama.”<sup>31</sup> When a critic described the white-painted Manchester Gaiety as “more like a schoolroom than a theatre,” he was referring to atmosphere as much as appearance.<sup>32</sup>

Repertorists embraced the curricular approach. University professors were prominent repertorists in Glasgow and Liverpool. In Liverpool, Leeds, Stockport, Sheffield, and Bristol,

playgoers' clubs organized lectures and play readings according to a seasonal "syllabus." These clubs also published journals, newsletters, and guides to plays in the region; took out circulating library subscriptions; and sponsored theatregoing trips between cities. (The Abbey and Liverpool Rep programs listed train and tram timetables so playgoers could return home.)<sup>33</sup> Such clubs were instrumental to assembling the repertory "nucleus." However, members were perceived to be culturally similar to elitist metropolitan coteries like the Incorporated Stage Society; one Liverpudlian described the local Playgoers' Society as "a 'cranky' lot of people who gave you the impression that they are also vegetarians and Freethinkers as well as the high priests of the drama"—an impression no doubt strengthened by dramatist John Masefield having poetically christened the Liverpool Rep "a temple for the mind."<sup>34</sup> If repertorists weren't schoolmasters, then they were church ministers, As one Glaswegian put it:

Of course the 'reformers' may, by dint of perseverance, bring about the day when people will go to the theatre in the same spirit as they go to the church. . . . It will be the recognised function of the theatre to disseminate physical, moral, and spiritual instruction, and we will sit out the 'play' from a sense of duty—surreptitiously eating peppermint lozenges and stifling yawns.<sup>35</sup>

As a result, claimed the *Liverpool Porcupine*, the proverbial man-in-the-street "somewhat mistrusted the word 'Repertory'; it suggested to his mind an attempt on the part of a coterie of cranks to foist upon him weird, esoteric dramas tinged with gloom, and totally above the comprehension of the multitude."<sup>36</sup> As was characteristic of such vertical collectives, repertorists imagined the majority of playgoers on the submissive end: lectured at, condescended to. More stringent repertorists even insisted that provincial playgoers were in

need of healthful nourishment, metaphorically and sometimes even literally. As critic St. John Ervine put it: “Sickly people, because their palate has been ruined by unhealthy food, prefer tinned salmon to fresh salmon because it has a nippier taste.”<sup>37</sup> In a curiously mixed metaphor that compared playgoers both to babies and boozers, Liverpool Rep board member Robert Hield proclaimed: “however obscure the true diet, it is a step in the right direction to have weaned the infant from such unwholesome comestibles as pickles and gin.” The repertory diet would be medicinal, Hield averred, for “[to] urge that the repertory public exhibits the symptoms which the Repertory Theatre was established to cure is like complaining that the occupants of a sanatorium are tuberculous.”<sup>38</sup> In Glasgow, Wareing tried to make this easier to swallow, saying it was “necessary to gild the pill, if pill there was.”<sup>39</sup>

Contemplating theatre as a nurse or schoolmaster represented one of the most dramatic reversals in English and Irish theatre history since the collapse of the morality play. In 1909, one Glaswegian could still observe that “[t]o go two or three times in one week even to Shakespearean tragedy is rank dissipation, and a collection of play bills, like proficiency in billiards, is evidence of a misspent youth.”<sup>40</sup> Now, ardent repertorists compared provincial playgoers to soon-to-be-enlightened savages. Annie Horniman preferred the term “civilised” to “repertory,” stating her aim “to gather together a company which will be able to act a number of different plays of decent sorts such as are to be seen in the civilised theatres in all civilised countries where the drama takes its proper place.”<sup>41</sup> Liverpool Rep producer Basil Dean concurred: “The production of fine drama ought to be a burden upon the community, and the community should receive its dividend in the exquisite enjoyment of one of the most civilising influences of the present day.”<sup>42</sup> It fell to actor-manager Herbert Beerbohm Tree to carry this line of thinking to its inevitable conclusion: “But if it is great to conquer black races, to bring them the blessings (sometimes doubtful) of civilisation in exchange for land

and gold and ivory and peacocks, it is no less splendid, it is no less a victory, to conquer the white races at home.”<sup>43</sup> The provinces were a primitive wilderness, with these repertorists—all of whom were from London—figured as missionaries. As it happened, the metropolis was not in much better shape, inarticulately attempting to organize a Shakespeare Memorial National Theatre in time for the tercentenary, but the provinces were doubly patronized.<sup>44</sup>

Even though their analogies were tongue-in-cheek, repertorists reinforced vertical collectives all the more ironic for the emphasis they placed on audiences. Imagining playgoers as pupils, patients, and savages enabled repertorists to insist that theatre was a public good that deserved municipal funding. Repertorists expounded in language similar to the sporadic rumblings for Continental-styled municipal theatres that had been spreading from Victorian theatricalists since the 1870s. In the last decade of his life, megastar Henry Irving campaigned for the establishment of “rate-aided” (taxpayer-assisted) theatres on the principle that they were public utilities. The British “might burn municipal gas, consume municipal water, sleep in a municipal lodging, travel on a municipal tramway, study municipal antiquities, read municipal books, enjoy the air in municipal parks, gaze at municipal pictures; but they could not go to the municipal play and applaud the municipal actor.” He made the case for “adopting the drama formally amongst the agencies of instruction and recreation already classed in the sacred category of public works.”<sup>45</sup> The arguments of these early municipalists and later repertorists were by no means identical—Irving would have been dismayed by the avant-garde fare proposed by repertorists, and Horniman initially believed repertory theatres should be “self-sustaining”—yet by 1910, repertorists presented theirs as the kind of theatre that would best merit municipalization.<sup>46</sup>

But repertorists’ biggest burden was indifference: according to some critics, the problem with thinking of the theatre as a public good was that the public didn’t think much of the theatre at all. Far from questions of enlightenment or amusement, actor Frank Curzon

remarked: “You cannot put the theatre on the same plane as an art gallery, a park, or a swimming bath. You would be surprised to know how small a percentage of the population patronise the theatre regularly.”<sup>47</sup> The *Glasgow Herald* agreed, contrasting theatre with services like paving and lighting, which apparently had been “spontaneously demanded by the citizens through their municipal representatives.”<sup>48</sup> It’s questionable whether a utilities comparison would end up benefiting the theatre—when actor-manager George Alexander observed that “people would take as much interest in their [municipal] theatre as in drains or tramways,” this could just as easily be bad as good: citizens want their drains to flush, but usually don’t care where the water comes from or where the waste goes.<sup>49</sup> In truth, spontaneous demand was rarely the case for municipal services, particularly the theatre’s more obvious cousins like libraries, galleries, and museums, which tended to be vertically managed by city councils. Shakespeare scholar Sidney Lee anticipated the logic of repertorists when he observed in 1906 that “[t]he State, in partnership with local authorities, educates the people, whether they like it or no.”<sup>50</sup> Yet that opportunity was a necessity, as Basil Dean acknowledged: “Until we have a thorough awakening of the public conscience as to the educative value of the theatre we cannot have [repertory theatres] existing as part of the real life of a town—as supplying a public want.”<sup>51</sup> When purchasing the Gaiety, Horniman pragmatically surmised that playgoers who wanted a municipal theatre would “have to elect on the town councils, or to Parliament, those who are in sympathy with such an idea and who will push it forward.”<sup>52</sup> Short of that, the only viable option was for a wealthy patron to finance the theatre herself, which meant that playgoers would continue to be represented as pupils, patients, and savages—or so it seemed.

