

**Provincial Shakespeare Performance,
1769-2016:
Cultural Exchange Between
Centre and Periphery**

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In memory of Joyce and Harold Hoddinott

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Abstract

This thesis provides a wide-ranging analysis of Shakespeare performance in the English provinces from the 1769 Shakespeare Jubilee to the 2016 quatercentenary of Shakespeare's death. Using playbills, programmes, reviews and interviews, I reconstruct over two hundred and fifty years of provincial performance to reveal a complex ecology of cultural exchange between 'centre' and 'periphery'.

Chapter 1 considers the factors that cast London as the centre and the English provinces as the periphery of Shakespeare performance from 1769 to 1850. It examines in what ways provincial productions were shaped by this hierarchy, and how they developed their own approaches. Chapter 2 traces connections between the demise of the provincial stock company and the advent of the railway from 1850 to 1900. It explores how technological change increased national connectivity and reconfigured the centre/periphery binary by expanding intra-provincial cultural exchange. Chapter 3 addresses the impact of repertory upon the theatrical hierarchy, and considers the extent to which this altered – and failed to alter – the nature of Shakespeare performance in the provinces. Chapter 4 is centred upon the introduction of government subsidy and the creation of the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) in 1961. It examines the RSC as a new Shakespearean authority, before shifting focus to the productions and practices of the Nottingham Playhouse. Chapter 5 uses a micro study of a major 2016 collaboration between the RSC and eleven provincial theatres to examine interactions between cultural centre and periphery in Shakespeare performance up close.

Abbreviations

In references, the following archives, titles and resources have been abbreviated as follows:

Burney	British Library Burney Collection
BLPBC	British Library Playbill Collection
CUP	Cambridge University Press
NCLLS	Newcastle City Library Local Studies
NFHC	Norfolk Heritage Centre
NLSL	Nottingham Local Studies Library
NSA	Nottinghamshire Archives
OUP	Oxford University Press
OXDNB	Oxford Dictionary of National Biography
TR	Theatre Royal

Introduction

In September 1769, the renowned actor-manager David Garrick held a Jubilee in Stratford-upon-Avon to celebrate the life of the town's most famous son, William Shakespeare. The event – the first of its kind – drew hundreds of wealthy Londoners into the rural West Midlands but left them entirely underwhelmed. Disappointed by the rained-off Shakespeare pageant, disgusted by the food and accommodation on offer and disturbed by the avaricious locals, many visitors aired their grievances to the popular press upon their safe return to the capital. One particularly disgruntled attendee complained to the *St James Chronicle* at length about the Stratfordians' superstition, writing that,

The low People of Stratford upon Avon are without doubt as ignorant as any in the whole Island. I could not possibly imagine that there were any such Beings in the most remote, and least frequented Parts of the Kingdom. I talked with many, particularly the old People, and not one of them but was frightened at the Preparations for the Jubilee, and did not know what they were about. Many of them thought that Mr G- would raise Devils, and fly in a Chariot about the Town. They ordered those whom they had Power over, not to stir out the Day of the Jubilee; and when the Cannon came, they would have it that some Mischief was going forward about the Pretender. It is impossible to describe their Absurdity; and indeed Providence seems

by producing Shakespeare and the rest of his Townsmen, to shew the two Extremes of Human Nature.¹

This characterisation of ‘absurd’ country folk, ‘ignorant’ of Shakespeare, was preserved and propagated in Garrick’s dramatized version of the event, *The Jubilee*, first performed on 14 October at the Theatre Royal Drury Lane. The tone is set in the opening scene, in which three locals discuss their confusion over the Jubilee’s purpose and their fear of a popish conspiracy to blow up the town. Later, one character expresses her disappointment after finally learning who Shakespeare is with the line, ‘all this for a poet – o no’.² The London audience were thus encouraged to revel in their superiority over their provincial countrymen, and to celebrate Shakespeare, in part, for his success in transcending his lowly origins.³

Garrick’s Jubilee has long been regarded as a deeply significant moment in the afterlife of Shakespeare. Michael Dobson identifies it as the marker of ‘fully developed Bardolatry’ and the point at which Shakespeare’s status as the ‘national poet’ was confirmed; Batz Engler details how the Jubilee ‘sanctified’ Stratford and allowed it to develop as ‘a place of pilgrimage’.⁴ I would add to this that a third significance of the Jubilee and *The Jubilee* was that together they perfectly encapsulated a facet of English culture that is widely recognised but rarely analysed from a historical perspective: the binary between London and

¹ *The St James Chronicle*, 12 October 1769, p. 4, cited in Johanne M. Stochholm, *Garrick’s Folly: The Shakespeare Jubilee of 1769 at Stratford and Drury Lane* (London: Meuthen & Co., 1964), p. 111.

² Stochholm, *Garrick’s Folly*, p. 158.

³ Michael Dobson, *The Making of the National Poet: Shakespeare, Adaptation and Authorship, 1660-1769* (Oxford: OUP, 1992), p. 221.

⁴ Dobson, *National Poet*, pp. 226-227; Batz Engler, ‘Stratford and the Canonization of Shakespeare’, *European Journal of English Studies*, 1:3 (1997), 354-366 (p. 361).

the provinces, centre and periphery. This concept has its roots in the social sciences and has been applied in countless studies, but here I use the terms as deployed by Claire Cochrane in *Twentieth-Century British Theatre*. She argues:

The way in which resources are controlled by the centre of legislative and economic power impacts on the material conditions within which theatre, as with any other industry, is positioned in a specific regional context. [...] Knowledge, influence, access to important and/or exclusive networks have tended to be located in the dominant *centres* of power and wealth, or their intellectual outposts, and thus create Lefebvre's 'dominant form of space', which extends across national spaces, infiltrates the *periphery* and is capable of supressing and limiting independent creativity.⁵

Taking inspiration from Cochrane's work and from Jacky Bratton's investigation of the binaries 'between high and low, elite art and "the popular"' which, she contends, 'are [...] at the root of much of the hegemonic work done by modern theatre history ever since it was invented', this thesis examines the mechanisms which made possible the divide between centre and periphery in the theatre industry.⁶ I focus on the ways in which that binary structure shaped Shakespeare performance in the English provinces between the first jubilee in 1769 and the quatercentenary in 2016, and argue that provincial performance culture remained in perpetual dialogue with the centre but was – contrary to much of the received wisdom in this field – inventive rather than derivative, and

⁵ Claire Cochrane, *Twentieth-Century British Theatre: Industry, Art and Empire* (Cambridge: CUP, 2011), p. 14. Emphasis added.

⁶ Jacky Bratton, *New Readings in Theatre History* (Cambridge: CUP, 2003), pp. 8, 10.

worthy of recognition on its own terms. My deliberate adherence to the term ‘provincial’, with all its negative connotations, is intended to draw attention to the fact that all too often the experience of the English regional population has been obscured by that of the dominant minority in the capital. The narrative that I have constructed in this thesis reclaims the provincial theatrical experience through the lens of Shakespeare, and illuminates the alternative approaches to his plays that have been found outside London and Stratford.

My research draws upon two distinct but overlapping areas of study: theatre history and Shakespeare performance. The history of provincial theatre as a whole has traditionally been neglected, but there does appear to be a direct relationship between the value that contemporary society placed upon peripheral work and the corresponding volume of academic research produced on that subject.⁷ There have been few studies of late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century provincial theatre, an era in which those within the industry explicitly classified theatre outside London as second-rate, and substantially more on the twentieth century, during which influential figures and institutions invested in the English regions and actively pursued decentralisation, a policy which continues to this day.⁸ Indeed, since 2005 several theatre histories have been published which apply a geographically broad focus to their subject and

⁷ Prior to 2005, very few monographs on the subject of provincial theatre had been published: Norman Marshall, *The Other Theatre* (London: John Lehmann, 1947) 2nd edition; Sybil Rosenfeld, *Strolling Players and Drama in the Provinces 1660-1765* (Cambridge: CUP, 1939); George Rowell and Anthony Jackson, *The Repertory Movement: A History of Regional Theatre in Britain* (Cambridge: CUP, 1984).

⁸ See, for example, the Arts Council’s report, ‘Written evidence submitted by Arts Council England for the APPG for Reform, Decentralisation and Devolution in the UK’s inquiry into Better Devolution for the Whole UK’, October 2015
<http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/Written_evidence_submitted_for_the_APPG_devo.pdf> [accessed 04 November 2016].

specifically address performance beyond London in great depth: Jen Harvie's *Staging the UK*, Baz Kershaw's *The Cambridge History of British Theatre Volume 3*, Olivia Turnbull's *Bringing Down the House: The Crisis in Britain's Regional Theatres*, Kate Dorney and Ros Merkin's *The Glory of the Garden: English Regional Theatre and The Arts Council 1984-2009*, and Cochrane's *Twentieth-Century British Theatre*.⁹ All address post-1900 theatre and all, with the exception of Dorney and Merkin, look at theatre in Scotland and Wales (and occasionally Northern Ireland) as well as England.

However, running parallel to this nascent interest in the provincial is a concurrent move towards the global. In 2004, Marvin Carlson called for theatre historians to 'Become Less Provincial' in order to bring the discipline into the new millennium.¹⁰ He criticised 'the widespread American indifference to international theatre' and argued that 'theatre historians, perhaps especially in America, need to make a far greater commitment than they have so far done to expand the geographical boundaries of their investigations'.¹¹ While Carlson's main concern was reform in the United States, Jo Robinson has demonstrated that Carlson's demands have 'resonance for theatre historians in Britain'.¹² In an article titled 'Becoming More Provincial?', she warns that 'in a rush to the global we should not abandon or denigrate the local' and suggests that

⁹ Jen Harvie, *Staging the UK* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005); *The Cambridge History of British Theatre Volume 3: Since 1895*, ed. by Baz Kershaw (Cambridge: CUP, 2008); Olivia Turnbull, *Bringing Down the House: The Crisis in Britain's Regional Theatres* (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2008); *The Glory of the Garden: English Regional Theatre and The Arts Council 1984-2009*, ed. by Kate Dorney and Ros Merkin (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010); Cochrane, *Twentieth-Century British Theatre*.

