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by Jeanne Klein

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Without Distinction of Age: The Pivotal Roles of Child Actors and Their Spectators in Nineteenth-Century Theatre

Jeanne Klein

Unlike in film and television, child actors are seldom seen on professional U.S. stages today, primarily for historical reasons. First, with some exceptions (e.g., *Billy Elliot* in 2009), whether on Broadway, at regional theatres, or in touring companies at performing arts centers, adult actors have controlled children's roles ever since Maude Adams characterized Peter Pan in 1905. Casting petite women in boys' or "breeches" roles had been a long-held theatrical convention established in England during the seventeenth century that "feminized, infantilized, and sexualized the cross-dressed actress" (Mullenix 4). Second, early twentieth-century child labor laws equated the exploitive labor of factory work with the commercialized labor of stage acting and thereby legally restricted child actors from performing in professional theatre. Third, these labor laws coincided with compulsory education laws that forced child actors and their spectators into public schools with teachers who had not been educated in the artistic crafts of theatre. With no professional acting coaches to guide their artistic development, children were deemed to be amateurs who performed in school plays solely for extra-curricular and recreational purposes, much like today.

Despite these historical reasons, most professional and university directors of Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA) today cast adult actors in child roles more for artistic and aesthetic reasons, based on the needs of specific plays, than for practical or ethical reasons, as explicated during contentious debates over "age-appropriate" casting in 2007. Many directors question whether child actors are sufficiently talented to master artistic truthfulness on stage and to sustain spontaneous freshness during long runs even when trained. While some directors argue that child audiences prefer and deserve to see themselves represented on stage, others also justify casting adults by

clinging to romanticized beliefs that child audiences have vast imaginations through which they “suspend their disbelief” and “project themselves” into child characters performed by adults (Nolan 15). These ongoing assumptions regarding the hypothetical imaginations and artistic talents of children refuse to give way to the psychological actualities of children’s embodied minds and their expert acting abilities (Klein, “Mediating” 115–20).

In this essay, I will explain how child actors commanded their own roles as an integral part of nineteenth-century theatre culture until age stratifications segregated audiences and moved children into schools. Furthermore, I will argue that wholly competent child actors and their child spectators not only invented children’s theatre well before the twentieth century but were also primarily responsible for legitimizing popular theatre entertainments throughout the nineteenth century. Unlike the strict age stratifications of today, theatre back then was categorized not by age but by legitimate and nonlegitimate forms of theatre. Yet not until the 1970s were “nonlegitimate” popular entertainments more fully examined and thereby legitimized by theatre historians (Matlaw). Concurrently, in 1978, the Children’s Theatre Association of America sought to legitimize this burgeoning profession by redefining generalized conflations of children’s theatre on the basis of actors’ ages (Davis and Behm). This forcible separation of child actors from adult actors has led theatre academics not only to dismiss “children’s theatre” as “nonlegitimate” (Buckley 424) but also to neglect the significant impact of children on the very history of U.S. theatre.

Like the pernicious dismissal of “kiddie lit,” “children’s theatre” has had to justify its legitimacy against ambivalent attitudes toward childhood and ongoing misconceptions regarding its artistic, educational, and social aims, as Manon van de Water has observed (101). Scholars contend that theatre for children could not emerge as a distinctive profession until theatre managers acknowledged child audiences as unique beings different from adults with plays designed specifically for their aesthetic needs and interests (Bedard 1, 6–10). Yet limiting theatre to public performances of literary dramas intended exclusively for children excludes the highly popular nonliterary entertainments that populated theatre companies’ repertoires throughout the nineteenth century. Even Marah Gubar, who has explored the central role child actors played in nineteenth-century dramas aimed at mixed-age audiences, defines children’s theatre as “a genre whose existence depends on the idea that children are different from adults,” a move that leads her to privilege overtly child-oriented literary dramas (189). Given the metaphorical proclivities of our embodied minds, these human urges to separate and contain unruly childhood from adults’ disciplined categories inevitably leads to discriminatory prejudices against the very cultural constructions one seeks

to integrate and unify. Legitimizing child actors and child spectators then depends on examining both literary plays with child characters that required child actors and nonliterary amusements performed by and for children, as well as the legal, political, economic, social, and literary conditions from which popularized theatre arose in public playhouses. By contextualizing these historical antecedents, we may remedy historiographical accounts and recognize the pivotal roles that children played in U.S. theatre when age distinctions mattered far less than today.