### **Shareholder Democracy**



In the months before Annie Horniman established the Gaiety, some Mancunians anticipated problems with the angel-investor model, which already had proved troublesome in Dublin. W. A. Brabner wrote the *Guardian*'s editor to ask: "Would Mr. Carnegie build [a repertory theatre] for us? And if he would, should we not accept it? I say no. To be all that it should be, it must be our own."<sup>53</sup> When Glasgow launched a theatre company by public subscription, the *Daily Chronicle* compared it to Manchester's:

Both are repertory schemes, but, on the one hand, Manchester has left its theatre to private enterprise. . . . On the other hand, Glasgow's experiment is a communal one, and so much more interesting in its character. It is our nearest approach to the French and German municipal theatres. Its working, it is true, is not undertaken by the city council, but by a body of representative citizens, either shareholders or directors, who select the plays to be enacted and who control the entire management of the theatre.<sup>54</sup>

Today, we might think that a democratically elected city council *is* a body of representative citizens, but here the implication seems to be that public subscription enabled citizen shareholders to exert more representative control than they would were the theatre actually tax-funded and "citizen" or "public" in the contemporary sense. In other words, public subscription, though technically a private transaction, actually was closer to the ideals of representative democracy than municipalization. It is curious that a theatre that was thus contrasted with a city council-funded theatre emerged from what was supposed to be an intermediary step from private enterprise toward municipalization. (Indeed, Glasgow Rep briefly received Glasgow Corporation patronage in 1914.) Civic pride played a big role. The *Liverpool Courier* goaded subscribers "in order that Glasgow may not enjoy another great

advantage in its rival claim to the title of Second City of the Empire. To establish a Repertory Theatre by public subscription will be an achievement which no endowment, however handsome, can emulate.”<sup>55</sup> Like a displaced pageant queen, the *Glasgow Times* pointed out that Liverpool’s theatre “was frankly modelled on the pioneer example of Glasgow,” and remarked that some of the details given by the chairman “are calculated to raise a little envy in the breast of the Repertory enthusiast in Glasgow.”<sup>56</sup> Both Glasgow and Liverpool referred to their repertories as “Citizens’ Theatres,” and this ideal extended to all patrons, whether subscribers or not. In Liverpool, Basil Dean reported “an extraordinary local interest; wherever one goes one finds that the theatre is spoken of as ‘our theatre,’ and unconsciously it has a different footing from either of the two other large theatres, which are regarded merely as places of entertainment and not as public institutions.”<sup>57</sup> When parliamentary elections coincided with a repertory season in Glasgow, the *Herald* declared that “by the time [Glaswegians] elected their representatives for the ensuing Parliament they will already have practically decided, by their bestowal or withholding of adequate support, whether or not the Repertory Theatre is to become their dramatic representative.”<sup>58</sup> Apparently, playgoing had turned into poll-going.<sup>59</sup>

Twenty-first-century scholars might object to a comparison between corporate shareholding and representative democracy. Though shareholders have some control over a board of directors, usually proportional to the number of shares they own, this is different from the control citizens have over elected officials. Nevertheless, at the time critics and playgoers celebrated public subscription as a return to theatre’s mythically democratic spirit. They used the word “democracy” to mean that all classes could contribute according to their means, and thereby share *equally* in the theatre. Yet even as the *Times* praised “the ancient Greek or medieval Italian spirit,” the *Observer* cautioned: “Popularity with the largest number indicates not invariably, but nearly always, in nearly all things, the lowest average of

taste. In Athens and Florence the appeal within a nominal democracy was to an effective aristocracy of influence and mind.”<sup>60</sup> The *Manchester Guardian* shifted from thinking of democracy nominally to thinking of it both alchemically and nautically: “Will the proverbial magic of property turn the sand of ‘advanced’ drama into gold? Or will the old gibe that democracy is like a crowd trying to sail a ship be found to apply to an audience trying to run a theatre?”<sup>61</sup> Public subscription sought to transform theatregoers from consumers to patrons, “to give the public a feeling of ownership and responsibility towards their local theatre, and thereby to make the middle classes an instrument . . . in the general elevation of the public taste,” as the *Eastern Daily Press* put it. This fantasy of elevation did not require the schoolmaster’s patronization: the *Daily Press* emphasized that subscription wasn’t “an attempt on the part of the wealthy and cultured to educate the masses”; rather, the object was “making the theatre depend for its material, as well as for its spiritual, existence, upon the public for which it exists.”<sup>62</sup> The circular logic was that the public would patronize a theatre they had funded.

Public-subscription campaigns conditioned playgoers’ sense of horizontal collectivity. In November 1909, the *Glasgow Herald* published the directorate’s appeal for shares in an open letter, while clarifying that it was “not sued for *in forma pauperis*, but claimed as a tribute justly due to a native institution of tried and sterling worth. We have no doubt that the general public will respond spontaneously to that appeal.”<sup>63</sup> The subtext was clear: native rather than London; general rather than elite. After months of anticipatory coverage, in May 1911 both the *Post* and the *Courier* ran the Liverpool Rep prospectus, along with an application for shares that readers could fill out, detach, and submit.<sup>64</sup> (It helped that the papers’ editors served on the repertory’s directorate.) In both cities, subscriptions were priced on a £1 share scheme planned “to enlist the help of the theatre-going class, which as a whole is not opulent,” in the words of one Liverpudlian.<sup>65</sup> Glasgow Rep warned that it was “not a

dividend-hunting company,” and Liverpool Rep limited dividends to 6 percent, with “the rest of the profits being allocated to the encouragement of repertory plays.”<sup>66</sup> Though a 6 percent dividend would turn out to be optimistic, one subscriber later noted, perhaps disingenuously: “we thought more of assisting a desirable addition to the attractions of the city and have the pleasure of contemplating ‘our theatre.’”<sup>67</sup>