¹⁰ Marvin Carlson, 'Become Less Provincial', *Theatre Survey*, 45:2 (2004), 177-180.

¹¹ Carlson, 'Become Less Provincial', (pp. 177-178).

¹² Jo Robinson, 'Becoming More Provincial? The Global and the Local in Theatre History', *New Theatre Quarterly*, 23:03 (2007), 229-240 (p. 229).

a combination of local and global – rather than ‘become less provincial’ – is the most useful stance for the theatre historian to adopt. The local can address many of the questions implied by the new focus on the global, and will also ensure that our perspective is driven by the materials we encounter, not simply grafted on in the currently fashionable but still questionable name of globalisation.¹³

The studies cited above – all published after Carlson’s call – are a testament to the fact that many have not, in fact, abandoned the local. Merkin has, however, asserted that in the years since Carlson’s article ‘the local, never a very fashionable concept for mainstream historians, has become increasingly marginalised’, while ‘the old binary of the metropolitan and the local is still very much in evidence’.¹⁴ The provincial, then, is still at risk of being swallowed by narratives that claim to be ‘global’ but which are in fact, as Sonia Massai has argued, ‘the product of specific, historically and culturally determined localities’.¹⁵ In this context, it is my intention that this thesis will provide further evidence of the value in ‘becoming more provincial’ through the illumination of a previously overlooked aspect of English culture and a sustained analysis of the binary referenced by Merkin. Together, these lines of investigation underscore the vast gaps in the historical record and raise important questions about the dominant histories that are often treated as if they are representative of England, or Britain, more generally.

¹³ Robinson, ‘Becoming More Provincial’, p. 240.

¹⁴ Ros Merkin, ‘Liverpool’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Theatre History* (Cambridge: CUP, 2013), pp. 91-103 (p. 91).

¹⁵ Sonia Massai, ‘Defining Local Shakespeares’ in *World-wide Shakespeares: Local appropriations in film and performance*, ed. by Sonia Massai (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), pp. 3-11 (p. 9).

It is primarily my focus on Shakespeare performance which has led me to limit my scope to provincial England, rather than Britain. As I explore in greater detail in Chapter 1, Shakespeare has been upheld as a symbol of a distinctly Anglo-centric British national identity since the mid-eighteenth century, and productions of his plays have thus been imbued with a certain set of expectations which may well have received different treatment in the other constituent countries of the UK. There is, however a second imperative: as in theatre history, studies of Shakespeare performance have typically been weighted in favour of work created in the centre. In the Georgian and Victorian period the centre of Shakespeare performance was sited at the Theatres Royal Covent Garden and Drury Lane; in the later twentieth century, with the Royal Shakespeare Company in Stratford and London. Cochrane's *Shakespeare and the Birmingham Repertory Theatre, 1913-1929* is the only monograph dedicated to UK Shakespeare performance outside London; other publications are limited to journal articles and chapters in edited collections.¹⁶ Whilst those shorter works have provided a vital counter-narrative in the field, they are necessarily restricted to either micro-histories of individual theatres or companies, or overviews which attempt to summarise entire eras within twenty or so pages. There is, therefore, a gap in the existing body of literature for a study such as

¹⁶ Claire Cochrane, *Shakespeare and the Birmingham Repertory Theatre, 1913-1929* (London: The Society for Theatre Research, 1993); examples of shorter works include Jeremy Crump, 'The Popular Audiences for Shakespeare in Nineteenth-Century Leicester', pp. 271-282 and Arnold Hare, 'Shakespeare in a Victorian Provincial Stock Company', pp. 258-270, both in *Shakespeare and the Victorian Stage*, ed. by Richard Foulkes (Cambridge: CUP, 1986); Richard Foulkes, 'Shakespeare in the Provinces' in *Shakespeare in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Gail Marshall (Cambridge: CUP, 2012) pp. 169-186; and Adam Hansen and Monika Smialkowska, 'Shakespeare in the North: Regionalism, Culture and Power', in *Shakespeare on the Global Stage: Performance and Festivity in the Olympic Year*, ed. by Paul Prescott and Erin Sullivan (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015), pp. 101-132.

mine, which looks in-depth at Shakespeare performance across the provinces over the *longue durée*.

Such a broad remit does, of course, require further focus. I am concerned with the relationship *between* centre and periphery, not necessarily what is happening *within* those spaces, and so I have chosen to concentrate on professional performance in purpose-built buildings and to exclude amateur, street and outdoor productions. In addition, I have selected five towns from different regions to serve as case studies: each has a continuous history of professional Shakespeare performance. These have been chosen in order to provide variation in population size and local industry and a diverse geographical spread: in the South-West, Bath; in the South-East, Brighton; in the North-East, Newcastle; in East Anglia, Norwich; and in the East Midlands, Nottingham. Later chapters discuss specific changes within these towns, but here I provide a brief overview of their character and development as necessary context.

Throughout the eighteenth century, Bath – regarded as ‘the premier resort of frivolity and fashion’ – was the eleventh most populous town in England and attracted thousands of visitors each season.¹⁷ The first theatre was built in 1705, and several short-lived replacements followed until the Orchard Street theatre opened in 1750; in 1768, this became one of England’s very first provincial Theatres Royal.¹⁸ By 1800, however, Bath was no longer in favour with the aristocracy, and as a result tourism slumped. The city began to decline

¹⁷ Graham Davis and Penny Bonsall, *Bath: A New History* (Keele: Keele University Press, 1996), p. 28.

¹⁸ ‘History’, *Theatre Royal Bath*, <<https://www.theatreroyal.org.uk/about/history/>> [accessed 10 December 2015].

into a predominantly middle-class settlement; after 1851, population growth shifted to the suburbs, creating a stagnation in the city's size which has persisted into the twenty-first century.¹⁹ The expansion of the railway network in the 1860s and 1870s brought in visitors from neighbouring counties eager to enjoy Bath's Spa waters, reviving the city's wider tourist industry. Although tourism waned again in the early twentieth century, it was restored in the post-Second World War era, and cemented when the city gained UNESCO World Heritage status in the 1980s. Residents, retirees and visitors have continued to sustain Bath as a site of entertainment and culture in the twenty-first century.

Brighton, a town similarly centred on tourism, experienced a reversal of Bath's downward trajectory. The first theatre was not built until 1774, by which time the town's transformation from struggling fishing village to superior seaside resort was well underway; in the 1780s, decades of redevelopment were rewarded when the Prince of Wales made the first of many visits, thus securing Brighton's role as the new aristocratic playground.²⁰ The Theatre Royal Brighton opened in 1807 on the site it still occupies today, but the building's longevity should not be mistaken as a mark of success: throughout the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, theatre managers often found 'that the need for periodic modernising was a disadvantage of being close to London and attracting a market used to the standards of the capital', and the theatre often struggled to stay afloat.²¹ Despite the loss of royal patronage under Queen

¹⁹ Davis and Bonsall, *Bath*, pp. 63-66, 76.

²⁰ Sue Berry, 'Myth and Reality in the Representation of Resorts: Brighton and the Emergence of the "Prince and Fishing Village Myth", 1770-1824', *Sussex Archaeological Collections*, 140 (2002), 97-112 (pp. 98, 106).

²¹ Sue Berry, 'A Town Transformed: Brighton c.1815-1840', *The Georgian Group Journal*, XXIII, 213-230 (p. 226).

Victoria, Brighton sustained remarkable growth during the nineteenth century, increasing from 7,000 inhabitants in 1801 to 131,000 by 1901.²² In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries its growth was physically hampered by its geographical position between the South Downs and the sea, but Brighton's reputation as a home for the arts and strong transport links to London have allowed the town to retain a relatively high cultural profile.

Newcastle was a port town with an entirely different character, a regional capital which, as 'the only major urban centre between York and Edinburgh',

Functioned [from 1700 to 1840] [...] as 'the great Emporium of all the Northern Parts of England, and of a good share of Scotland', channelling both agricultural produce and manufactured goods to the industrial workforce of the north-eastern coalfield while reaping the benefits of the port's buoyant coastal and export trade.²³

The city's well-established position as a centre for service, commerce and industry ensured that it remained one of the most populous towns in the UK from the eighteenth century to the present day, and the largest of the case study towns for most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Temporary booths housed the city's theatre until a purpose-built venue opened in the 1760s; in 1788 a new Theatre Royal was established, moving to its current site in 1837.²⁴ The twentieth century brought the rapid decline of manufacturing and industry

²² B. R. Mitchell, *British Historical Statistics* (Cambridge: CUP, 1988), pp. 26-29.

²³ Joyce Ellis, 'Regional and county centres 1700-1840' in *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain, Volume II: 1540-1840*, ed. Peter Clark (Cambridge: CUP, 2000), pp. 673-704 (p. 675).

²⁴ James Winston, *The Theatrical Tourist* (London: T. Woodfall, 1805), p. 43; 'Our History', *Theatre Royal and City Hall, Newcastle Upon Tyne* <<https://www.theatreroyal.co.uk/about/our-history>>. [accessed 01 January 2018]. N.B. Unless stated otherwise, all other websites referenced in this chapter were accessed and live as of 01 December 2017.

in the region and without these the city's service and commercial sectors also suffered, resulting in an unemployment rate of over twenty per cent by the 1990s.²⁵ Newcastle survived the economic downturn by focusing on the development of retail and leisure facilities, and as a result theatre and the arts continued to thrive in the city.