The legitimacy of literary plays intentionally written for child spectators has been entangled in prejudicial criticisms against nineteenth-century U.S. dramatic literature as a whole. As Susan Harris Smith contends, American drama, whether professional or amateur, has suffered a long-standing reputation as a “bastard art” until Eugene O’Neill’s rise to national prominence in 1915. Smith documents how “the artificial anxiety created by competition with the European models” led countless critics to attack U.S. plays for being “emotional rather than intellectual, subliterary rather than literary, theatrical rather than dramatic, and derivative rather than indigenous” (42). Rather than lay blame for the bastardization of American drama solely upon critics, I will re-explain these four generalized charges by emphasizing the ways in which theatre managers selected their repertoires by creating relationships with their family audiences. Like today, children could not attend theatre unless their parents took them to entertainments deemed suitable to adults’ protective norms. Parents expected and demanded theatre that met their own outspoken desires for aesthetic pleasure—and at ticket prices they could afford. Out of financial necessity, nineteenth-century managers endeavored to attract and maintain all age groups for their companies’ economic survival, profit-driven conditions that critics came to deplore by the late nineteenth century. Whether entertainments were praised as legitimate or condemned as nonlegitimate, parents determined what children would see by making their preferences clear at the box offices.

Before the founding of the United States, the nonlegitimacy of theatre for children was foreshadowed in legal, political, and philosophical terms during the eighteenth century. Britain’s Licensing Act of 1737 defined “legitimate theatre” as only those plays produced by London’s two major companies—the Drury Lane and Covent Garden. To ward off satirical attacks against politicians (e.g., Fielding’s *Tom Thumb* in 1730), the Lord Chamberlain censored or licensed their approved plays, leaving more musical amusements unlicensed until 1752. In that year, these legal interventions prompted Lewis Hallam, his three children (ages ten, twelve, and fifteen), and twelve adult actors to emigrate to the colonies in the hopes of securing freedoms for their repertoire. Upon arriving in the New World, the Hallams were required to seek licensed

permission from local magistrates to perform their plays. They struggled mightily against an “anti-theatrical prejudice” that stemmed not only from fierce religious oppositions to licentious exhibitions and frivolous pursuits that would corrupt young souls but also from boycotts of any British products that jeopardized goods sold by New England merchants (Davis 18–19). In the first major text on U.S. theatre, playwright-manager William Dunlap avowed, “As Puritanism or bigotry cannot shut the theatre . . . let those who seek rational amusement and elevating pleasure . . . unite in supporting, and by their presence purifying and directing the theatre” (72).

Theories of “rational amusement” had been promulgated by European philosophers who established notions of “aesthetic taste” not only to explain the “elevating pleasures” derived from theatre but also to distinguish classes of literate from illiterate spectators. In 1795, in response to the French Reign of Terror, Schiller theorized that political tyrannies could be resolved by cultivating an aesthetic education in Man through the human drive to dramatize (*Spieltrieb* or “dramatic instinct”) whereby formal reasoning and sensory emotions unify to actualize and preserve democratic freedoms. Over the next century, discourses regarding aesthetic tastes and dramatic instincts distinguished literate parents of the rising middle class who sought to cultivate their children’s aesthetic, moral, and literary educations through dramatic literature and theatrical entertainments in both private and public venues.

To inculcate moral virtues, literate adults privileged the Word by relying on emerging literature for children that included dramatic dialogues recited in schools. With increasing leisure time, children and parents also performed plays and fairy tales published by “amateur” playwrights (e.g., Edgeworth) as home theatricals, especially around the holidays—a dramatic instinct that flowered more fully in subsequent decades (Levy 5). These prolific plays, performed at home and school, undergirded children’s initial exposures to and aesthetic educations in theatre for succeeding generations; as Louisa May Alcott publicized in *Little Women* (1868) by immortalizing her “comic tragedies” staged with her sisters in the 1840s.

The acting profession itself had always been a family affair ever since Hallam’s progeny and Sarah and Eliza Tuke played supporting roles in various tragedies, comedies, and farces (Dunlap 8–13, 93). Parents carried their infants on stage whenever plays called for babes-in-arms, and children grew up on the road trouping with their families across the eastern seaboard and western frontier. As Dunlap attested, “By those who have consulted the actor’s calling a good and reputable one, children have been trained to it, and are among the best and worthiest, as artists and members of society” (407).

Young actors of unknown ages debuted and played the Duke of York in *Richard III* (1752), Young Norval in Home’s *Douglas* (1778), and Cora’s

child in Sheridan's adaptation of Kotzebue's *Pizarro in Peru* (1799). These frequently produced tragedies spotlighted long-lost children reunited with their distressed mothers and thereby supplied countless child actors with melodramatic roles through the 1860s, according to Brown's records. Significantly, Little Pickle in *The Spoiled Child* (1790), a farce arguably written by Isaac Bickerstaff but associated with its first British performer, "Mrs." Jordan, may have been the first leading child role that offered novices their most frequent training vehicle (Varty 109–14). After Miss Harding premiered this mischievous urchin in 1795, innumerable girls and young women—including Eliza Poe (Edgar Allan's mother)—showcased their hilarious father-daughter antics to delighted audiences. Other plays with essential child roles included Morton's *Children* (or *Babes*) in *the Wood* and Inchbald's version of de Genlis's *The Child of Nature*, both frequently produced and praised for their romanticized associations of childhood with nature from the 1790s through many successive decades.

