

More than Music Hall, or How the Alternative is Not So New

(Keynote Speech delivered by Prof. COLIN CHAMBERS, Kingston University, to the *East Through Performance* conference, East London Theatre Archive, Victoria and Albert Museum, 29 January, 2009)

Previous lectures have looked at performance in the East End through the perspective of geography, demography, architecture and audience, so now we come to the repertoire. In this, the final lecture of the conference, I shall be looking briefly at what the theatres of the East End put on. The title of the session – ‘More than Music Hall, or How the Alternative is Not So New’ - takes as its starting point what seems to be the most common association that is made when the words theatre and East End are joined together. And that is quite understandable, for the music hall of the East End is a wonderful creation, as a glance through the ELTA website shows, but it is not the whole story, and, indeed, its own story is not as straightforward as it might popularly seem.

Theatre, in general and across genres, often maps the history of its location and of its nation and of the relationship between the two. It is not surprising, therefore, to find an extraordinary range of performance type and an even more astounding variety of what might loosely be called its content gathered together under the umbrella of East End theatre, which is marvellously mixed and contradictory. Within this vast array of theatrical activity I want to identify in a rather sociological sense a tradition of alternative theatre that can be found in the

East End that we will probably be familiar with in the post World War II era of ELTA partners such as Theatre Workshop, the Half Moon, Theatre Venture or the revived Hackney Empire, but perhaps which is not so familiar prior to that.

At this point I should flag up the usual caveats related to such an undertaking: the first concerns the East End itself and the inevitable ambiguities of definition in relation to location and boundaries, the links of the performers and creators with the area, and the make-up of the audiences. The definition and importance of such different factors will shift over time as well as within one period (for example, the Theatre Workshop of *Richard II* or *Fings Ain't Wot They Used T'Be* or *Oh What a Lovely War* is both the same but different), so I will be using the term East End in a hermeneutically and geographically 'generous' way. The second caveat relates to the notion of the alternative. This can be interpreted generously as well, from the conscious promulgation of ideas found in socialist groups such as CAST to the presentation of a set of values rooted in a way of life that has been marginalized, such as seen in working-class communities or represented in the Yiddish theatre of the late 19th and 20th centuries, or in some of the more recent black and Asian theatre seen at the Hackney Empire or Theatre Royal Stratford East. Alternative theatre is not always progressive, though it often is, but, like all theatre, it is to some degree always political in the broadest sense because of the relationship to its audiences through representation of how they relate to their own lives and those of the rest of the world. In this sense, the notion of alternative can also embrace styles of theatre,

a different theatre experience, a different performer-audience relationship, and this is important in relation to the East End.

A third caveat is to do with interpretation and selectivity, with what we choose to look at and what is available to look at in the archive (by which I do not mean specifically ELTA but the wider archive). By definition, there is a confluence of what is called mainstream and the archive; whereas the areas we are examining, the East End theatre in all its manifestations, the actors, the writers, the audiences, are often neglected and are not readily accessible or available. The historical construction and retrieval process is difficult and fraught. There is a great debate going on about the nature of the archive and about how we view the past, and about the influence of our ideologies on this process - the temptation to find evidence that chimes with our own agenda and reinforces our own suppositions. Making historical judgements is complicated not only by our ignorance and our bias, but also by the fact that in theatre, the key lies in performance. Theatrical genres are not as monolithic as they might seem, but how to assess the deviations, contradictions, and counter flows active within them and the meanings that have been derived from them is not always clear from the text, and requires an assessment that recognises the impact of performance and the factors that shape this.

End of caveats and back to alternative theatre.

It is easy to forget that theatre itself has roots in the alternative: in British history, it was at one time alternative to the church and, at the birth of the public playhouses here in the capital London, alternative to the city; the Elizabethan playhouses had to be built outside the city boundary and were subject to political control. This sense of theatre as an alternative continued in the struggle against the patent theatre system inaugurated by Charles II at the Restoration of the monarchy, a struggle, which, especially towards the end of the eighteenth and first decades of the nineteenth century, saw the growth of East End theatre as part of the growth of non-patent or so-called illegitimate theatre. A sense of outsider/alternative was therefore inscribed in the theatres of the East End and their permitted repertoires, as it was in the locations themselves. Growth in illegitimate theatre saw an overlap between middle and working class aspirations against the restrictions of the patent system, and this tied in politically with the movements against slavery and for social and parliamentary reform, though there was a clearer class divergence after the passing of the 1832 Reform Act. Such political links found expression in theatre, both directly through the repertoire (in plays such as *The Barn Burners*, seen at the City Theatre in Cripplegate in 1833) and indirectly through the use of theatre to raise funds for political campaigns. And, as has been pointed out elsewhere, the great demonstrations of the 19th century reform movement were themselves spectacular forms of street theatre.