Norwich, another regional capital, experienced a decline in prestige similar to that of Bath. In the eighteenth century Norwich was widely regarded as the second city of England, and its population expanded continuously until the mid-1780s, sustained by a 'capacity to combine its long-standing trading role as a centre of distribution and consumption, with a specialist industrial role as a centre of textile production'.²⁶ As was fitting for such a distinguished city, Norwich was at the forefront of theatrical development: in 1758, Thomas Ivory's purpose-built theatre opened, and in 1768 it became – along with Bath – a Theatre Royal. In the 1800s, however, Norwich was 'outstripped by the huge growth in population in the industrial towns of the Midlands and the North', and by the mid-century its traditional weaving industry had been all but destroyed as a result of competition from Yorkshire, the decline of East India Company exports, and a failure to mechanise.²⁷ Mass unemployment was stemmed relatively quickly by the development of the shoe and boot making industry, which was in turn replaced in the twentieth century by engineering and food and drink manufacture. By the twenty-first century, Norwich was one of the

²⁵ Natasha Vall, 'The Emergence of the Post-Industrial Economy in Newcastle 1914-2000', *Newcastle-upon-Tyne: A Modern History*, ed. Robert Colls and Bill Lancaster (Chichester: Phillimore & Co., 2001), pp. 47-70 (pp. 61, 68-69).

²⁶ Penelope J. Corfield, 'Norwich on the Cusp - From Second City to Regional Capital' in *Norwich Since 1550*, ed. Carole Rawcliffe and Richard Wilson (London: Hambledon, 2004), pp. 139-166 (pp. 144-145).

²⁷ Frank Meeres, *A History of Norwich* (Chichester: Phillimore & Co, 1998), pp. 136, 140.

smaller English cities by population, but it maintains a wide range of performing arts venues.

Nottingham experienced perhaps the most rapid demographic transformation of all the case study towns from the eighteenth to the twentieth century, growing from a geographically-small town of c.12,000 in 1750 to a city of 240,000 inhabitants by 1901.²⁸ Fuelling this change were the lace and hosiery manufacturing industries; when lace became unfashionable in the inter-war period, factories turned instead to the manufacture of ready-to-wear clothing.²⁹ In the mid-twentieth century the city's cultural reputation received a significant boost with the opening of the Nottingham Playhouse, a leading repertory theatre that attracted prestigious directing and acting talent. There had been a permanent theatre in the town since 1760, but unlike the other case study towns Nottingham never received the necessary patent that permitted the title 'Royal' in the years before 1843, and as such its theatre did not enjoy the national reputation of Bath, Brighton, Newcastle and Norwich. By the 1990s, Nottingham possessed a sprawling urban centre and was the largest case study town by population, boasting several performance sites across the city, including an amateur theatre in the repurposed Lace Market.

Although all the case study towns attained city status by the twenty-first century – and some long before – their theatre remained distinctly 'provincial' in the sense that I will use the term throughout. Indeed, central to my thesis is the

²⁸ J. D. Chambers, 'A century of Nottingham History, 1851-1951', in *A Century of Nottingham History, 1851-1951* (Nottingham: University of Nottingham, 1951), pp. 5-25, (pp. 8-9); Mitchell, *British Historical Statistics*, pp. 26-29.

²⁹ F. A. Wells, 'Nottingham Industries: A Hundred Years of Progress', in *Nottingham History*, pp. 26-40 (pp. 33-34).

argument that all theatre outside London was defined by the very fact of its distance from the centre of production – thus warranting the label ‘provincial’ – and, furthermore, that this remained true even after the 1960s, when critics began consciously replacing ‘provincial’ with ‘regional’ in discourse. Consequently, in my first two chapters I use the term ‘metropolitan’ synonymously with ‘London’ as, until the twentieth century, the city was considered the only ‘metropolis’ in Great Britain.³⁰

However, as well as exploring the binary between centre and periphery, I also suggest that there were further internal hierarchies within the provinces. All the case study towns are urban rather than rural, and are therefore found towards the top of the intra-provincial hierarchy, a fact which – as we will see in the subsequent chapters of this thesis – shaped the nature of Shakespeare performance in their theatres. This was a necessary choice, as the longitudinal nature of my research required me to select towns that had regular interactions with London from the late eighteenth century onwards. Rather than restrict my research, this has instead allowed me to explore each town’s place in the national theatrical structure. In doing so, I have identified the extent of local variation as well as regional networks of cultural exchange, and have thus created a more nuanced picture of provincial theatre.

³⁰ Derek Keene, ‘Ideas of the Metropolis’, *Historical Research* 84:225 (2011), 379-398 (pp. 390-392).

Methodology and Structure

My research approach has been dictated in large part by the nature of my AHRC studentship, which was funded as a Collaborative Doctoral Partnership (CDP) between the University of Nottingham and the British Library. This project had two objectives, the first of which was to contribute to a British Library exhibition marking the quatercentenary of Shakespeare's death. For the first three years of study I divided my time between my doctoral research and the preparations for the exhibition, titled *Shakespeare in Ten Acts*, for which I assisted in the curation of a section on women in Shakespeare performance and produced associated publications. The second objective was to utilise the British Library's collection of playbills, which until recently were largely inaccessible to the public and thus underused as a historical source.³¹ The terms of my studentship stipulated that my project should be based upon research into the Shakespearean playbills and encompass a large geographical area and a broad time frame, in order to have as wide a scope as was practical. Playbills, however, were phased out in the early 1900s, and so an entirely separate evidence base and methodological approach was necessary for the chapters addressing Shakespeare performance in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. To ensure that I was able to fully explore the different strengths of each dataset, I have structured this thesis in two parts. Part One works with playbills as key evidence and draws examples from my case study towns; Part Two makes use of a variety of historical sources and concentrates on specific theatres, companies and

³¹ As discussed in the Conclusion, a selection of the British Library's playbill collection was digitised and made publicly available in late 2017.

productions. Each chapter addresses a chronological period and is centred around a particular historical event.

Part One

The Playbill Collection consists of almost a quarter of a million individual bills from various theatres throughout the UK and overseas, catalogued by place and dating from the late-eighteenth to the early-twentieth centuries. In order to make best use of the available resources, I selected case study towns that were represented in the British Library holdings and then extended my search to local and county archives. Having narrowed my field, I began my research by recording every playbill for each town in a spreadsheet, totalling around 20,000 entries (including duplicates of some performances). Extra fields of information were recorded for Shakespeare playbills, including the full descriptive text and whether the play was performed by the stock company, a visiting performer or a touring company. A simplified version of this spreadsheet can be viewed at <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1DiDnWBeb70Eo38JLlQDEPmgLqd kpc4tx2aBDKsf4T-o/edit?usp=sharing>.

There is considerable variation in the number of extant bills for each town: Newcastle is the best-represented, largely due to the strength of the collection at the Newcastle City Library Local Studies archives; the British Library collection for Bath contains many full seasons for the first half of the nineteenth century, but is much more sparse thereafter; there are fewer holdings for Nottingham and Norwich at the British Library but their respective local archives supplement these; and Brighton has the weakest archival representation, with only around 700 playbills held at the British Library, and a

few hundred more scattered across several other archives. The gaps in my data meant it was not possible to draw firm conclusions from analysis of this alone. I was, however, able to identify potential patterns which I then tested against further research using local and national newspapers, as well as secondary texts. While, then, I have largely avoided citing statistics drawn from my spreadsheet, I have made use of my data where possible in Chapters 1 and 2. Where relevant I have included images of playbills referenced in this thesis, although some were unsuitable for photography due to their poor condition.

Playbills are a well-established resource for theatre historians and have been the subject of a thesis in their own right.³² However, as Bratton has argued, they have often been used ‘unimaginatively’, as ‘a simple source of extractable factual information’,

from which one may learn exactly how many times each Theatre Royal gave *A School for Scandal* or *A New Way to Pay Old Debts*, where and when a vanished host of performers made their London debuts and in which roles they appeared.³³

Whilst this data forms ‘the bones’ of theatre history – I found it necessary to start my own research with a simple collation of names, dates and plays – Bratton seeks recognition of ‘the part [the playbill] plays in the dramatic experience’ and urges historians ‘to read the bill whole, and understand that every element on it is a signifier which, like all signifiers, has a meaning only as

³² David R. Gowen, ‘Studies in the history and function of the British theatre playbill and programme 1564-1914’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Oxford, 1998).

³³ Bratton, *New Readings*, pp. 38-39.

part of a system of relationships'.³⁴ Christopher Balme has developed this concept further with his theorisation of the 'theatrical public sphere' in which, he argues, playbills reached a far wider section of the community than just theatre-goers. In Balme's argument, the theatrical public sphere is the space in which the public encounters the theatre as a community institution as well as a site of entertainment. Playbills act as a gateway between the outside and the inside: they are the central point of articulation between theatres and their prospective audiences, and address the public as a distinct entity.³⁵ I have applied Bratton and Balme's approach to my own use of playbills, and in particular have focused on the extra-theatrical playbill text which speaks to and instructs the public sphere, and on the formatting details of the Shakespearean bills that, I suggest, indicate where theatre managers believed their repertoire's appeal lay. A typical example of my methodology is demonstrated below with reference to Figure 1, a playbill for a performance of *As You Like It* at the Theatre Royal Newcastle.

³⁴ Bratton, *New Readings*, pp. 39-40.

³⁵ Christopher B. Balme, 'Playbills and the Theatrical Public Sphere' in *Representing the Past: Studies in Theatre History and Culture*, ed. by Charlotte M. Canning and Thomas Postlewait, (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2010), pp. 37-62.

THEATRE-ROYAL, NEWCASTLE.

Mr GIBSON; ^(a)
BOX KEEPER,

Most respectfully begs Leave to acquaint the Ladies and Gentlemen of Newcastle, that his Benefit is appointed for Tuesday, March 25th, 1817, when he earnestly solicits their Sanction and Support, which by strict Attention to the Duties of his Situation, it shall be his Study to deserve.

On **TUESDAY, March the 25th, 1817,**
Will be presented, Shakspeare's Comedy of

AS YOU LIKE IT.

Jaques Ameins Duke Senior Duke Frederic Oliver Adam Celia Phoebe	Orlando, Mr GORDON. Mr JOHNSON Mr SHORT Mr VILLARS Mr ANDREWS Mr BAKER Mr CRESWELL Miss VINING Mrs WILSON	Lebeau Corin Sylvius William Charles And Touchstone Audrey And Rosalind	Mr ROWBOTHAM Mr KILNER Mr VINING Mr VEAL Mr ROBERTS Mr LANE Mrs MARA Mrs POPE
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END OF THE PLAY, ^(b)
Dancing, by Mr Riley, Mrs Johnson, Misses Cooke & Parr.
MR JOHNSON, BY PARTICULAR DESIRE, WILL RECITE
MONSIEUR TONSON.
A COMIC SONG, CALLED
The Beadle of the Parish, by Mr Lane.
Song—"The Bewildered Maid,"
And "Adieu my native Land," by Mr SHORT.