The Glasgow directors decided to start the company with £3,000 in £1 shares, of which 2,000 were offered for public subscription; two hundred shareholders jointly subscribed to the minimum 1,000 shares required for allotment, and in April 1909 the Glasgow Repertory Company took the first of many leases at Howard and Wyndham’s Royalty Theatre, for £80 a week. By mid 1912, the company had raised over £5,000 in share capital. In Liverpool, the directors offered the public £20,000 in shares; by June 1911, more than nine hundred shareholders had subscribed for a total of £12,000, and the directors purchased and renovated the Star Theatre. (The decision to buy, rather than rent, would prove crucial to surviving the war.) By 1912, 1,400 shareholders had subscribed for £13,700 in all. The largest shareholder had taken £1,000 in shares, but the majority were businessmen, clerks, tradesmen, workingmen, and young women. One plumber subscribed £100.<sup>68</sup> As the *Sunday Chronicle* reported, the unpublished subscription lists “include the names of everybody who is anybody in Liverpool and district, and a large number of faithful pittites and galleryites who have rolled up with their mites,” with the *Daily Chronicle* adding that they represented “all ranks and stations in life.”<sup>69</sup> In Glasgow, Wareing proudly emblazoned programs and posters with the words: “The Repertory Theatre is Glasgow’s own Theatre, financed by Glasgow money, managed by Glasgow men. It is a Citizens’ Theatre in the fullest sense of the term, established to make Glasgow independent of London for its Dramatic Supplies.”<sup>70</sup> (Wareing was from Greenwich.) In Liverpool, programs boasted that the theatre “is the property of upwards of fourteen hundred Liverpool citizens. It is the first

English Repertory Theatre to have been founded by these public means.”<sup>71</sup> The *Westminster Gazette* speculated “that within two or three years there will be a dozen of these theatres in the country; a dozen theatres, municipal in one sense, though unassisted directly by the municipalities. . . . Indeed, it may not be long before the provinces dictate in matters of taste to London.”<sup>72</sup> Though the war would put a temporary hold on their endeavors, Bradford, Stockport, Leeds, Birmingham, and Sheffield all had active playgoers’ societies and trial repertory seasons, which were promoted in newspapers like the *Leeds Mercury*, *Birmingham Mail*, and *Sheffield Telegraph*. Provincial papers were in a key position to advance the repertory movement, given that they historically had been on the passive end of a similarly vertical configuration with the metropolis.

Though the Abbey had been operating for six years before Annie Horniman stopped her subsidy, the democratic spirit behind the public-subscription campaign was similar. The *Irish Times* illustrated this point by publishing a list of the first seventy-five subscribers to the Abbey Theatre Endowment Fund, ranging from its treasurer, Lady Tennant (£350), to “A School-boy” (six pence).<sup>73</sup> The fund ultimately raised £2,800. Though Glasgow and Liverpool boasted of local shareholders, many Abbey subscribers, including the treasurer taking subscriptions, lived in London. Irish independence fell by the wayside. Though nationalist sentiment had pushed Horniman out from what by that time was known officially as the “National Theatre Society, Ltd,” the *Irish Independent* observed that “subscriptions to the endowment fund have come from persons of most diverse views on all questions that can divide us.”<sup>74</sup>

## Letters to the Editor

The sources described so far mostly have been representations of—rather than by—playgoers. If repertorists initially did not comprehend the challenge public subscription posed to their authority, they soon read the writing on the fourth wall. The sense of playgoers in horizontal collectives as shareholders, citizens, and patrons manifested most strongly in their letters to the editor, which they penned under pseudonyms like “A Shareholder” and “A Plain Citizen.” After Liverpool Rep’s first season, the *Porcupine* observed:

It is ludicrous and amusing to read the foolish fulminations pouring out from these indiscreet well-wishers in the columns of the daily papers. They one and all express in general a decided opinion that the season has been a huge success, and that the theatre has amply justified its existence, and then, mirabile dictu, apply the scalpel and dissecting knife and ruthlessly cut the whole proceedings into shreds.<sup>75</sup>

The repertory’s sharpest critics weren’t newspapers but their readers. When Liverpool Rep mounted James Sexton’s *The Riot Act* (1913), whose subject was the shipping trade, “A Docker” wrote the *Post*’s editor to critique the costumes and dialect, concluding: “And now, having had my growl, may I be allowed to say how heartily I appreciate the play as a whole.”<sup>76</sup> “A Non-militant Suffragist” had a different opinion, given that the play’s sole female character was a villainous suffragette: “Heaven knows we have enough opposition to overcome in gaining the recognition of our citizenship without having further stumbling blocks put in our way.”<sup>77</sup> The newspapers invited criticism of their own; as one correspondent joked: “Running a theatre like editing a paper is one of those easy jobs we all think we are fit for.”<sup>78</sup> After the *Liverpool Courier*’s theatre critic slated a Christmas production of *Cinderella* (1913), “A Gallery Boy” wrote in to defend it:

Surely those who profess leadership in Art, with a big A, must have missed, or have failed to perceive, the real artistic beauty of the production. Happily the audience, though, perhaps, not quite such authorities in the big A line, were humane enough and clear-eyed enough to appreciate the beauty, charm, and grace apparently unseen or uncomprehended by your contemporary.<sup>79</sup>

As playgoers announced their class, gender, and age in their pseudonyms, they virtually populated the much larger newspaper-reading public's mental list of spectators.