By the start of the nineteenth century, the small bodies and "precocious" talents of child actors attracted widespread admiration as "novelty" objects. After twelve-year-old Master Betty incited a rage for "infant" actors in Dublin in 1803, sixteen-year-old Master Payne exploited his child-like figure in Betty's same roles as the "American Roscius" in 1809 to support his financially bankrupt family. Subsequent child "prodigies" did not garner widespread attention until 1827 when sixteen-year-old Clara Fisher and eight-year-old Louisa Lane arrived in the United States, as Lane's father determined to make his daughter "a second Clara" (Drew 26). Over the next three years, Lane played Little Pickle, Dr. Pangloss in Colman's *The Heir at Law*, and Goldfinch in Holcroft's *The Road to Ruin*. Like Fisher, she also amazed audiences by transforming herself into four to seven characters in such plays as Scribe's *Old and Young, or the Four Mowbrays* and Oxberry's *Actress of All Work* (Drew 26–30). By the time twenty-three-year-old Fanny Kemble and her father Charles arrived on U.S. shores in 1832, Lane and Fisher had already primed her adoring spectators.

As Faye Dudden explains, Fanny Kemble's stardom shifted attentions away from admiring women's charming voices to scrutinizing their bodies as visual objects of affection—especially when installations of gas lighting improved visions in cavernous playhouses. This significant visual turn away from the aural word of literary dialogues transformed audiences into spectators who gazed upon the theatricality of actors' youthful personalities. Kemble's performances attracted more women to theatres through domestic dramas that emphasized patriarchal conflicts between controlling fathers and dutiful daughters who struggled to win their preferred romantic lovers in happily ended marriages. While Kemble cultivated male pleasures of sexual

desire, she also offered a valuable role model to spectating girls and aspiring actresses (Drew 46; Dudden 1–8, 24–39).

While the lives of incalculable child performers remain unrecorded, those who achieved fame as adults included many boys who were freer than girls to leave their homes early and train with wandering minstrels. Prior to 1870, those children born within (or at times outside) theatrical families known to have made their first U.S. stage appearances between the “tender” ages of three and ten included the following (by debut year): Emily Mestayer (1822), Anna Cora Mowatt (1824), William and Emma Wheatley (1826, 1828), Louisa Lane and Alexina Fisher (1827), George L., Caroline, and James Fox (1830–34), Joseph Jefferson III (1833), Maggie Mitchell (1837), Mary Ann Gannon (1838), Susan and Kate Denin and Julia Dean (1841), Adelaide Phillips (1842), Olive and Eliza Logan (1844), Tony Pastor (1846), Kate and Ellen Bateman (1849), Cordelia Howard (1852), Lotta Crabtree (1853), Fanny Davenport (1857), Francis Wilson (1863), and Minnie Maddern (Mrs. Fiske) (1867). In addition to their touted achievements in acting as both child and adult actors, many of these children went on to play pivotal roles in changing the face of U.S. theatre in adulthood. In discussing their contributions below, I contend that their acting apprenticeships provided a requisite foundation upon which they developed the theatre profession as significant and innovative playwrights, managers, critics, and political activists.

Some young actors, such as John Howard Payne, found writing more to their liking than acting. In 1805, at age thirteen, Payne published *The Thespian Mirror*, his collection of dramatic biographies and theatrical criticism that included a list of British and Irish child prodigies (Dunlap 351–54). After his first play at age fifteen, he went on to write and adapt sixty more, many with leading roles for girls, such as *Clari, or the Maid of Milan* (1823) with its signature song, “Home, Sweet Home.” However, given the actor-manager system of resident stock companies, Payne, like other playwrights, received only a lump-sum salary or proceeds from one benefit performance with little financial incentive to write original, indigenous plays, especially for child audiences admitted at half price. Nevertheless, to answer repeated calls for a national drama unique to the new country’s identity, playwrights’ dramatic instincts evoked U.S. character-types—the Yankee, Negro, Indian, and ethnic immigrants—who yearned to achieve their democratic freedoms from respective tyrannies, just as Schiller had advocated. However, playwrights would not dramatize the character of the U.S. child as a leading protagonist until Charles Dickens and subsequent social reformers in the Progressive Era called attention to the plight of oppressed children caught in the tyranny of legalized institutions that impinged upon their democratic freedoms. Until then, playwrights and managers would rely more upon the general content

of children's literature than upon the ages of its child characters to edify family audiences.