To which will be added, (not acted this Season,) the favourite Musical Farce called ^(c)

MY SPOUSE & I.

Frisk Dick Paddock Scorem Wilton Janet	Mr JOHNSON Mr LANE Mr KILNER Mr ANDREWS Mr ROWBOTHAM Mrs WILSON And Harriet, Miss VINING.	Pross Ned Clerk Roger Constable Dame Paddock	Mr LEWIS Mr VEAL Mr VINING Mr RILEY Mr ROBERTS Mrs MARA
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Tickets to be had of Mr Gibson, at the Old Dispensary Court, Pilgrim Street, and at the Lobby. ^(d)
For the Benefit of Miss GRIMANI. On Wednesday, the 26th of March, will be presented
Shakspeare's Tragedy of ROMEO & JULIET. End of the Play, an Interlude called BLUE
DEVILS. To which will be added, the musical Farce called PAUL & VIRGINIA. ^(e)

Newcastle: Printed by Edward Walker.

Figure 1 – As You Like It, TR Newcastle, 25 March 1817 (NCLLS)

The eye is immediately drawn to the top of the bill, where Mr Gibson's name is printed in a large, bold, italic font, just above his occupation (a). Within the theatrical public sphere, this familiar format would have immediately indicated that this was a playbill for a benefit night, when all profits were passed onto a specific member of the company. Interested parties who took a closer

look at this playbill would see that the standard deferential plea for patronage was reproduced beneath, in which Gibson ‘earnestly solicit[ed]’ the ‘sanction and support’ of the ‘Ladies and Gentlemen of Newcastle’. Interestingly, Gibson did not appeal for the support of those from the ‘vicinity’ of Newcastle, as other playbills from the period often did, which might indicate either that he was confident of sufficient support from the town alone, or that he lacked contacts outside of Newcastle and could not hope for their backing. The playbill’s extra-theatrical text does indicate that Gibson may have been recognised not just by regular theatre-goers but by those in the town’s wider community: the bottom of the bill details that he sold tickets at a site a short distance from the theatre, at the Old Dispensary Court (d).

As well as these insights into the nature of the relationship between the box keeper and the local community, the playbill also discloses much about the expectations, conventions and appeal of benefit nights and the theatrical experience. At the very end of the playbill, Miss Gibson’s upcoming benefit night is advertised, at which another Shakespeare play – *Romeo and Juliet* – will be performed (e), and indeed my research has found that popular Shakespeare plays were often chosen for benefit nights, presumably because they were known to please audiences. Other elements of the playbill, however, suggest that Gibson may have considered the Shakespeare play less of a draw than the overall appeal of a well-programmed benefit night. Usually, the afterpiece would be listed in a slightly smaller or less distinctive font than the main piece, but here *My Spouse & I* is given the same prominence as *As You Like It* (c); furthermore, the various entertainments that make up the interlude are afforded as much space as each of the two dramatic comedies (b), whereas other

Shakespearean playbills from this season list the interlude in just two lines.

Exclusivity and the promise of a favoured performance are extra incentives to attend Gibson's night: Mr Johnson recites *Monsieur Tonson* 'by particular desire', and the afterpiece is announced as a 'favourite Musical Farce', 'not acted this Season'. Finally, it is worth considering what does not appear on the bill. There is no mention, for example, of scenery or costume, and none of the *As You Like It* cast members are given particular emphasis, which often featured on other playbills. These omissions tell us that this was a standard, stock company production with no innovations or guest stars. Thus, just a single playbill has revealed not only what was performed (or intended to be performed) on a particular night, but also something of the theatrical culture and nature of Shakespeare performance at the Theatre Royal Newcastle.

Part One of this thesis determines the nature of provincial Shakespeare performance and the centre/periphery relationship in the years 1769 to 1900. Chapter 1, '1769-1850: The Stock Company and the Star Circuit', lays the foundation of the core argument pursued throughout this thesis. I begin with an analysis of political source material: the testimonies presented to the 1832 parliamentary Select Committee on Dramatic Literature. These testimonies typically cast all theatre outside the capital as derivative – a narrative that has been repeated in contemporary scholarly work – but were, I suggest, informed more by popular opinion than by fact. In the first section of this chapter, I establish the basis of the London-centric theatrical culture that has permeated the historical record, and argue that three key factors contributed to it. Firstly, the laws concerning dramatic performances were designed specifically to address the London theatres, and effectively discriminated against provincial

theatres that wished to stage Shakespeare. Secondly, the elevation of Shakespeare to 'national poet' created a climate in which performances of his plays were expected to meet standards set by the London Theatres Royal. Thirdly, the star circuit, which saw actors from the capital appear in local stock company productions, reinforced the image of the superior London actor.

Having established the flow of influence from centre to periphery, the second section of Chapter 1 explores the ways in which the peripheral environment itself – characterised as the 'nursery' of talent by Select Committee witnesses – shaped Shakespeare performance. I argue that the peripheral status of provincial theatre allowed for greater experimentation in Shakespeare performance: away from the expectations of London audiences and critics, provincial managers and actors were able to break with convention, explore more of the canon and experiment with cross-casting, novelty and child actors. Using Peter Borsay's two-way model of cultural exchange, I propose that some of these elements travelled from the periphery into the centre, thus challenging narratives that cast London as the only hub of innovation in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Chapter 2, '1850-1900: Railways and the Rise of Touring Companies', turns the focus away from the centre/periphery relationship and towards the mechanics of intra-provincial cultural exchange, facilitated in this period by the development of the national railway network. Once again, a parliamentary Select Committee is the starting point; this time, the 1866 Select Committee on Theatrical Licenses and Regulations. The first section explores witnesses' opinions on the state of Shakespeare performance and of the impact of the

railways upon provincial theatres. I argue that the fears expressed about deteriorating theatrical standards can be traced back to the transformative effect of industrialisation upon the nation. Shrinking national space and the growth of powerful industrial cities reduced the gap between centre and periphery, and implicitly threatened London's position at the top of the hierarchy. As actors and then acting companies were able to move (relatively) quickly and comfortably around the country, the opportunities for cultural exchange expanded. I demonstrate that the largest provincial towns developed their own regional spheres of influence, and that even smaller towns could, with the right infrastructure, draw in audiences from further afield for their performances. The latter two sections of Chapter 2 address the impact of these changes upon provincial Shakespeare performance through the arrival of provincial tragedians in the 1860s and then touring companies in the 1880s. These peripatetic performers occupied a space between centre and periphery, ultimately lessening the strength of London influence and fostering a more unified provincial culture.

Part Two

By the early 1900s, playbills had been replaced by programmes and posters which, along with newspapers and theatre company archives, form my primary research materials for chapters 3, 4 and 5. Programmes have received even less scholarly attention than playbills as historical sources, but in Robert Shaughnessy's analysis of *Hamlet* programmes from London theatres he suggests that they should be read in much the same way as Bratton's proposed

approach to playbills.³⁶ In applying this, I have to some extent approached programmes as a form of direct marketing, an opportunity for theatres and theatre companies to speak directly to their target audience. As such, these materials – like playbills before them – grant insight into how theatres, actors and directors wish to be perceived and what they consider to be their most appealing elements. The style of the rehearsal photos (playful or earnest?), the tone of the plot summary (academic or accessible?), and the image chosen to represent the production on the programme cover and on posters and advertisements (actor focused or abstract image?) all play a crucial role in priming the audience to receive the performance in a particular way. I have found programme essays to be especially illuminating as spaces in which the director can lay their intentions bare; the way that this is communicated to the reader in terms of the sophistication of the language and references to popular or classical culture can reveal the demographics of their anticipated audiences and the extent to which the production hopes to address contemporary societal issues.

Paul Prescott makes a similar argument for newspaper reviews, writing that when these ‘are read strictly as a means of reaching the “reality” of a performance, they will often frustrate the theatre historian’;

When they are read as evidence of much wider theatrical-cultural phenomena, however, they are invaluable sources. Read as a guide to what actor X did in a certain role on a certain evening, reviews have limited value; as guides to the ways in which audiences of the past

³⁶ Robert Shaughnessy, ‘A Choice of Programs’, *Shakespeare Bulletin*, 28:1 (2010), 55-75 (p. 59).

have read performance, have found meaning in theatre and have negotiated the worth of Shakespeare, reviews are enormously fruitful documents.³⁷

I have applied this perspective to all my source materials, looking, for example, beyond *what* is reported in the newspapers and instead considering *why* this is the case. Critical comparisons to other actors, directors or companies are not necessarily proof of similarity, but they do pinpoint who the authoritative or influential figures were at that moment in time. Strong critical reactions to specific themes in performance *can* indicate the general audience reaction, but it is also important to consider the political allegiances of critics and/or the papers they write for – as well as the broader political climate – when analysing reviews. In 2016, for example, a right-wing publication is unlikely to print a supportive response to a production which sympathetically addresses the subject of immigration; the historian must consider the extent to which that review is indicative of the typical audience experience, rather than the attitudes of the paper's intended readership. Finally, just as the extra-theatrical text of the playbill can reveal details of the theatrical experience, so too can references to contemporary events in critical reviews. Those from the early twentieth century might mention the proposed plans for a National Theatre; those of the 1980s frequently discussed the Conservative government's arts and culture policies. These comments preserve the production's wider context, providing an alternative perspective that is not always readily accessible to researchers.

³⁷ Paul Prescott, *Reviewing Shakespeare: Journalism and Performance from the Eighteenth Century to the Present* (Cambridge: CUP, 2013), p. 22.