Repertory patrons were not to be patronized. Contesting the notion that provincial audiences lacked taste, one playgoer wrote to the *Glasgow Herald*: "The citizens' theatre is for the citizens, for all sorts and conditions of men, not for that highly developed section only whose fastidious taste craves caviar."<sup>80</sup> In the *Liverpool Post*, "Playfellow" similarly dismissed the idea of playgoers as patients: "We all know that the phrase 'worth a guinea a box' does not actually increase the medicinal value of Beecham's pills, but it helps to sell them. And, unfortunately, the Repertory Theatre has chosen a label ['intellectual'] which only damns it in the eyes of the ordinary mortal."<sup>81</sup> More provocative are the instances when playgoers *affirmed* repertorists' patronizing analogies. Reiterating the comparison of playgoers to savages, "Disgusted" wrote in: "Sir,—What is the matter with Liverpool theatre audiences? As one who was present at the last performance of 'A Doll's House' at the Repertory Theatre on Saturday night, may I beg the courtesy of your columns to ventilate a grievance which I fear is not mine alone—the amazing behaviour of the great many of those present during certain of the most tragic passages? . . . [W]ill you believe it, sir, but at [a climactic] moment some of the audience, a good half I should judge, guffawed—I can use no more expressive word—loudly?"<sup>82</sup> "Disgusted" separated a "good half" into a bad half; reciprocal resonance meant that even antipopulist impressions could circulate. A more

generous reading might interpret such criticism constructively: in a different column, the *Post* reported that members of the elitist Playgoers' Society had considered issuing a manual on "How to Behave in the Theatre," since "the perfect theatre required a perfect audience, and the audience at the Repertory Theatre was by no means perfect": the interruptions of unnecessary applause "were to be deprecated," as was the practice of audience members entering the theatre during the course of the play, "who should be compelled to stand at the back until the act was over."<sup>83</sup> From proscribing loud guffaws to constraining latecomers, new rules scaffolded the repertory theatre's climb to artistic respectability as surely as light comedies were mounted "to pay for the less popular" modern drama.<sup>84</sup>

Another aspect of representation for which correspondents clamored had to do with local playwrights, as opposed to simply local productions. As "Convinced" complained to the *Herald*: "The [Glasgow Rep, also known as the Scottish Playgoers Company] is called Scottish and it is not. . . . [I]t gives us plays dealing with life in Norway and England."<sup>85</sup> Any hope for an alternative could be attributed to the Abbey. Even without the question of Home Rule, hopes for a Glaswegian or Lancastrian Synge proliferated correspondence columns. Paradoxically, the search for local peculiarity reduced it to a universal label similar to today's "buy local" movement. Though repertory companies tried to nurture local playwrights, none produced any lasting original dramas. The Glasgow Rep is better remembered for the first British production of Chekhov's *The Seagull* (1913) than for J. A. Ferguson's one-act *Campbell of Kilmohr* (1914); the company also synchronized with London to premiere Galsworthy's *Justice* (1910), coming just under the wire, over the wire—as Wareing claimed: "At the end of every act I telegraphed to Mr. Galsworthy in London the reception the play received in Glasgow, so that he knew it was a big success in Scotland before the prolonged cheering which greeted it in London confirmed the judgment."<sup>86</sup> Apart from Dublin's widely toured Synge–Yeats–Lady Gregory triple bill, the repertory movement's greatest original



dramatic successes were the Manchester-school playwrights Allan Monkhouse, Harold Brighouse, and Stanley Houghton; Houghton's *Hindle Wakes* (1912) became an international sensation after Horniman's company performed it in London. British provincial repertory theatres were a circuit for these playwrights' work, with Glasgow premiering new works by Brighouse, and Liverpool by all three. The push for new provincial drama was in part a reaction against Shaw and other metropolitan dramatists who refused to allow their most recent plays to be licensed for production in the provinces. But a local dramatist to rival Synge proved elusive; as "Playgoer" wrote to the *Herald*: "vernacular dramas . . . do not exist. . . . If the limitations are necessary, why complain?"<sup>87</sup> If not any major playwrights, at least playgoers were proud local shareholders and citizens, as pseudonyms like "A Plain Liverpolitan" communicated.

### **Columns and Rows**

The biggest obstacle to equality among playgoers has always been the physical theatre space. As Ric Knowles points out, ticket prices and seats stratify spectators by "continu[ing] effectively to reflect and reify currently dominant social hierarchies."<sup>88</sup> The Edwardians inherited theatregoing types that reflected these stratifications, such as gilded "Johnny in the stalls," the man-about-town whose "benumbing influence" had arrested the English drama, and "'Arry and 'Arriet," the cockney couple who howled and chirruped in the pit or gallery.<sup>89</sup> Repertorists' vertical collectives and playgoers' horizontalizing responses might lead one to imagine that wealthier patrons would support the repertory theatre at least in proportion to their means. In fact, correspondence columns suggested the opposite: the provincial repertory

theatre disproportionately depended on lower-middle-class playgoers who sat in the pit and gallery.

For provincial playgoers, correspondence columns in some ways were more egalitarian spaces than were literal theatres. Of course, correspondents had to be literate and approved by the editor, but once admitted all were accorded the same typographic treatment, whereas one early repertory playgoer complained to the *Liverpool Porcupine* that occupants of the “bob seats” were “not allowed in the foyer as not being class enough to mingle with the elite of the stalls and dress circle.”<sup>90</sup> But as time went on, playgoers from the less prosperous parts of the theatre began filling columns with explanations for unfilled seats. Playgoers remarking on empty seats could be divided into two camps: those who faulted the management, and those who faulted each other. A member of the second camp insisted that those responsible for empty seats were “not, sir, your democratic public, but your ‘nobility’ of orchestra stalls and dress circle. That is where the shoe pinches! The family circle will be filled time and again—aye, and the pit stalls, too—but that the ‘aristocracy’ of Liverpool should enter their seats is apparently unthinkable!”<sup>91</sup> This playgoer used correspondence columns to reach the wider newspaper-reading public, hoping that “aristocratic” patrons would remember their “democratic” duty. “Two Pun’ Ten” made a similar observation, but concluded that the shortfall justified municipal support:

If the liking for sound elevating drama is most markedly displayed by people who can only afford to pay a shilling or two shillings to see it, that fact is itself a pretty good argument in favour of the municipality giving the enterprise the encouragement of material aid. My own observation is that the patrons of the family circle and the pit stalls belong to the same social class as myself, which is what is called, I suppose, the lower middle class. This is the class for which the municipalities and the State do the

very least, and a small grant to the Repertory Theatre, or any other worthy institution in which the lower middle class has shown an appreciative interest, would be at least a recognition of the claims which that class has upon the distributors of public benefits.<sup>92</sup>

Like the playgoer above, “Two Pun’ Ten” (who very well could have been a plant) hoped to reach the wider newspaper-reading public—here, the municipal authorities. Unsurprisingly, playgoers who blamed the public were difficult to placate.