While children are known to have attended and participated in theatre since medieval times, historians do not know or record the extent to which child audiences attended early theatres, largely because managers did not keep demographic box office records and commentators seldom mentioned children in attendance. Yet my extensive review of primary evidence from published advertisements indicates that "children under 12 years of age" were admitted at half price to museums, panoramic exhibitions, circuses, and some theatres during the 1820s. Most evidence from playbill advertisements and news accounts indicate that spectators were segregated primarily by class and race on the basis of different ticket prices for those seated in British-modeled pit, box, and three-tiered gallery structures. Rosemarie Bank summarizes the following ticket prices at New York's first three playhouses from 1827 to 1831:

Park Theatre prices varied between 75 cents and \$1.00 for a box seat, 37½ to 75 cents for a seat in the pit, and 25 to 50 cents for a gallery seat, depending on business. The Bowery charged 75 cents for a box seat, 37½ cents for the pit, and 25 cents for the gallery, while the Chatham had only box (50 cents) and pit (37½ cents) seats, with half price for children in boxes [initiated in 1824]. These amounts were charged in other northern cities during the period and in Baltimore, Norfolk, and Richmond as well. (51)

Thus, Grimsted and others conclude that "the Park was associated with the upper classes, the Bowery with the middle, and the Chatham with the lower" (56). However, Bank questions this classist depiction as a "canonical myth" by arguing that male critics' oft-repeated denigrations of prostitutes seated in third tiers actually characterized legitimate working women engaged in trades at both artisan shops and home. To regulate "the guilty third tier," "respectable" women, and presumably their disciplined children, were required to be escorted by gentlemen in boxes, situated vertically on either side of the proscenium, in order to see and be seen (Bank 120–38, 207n37). Linking the Chatham with a lower-class clientele for its inclusion of children and cheaper tickets set a discriminatory precedent of associating particular theatres by their literate readers and illiterate patrons with plebeian tastes.

While domestic dramas and light farces drew escorted women, pantomimes captivated child spectators, ever since 1739 when Harlequin first plied his slapstick trademark on Pantaloon in the colonies. British pantomimes merged commedia dell'arte characters into adapted fairy tales as profit-making ventures at Christmas time. Just as the Hallams had capitalized on Drury Lane successes with *Harlequin's Vagaries* (1767), Brown's records indicate that at least fifty British pantomimes, such as *Robinson Crusoe* (1786); *Blue Beard*,

or *Female Curiosity* (1802); *Cinderella* (1808); *Forty Thieves* (1809); *Aladdin* (1815); *Mother Goose* (1817); and *Cherry and Fair Star* (1824), premiered in the United States. From France, the respective arrivals of the Placide and Ravel families in 1792 and 1832 to the United States further accelerated excitement for imported pantomimic ballets, acrobatic feats, and “vaudeville” (i.e., farcical songs) introduced by French opera troupes. After Henry Placide humored families at the Park Theatre for twenty years (1823–43), the widely popular Ravel family of acrobats dazzled two generations of family audiences at Niblo’s Garden for ten seasons (1842–60) (Henderson 65). Some children may have attended pantomimes only once a year, for as one woman complained, husbands and brothers refused to escort women to theatres, other than taking their children to the Ravels at Christmas (“A Plea”).

However, just as pantomimes and operatic burlettas were making commercial headway in the United States, back in London, Parliament was amending its copyright laws in 1832 by redefining “legitimate” drama as “spoken dialogue” that evidenced “poetic qualities or superior literary worth,” such that “the interest of the piece is mental rather than physical,” according to artists’ testimony (qtd. in Levine 75–76). Any dramatic dialogue accompanied by music and dance was deemed illegitimate. So, after satirizing legitimate and illegitimate drama in *The Drama’s Levée* (1838) at Madame Vestris’s Olympic Theatre, J. R. Planché dropped the “vague title of Burletta” and billed his *Sleeping Beauty* (1840) as a “fairy extravaganza” to distinguish “the whimsical treatment of a poetical subject from the broad caricature of a tragedy or serious opera, which was correctly termed a ‘Burlesque’” (Croker and Tucker 66). When the Theatre Regulation Act abolished the monopoly of legitimate drama by patent houses in 1843, a flurry of nursery stories, adapted by Planché and others, were pirated, imitated, and parodied in the United States.

During the 1840s, the Panic of 1837 had already forced U.S. theatre managers to change their audience strategies and repertoires given record-high unemployment. This pivotal decade sharpened cultural divisions between the urban, industrialized, and theatre-centered North with its Irish and German immigrants and the rural, agricultural South built on the backs of slave labor, all of which climaxed in the Civil War. Similarly, a cultural consciousness of age stratification increased from the 1840s to 1870s with the institution of common schools (Chudacoff 29–40). Along with calls for age-graded schools and the abolition of slavery came cries for women’s rights beyond domesticity and more conscious demarcations among the lower, middle, and upper classes of native- and foreign-born citizens. As Butsch explicates (47–76), it was the boisterous “b’hoys”—young male laborers that included fourteen-year-old newsboys and trade apprentices attending theatre—who

activated three bourgeois discourses regarding cultivated taste, morally superior respectability, and status-driven fashion. The satirical comedy, *Fashion*, penned and performed by former child prodigy Anna Cora Mowatt at the Park Theatre in 1845, epitomized the decade's shifting views of respectable theatre for women and their children.