Censorship kept a great deal of alternative politics off the stage, and, generally, in the vast panoply of theatrical performance that we find throughout the 19th

century - from middle-brow theatre to the panoramas and dioramas, exhibitions and lectures, from local and amateur mumming plays (which enjoyed a renaissance during the industrial revolution) to the popular theatre of pantomime, saloon, circus, street and pier shows – in all this, the imperial project was vigorously promoted. Often operating a little like the Living Newspapers of the 20th century, popular theatre offered audiences naval adventure, red-coat victories, and racial and cultural superiority at times of key encounters abroad, such as the Indian Uprising of 1857 or the wars in Sudan and Crimea.

There were plays, however, that countered the dominant imperial view or, at least, challenged aspects of it. In his book *Harlequin Empire*, David Worrall, for instance, identifies plays that gave space to Islamic Indian pride and offered protest at the British invasion of India, plays like William Barrymore's *El Hyder* or H.M. Milner's *Tippoo Saib*ⁱ. There were also plays dealing with dissent in England's history, like JH Haines' *Richard Plantagenet*, which portrays Wat Tyler as a hero, or those dealing with contemporary concerns from a dissenting viewpoint, like John Walker's *The Factory Lad*, which attacks the Poor Law system. At the inception of what became called 'Tom mania', when *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was first published in Britain and adapted theatrically many times in different versions, the Britannia in Hoxton presented productions that had audiences booing the villainous plantation owner and cheering as a slave escaped, in keeping with general support for the underdog and the idea that British liberty was better than American.

When Jim Davis studied the melodramas that were presented at the Britannia in the 1860s and '70s, in order to obtain a representative picture he read some 50 of them in manuscript form which had not been published and he discovered that 'there is certainly social protest (explicit and implicit) in many...and an underlying sense of shared assumptions from play to play. There is, however, no coherent pattern of social protest' yet, without wishing to impose a social agenda, he says 'it does seem that social protest is a discernable if sometimes arbitrary tendency in some of the melodramas.' He points out that 'Intrinsic to many...was the social division between rich and poor. ...theatres like the Britannia continued to fan the flames of class antagonism through centring on this particular form of conflict.' Poverty is a vital problem in many Britannia melodramas, being 'elevated to a condition of moral excellence'. Other major concerns Davis found were problems of disease, starvation, unemployment and aristocratic indifference. In presenting an opposition to the aristocracy and the rich, the melodramas tackle questions of social responsibility, the need for better homes and wages, and the dignity of labour. Exploitation of labour is attacked, and in particular the exploitation of female labour, with women forced into prostitution, the workhouse, drink, and gambling. The link between poverty and crime is frequently made, and can be found in many plays, including several stage versions of *Oliver Twist*. Davis concludes that to a certain extent melodrama was 'passive and escapist, yet paradoxically it indoctrinated its audience into a continual questioning of the status quo.'ⁱⁱ

This 'continual questioning of the status quo' does seem to have been a constant in East End theatre, and the importance of the audience in this process is critical. We heard earlier about some of the demographic changes that made East End audiences diverse. To what extent this diversity was reproduced in the 19th century repertoire remains unclear, but there are enough examples to suggest that, as one might expect, the theatres *did* reflect this reality. Aside from standard figures of otherness such as the Irish and the Jews, of interest is the representation of non-white characters from the Asian and African diasporas, who, while adhering in broad outline to theatrical stock traits, offered something different as well. Mostly, they appeared as exotic background, and occasionally as central figures (for example, in Edward Fitzball's *The Negro of Wapping* about a vengeful black sailor called Sam), or even as stage versions of real people, such as the celebrated street character Billy Waters in *Tom and Jerry*, an adaptation by William Moncrieff of a picaresque novel of London life. In *How We Live, or, London Labour and London Poor* by JB Johnstone, however, the figure who acts as guide through the urban jungle no longer comes from the privileged class, but is not only a coster (someone who sells fruit and vegetables) but also a 'Hindoo', called Araxa. In James Willing and Frank Staniforth's *Glad Tidings*, the plot's pivotal figure is a female Indian beggar called Juanna (who is later discovered to be related to the main character). Both Juanna and Araxa criticize the cruel treatment of the poor by the ruling class, a staple of working-class drama, and, as Heidi J. Holder points out in her essay in a book called *Imagined*

Londons, instead of passively carrying notions of race, class, and gender, they are the active agents of social restoration and humane values, even if they renovate the existing social order by eventually being sacrificed.ⁱⁱⁱ Both characters achieve their dynamic role in deathbed confessions and then are required no more, a device also seen typically in Noble Savage plays.