Playgoers who faulted the management met greater success. In Liverpool, “An Elderly Playgoer” wrote in to the *Post* to say that although she or he was “very fond of the Repertory Theatre, and much interested in the discussion, particularly . . . in your paper,” the playgoer also was “rather deaf,” and so had trouble hearing the discussion *inside* the theatre from the less expensive seats: “[W]hile the cheaper parts of the theatre were well filled, the orchestra stalls were a wilderness of empty seats. Would it not pay better to fill the seats at half a crown than to keep them empty?”<sup>93</sup> This was a kind of wilderness repertorists would not be able to civilize. In Glasgow, a playgoer similarly complained about the pit booking system, arguing that those “who visit the theatre every week” should have the same consideration as “the less regular clients” who sat in more expensive seats.<sup>94</sup> Taking a different view, some lower-middle-class correspondents argued the management could do better than to produce middling fare. “A Plain Liverpolitian” had not enjoyed the repertory’s production of a frothy play by Rudolf Besier called *Lady Patricia*:

I am not much of a theatregoer as a rule, but I have found real entertainment in the Repertory. Far from being a place of gloom and chilly intellectuality, it seems to me an exceedingly cheerful little theatre where one gets a feeling of really social enjoyment. . . . The moral it seems to me, is not that one should go to see every play

that the Repertory management chooses to put on, but that the Repertory management should be a little more careful in selection of plays. After all, many of the most loyal supporters of the Repertory in Liverpool are folk of humble means, and it is quite absurd to expect them to pay out week after week, no matter what sort of fare is offered to them.<sup>95</sup>

Here, the lesson was for the management, rather than the playgoers: repertory's frequent change of bill—usually every two weeks—meant that regular, lower-paying clients were far more valuable than higher-payers who showed up only for a play or two each season.

One could point out an inherent bias. Poorer playgoers are more likely than wealthier to complain of ticket prices, and for this reason might be better represented among correspondents. Nevertheless, these poorer playgoers demanded concrete changes and usually got them. Glasgow Rep's director took to the *Herald* to “acknowledg[e] communications from numerous anonymous correspondents who have lately favoured me, some wise helpful criticisms.”<sup>96</sup> Liverpool Rep's chairman remarked that he “had been studying with care and interest the criticism which had been appearing in the correspondence columns,” and agreed with “A Plain Liverpoolian” in particular.<sup>97</sup> Professor Reilly contended that in the provinces, cultural geography could be mapped onto playhouse layout: “It is in the stalls that the real provincialism sits; they fill on some well known name or on the production of a London success. The richer people of the town do not yet seem to have the pluck to come to a new play on which London has not yet pronounced.”<sup>98</sup> This was the exact opposite of the dynamic in the metropolis, where, as Frank Curzon observed, “we depend chiefly upon our stalls and circles.”<sup>99</sup> (For example, one of the relatively few letters sent to the *Times* about the Shakespeare Memorial National Theatre was signed “The Woman in the Stalls.”)<sup>100</sup> Provincial playgoers in the pit and gallery emerged as the saviors who would counteract what Horniman described as “the men and women who were well off and too well fed, who had

supported rubbish in London, and so made it possible to take the plays round the country until the taste of the whole nation had become deteriorated.”<sup>101</sup> This is not to suggest that correspondents’ power was equivalent to that of shareholders, or to that of the directorate or of the management that the directorate appointed. But since the theatres could not survive with only shareholders for playgoers, the debate as to how these theatres should run was crowdsourced to newspaper readers. As the *Liverpool Post* reported:

Last December correspondence was invited in these columns on the subject of the Repertory Theatre. . . . The public, as represented by a large number of correspondents, showed a lively interest in the theatre’s welfare, but little unanimity as to the best methods of promoting it; and at the annual meeting of shareholders the problem was admitted, regretted, and left unsolved. . . . [N]ow the adoption of certain of these suggestions . . . has brought about remarkable results.<sup>102</sup>

Following on the heels of a sparsely attended season, these suggestions included varying the bill to include a mixture of light comedy and serious drama, as well as adopting a “true repertory” schedule that alternated plays nightly rather than a series of one- to two-week runs—an idea that repertorist Harley Granville-Barker had strongly promoted. Managers balanced the books using playgoer criticism, and on the eve of the war that would shutter Glasgow and suspend Liverpool, both companies had started to turn a profit. Liverpool Rep survived as the Liverpool Playhouse and eventually received state subsidy with the 1946 establishment of the Arts Council. The Abbey achieved state subsidy much sooner, with Irish independence.<sup>103</sup> Public-subscription repertory theatres continued to be launched throughout the interwar period, from Northampton to York to Perth.<sup>104</sup> As journalist Cecil Chisholm recommended in 1934: “Make a man a shareholder and you may make him an habitu  .”<sup>105</sup>

By way of conclusion, it bears mentioning that playgoers were not the only readers treating newspaper columns as virtual extensions of theatre buildings. Even before the playhouse had been purchased, actor Nigel Playfair charged into the pages of the *Liverpool Courier* on a quest to keep it clean: “SIR—Will you grant me the hospitality of your columns while I endeavor to mop up, drop by drop, the deluge of kindly disapprobation which your correspondent ‘Truepenny’ showers upon the Repertory Theatre scheme in to-day’s issue.”<sup>106</sup> From metaphorical to literal mopping up, house manager Thomas Pigott chastised “A Shareholder” who had dared to question Liverpool Rep’s cleanliness by calling its atmosphere “amateurish” in a letter to the *Post*:

There are four female cleaners working every day for eight or nine hours, supervised by a very reliable housekeeper, and assisted by a male cleaner. From two to three gallons of special disinfectant liquid soap is used weekly in the water for scrubbing purposes, and a large quantity of disinfectant dust—Sweepodust—is sprinkled on all the floors before the sweeping begins.

Pigott registered a hygienic concern also reflected in Abbey and Glasgow Rep programs, which assured audiences that Jeyes’ Fluid had been used for the same purpose.<sup>107</sup> He concluded: “It seems to me that ‘Shareholder’ is not able to speak out for himself unless he is behind the screen of a nom-de-plume.”<sup>108</sup> This letter was dated 23 December 1913. Two days later, “A Shareholder” sent the following reply:

It is Christmas Day, and, detesting controversy for the rankle it too often leaves behind, I wish frankly to apologise to [Mr. Pigott] for any such irritation, and trust my statement will be as frankly accepted when I say that my little list of grievances were

simply general, and had no particular individual in view, as no one individual was known to me. May I assure Mr. Piggott that I am not directly or indirectly ‘professional.’ My identity covers that of a clerk, who has found in books and plays some recompense for irksome surroundings at times; and looked to, and does look to, the Repertory to assist that end. From my knowledge of town life I think there are many such like frequent the Repertory. It was only on the last lap that I entered myself and little family as small holders, in order to quicken their interest in real good plays, and keep a taste for them when once attained; and with that end we have made up our little parties as means would afford, and, naturally, when the little things happened which I have mentioned it was annoying. . . . It was like finding out some petty fault in one’s sweetheart. Had I the means I would just as gladly assist further, and I am sure that all the small Repertory shareholders would do the same.<sup>109</sup>