When William Mitchell managed his "Temple of Momus," the Olympic Theatre (modeled after London's in 1837) from late 1839 to 1850, he achieved remarkable commercial success at his 1,100-seat theatre by halving the ticket prices charged at the Park and the Bowery and lampooning their patrons. He relegated the b'hoys to his 12½¢ pit and gratified newsboys by inserting local news into his burlesques while chiding, "Boys, if you misbehave yourselves I shall raise the prices" (qtd. in Brown 271). To attract respectable women and their children, he advertised the first tier as the "dress circle" for 50¢ and charged 25¢ for second and third tier "upper boxes," with private boxes costing \$5. In 1840, he performed as Crummies in Horncastle's adaptation of Dickens's *Nicholas Nickleby*, entitled *The Savage and the Maiden*, and in Allan's *1940!; or, Crummies in Search of Novelty*, with eight-year-old La Petite Celeste as his "infant phenomenon." When Dickens himself arrived in the United States in 1842, Mitchell revived *1940!* and then burlesqued New York's fashionable fanfare of Dickens in *Boz, or The Lion Lionized*. Horncastle's "convincing characterization" of Boz sparked a spate of Dickensian adaptations that further groomed young actors for generations thereafter, despite Dickens's opposition to unauthorized and pirated dramatizations of his serialized novels (Bolton 43–52, 154–55). Like Vestris, Mitchell catered to families further by premiering Planché's fairy extravaganzas, including *Puss in Boots* (1841), *The White Cat* (1843), and *The Bee and The Orange Tree* (1846) (Rinear 19–25, 44–45, 55, 74–77, 164–65).

Back at the Bowery in 1843, Hamblin premiered the Virginia Minstrels (four white men in blackface) and thereby accelerated the public popularity of Negro minstrelsy. As the most indigenous theatre from which many performing boys got their start (e.g., Jefferson, Pastor, and Wilson), minstrels derided suffragettes, politicians, and other occupations over the next four decades. Irish families could also marvel at Juba, a fourteen-year-old African American master of Irish jigs or "Ethiopian Imitations," that left Dickens wondering, "what is this to him?" (qtd. in Hatch 98–99). To Juba, it was a profitable career touring the United States and Great Britain after earning over \$1,000 in dance competitions.

The 1840s also launched the most significant theatres connected to children's education when museums with stock companies catered directly to families and schools (i.e., women and children *without* male escorts). Moses Kimball and his compatriot, P. T. Barnum, managed respective theatres in

Boston (1843–93) and New York (1842–65) and pioneered Saturday and weekday matinees of “highly moral and instructive domestic dramas,” as well as minstrel shows, pantomimes (performed by the Fox-Howard families), and farcical afterpieces in their respective 1,200- to 3,000-seat “lecture rooms” (qtd. in Dennett 34, 86–100; cf. Wilson, *Francis Wilson’s Life* 303). Open continuously from morning to night, Kimball initially advertised a 25¢ admission to his exhibitions and performances “without distinction of age” and “to which schools, in a body, will be admitted on liberal terms” (Boston); but Barnum charged children half that price (12½¢) at his American Museum. By staging didactic temperance dramas and prohibiting liquor on their premises, they preached against the evils of alcoholic husbands who left their families impoverished. By censoring vulgar language, enforcing codes of actors’ conduct, and policing visitors’ behaviors, they protected children from moral improprieties. Barnum’s emblazoned slogan, “We Study to Please,” used education as a ploy for aesthetic pleasure to placate parents’ ongoing anti-theatrical prejudices and thereby propagated numerous imitators after the Civil War.

Following the leads of these innovative managers, other competing theatres with similar repertoires, such as Marshall’s new 4,500-seat Broadway Theatre (modeled after London’s Haymarket in 1847), began to advertise their 25¢ third tiers as the “family circle” in 1848. By substituting families for suspect prostitutes, managers could also relegate mothers to upper tiers to keep crying infants, restless toddlers, talkative youngsters, and undisciplined children furthest away from older spectators. The institution of dress and family circles transformed the problematic pit into a more egalitarian and fashionably French “parquet” (today’s orchestra) that likely included disciplined children escorted by their upper- and middle-class parents.