The representation of non-white characters raises the contentious issue of blackface and the extent to which dissonance occurred or was possible in performance of blackface. The Royalty in Tower Hamlets as early as 1787 (its opening year) featured a pantomime called *Harlequin Mungo; or, a Peep into the Tower* by William Bates, in which Harlequin, a slave on a Caribbean plantation, escapes with the white slave owner's daughter, who becomes Colombine. In other words, a white actor, presumably blacked up as a slave, dons a black mask as Harlequin and elopes with a white woman in the safe knowledge that both are actually white performers. This inter-racial mix and playing with the meanings of colour was familiar, for instance from stage versions of *Robinson Crusoe, or Harlequin Friday*, in which blackface Friday is transformed into black-masked Harlequin and marries white Colombine. The association of Harlequin, the iconic outsider, with Africa – for example, the figure's roots in Roman slavery, and the use of black mask and black patches on the costume to make him disappear, a device central to black cultural traditions – makes for complex inter-racial messages and identification of the colour black with resistance. Where these characters spoke, they often used an English version of Caribbean dialect and

aired the grievances of an oppressed population but at the same time they were opened to ridicule. The situation becomes more problematic with blackface in minstrelsy, also popular in East End theatres, which subsumes the Harlequin tradition and feeds in to music hall with its class solidarity and gender empathy but set within a frame of racialized control and infantilization of the black body. There is a related debate concerning the politics of music hall itself, which, as has been said, thrived in the East End. Like melodrama, it dealt with class issues from a working-class perspective, but it was also sentimental and rarely called for protest, yet, in fostering class consciousness, there remains the question of to what degree did it make a contribution to oppositional politics, or, at least, contribute to the 'continual questioning of the status quo'?

A major issue in the debates about diversity and its stage representation is the role of those who themselves came from the peoples who were being represented. In the case of the Asian and African diasporas, there is much work to be done on this, as the archive is badly lacking. It is known that some from these diasporas tried to make a living in the 18th and 19th century worlds of travelling fairs and street entertainment as dancers, jugglers, acrobats, boxers, musicians and magicians. It is possible some may have appeared at theatres like the Royalty where audiences would probably be drawn from a multi-ethnic population or in the saloons or spouting clubs, which were schools of drama, mostly for young men, who gathered to stage performances and try out roles, and were found in taverns as part of the fashion for private theatricals. There is

evidence of appearances in such places by two black performers - Julius Soubise, who acted extracts from Shakespeare, especially Othello and Romeo in the garden scene, and of Joseph Jenkins at the Eagle Saloon in City Road, said by William Wells Brown, the American abolitionist and writer, to be a genius, but we do not know how many others there might have been.

One important figure about whom there is more information is the African American Ira Aldridge, regarded as the first great black actor in Britain. Aldridge made his first British appearance in the East End at the Royalty in 1825 as Othello and as Gambia in *The Slave*, Thomas Morton's version of the Oroonoko story. Aldridge also appeared at the Pavilion, Whitechapel, the City of London Theatre, Bishopsgate, the City Theatre, Cripplegate, the Standard, Shoreditch, and the Britannia, Hoxton as well as other so-called minor theatres in the capital in contrast to his severely limited access to London's patent theatres. Seen by abolitionists as a model for their argument, he challenged theatrical tradition in a number of ways: he whited up – he was probably the first black person to implement this reversal in Britain - and he played Shylock, his most celebrated white role, as a persecuted outsider; and, despite the conventions of the time, he found ways in both comic and tragic roles to portray a positive image of his own people, often against the grain of the play. For example, as the first actor in more than one hundred years to revive *Titus Andronicus*, he had the text adapted so he could play Aaron the Moor as a hero rather than a villain. He sent large sums of money to America to help fight slavery and would end performances with pleas for equality. He appeared in roles that carried abolitionist feelings such as

Gambia in *The Slave*, Oroonoko and Christophe in *The Death of Christophe, King of Hayti*. He played Dred, a Harriett Beecher Stowe character who calls for slaves to revolt, and regularly appeared as the eponymous anti-hero in *Obi, or Three-Fingered Jack*, the story of the leader of a group of escaped slaves. He could not hide the racism of the plays he appeared in, but his subversion of expectation in roles as different as the comic servant Mungo in *The Padlock* or Othello, which he performed with great skill and poise, made its own distinctive and historic contribution to alternative ways of seeing.