As well as the changes in primary materials outlined above, I have also narrowed my focus to productions of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *King Lear*, a choice which allows for an appropriate depth of analysis. Both plays were frequently performed in the twentieth century: *Lear* arguably overtook *Hamlet* as the most revered Shakespearean character for an actor to perform – partly out of necessity, as the influence of realism forced mature actors to leave the Prince of Denmark behind and turn to *Lear* for their starring role, and partly because the play rose in popularity following the Second World War; meanwhile, *Dream* offered the greatest opportunity for ensemble work, was considered the most family-friendly of Shakespeare's plays, and lent itself to outdoor performances, a genre that, as Michael Dobson has demonstrated, increased in importance and popularity as the century progressed.³⁸

The chapters in Part Two address the advent of subsidised theatre and the shift of the centre of Shakespearean performance from the London Theatres Royal to the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) in Stratford, and consider what impact these changes had upon the provincial theatrical ecology. Chapter 3, '1900-1960: Change and Consistency in the Age of Repertory', examines the repertory movement as a potentially decentralising force in Shakespeare performance. The first section follows the progression of repertory theatre across provincial England in the early twentieth century, exploring the practices of two Shakespearean specialists – the Cambridge Festival Theatre and the Birmingham Rep – and the repertory theatres of the case study towns. I suggest that although Cambridge and Birmingham successfully proved that high-quality,

³⁸ Michael Dobson, *Shakespeare and Amateur Performance: A Cultural History* (Cambridge: CUP, 2011), p. 155.

innovative approaches to Shakespeare could be developed outside the centre, they caused only minimal disruption to the established patterns of exchange between centre and periphery. I develop this line of argument further in the second section, which examines the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre's gradual move from periphery to centre and demonstrates that this was made possible only by casting aside the theatre's provincial identity and adopting a metropolitan image. The third section addresses touring Shakespeare companies and finds that although their creative work resisted the influence of the repertory theatres, their mode of operation could not; ultimately, the actor-manager model of Shakespeare performance had all but disappeared by the end of the 1950s.

In Chapter 4, '1960-2015: Subsidised Theatre and the RSC', I consider how provincial Shakespeare performance and the theatrical hierarchy were affected by the 1961 creation of the RSC, and examine the broader implications of the commercial/subsidised dichotomy, including the debates surrounding the process of decentralising performance in general and Shakespeare in particular. Histories of twentieth-century Shakespeare performance have been dominated by the work of the publicly-funded RSC, but while much has been written about the RSC's origins, progress, difficulties and successes, the impact that the RSC has had on provincial Shakespeare performance has received very little attention.³⁹ In the first section, I focus on the ways in which the RSC asserted its

³⁹ E.g. Beauman, *The Royal Shakespeare Company; Players of Shakespeare*, 6 vols, ed. by Phillip Brockbank, Russell Jackson and Robert Smallwood (Cambridge: CUP, 1985-2004); Colin Chambers, *Other Spaces: New Theatre and the RSC* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1980) and *Inside the Royal Shakespeare Company: Creativity and the Institution* (Oxford: Routledge, 2004); Simon Trowbridge, *The Rise and Fall of the Royal Shakespeare Company* (Oxford: Editions Albert Creed, 2013). One notable exception to this is Hansen and Smialkowska, 'Shakespeare in the North: Regionalism, Culture and Power', which addresses the RSC's activity in the 2012 Olympic year.

status as a second national theatre located in the provincial West Midlands, exploring in particular the importance of place in the construction of the RSC's self-image, with reference to the company's bases in Stratford, London and Newcastle and their provincial main-house tours. I argue that these aspects of the RSC's work granted the company a metropolitan identity and allowed them to exert their influence upon the periphery. The second section is concerned with late-twentieth century provincial Shakespeare performance. I consider the ways in which the RSC and government subsidy shaped productions in the case study towns, focus in particular on the Nottingham Playhouse, and question the success of the Arts Council's policy of theatrical decentralisation.

Chapter 5, '2016: Provincial Shakespeare Performance in the Quatercentenary Year', brings together all of my preceding research in an analysis of the politics, execution and implications of a single production: the RSC's 2016 *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a collaborative project in which local amateurs played the mechanicals at each leg of a national tour. This represents a unique example of interaction between centre and periphery, which I explore using my experiences as an audience member at six performances and with interviews conducted with members of the creative team and some of the amateur performers.⁴⁰ These provided valuable insights that I would not otherwise have had access to into the planning and execution of the production. I have, however, sought to apply as critical a lens to the interviews as I have to all other source materials whilst remaining respectful of my participants and

⁴⁰ This element of my study was given ethics approval by the University of Nottingham Faculty of Arts. Each participant signed consent forms advising them of the aims of my research and of their right to withdraw at any time.

their personal experiences. The production was subtitled ‘a Play for the Nation’, and in the first section I consider how the RSC approached the concept of nationhood in this piece. I argue that the debate surrounding the UK’s EU membership referendum may have altered audience readings of the production’s Second World War setting, and furthermore that elements of the piece may have inadvertently exposed a gap between the RSC’s ideal vision of nationhood and reality. The second section analyses the ways in which the conventional relationship between centre and periphery, established in the previous chapters, was both reinforced and challenged by the rehearsal and performance practices of this production. I contend that while the RSC controlled many aspects of the creative process, the amateurs and the provincial theatrical environment itself also shaped the piece.

In the Conclusion, I reiterate the arguments made throughout this thesis and look to the past, present and future of regional theatre history. I detail the ways in which the centre/periphery binary has impacted historical documents as well as performance itself: materials concerning provincial theatre have tended to be less well preserved than those of the centre, are often more difficult to locate, and are becoming increasingly inaccessible as public spending cuts force libraries and archives to reduce their hours and increase their charges. I also, however, consider the democratising impact of new technology upon theatre history. Online platforms can amplify new and alternative critical voices, while digitisation allows researchers not only greater access to materials, but also new means of analysis. I end on a hopeful note, suggesting that the turmoil of Brexit may yet generate a confrontation of the cultural and economic imbalance between London and the English regions.

PART ONE: 1769-1900

Chapter 1

1769-1850: The Stock Company and the Star Circuit

On 2 July 1832, George Bartley, actor and stage-manager at the Theatre Royal Covent Garden, gave his testimony to the parliamentary Select Committee that had been tasked with inquiring into ‘the State of the Laws concerning Dramatic Literature’.¹ Chairing the session was Edward Bulwer-Lytton, the writer and radical MP who had instigated the investigation. Current legislation severely restricted the performance of ‘legitimate’ drama, and in London only the Theatres Royal Covent Garden, Drury Lane and Haymarket were permitted to perform Shakespeare and the other spoken dramatists that fell under this loosely-defined category. Bulwer-Lytton’s conceit was that these stringent regulations had had a deleterious impact on the national drama, and that the industry would better serve both the public and theatre owners if it was allowed to operate under ‘free trade’.

During his questioning by the committee, Bartley concurred with the central premise put forward by Bulwer-Lytton: that the drama had been injured as a result of the present laws and was currently in danger of ‘utter degradation’.² In total, thirty-nine witnesses connected to British theatre were

¹ *Notes on the Report from the Select Committee on Dramatic Literature* (London: House of Commons, 1832). Hereafter referenced as *SCDL*.

² Edward Bulwer-Lytton, ‘The Drama’, *New Monthly Magazine*, 33 (April 1831), p. 166, cited in Katherine Newey, ‘The 1832 Select Committee’, in *The Oxford Handbook of the Georgian Theatre 1737-1832*, ed. by Julia Swindells and David Francis Taylor (Oxford: OUP, 2014), pp. 140-155 (p. 146).

interviewed over the course of a month, most of whom were proprietors, playwrights, and actors.³ Like Bartley, all agreed that the quality and morality of British theatre was in decline, and many cited the popularity of melodrama as both symptom and cause of this state of affairs. Melodrama evaded regulation on a legal technicality, and was the staple fare in London's 'minor' theatres – venues that did not have the jurisdiction to produce legitimate work – but was also performed at the metropolitan Theatres Royal. Bulwer-Lytton and his witnesses were primarily concerned with the state of theatre in London, but George Bartley took the unusual step of specifically referencing melodrama-related deterioration in the provincial theatres as well as the capital's. He stated,

Tom and Jerry and *Black Eyed Susan* [popular melodramas], they have been played almost exclusively by provincial theatres for a great number of years past, and consequently the managers have given a taste to country towns, or whether the public taste would only receive that species of entertainment, is not for me to say; I only speak to the fact, that these pieces are almost the only ones now performed in provincial theatres, and they do not require the same talent to act them as the plays of Otway, Shakespeare, Rowe or Colman, or Sheridan, or our settled drama; hence it comes that these persons in the country have no practice in what we call the regular drama. When I first came to London, 30 years ago, there were none of

³ A full list of the witnesses and their occupations is provided by Dewey Ganzel in 'Patent Wrongs and Patent Theatres: Drama and the Law in the Early Nineteenth Century', *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, 76:4 (1961), 384-396 (pp. 384-385).

these [minor] theatres open, and the regular drama was the only thing that provincial managers could have recourse to.

[...] At the time I am speaking of, it would answer the manager's purpose to let Mr. Elliston act Othello, or Felix, or Benedict, each season three or four times. Now, even in the Bath theatre, not any one of these plays is ever thought of being got up by the regular company; they only play novelties, and therefore an actor, however great his talent may be, has no chance; the manager cannot afford to let him act Hamlet three times in a season.⁴

Although Bartley was soon steered back onto a discussion of London theatre, I would argue that his impression of provincial theatre in general and Shakespeare performance in particular was representative of the beliefs commonly held by his contemporaries. The narrative outlined by Bartley and numerous others described a golden age of British theatre in the mid-Georgian era that had given way in the nineteenth century to rapid deterioration. This had originated in London, specifically on the stages of the minor theatres, but had by 1832 spread to the provinces. Because of the powerful influence London held over English theatre, provincial performance was commonly perceived to hold no identity of its own and was believed to simply imitate the capital as best it could. According to the handful of testimonies that addressed the subject – from David Morris, manager of the Haymarket; Douglas Jerrold, London playwright; and John Braham, singer – so-called 'country' theatre was largely indistinguishable from one town to another, with the exception of a little

⁴ *SCDL*, pp. 181-182.

variation in terms of quality and profitability.⁵ All three men identified a small subset of provincial theatres that stood out from the rest, located in the ‘principal towns’ of the UK: Bath, Bristol, Norwich, Liverpool, Edinburgh, Dublin and York. In Braham’s case, this was on account of their audiences’ appreciation of ‘the beauties of foreign music’; in Morris’ and Jerrold’s, because those theatres were profitable enough to be able to afford a fee of ten or twenty pounds to the authors of the plays they staged.⁶ While the theatres identified by these witnesses were still cast as inferior to the London Theatres Royal – Morris, for example, had paid four hundred pounds to John Poole for his 1825 farce *Paul Pry* – they were also considered exceptional precisely because they were able to approximate London markers of success.