The increasing vogue for sensational melodramas, driven in part by juvenile spectators, reached a climax when the nation’s first “blockbuster,” *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, materialized in 1852. Within months, four pirated dramatizations of Stowe’s novel appeared without her authorized permission and no payments to her for recordbreaking performances. Significantly, the death of Little Eva, performed by four-year-old Cordelia Howard until her retirement at age thirteen, not only traumatized the nation into abolishing slavery but also substantiated the emotional power of child actors while evoking the “sacralization” of children’s lives (Zelizer 11). Despite critical accusations against sentimentality (or girls’ manipulations of men’s emotions), men could no longer deny the evidence of their families shedding uncontrollable tears openly in public.

By the mid-1850s, Laura Keane proved that women could successfully manage companies by appealing to mothers, despite the impending Panic of

1857. Having been mentored by Madame Vestris in London, Keene intended to open her Varieties with Planché's *Prince* (or *King*) *Charming* on Christmas Eve in 1855, in direct competition with the Broadway Theatre, but someone maliciously slashed her scenery. Even so, by devoting one-third of her new 1,538-seat theatre to family circles, she appealed to children and her female supporters by staging *Young Bacchus* (1857), *The Elves* (1857), *Harlequin Blue Beard* (1858), *The Invisible Prince* (1859), and *Cinderella* (1859) before closing with *Tib*, *The Cat in Crinoline* (1863). In Philadelphia, she offered Saturday matinees of *Beauty and the Beast*; *Little Red Riding Hood*; *Bold Jack*, *The Giant Killer*; *Babes in the Woods*; and, *A Christmas Carol* (1869) at the Chestnut Street Theatre; while Mrs. John Drew (Louisa Lane) managed her own young Drew-Barrymore dynasty at the Arch Street Theatre (1861–92).

Like Mrs. Drew, other former child actors, who were fully mature by the troubled 1860s, impacted popular entertainments in appreciable ways. Joe Jefferson endeared family audiences to his sympathetic portrayal of Rip Van Winkle from 1865 to 1904 while nurturing more child actors in the play's two leading roles. George L. Fox perfected his nonverbal pantomimes that culminated in his long-running, two-act pantomime *Humpty Dumpty* in 1868, having been inspired by Gabriel Ravel's acrobatic stunts and honed at museum theatres as a child. Although pantomimes never endured in the United States as they did in Britain, child spectators popularized the transmutations of these spectacular extravaganzas with persistent fortitude (Senelick 218–23).

In 1866, William Wheatley also made headlines by co-producing *The Black Crook* at Niblo's Garden. Like Keene's *The Seven Sisters* (1860), this spectacular five-hour extravaganza and presumed forerunner of musical comedy broke records for its long-running performances by foregrounding theatricality over its thin literary text. Most critics gazed upon the "immodest" costumes worn by over one hundred women, as well as the dazzling scenic transformations achieved with gauze curtains and trap doors (as perfected by Planché). However, the *New York Times* found the "most entertaining novelty" to be "the baby ballet" led by the infant Ravel. This *Pas de Militaire* was "performed by over a hundred youngsters varying in height from 25 to 45 inches tall. These military marches are growing to be great bores, and only the precocity of the performers makes the present one interesting" ("Amusements"). Two years later, Lydia Thompson and her British Blondes imported bawdy versions of parodied pantomimes (e.g., *The Forty Thieves*) and thereby associated satirical burlesques with striptease acts through the 1890s. Despite Olive Logan's public attacks against "the leg business," this former child actress and active feminist could not dissuade girls at that "very trying age" of twelve or thirteen from entering a profession that valued physical attractiveness over diligent work and artistic talent.

From 1865 through 1908, Tony Pastor, deemed “The Father of Vaudeville,” picked up where Barnum left off by employing his strategies. Like other “Great Family Resorts,” he offered weekday matinees of variety acts at 15¢ for children under ten, leading newspapers to observe that “ladies and children now form a large portion of [Pastor’s] audience” (Zellers 43, 56, 72). To legitimize vaudeville further, Keith and Albee built luxurious “palaces” near shopping districts so mothers could leave their children with matrons at the theatre while shopping during continual performances. By promising “cleanliness, comfort, and courtesy,” they assured women that vaudeville acts would contain no profanity, vulgar innuendos, or sexually seductive costumes. Yet the commercial success of vaudeville also cheapened melodramas to 10- to 30¢ admissions as businessmen, rather than artistic managers, increasingly consolidated their booking powers into the Theatrical Syndicate in 1896 (Wertheim 30–34, 97–99).

As a testament to the consistent popularity of child performers, the Census Bureau began to count actors ages ten and up in 1870; and by 1880, young vaudevillians were traveling with their families by railroad to roughly 5,000 theatres across 3,500 cities. Likewise, stage actors left their resident theatres to tour in “combination” companies that carried constricted amounts of scenery and costumes (today’s “road show”). Given that these productions seldom required child actors for child roles, an increasing number of young apprentices were left behind with fewer seasoned actors to initiate them into the professional trade at dwindling stock companies.