One of the East End theatres Aldridge appeared in, the Pavilion, also known as the New Royal, became associated in the late 1800s through to the 1930s with another diasporic performance culture, Yiddish theatre; and alongside the plays, concerts, boxing and wrestling, there were also many political rallies held there. Yiddish entertainment became synonymous with the East End and featured artists from Eastern Europe and America as well as Britain. It continued the East End theatrical tradition in the range of its repertoire, the versatility of its performers, and the fervour of its audiences.^{iv} The South Asian settlement in the East End in the 20th century introduced a very different kind of performance culture, and now diversity is an accepted hallmark of East End theatre practice.

In the 20th century, however, the connection between the East End and alternative theatre was mostly associated with the left. The Workers' Theatre Movement of the late 1920s-early 1930s – which had the slogan 'a propertyless theatre for the propertyless class' - had its roots in the Hackney Labour Dramatic

Group, which staged plays of social significance, like Shaw's *Mrs Warren's Profession*. After the general strike, the group changed its name to the Hackney People's Players, and in 1927 it adapted for the stage Robert Tressell's socialist novel *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*. In 1929 the group became Red Radio, an agitprop troupe. Such Workers' Theatre Movement groups operated primarily outdoors, using open platform stages – carts, lorries, steps, ladders, street corners, parks, factory gates. London had the greatest concentration of such groups (around ten at one point), including in the East End the Yiddish-speaking Proltet and two groups based in Hackney, Red Radio and Rebel Players. This latter formed the basis of Unity Theatre when in 1936 it became what was known as a curtain stage company by performing indoors. Though it had its own theatre in north London, the Communist-oriented Unity retained its links with the East End through its personnel and its touring wing, which regularly played East End venues, whether in the open air, at factories or halls or the Grand Palais. This was especially the case during the war when Unity performed in shelters or, for example, under the Stepney railway arches, which provided refuge for hundreds of people. There was also a Stepney Unity, which sometimes performed at the main Unity theatre. In 1943, Unity's Living Newspaper, *India Speaks*, which dealt with the famine in eastern India and was written by Mulk Raj Anand, was performed for Indian seamen in the East End. Anand recalled there being several Indians in the cast.^v Unity toured the docks again in the early 1950s with Ted Willis's *The Jolly George*, which told of the Royal Albert dockers who refused to load a ship that was to sail with munitions

for use against the young soviet Republic, and with Lesley Martin's *The Dockers Tanner*, about the 1889 London dock strike.

Unity people were also involved in other political theatre initiatives that took plays to the East End, such as the Left Theatre production of John Wexley's *They Shall Not Die*, which in 1934, with the co-operation of the Scottsboro' Defence Committee, came to East Ham Town Hall. The play told of events in the US surrounding a notorious case in which a group of black teenagers – some as young as 13 - were falsely convicted of raping two white women, sentenced to death and held in prison while the case was fought out. At the end of the East Ham performance a resolution was moved by the local mayor and carried unanimously protesting at the trial and demanding the release of the 'boys' with compensation for their imprisonment. The resolution was sent to the American Embassy as part of an international campaign.

There was also an overlap between Unity and other amateur groups operating in the East End, such as the Toynbee Players, whose base at Toynbee Hall became a venue that hosted many radical plays. In the 1950s, however, another scion of the Workers' Theatre Movement gave the East End its most visible and renowned alternative theatre in the shape of Theatre Workshop. Arriving at the Theatre Royal Stratford East in 1953, Joan Littlewood and company cemented a radical reputation that had begun more than a century earlier and which has been continued since through groups like CAST and their saving of the Hackney Empire and at venues like the Half Moon in its various incarnations. I shall not

say anymore about these modern manifestations of the alternative, as my main purpose was to identify, however sketchily, a tradition of challenge that stretches back from them, a tradition that can be explored on the ELTA website and that, as the title of the lecture says, is much more than music hall.

ⁱ *Harlequin Empire: Race, Ethnicity and the Drama of the Popular Entertainment* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2007), pp. 94-101.

ⁱⁱ 'The Gospel of Rags: Melodrama at the Britannia, 1863-74', *New Theatre Quarterly*, vii, 28, Nov 1991, pp. 369-389.

ⁱⁱⁱ 'Other Londoners: Race and Class in Plays of Nineteenth-Century London Life', in *Imagined Londons*, ed. by Pamela K. Gilbert (New York: State University of New York Press, 2002), pp. 31-44.

^{iv} See David Mazower in his book *Yiddish Theatre in London*, London, the Jewish Museum, 1996, 2nd ed.

^v See Colin Chambers, *The Story of Unity Theatre* (Lawrence and Wishart, 1989), p. 236.

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