In his statement, Bartley chose specific examples in order to emphasise to the decidedly metropolitan committee just how dire the situation in the provinces had become. He referenced decline at the Theatre Royal Bath because this was considered the pre-eminent provincial theatre on account of its high production standards and close links to the London Theatres Royal; similarly, the plays that Bartley cited as no longer being played by the regular company at Bath consisted of three of the most popular Shakespeare pieces of the time – *Hamlet*, *Othello* and *Much Ado About Nothing* – as well as Susanna Centlivre’s highly-regarded 1714 comedy, *The Wonder: or, a Woman Keeps a Secret*, in

⁵ SCDL, pp. 94, 152, 157.

⁶ SCDL, pp. 94, 152, 157.

which the revered David Garrick had often played the role of Don Felix.⁷ To those at the hearing, Bartley's message would have been clear: the greatest provincial theatre in the country had ceased to play the greatest works in the English canon, and this intolerable situation demanded immediate repair. However, the data that I have gathered from the substantial, but incomplete, performance record for this period at Bath contradicts Bartley's testimony. Initially, the playbills from the five seasons preceding the committee's investigation appear to support Bartley's claims: from 1827/28 to 1831/32, there is no record of the stock company playing *Hamlet* or *Much Ado About Nothing*, and just one documented performance of *Othello*.⁸ However, the stock company did perform at least six other Shakespearean pieces: *Romeo and Juliet* (three times), *The Merchant of Venice* (three times), *Henry IV*, *Richard III*, *Macbeth* and *The Tempest*. Furthermore, there were at least another thirty-eight performances of Shakespeare that were performed by the stock company with a visiting star from London: *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *As You Like It*, *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, as well as the plays previously mentioned, were all performed multiple times (with the exception of *Henry IV*). While it may have been accurate to state that no stock company actor at Bath had acted Hamlet 'three times a season' (or even once), they did have ample opportunity to play Richard III, Macbeth, Prospero, Romeo,

⁷ James Winston wrote that the 'Theatre Royal Bath as boasts the most distinguished rank in public estimation, and we trust that no one will deem it an invidious distinction, that, next to *London*, *Bath* should be thought the favourite of the muses' in *The Theatrical Tourist* (London: T. Woodfall, 1805), p.1. See also *Theatre Royal Bath: A Calendar of Performances at the Orchard Street Theatre, 1750-1805*, ed. by Arnold Hare (Bath: Kingsmead Press, 1977), pp. vi-xiv for a discussion of Bath's position at the top of the provincial theatrical hierarchy in the Georgian era. The playbills consulted for this thesis indicate the enduring popularity of *Hamlet*, *Othello*, and *Much Ado About Nothing*.

⁸ See BLPBC vol. 180.2.

or Shylock. Bartley's central allegation, that 'these persons in the country have no practice in what we call the regular drama', was thus unfounded. His motivation in misrepresenting Bath, and 'country towns' more broadly, was likely born from a desire to convince the committee that theatrical free trade would be disastrous. In his wider testimony, Bartley connected the prevalence of melodrama in theatres across the nation with a general 'paucity of talent' and agreed that it was 'in consequence of the performance of these small pieces [i.e. melodramas] that the taste for the drama deteriorates'.⁹ I would suggest that it is indicative of the gulf between centre and periphery in 1832 that not only was Bartley deeply misinformed about the repertoire at Bath, but that his inaccuracies went unchallenged by both the committee and other witnesses, who did comment elsewhere on previous testimonies.

This was not the only inconsistency regarding provincial theatre in the Select Committee's report. During the examination of Thomas Morton (playwright and reader to the Theatre Royal Drury Lane), chairman Edward Bulwer-Lytton stated that, 'there are only two theatres allowed to play the legitimate drama, with the exception of the Haymarket'.¹⁰ This assumption was repeated or implied throughout the investigation but was, like Bartley's picture of Bath theatricals, factually inaccurate. By 1832 there were thirteen licensed theatres outside the capital, most of which had held their patents for over forty years. The selection of witnesses can perhaps explain why errors of this kind were able to go unnoticed, as only three of forty-seven were actively connected to the provincial stage: Edward William Elton, a provincial actor for all but the

⁹ *SCDL*, pp. 181-183.

¹⁰ *SCDL*, p. 217.

last twelve months of his then eight-year career; Richard Malone Raymond, manager of Liverpool's second theatre, the Liver; and William Wilkins, builder and proprietor of the 'Norfolk theatres': Norwich, Bury, Cambridge, Ipswich, Yarmouth and Colchester.¹¹ However, rather than being asked their opinion on declining quality in the provinces and the lack of support for legitimate dramatists such as Shakespeare, the questions directed to these witnesses were primarily concerned with the profitability of theatre outside London, in order to assist the committee in determining whether copyright laws could and should be expanded and applied to dramatic literature. While Elton did defend the standards of acting in the provinces, stating that he knew many performers in the country that were 'equally clever' as those in London, this was more in the context of support for theatrical 'free trade' than to contradict claims of dramatic degradation; the committee overlooked his comment that he had excelled in the roles of 'Richard the Third, Othello, Hamlet, and parts of that class', which inherently contradicted Bartley's testimony.¹² The Select Committee's first recommendation to the House of Commons reflected their assumption that what was true for London was true for the country: they stated 'that a considerable decline, both in the Literature of the Stage, and the taste of the Public for Theatrical Performances, is generally conceded'.¹³

While successive scholars have challenged the narrative of nineteenth century dramatic decline, the committee's assertion that theatre in London was representative of theatre nationwide has been continually repeated, or assumed,

¹¹ *SCDL*, pp. 232-235, 209, 209-214.

¹² *SCDL*, p. 235.

¹³ *SCDL*, p. 3.

by those working in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.¹⁴ Studies of English Shakespeare performance in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries tend to concentrate almost exclusively on London productions and to omit a caveat that their work is relevant only to the capital.¹⁵ When critics have looked beyond London, it is often the global, rather than the provincial, that has drawn their attention. In the past fifteen years, interest in overseas performances and traditions of Shakespeare has grown, but provincial British Shakespeare has remained neglected, which serves to reinforce the notion that notable developments and productions took place only in London. An essay by Richard Foulkes dedicated to 'Shakespeare in the Provinces' was included in Gail Marshall's 2012 edited volume *Shakespeare in the Nineteenth Century*, but this too repeats an account of falling standards of performance.¹⁶ For the period 1800-1850, Foulkes relies upon a favourite source for many theatre historians: Leman Thomas Rede's *The Road to the Stage*, an 1827 guide for aspiring actors detailing how to enter the profession.¹⁷ Referencing Rede's account, which asserts that Shakespeare's appeal was declining in the provinces and that there were strict guidelines for costume and performance, Foulkes concludes that Shakespeare performances by early nineteenth century provincial companies would have been 'decidedly hidebound'.¹⁸ However, as my analysis of George

¹⁴ E.g. Michael R. Booth, 'A Defence of Nineteenth-Century English Drama', *Educational Theatre Journal*, 26:1 (1974), 5-13.

¹⁵ E.g. Jonathan Bate, *Shakespearean Constitutions: Politics, Theatre, Criticism 1730-1830* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989); *Victorian Shakespeare, Volume 1: Theatre, Drama and Performance*, ed. by Gail Marshall and Adrian Poole (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); *Shakespeare in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. by Fiona Richie and Peter Sabor (Cambridge: CUP, 2012).

¹⁶ Richard Foulkes, 'Shakespeare in the Provinces' in *Shakespeare in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Gail Marshall (Cambridge: CUP, 2012) pp. 169-186.

¹⁷ Leman Thomas Rede, *The Road to the Stage; or, the Performer's Preceptor* (London: Joseph Smith, 1827).

¹⁸ Foulkes, 'Provinces', p. 171.

Bartley's testimony has shown, such sources must be further interrogated.

According to the biography of the author that prefaced the second, posthumous edition of *The Road to the Stage*, Rede had only worked in the theatre for a few years before an accident at Margate 'induced him to resign the idea of making the stage permanently his profession' and turned him instead to 'literary pursuits'.¹⁹ His experience of provincial Shakespeare performance was, therefore, more limited than the authoritative tone of his guide would suggest.

Görel Garlick's chapter on 'Theatre outside London, 1660-1775' similarly draws almost exclusively on dated material, and takes actors' and managers' accounts at face value. In her conclusion, she writes that visits from London performers to provincial theatres in the summer months 'no doubt helped to raise performance standards amongst the circuit-based actors', displaying an acceptance of London theatrical superiority without further examination.²⁰ She adds, '[i]t is also probable that the more educated spectators outside London expected, indeed demanded, that their playhouses replicate the fare available in the London patent houses'.²¹ This is a reasonable supposition, and indeed one that has been supported in my own research. What is missing from the historical record is a closer examination of the reasons for this desire, an assessment of the success of provincial imitation of metropolitan theatre, and a study of what happened to performance when imitation was not possible. This chapter will seek to address these questions, using playbills and other documentation to survey and analyse provincial Shakespeare performance from 1769 to 1850 and

¹⁹ Rede, *Road to the Stage*, 2nd edn (London: J. Onwhyn, 1836), pp. iii-iv.

²⁰ Görel Garlick, 'Theatre outside London, 1660-1775' in *The Cambridge History of British Theatre Volume 2: 1660 to 1895*, ed. by Joseph Donohue (Cambridge: CUP, 2004), pp. 165-182 (p. 182).