These threats to the future of the acting profession induced Franklin Sargent to open the Lyceum Theatre School in 1884 (the present American Academy of Dramatic Arts) (McArthur, *Actors* 100–03). It was here that twenty-one-year-old Emma Sheridan (Fry) learned how to utilize dramatic instincts to coach Herts’s young actors, as explained in her 1913 manual *Educational Dramatics*. After perfecting her acting and teaching at the Boston Museum and the Lyceum School, Mrs. Fry “knew more about acting than [Stanislavsky]” as one of the foremost acting teachers in the country (Tukesbury 342).

However, the legitimacy of child actors had been under attack since 1876 when the New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children sought to ban performers under age sixteen. Elsie Leslie sparked controversies after debuting at age four as Meenie in Jefferson’s *Rip Van Winkle* (1885), initiating Burnett’s *Little Lord Fauntleroy* craze (1888), and starring in Twain’s *The Prince and the Pauper* (1890). Her commercial profitability led Harrison Grey Fiske (Maddern’s husband) to convince New York’s mayor to license child performers in 1892. Subsequently, former child actor Francis Wilson led the National Alliance for the Protection of Stage Children before serving as the first president of Actors’ Equity (a labor union) in 1913.

By 1900, at least half of all produced plays required child performers (McCracken 501). As a result, in 1903 over 4,000 applications for child acting licenses were submitted to the New York mayor's office, suggesting that child actors represented at least one-third of all New York actors. Subsequent evidence indicated that twice as many girls than boys debuted at ages three to twelve (16% vs. 7%) and ages thirteen to seventeen (47% vs. 21%), while twice as many young men than women debuted at ages eighteen to twenty-four (61% vs. 30%). Given fewer occupations open to females than males, acting offered girls, especially the daughters of impoverished immigrants, an economically viable means of supporting their families before marriage. Young performers could earn anywhere from \$6 to \$8 a week for song-and-dance routines to \$75 to \$100 a week for leading roles in melodramas (McArthur, *Actors* 23–41).

After the formation of the National Child Labor Committee in 1904, four states (Massachusetts, Illinois, Louisiana, and Maryland) applied factory labor laws to child actors under age fourteen, wreaking havoc on touring productions out of New York. As a consequence, Wilson rallied his colleagues and former child actors, such as Fanny Davenport and Mrs. Fiske, to explain why the theatre profession needed child apprentices for its proper development in virulent debates that climaxed in 1912 ("Francis Wilson Defends"; McArthur, "Forbid"). In the end, as Zelizer concludes,

Acting was condemned as illegitimate labor by those who defined it as a profane capitalization of the new "sacred" child. Yet, ironically, at a time when most other children lost their jobs, the economic value of child actors rose precisely because they symbolized on stage the new economically worthless, but emotionally priceless child. (96)

From the 1880s through the turn of the century, "low-brow" melodramas and vaudeville led elder critics to reminisce over the "good old times" of pantomimes and fairy stories circa 1850 and to debate whether the responsibility of reforming theatre lay with managers, audiences, or playwrights. To resolve these nagging problems, social scientists and artists, such as William Partridge, began to discuss "The Relation of the Drama to Education" by engaging in circular reasoning over how to "elevate" both the much-lamented decline of legitimate theatre and the aesthetic tastes of rising generations simultaneously (199). Despite entrenched cultural hierarchies, Partridge called upon his readers to "rise above the foolish and injurious prejudice that there is any opposition between education and amusement" (200), while others advocated for an endowed national theatre, just as Dunlap had proposed (72). For example, despite his yearning for "fairy plays" from his youth (7–10), Clapp argued that an endowed theatre "is not to be a kindergarten for infants who still suck their sustenance from a 'vaudeville' bottle, nor a primary or

grammar school for small children, but a high school or university for adults” (185–86). Toward these ends, George Pierce Baker trained new playwrights at Harvard University from 1888 to 1925, thereby initiating departments of university theatres by 1914.

In 1899, these cultural conditions coalesced when Sargent founded and directed the first Children’s Theatre at the 727-seat Carnegie Lyceum in a series of matinee performances that appealed directly to child spectators. Initially, several fairy pantomimes and *Jack the Giant Killer* were performed by graduates of his school before subsequent plays were performed by child actors (Dorr). Playwright Alexander Hume Ford discovered that “the fickle little New Yorkers soon wearied of fairy stories and demanded real dramas such as their parents enjoyed” (400):

At first many thousands of dollars were lost experimenting with childish taste; spectacular scenes from Mother Goose were tried, and while the very little children came, their older brothers and sisters remained away, and as the theatre, so the law says, is no place for children under seven years of age, it was necessary to either alter the policy or close the house. It is a remarkable fact that children over seven years of age will follow the plot of a play even more closely than will adults; to them the story is real, and if it is simply told, it holds both the little ones and their adult companions. (403–04)

Therefore, the theatre turned to dramatizing Twain’s stories and further popularized Dickens’s novels for five seasons. But without an endowment supported by wealthy “angels,” Sargent’s theatre apparently closed, despite a brief revival in 1912 under different managers.