Both manager and shareholder misapprehended one another other as fantasies composed of no particular individuals. By describing the repertory theatre as an erudite, family-friendly fiancée, “A Shareholder” romanticized the repertory theatre in much the same way that contemporary theatre scholars have romanticized the audience. As Christopher Balme observes: “Although the spectator and his/her collective cousin, the audience, are regularly invoked as being at the ‘heart’, ‘centre’ or otherwise located in the vicinity of the ‘theatrical event’, the amount of serious scholarship available stands in stark disproportion to these ritualized rhetorical enunciations.”<sup>110</sup> In other words, the effusions of theatre and performance scholars would be better supported if we paid attention to the self-representations of spectators. At public-subscription repertory theatres, at least, the romantic ideal of a communitarian audience was virtually assembled. Claiming collective ownership, playgoers gave us their impressions—if not always their Christian names.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> “Vox Populi,” letter to the editor, *Dublin Evening Telegraph*, 3 February 1907.

<sup>2</sup> “Oryza,” letter to the editor, *Dublin Evening Telegraph*, 4 February 1907.

<sup>3</sup> D. J. O’Donoghue, letter to the editor, *Dublin Evening Telegraph*, 4 February 1907;

Michael O’Dempsey, letter to the editor, *Irish Times*, 11 February 1907.

<sup>4</sup> William Boyle, letter to the editor, *Freeman’s Journal*, 4 February 1907. Boyle temporarily withdrew his plays from the Abbey during the *Playboy* controversy.

<sup>5</sup> Arthur Bingham Walkley, “The Drama,” *Times Literary Supplement*, 24 March 1905.

<sup>6</sup> Helen C. Long, *The Edwardian House: The Middle-Class Home in Britain, 1880–1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), 9.

<sup>7</sup> Ireland was not subject to the Lord Chamberlain’s censorship.

<sup>8</sup> S. R. Littlewood, “Citizens’ Theatres,” *Daily Chronicle* (London), 13 December 1911.

<sup>9</sup> In London, professional alternatives to the long-run commercial theatre were joining a coterie society, such as the Independent Theatre Society or the Incorporated Stage Society, or attending the repertory seasons at Barker and Vedrenne’s Royal Court (1904–7). The project from which this essay is drawn examines these metropolitan enterprises extensively, and they are essential to the history of the British repertory movement. However, in this essay I have focused on public-subscription theatres, which primarily were a provincial phenomenon.

<sup>10</sup> The only not-for-profit scheme to preexist the repertory movement was an 1811 plan for a subscription theatre in Marylebone. Tracy C. Davis, *The Economics of the British Stage, 1800–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 231, 171, 10, 173, 238–40.



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<sup>11</sup> For more on true repertory and the origins of the movement, see George Rowell and Anthony Jackson, *The Repertory Movement: A History of Regional Theatre in Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 18, 28–31, 42.

<sup>12</sup> Jim Davis and Victor Emeljanow, *Reflecting the Audience: London Theatregoing, 1840–1880* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2001).

<sup>13</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 1983). Christopher B. Balme, *The Theatrical Public Sphere* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 63. Of the period before radio, Balme writes: “Apart from the occasional letter to the management or to a newspaper editor, there was little potential for reciprocal resonance” (Ibid.). Theatre researchers draw on playgoers’ letters to the editor from time to time; for example, see Elizabeth Maddock Dillon, *New World Drama: The Performative Commons in the Atlantic World, 1649–1849* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 45–7, 141–8.

<sup>14</sup> Sarah Bay-Cheng, “Pixelated Memories: Theatre History and Digital Historiography,” accessed 15 November 2015, [www.academia.edu/2131876/Pixelated\\_Memories\\_Theatre\\_History\\_and\\_Digital\\_Historiography](http://www.academia.edu/2131876/Pixelated_Memories_Theatre_History_and_Digital_Historiography).

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Henry George Hibbert, *A Playgoer’s Memories* (London: Grant Richards, 1920); Walter Macqueen-Pope, *Carriages at Eleven: The Story of the Edwardian Theatre* (London: Hutchinson, 1948). For a discussion of theatrical scrapbooks, see Sharon Marcus, “The Theatrical Scrapbook,” *Theatre Survey* 54.2 (2013): 283–307.

<sup>16</sup> Helen Freshwater, *Theatre and Audience* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 3–4.

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<sup>17</sup> Pat Rogers, "Pope and His Subscribers," *Publishing History* 3 (1978): 7–36; Otto Erich Deutsch, "The Subscribers to Mozart's Private Concerts," *Music & Letters* 22.3 (1941): 225–34; Alex Dault, "Crowdfunding Indie Theatre: Understanding the Costs," *Canadian Theatre Review* 160 (2014): 64–7; Benjamin Boeuf, Jessica Darveau, and Renaud Legoux, "Financing Creativity: Crowdfunding as a New Approach for Theatre Projects," *International Journal of Arts Management* 16.3 (2014): 33–48.

<sup>18</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2009), 16.

<sup>19</sup> For more on theatregoing as a form of local citizenship, see David Wiles, *Theatre and Citizenship: The History of a Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). For a theory of theatre and national, rather than local, citizenship, see Loren Kruger, *The National Stage: Theatre and Cultural Legitimation in England, France, and America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). For an account of the relationship between audience participation and political empowerment, including how subscription audiences use their power to constrain the New York Metropolitan Opera repertoire, see Susan Bennett, *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990). For a psychoanalytic approach to audience, see Herbert Blau, *The Audience* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990).

<sup>20</sup> For an account of these rioters, see Neil Martin Blackadder, *Performing Opposition: Modern Theater and the Scandalized Audience* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), 69–108. For a reading of *Playboy* as Synge's theory of Irish audience and criticism of the modern press, including some letters to the editor, see Paige Reynolds, *Modernism, Drama, and the Audience for Irish Spectacle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 38–75.