²¹ Garlick, 'Theatre outside London', p. 182.

to consider the extent to which an alternative approach to Shakespeare was cultivated outside the capital. In doing so, I will demonstrate that assumptions about the derivative nature of provincial theatre need re-evaluation, and suggest an alternative model of cultural exchange between centre and periphery that acknowledges a two-way flow of influence and ideas.

1.1 A London-centric Culture

By 1832 scholars, professionals and the general public alike regarded London as the centre of Shakespeare performance. In this section, I argue that three factors played a major role in the creation and conservation of a London-centric theatrical culture: legislation, the adoption of Shakespeare as a national icon, and the enduring appeal of the star circuit. Together, these factors encouraged theatres on the periphery to imitate the Shakespeare productions of the capital but, as my research affirms, the very fact of their marginal status ensured that provincial performances would inevitably take a different shape from those in the centre. Through exploration of the context in which provincial Shakespeare was produced and the rationale behind the ideal of each performance element, I delineate the ways that centre influenced periphery and analyse how that influence manifested itself, before turning my attention to interactions between the two in the subsequent section.

1.1.1 Legislation

In her study of British identity and the stage from 1760 to 1800, Kathleen Wilson argues that theatre,

did much to consolidate and popularise ideas about English distinctiveness, and to socialise audiences into the typologies of gender, class, and national difference. [...] Stage played a crucial role in circulating the texts, bodies, ideas, and people meant to incarnate the best of an English, and secondarily a British, national identity.²²

Politicians were well aware of the influence of the stage, and looked to legislation as a means of control. However, the legal framework was created with the culture of the capital in mind, rather than that of the nation as a whole. As I demonstrate here, in the policymakers' haste to place restrictions on performance they created a system that was so limiting that it invited defiance. The result, I argue, was widespread confusion over the operation and legality of provincial entertainments, and a theatrical culture that prioritised the London patent theatres by default.

The Licensing Act of 1737 had had a substantial, and enduring, impact on British theatre. Created at the behest of Prime Minister Robert Walpole, the Act introduced the censorship of stage entertainments under the Lord Chamberlain, and effectively outlawed all performance outside the capital. Clause V stated that,

no person or persons shall be authorised by virtue of any letters patent from His Majesty, his heirs, successors or predecessors, or by the licence of the lord Chamberlain of His Majesty's household for the time being, to act, represent or perform for hire, gain or reward, any

²² Kathleen Wilson, 'Pacific Modernity: Theater, Englishness, and the Arts of Discovery, 1760-1800' in *The Age of Cultural Revolutions*, ed. by Colin Jones and Dror Wahrman (London: University of California Press, 2002), pp. 63-92 (p. 70).

interlude, tragedy, comedy, opera, play, farce or other entertainment of the stage, or any part or parts therein, in any part of Great Britain, except in the City of Westminster and within the liberties thereof, and in such places where His Majesty, his heirs or successors, shall in their royal persons reside, and during such residence only.²³

Only London's Covent Garden and Drury Lane Theatres Royal, the holders of the letters patent issued at the time of Charles II's Restoration, were legally permitted to stage spoken drama. Implementing this rule, however, was problematic. Until the Municipal Corporations Act of 1835, which provided a new foundation for provincial government, 'there was no coherent system of local government in England or Wales', and each town or village 'ran its affairs in its own way'.²⁴ Proper enforcement of the 1737 restrictions therefore rested on local magistrates, many of whom were willing to turn a blind eye to certain illegal activities, knowing there was little that the London authorities could do to stop them. Some were motivated by a sense that central government had overstepped the line in removing local authority; others were long-standing patrons of the drama who wished for their access to entertainments to continue.²⁵ Even if magistrates did attempt to uphold the law, circumstances often prevented this. The Act stipulated that charges must be brought within six months of the offence, but the majority of provincial theatre in the eighteenth century was performed by travelling troupes. The legal necessity of obtaining a

²³ Theatrical Licensing Act, 10 Geo. II c. 28.

²⁴ Jean Napier Baker, 'Theatre in the Provinces in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, with special reference to Sarah Barker in Kent' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Kent at Canterbury, 2000), p. 19.

²⁵ Napier Baker, 'Theatre in the Provinces', p. 22-23.

license in these circumstances was considered negligible to many within the industry, and the obvious difficulties in tracking down players who were constantly on the move and covering enormous distances by foot may have made prosecution an unattractive prospect to local authorities.²⁶

In larger provincial towns, the need to entertain a growing population necessitated a more permanent solution than relying on the discretion of local authorities. The Georgian era had witnessed great change in provincial England: urbanisation had unsettled the traditional balance of political influence between towns and shifted the country's economy from a reliance on agriculture to industrialisation, enabling England to modernise and to dominate the global economy.²⁷ Urbanised towns benefited from what Peter Borsay has identified as the 'urban renaissance': a period of cultural revival that inspired changes in architecture, the arts, sport, social relations and the national economy.²⁸ From 1660 to 1770 there was a 'remarkable revival' of provincial urban drama as regular theatrical seasons were developed to entertain the gentry during the winter months, regional and national touring circuits were established to meet demand, and purpose-built auditoria were constructed to improve the quality of productions.²⁹ The urban renaissance as a whole was unevenly distributed, as Borsay describes:

²⁶ Jean N. Baker, 'Theatre, Law and Society in the Provinces: The Case of Sarah Baker', *Cultural and Social History* (2004), 1:2, 159-178, (pp. 164-165).

²⁷ Rosemary Sweet, *The English Town, 1680-1840: Government, Society and Culture* (Harlow: Pearson Education, 1999), pp. 01-10.

²⁸ Peter Borsay, *The English Urban Renaissance: Culture and Society in The Provincial Town 1660-1770* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

²⁹ Borsay, *Urban Renaissance*, pp. 118-120.

The mass of smaller market towns and ports were much less affected than the regional centres and provincial capitals. But it was the larger towns that were the flagships of the urban system, the representatives by which its achievements would be judged.³⁰

By 1770, Borsay writes, 'provincial towns were again at the forefront of English cultural life'; their local pride, previously damaged by the Reformation, war, and economic crisis, was now restored.³¹

Therefore, while the revival was not uniformly realised across the nation, there was sufficient economic recovery in much of the provinces to render the Licensing Act's ban on issuing new patents unworkable just thirty years after it was introduced. Canny managers evaded prosecution even without the support of magistrates by obeying the letter, but not the spirit, of the law: the 1737 Act forbade legitimate entertainments to be staged for 'hire, gain or reward', but if a production appeared as a free afterpiece to a legitimate alternative, such as a music concert, then no crime had been committed. This approach was taken liberally in the late eighteenth century. In Bath, the Orchard Street Theatre was opened in 1750 and played a legitimate repertoire to great acclaim, despite the fact that their theatre would not be granted a patent for a further eighteen years; *Henry IV, part 1* was the opening performance, and Shakespeare was a staple of the repertoire.³² In Newcastle, a company frequently performed at the Turk's Head Inn in the Bigg Market. On Wednesday 15 March 1775, for example, a performance of *Henry VIII* was advertised as being played *gratis* 'between the

³⁰ Borsay, *Urban Renaissance*, pp. 311.

³¹ Borsay, *Urban Renaissance*, pp. 311-312.

³² Hare, *Orchard Street*, p. 1.

two parts' of a music concert. Despite the concert supposedly being the main piece of the night's entertainment, the playbill makes no mention of the nature of the music being performed, and instead lists the scenes, cast and highlights of the 'free' play in great detail:

At the theatre in the Bigg-market. Wednesday evening being
 March 15, will be performed a concert of music. Tickets -box, 2s.
 6d. -pit, 2s. -first gal. 1s 6d -upper gal. 1s. Between the two parts of
 the concert will be presented (gratis) an historical play, call'd *King
 Henry VIII*. Containing the arresting and beheading of the Duke of
 Buckingham; the trial and divorce of Queen Catherine; the fall and
 death of Cardinal Woolsey; the rise and marriage of Anne Bullen;
 the trial and acquittal of Archbishop Cranmer; the birth and
 christening of the Princess Elizabeth; with many other historical
 passages [...] In Act 1. The grand banquet scene. In Act II. The
 procession to the execution of the Duke of Buckingham, and the
 trial of Queen Catherine. The play to conclude with the christening
 of the Princess Elizabeth.³³

Such arrangements clearly made a mockery of the law. Moreover, they stand as evidence that the provinces were not content to be dictated to by London and could establish their own theatrical practices, independent of the capital. In 1766, however, a 'catalyst for institutional change' came when Samuel Foote successfully petitioned Parliament for a royal patent for the Haymarket Theatre

³³ Playbill, *Henry VIII*, Bigg Market Theatre Newcastle, 15 March 1775, BLPBC vol. 308.

in London.³⁴ With a precedent set, provincial managers followed suit, and in 1768 the first provincial English theatres, Bath and Norwich, were granted their own patents by individual acts of parliament. These permitted the use of the Royal moniker and allowed their managers to bypass the restrictions imposed in 1737. Although their licenses lasted only twenty-one years rather than in perpetuity, they now had the same playing rights as Drury Lane and Covent Garden: namely, to perform the legitimate drama and to play in regular theatrical seasons for as many consecutive months as they desired. York and Hull were granted their own patents the next year, followed by Liverpool (1771), Manchester (1775), Chester (1777), Bristol (1778), Margate (1786), Newcastle (1787), Birmingham (1807) and Ramsgate (1826). Brighton's theatre did not become Royal until 1810, but as the town was an official Royal Residence and as such fell under royal, rather than parliamentary, authority, it was issued with an alternative annual licence from 1788 onwards by the Lord Chamberlain that granted the same rights as the above.³⁵ Jane Moody has argued that the acquisition of these patents 'marked a transformation in the moral and political status of provincial theatre' and defined 'a new age of polite entertainment outside London'.³⁶ I would add that as well as transforming the status of the new Theatres Royal, the patents also crystalized an internal hierarchy of provincial theatres which would, as I discuss below and in later chapters, exert its own influence upon Shakespeare performance.