On the heels of Sargent’s Children’s Theatre, Alice Minnie Herts founded the Children’s Educational Theatre in 1903 and initiated the myth that the discriminatory tastes of future audiences could be inculcated by nurturing the dramatic instincts of children while keeping child actors “off the professional stage” (14, 53, 73–75; her emphasis). After opening with *The Tempest*, her repertoire included Burnett’s *The Little Princess* (1903), *Little Lord Fauntleroy* (1885), and *Editha’s Burglar* (1887); *The Forest Ring* (1901), adapted for Sargent by William C. de Mille and Charles Barnard; Marguerite Merington’s adaptation of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1905); and, an altered version of Abby Sage Richardson’s *The Prince and the Pauper* (1890). Given the 800-seat theatre’s location in a working class Jewish settlement on the Lower East Side, Herts presented 10¢ Sunday matinees to families and public schools. But in 1909, having failed to secure an endowment, the theatre closed when New York laws banned theatre performances on Christian Sundays.

Yet among Herts’s many avid supporters, Mark Twain proclaimed that “the children’s theatre is one of the very, very great inventions of the twentieth century,” thereby initiating an oft-repeated fallacy that obliterated nineteenth-century child actors and their spectators. In a series of lectures that conflated

meanings of children's theatre, G. Stanley Hall predicted "a proper curriculum of theatre-going" for child spectators, based on Schiller's model of aesthetic education, and foresaw a "closer union between the theatre and the school"; while Baker believed that "competent, intelligent" acting coaches of Fry's caliber could be found for child actors "without serious difficulty" for "school plays" (in Herts 100, 106, 115). However, few universities trained acting and directing teachers until 1912. By 1917, University of Wisconsin professor Thomas Dickinson denied the possibility of children's theatre serving "any good purpose" (118), unless and until it attracted and sustained "the mature intelligences of men and women" as a commercially viable enterprise (123)—an economic argument that circled back to the very problem reformers of legitimate theatre sought to correct.

Shifting the responsibility of theatre for children from for-profit theatres to nonprofit schools gradually took parents off the hook and made teachers responsible for taking their students to local productions over the twentieth century. These educational links also chained playwrights to the literature taught in schools and greatly constricted the writing of original plays for children, an ongoing trend that continues unabated today (Guehring; Klein, "Why"). The commercial success of dramatizing novels by Dickens, Twain, and Burnett instituted the tradition of dramatizing such books as *Alice in Wonderland* (1900), *The Wizard of Oz* (1903), *Mrs. Wiggs and the Cabbage Patch* (1904), *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* (1910), *Little Women* (1912), *Treasure Island* (1915), and *The Birthday of the Infanta* (1916). As children had taught managers long ago, TYA spectators today can still witness the vestiges of nineteenth-century entertainments with its emphases on physically animated actors, melodramatic emotions, and theatrical spectacles as derived from children's literature and one-act "junior" versions of Broadway musicals (e.g., *Seussical* in 2004). In other words, the same four charges leveled against "bastard" drama remain in place today, despite the excellent but underappreciated repertoire of TYA plays written by many accomplished playwrights.

This reinterpretation of nineteenth-century theatre suggests at least three possible ways to legitimize twenty-first-century TYA today. First, more professional and university companies need to cast child actors in child roles from the ranks of their own extensive K-12 educational programs. If live theatre is to survive the digital age, then producers need to lay the educational groundwork for future innovations in theatre by nurturing the dramatic instincts of child apprentices today, just as Wilson argued in 1910. Second, artistic directors need to invite child critics to evaluate their productions in order to challenge adults' misconceptions of their highly intelligent minds and aesthetic preferences. By making children's sophisticated criticisms more public, theatre artists may be persuaded to alter their romanticized conceptions

of childhood by discovering the actual rather than hypothetical machinations of their critical imaginations. Third, rather than restricting performances to school matinees only, producers need to offer more evening and weekend performances to allow and encourage more working parents to recoup their nineteenth-century responsibilities for bringing children to theatre as an artistic alternative to digital entertainments. While TYA companies will most likely retain their direct relationships with teachers in schools, inviting more parents to attend and provide critical feedback on productions could conceivably inspire playwrights to write more original plays focused on family concerns outside curricular literature. To promote and increase family attendance, the costs of attending evening and weekend performances could be reversed by offering cheaper ticket prices to parents and relatives accompanied by children. By these and other means, inter-generational families could recognize that Theatre for Young Audiences is simply Theatre for All Audiences—without distinction of age.

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