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- <sup>21</sup> Caroline Heim writes that, around 1880, “[a]udiences changed from being loud, extroverted and demonstrative performers to playing the role of audience consumer.” Caroline Heim, *Audience as Performer: The Changing Role of Theatre Audiences in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 64.
- <sup>22</sup> “Lover of Liberty,” letter to the editor, *Freeman’s Journal* (Dublin), 5 February 1907.
- <sup>23</sup> Michael R. Booth, *Theatre in the Victorian Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 16–20.
- <sup>24</sup> Stephen Hancocks, “Disgusted of Tunbridge Wells,” *British Dental Journal* 211.5 (10 September 2011): 191.
- <sup>25</sup> Marsh would go on to write a nationalist play and an important economic treatise. “Abbey theatre fund [raising],” holograph lists of subscribers and subscriptions, April 1910, Lady Gregory collection of papers, Berg Coll MSS Gregory, New York Public Library.
- <sup>26</sup> G. P. L., “Repertory Theory and Practice,” *Glasgow Herald*, 10 January 1914.
- <sup>27</sup> J. F. H., “The Perfect Audience,” *Yorkshire Telegraph*, 9 May 1912.
- <sup>28</sup> Quoted in “Theatre of the Future,” *Glasgow Herald*, 11 November 1911.
- <sup>29</sup> C. H. Reilly, “The Repertory Theatre and Its Aims,” *Education* (16 August 1912): 98.
- <sup>30</sup> W. A. Brabner, letter to the editor, *Manchester Guardian*, 29 July 1907.
- <sup>31</sup> “The Liverpool Repertory Theatre,” *Liverpool Porcupine*, supplement, 21 March 1914.
- <sup>32</sup> James Agate, quoted in Sheila Goodie, *Annie Horniman: A Pioneer in the Theatre* (London: Methuen Drama, 1990), 121.
- <sup>33</sup> Irish National Theatre Society, program, 27 December 1904–3 January 1905, George Roberts Papers Concerning the Abbey Theatre and the Irish National Theatre Society, 1903–1942, MS Thr 24, Harvard Theatre Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University;

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program, *The Admirable Crichton*, 11 November 1911, Liverpool Repertory Theatre Programmes, 792.1 PLA, Liverpool Central Library Archive. For a description of Liverpool repertorists attending plays at the Gaiety, see Grace Nisbet Goldie, *The Liverpool Repertory Theatre, 1911–1934* (Liverpool: University Press of Liverpool, 1935), 34–6.

<sup>34</sup> A. G., letter to the editor, *Liverpool Post*, 27 December 1913. Masfield's poem was reprinted in *A Souvenir of the Twenty-First Birthday*, 11 November 1932, Liverpool Repertory Theatre Programmes, 792.1 PLA, Liverpool Central Library Archive.

<sup>35</sup> J. G., letter to the editor, *Glasgow Herald*, 29 April 1909. According to the *OED*, “playgoer” follows from the earlier “churchgoer.”

<sup>36</sup> “Liverpool Repertory Theatre,” *Liverpool Porcupine*, suppl.

<sup>37</sup> St. John Greer Ervine, *The Organised Theatre: A Plea in Civics* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1924), 53.

<sup>38</sup> Robert Hield, letter to the editor, *Liverpool Post*, 25 November 1912.

<sup>39</sup> Quoted in “Repertory Theatres,” *Manchester Guardian*, 18 March 1912.

<sup>40</sup> Alfred J. Bent, letter to the editor, *Glasgow Herald*, 30 April 1909.

<sup>41</sup> Quoted in “Manchester and the Gaiety Theatre,” *Manchester Guardian*, 17 December 1913.

<sup>42</sup> Quoted in “The Repertory Theatre Movement,” *Yorkshire Observer*, 4 October 1912.

<sup>43</sup> Quoted in “Municipal Theatres,” *Manchester Guardian*, 23 September 1907.

<sup>44</sup> Starting in 1909 with £70,000 anonymously donated by Sir Carl Meyer, organizers decided that the Shakespeare Memorial National Theatre “would be far more national and real if it were erected by a large number of small donations rather than as the result of a few big subscriptions.” They managed to raise £30,000 (including a surprising £14 from Dublin)

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before dropping “National” from the title in the hope that subscriptions might come “pouring in” from America, Germany, Italy, Hungary, and South America. The Royal National Theatre finally found its feet in 1963. “Shakespeare Memorial National Theatre,” *Times* (London), 7 April 1910; “Shakespeare Memorial National Theatre,” *Times* (London), 9 December 1911. Dublin subscription amount from Receipt Book, 1910–16, Shakespeare Memorial National Theatre, GB 2080 SMNT/8/5, Royal National Theatre Archive, London.

<sup>45</sup> Quoted in “Mr. Irving on the Drama,” *Times* (London), 27 September 1894.

<sup>46</sup> Horniman: “This Playgoers’ Theatre is a speculation of my own, and I hope to make money by it . . . a financial success and an artistic success. I want to see plays produced that it will be worth paying to see, from the point of view of the public.” Quoted in “Manchester’s New Theatre,” *Manchester Courier*, 28 September 1907.

<sup>47</sup> Quoted in “New Theatres for the Provinces,” *Daily Despatch*, 17 March 1911.

<sup>48</sup> “The Drama as a ‘Public Service,’” *Glasgow Herald*, 29 October 1910.

<sup>49</sup> Quoted in “Repertory at Croydon,” *The Era* (London), 22 February 1913.

<sup>50</sup> Sidney Lee, *Shakespeare and the Modern Stage: With Other Essays* (London: John Murray, 1906), 133.

<sup>51</sup> Quoted in “Repertory Theatre Movement,” *Yorkshire Observer*.

<sup>52</sup> Quoted in “Manchester’s New Theatre,” *Manchester Courier*.

<sup>53</sup> W. A. Brabner, letter to the editor, *Manchester Guardian*, 23 July 1907.

<sup>54</sup> Constance Ray, “Theatre,” *Daily Chronicle* (London), 4 November 1909.

<sup>55</sup> “£40,000 For A Theatre,” *Liverpool Courier*, 1 June 1911.

<sup>56</sup> “Liverpool’s Repertory,” *Glasgow Times*, 26 September 1911.

<sup>57</sup> Quoted in “Repertory Theatre Movement,” *Yorkshire Observer*.

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<sup>58</sup> “Our Dramatic Candidates,” *Glasgow Herald*, 7 January 1910.

<sup>59</sup> At the time, single women ratepayers could vote in municipal but not national elections.

<sup>60</sup> “Glasgow Repertory Theatre,” *Times* (London), 19 October 1909; “The Appeal for a Repertory Theatre,” *Observer* (London), 4 January 1914.

<sup>61</sup> “Gaiety Theatre,” *Manchester Guardian*, 31 October 1911.

<sup>62</sup> “The Repertory Theatre,” *Eastern Daily Press*, 2 May 1912.

<sup>63</sup> “A Citizens’ Theatre,” *Glasgow Herald*, 19 November 1909.

<sup>64</sup> “Prospectus,” *Liverpool Courier*, 26 May 1911; “Prospectus,” *Liverpool Post*, 26 May 1911.

<sup>65</sup> Oliver Elton, letter to the editor, *Liverpool Post*, 6 June 1911.

<sup>66</sup> “The Repertory Theatre,” *Liverpool Post*, 14 June 1911.

<sup>67</sup> “Onward,” letter to the editor, *Liverpool Post*, 14 January 1914.

<sup>68</sup> This was according to Professor Reilly, who lectured the Sheffield Playgoers’ Society and was paraphrased as saying: “A large number of subscribers were working-men, which was very good. The only thing that worried him was when he found a plumber with £100 in the company. It might mean something to such a man if the company did not pay its 6 per cent, which was the maximum to which its dividends were limited.” “Wealth & Culture,” *Sheffield Telegraph*, 22 January 1912.

<sup>69</sup> “Liverpool’s Repertory Scheme,” *Sunday Chronicle* (London), 18 June 1911; Littlewood (see note 8).

<sup>70</sup> Program, *Man and Superman*, 29 September 1910, Records of Scottish Repertory Theatre GB 247 STA Fm 11, Special Collections Department, Glasgow University Library.

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<sup>71</sup> Program, *A Doll's House*, 16 September 1912, Liverpool Repertory Theatre Programmes, 792.1 PLA, Liverpool Central Library Archive.

<sup>72</sup> E. F. S., "The New Liverpool Repertory Theatre," *Westminster Gazette*, 28 October 1911.

<sup>73</sup> "Abbey Theatre Endowment Fund: Subscriptions Already Received," *Irish Times*, 7 November 1910.

<sup>74</sup> "Matters of Moment," *Irish Independent*, 29 October 1910.

<sup>75</sup> "Repertory," *Liverpool Porcupine*, 18 May 1912.

<sup>76</sup> "A Docker," letter to the editor, *Liverpool Post*, 7 February 1914.

<sup>77</sup> After protests from suffragettes, Sexton vowed to change the villain's gender for future productions. "A Non-militant suffragist," letter to the editor, *Liverpool Post*, 16 February 1914.

<sup>78</sup> T. Herbert Kendrick, letter to the editor, *Liverpool Post*, 22 December 1913.

<sup>79</sup> "A Gallery Boy," letter to the editor, *Liverpool Courier*, 30 December 1913.

<sup>80</sup> B. D. M., letter to the editor, *Glasgow Herald*, 15 June 1912.

<sup>81</sup> "Playfellow," letter to the editor, *Liverpool Post*, 17 December 1913.

<sup>82</sup> "Disgusted," letter to the editor, *Liverpool Post*, 24 September 1912.

<sup>83</sup> "Liverpool Playgoers' Society," *Liverpool Courier*, 10 May 1912.

<sup>84</sup> Reilly (see note 29).

<sup>85</sup> "Convinced," letter to the editor, *Glasgow Herald*, 24 June 1909.

<sup>86</sup> "State of the Drama," *Globe*, 29 July 1913.

<sup>87</sup> "Playgoer," letter to the editor, *Glasgow Herald*, 24 June 1909.

<sup>88</sup> Ric Knowles, *Reading the Material Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 64.

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<sup>89</sup> In the nineteenth century, wealthy playgoers migrated from boxes to the renovated pit, now called the “stalls.” For a description of “Johnny in the stalls,” see “A National Theatre,” *Tribune*, 28 October 1907. For a description of “’Arry and ’Arriet,” see “Shakespeare Day,” *Birmingham Gazette*, 25 April 1910.

<sup>90</sup> “The Repertory and Its Patrons,” *Liverpool Porcupine*, 9 December 1911.

<sup>91</sup> I. L. W., letter to the editor, *Liverpool Post*, 17 December 1913. Another correspondent observed that the family circle was the “gallery rechristened (democratically).” Andreas, letter to the editor, *Liverpool Post*, 15 December 1913.

<sup>92</sup> “Two Pun’ Ten,” letter to the editor, *Liverpool Post*, 17 December 1913.

<sup>93</sup> “An Elderly Playgoer,” letter to the editor, *Liverpool Post*, 20 December 1913.

<sup>94</sup> T., letter to the editor, *Glasgow Herald*, 12 February 1912.

<sup>95</sup> “A Plain Liverpolitan,” letter to the editor, *Liverpool Post*, 16 December 1913.

<sup>96</sup> Alfred Wareing, letter to the editor, *Glasgow Herald*, 12 February 1912.

<sup>97</sup> Quoted in “Repertory Theatre Problem,” *Liverpool Post*, 18 December 1913.

<sup>98</sup> Reilly (see note 29).

<sup>99</sup> Quoted in “New Theatres for the Provinces,” *Daily Despatch*.

<sup>100</sup> “The Woman in the Stalls,” letter to the editor, *Times* (London), 31 May 1910.

<sup>101</sup> Quoted in “Shakespeare Day,” *Birmingham Gazette*.

<sup>102</sup> This model, which allowed for plays to be taken down or reshelved with greater frequency, required even more cash up front. Nobody had managed to implement it on a permanent basis before. “What the Public Wants,” *Liverpool Post*, 25 March 1914.

<sup>103</sup> Glasgow Rep’s subscription funds were redistributed to the Scottish National Players. The Rep’s mission statement later was adopted by the Citizens’ Theatre, Glasgow. For more, see



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David Hutchison, *The Modern Scottish Theatre* (Glasgow: Molendinar Press, 1977), 12–26. Liverpool Rep survived the war by reorganizing on a Commonwealth model. For more, see Ros Merkin, *Liverpool Playhouse: A Theatre and Its City* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011). For more on the Abbey, see Adrian Frazier, *Behind the Scenes: Yeats, Horniman, and the Struggle for the Abbey Theatre* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

<sup>104</sup> Claire Cochrane, *Twentieth-Century British Theatre: Industry, Art and Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 75–6.

<sup>105</sup> Cecil Chisholm, *Repertory: An Outline of the Modern Theatre Movement; Production, Plays, Management* (London: Peter Davies, 1934), 211.

<sup>106</sup> Nigel Playfair, letter to the editor, *Liverpool Courier*, 6 June 1910.

<sup>107</sup> Program, *John Bull's Other Island*, 23 April 1918, Abbey Theatre Digital Archive, National University of Ireland, Galway; program, *You Never Can Tell*, 29 May 1909, Records of Scottish Repertory Theatre, GB 247 STA Fm 11, Special Collections Department, Glasgow University Library.

<sup>108</sup> Thomas Pigott, letter to the editor, *Liverpool Post*, 23 December 1913.

<sup>109</sup> “A Shareholder,” letter to the editor, *Liverpool Post*, 27 December 1913.

<sup>110</sup> Balme, 13.