³⁴ Jane Moody, 'Dictating to the Empire: performance and theatrical geography in eighteenth-century Britain', in *The Cambridge Companion to British Theatre, 1730-1830*, ed. by Jane Moody and Daniel O'Quinn (Cambridge: CUP, 2007), pp. 21-41 (p. 24).

³⁵ SCDL, pp. 64-65, and House of Commons, *Report from the Select Committee on Theatrical License and Regulations* (London: House of Commons, 1866), p. 2; Anthony Dale, *The Theatre Royal Brighton* (Stocksfield: Oriel Press, 1980), p. 2.

³⁶ Moody, 'Dictating to the empire', pp. 24-26.

Acquiring a royal patent was expensive, and required the support of town officials as well as a degree of political influence. In addition, only a minority of provincial towns were large enough to sustain permanent theatres or the lengthy seasons that the patent entitled them to. For those towns that did not receive a patent, the impracticalities of the 1737 Act were not dealt with until 1788, when the Representations Act was introduced. This permitted local magistrates to 'license Theatrical Representations occasionally' for up to sixty days at a time but added a host of conditions intended to limit theatrical activity: the licensed location must not be within twenty miles of London, eight miles of a patent or licensed provincial theatre, fourteen miles of Oxford and Cambridge, or ten miles of a royal residence.³⁷ Whilst this allowed much of the rest of the country to perform theatre legally for the first time in over fifty years, once again the legislators had prioritised London's theatrical culture over that of the nation: the same rights had been granted to the capital some thirty-seven years earlier, in 1751, via the Disorderly Houses Act.³⁸

After 1788, more than fifty years passed before new theatrical legislation was introduced, when London theatre set the agenda once more. The 1843 Theatres Act was prompted by the findings of the 1832 Select Committee to tackle issues that specifically affected the capital, namely the growing number of minor theatres and the threat that these venues and their illegitimate fare – melodrama, extravaganza and burlesque – presented to the establishment (i.e. Covent Garden and Drury Lane). Burlesque, as Richard Schoch has argued, was

³⁷ Jean N. Baker, 'The Proclamation Society, William Mainwaring and the Theatrical Representations Act', *Historical Research*, 76:193 (2003), 347-363 (p. 362).

³⁸ Ganzel, 'Patent Wrongs', p. 36.

by design an almost exclusively metropolitan phenomenon. Its success depended on familiarity with specific productions and specific locations, both of which would have been unknown to the vast majority of provincial theatre-goers. Schoch lists 'topical references to life in London, ranging from the price of butter to the Trafalgar Square riots', as one of the defining elements of the 'highly consistent' mid-nineteenth century burlesque scripts, and writes that the 'common fate' of Shakespeare burlesques 'was to have a London production – lasting anywhere from a few weeks to a few months – followed by occasional productions in provincial theatres'.³⁹ Indeed, in my own research I have found very few instances of Shakespeare burlesques being performed in the case study towns.⁴⁰ In addition, although melodrama and extravaganza were to be found in the provinces, the fact that the majority of provincial towns could only support one theatre and that most did not hold a patent ensured that the London critics' anxieties about 'the invasion of the serious stages [i.e. the patent theatres] by tastes generated in the minor theatres' were irrelevant outside the city: there was no tradition of building-based segregation of genre in the provinces.⁴¹

However, as I have previously demonstrated, the committee paid little attention to the state of drama in the provinces; indeed, ignorance and outright indifference were often displayed on the rare occasions when provincial theatre

³⁹ Richard W. Schoch, *Not Shakespeare: Bardolatry and Burlesque in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: CUP, 2002), pp. 12-13.

⁴⁰ John Poole's *Hamlet Travestie* (1810) was performed at the TR Bath in March 1813, April 1821 and July 1824; Maurice Dowling's *Othello, According to Act of Parliament* (1836) at the TR Bath in January 1838 and at the TR Newcastle in January 1838 (under the title *Othello Travestie*) and March 1841; and J. Stirling Coyne's *Richard III* at the TR Bath in March 1844 and the TR Norwich in January 1851. See BLPBC vols. 178.1, 181.2, 182.1; NCLLS L792 N536(I), L792 N536T 1839-88, and NFHC P3.

⁴¹ Jacky Bratton, 'Romantic Melodrama', in *The Cambridge Companion to British Theatre, 1730-1830*, ed. by Jane Moody and Daniel O'Quinn (Cambridge: CUP, 2007), pp. 115-127 (p. 118). The exceptions to this rule were Manchester, Liverpool, and Birmingham, the three largest provincial towns, which each contained two or more permanent venues even before the 1843 Theatres Act.

was referenced. Witnesses and committee members alike tended to refer generally to ‘the country’, seemingly discerning no difference between industrial northern behemoths or southern market towns. John Payne Collier, a renowned Shakespeare scholar at the time and subject of one of the committee’s longest interviews, represented the views of many when he commented, ‘[w]e know little or nothing in London of what passes in country theatres’.⁴² The committee thus recommended that rights to the ‘regular’ drama be granted to all licensed venues, and in 1843 the Theatres Act passed this into law. In theory this terminated the supremacy of Covent Garden and Drury Lane, but in practice their hegemony lived on: one hundred years of undisputed supremacy had orientated the entire theatre industry around the two metropolitan theatres. In an era which revered tradition and viewed innovation with suspicion, it was perhaps inevitable that the provincial theatres were treated as second-rate pretenders. As the testimonies from the Select Committee have shown, even the provincial Theatres Royal went largely unrecognised in London, their lack of heritage apparently rendering them inconsequential in comparison to the long-established patents of the capital. Legislation, then, seems to have cultivated a divide between centre and periphery, first by treating London and the provinces unequally and then through enforcing regulations which bore little relevance to theatre outside the capital. In this way, the provinces were pushed to develop their own theatrical culture, and yet the systemic bias in favour of London ensured that that the capital retained its authoritative position.

⁴² *SCDL*, p. 31.

1.1.2 Bardolatry

Legislation placed London at the centre of the theatrical universe in this period, and in a similar way bardolatry – the worship of Shakespeare – elevated Shakespeare to the role of national playwright and in doing so imbued the performance of his works with great significance, creating pressure on provincial managers and performers to produce work of the highest quality in order to meet audience expectations. As I shall demonstrate in this section, this was interpreted, for a variety of reasons, to mean imitating the style and substance of Shakespeare performances at Covent Garden and Drury Lane.

Julia Swindells has noted that throughout the 1832 Select Committee proceedings, ‘allusions to William Shakespeare pervade the report as if he, like Heathcliff to Cathy, is always, always in the minds of both interviewers and witnesses’.⁴³ Members and witnesses alike displayed a fervent belief in the superiority of Shakespeare’s work and the importance of ensuring that his legacy was preserved. Opinion was divided over the best way to do this: some, including Bulwer-Lytton and his largely Radical and Whig committee members, felt that removing restrictions on licensing would improve performance standards across the board. Others, such as Thomas Morton, argued that only certain environments could do justice to what were generally considered the greatest plays in the English canon. In his testimony Morton, a playwright and reader at Drury Lane, spoke of his conviction that Shakespeare’s prologue to *Henry V* revealed the playwright’s aesthetic preferences:

⁴³ Julia Swindells, ‘Behold the Swelling Scene! Shakespeare and the 1832 Select Committee’ in *Victorian Shakespeare, Volume 1: Theatre, Drama and Performance*, ed. by Gail Marshall and Adrian Poole, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), pp. 29-46 (p. 32).

[I]n the prologue to *Henry the Fifth*, impressed with the nobleness of his subject and the mightiness of his powers, he [Shakespeare] asks for 'A kingdom for a stage, princes to act, and monarchs to behold the swelling scene!' I think he very feelingly complains of how he is 'cabin'd, cribb'd, confined within the girdle of those walls'; and for my part, it seems a command upon his countrymen that his pieces should be produced only in the noblest temples of the Muses.⁴⁴

Upon further questioning by Bulwer-Lytton, Morton explained that his opinion was that the plays of Shakespeare 'are acted better in large theatres, and from that, I suppose, he [Shakespeare] would have thought so too'.⁴⁵ Only Covent Garden and Drury Lane met Morton's criteria: even the Haymarket, the capital's third patent theatre, was considered inferior because of its smaller size, and Morton condemned the Shakespeare staged there as 'feebly performed'.⁴⁶ The examination continued, with Bulwer-Lytton posing leading questions as was his approach throughout:

[Bulwer-Lytton:] To what cause do you attribute there not being larger theatres erected in Shakespeare's time? Was it the small size of

⁴⁴ SCDL, p. 217.

⁴⁵ SCDL, p. 220.

⁴⁶ SCDL, p. 217. At this time the capacity of Covent Garden was 2800, Drury Lane c. 3060, and the Haymarket c.1500. Covent Garden figures from J. Britton and A. Pugin, *Illustrations of the Public Buildings of London*, 2 vols (London: J. Taylor, 1825), VI, p. 216, in *Survey of London: Volume 35, the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, and the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden*, ed. by F. H. W. Sheppard (London: London County Council, 1970), pp. 86-108. Haymarket figures from Edward Walford, *Old and New London: Volume 4* (London: Cassell, Petter & Galpin, 1878), pp. 216-226, via *British History Online* <<http://www.british-history.ac.uk/old-new-london/vol4/pp216-226>> [accessed 25 September 2017]. N.B. Unless stated otherwise, all other websites referenced in this chapter were accessed and live as of 01 December 2017. Drury Lane figures from 'Theatre Royal Drury Lane', *Theatres Trust* <<https://database.theatrestrust.org.uk/resources/theatres/show/206-theatre-royal-drury-lane>>.

the town, and the general poverty of the country which prevented these splendid edifices which have arisen in our time?

[Morton:] It was the infancy of the dramatic art, and, like other infancy, it had its cradle and not its temple.

[Bulwer-Lytton:] The general state of this metropolis, in short, prevented those splendid edifices which our improvement in wealth has given us?

[Morton:] Yes, they have increased in splendour and magnitude.⁴⁷

Although the two men were ideologically opposed, we can see here that they were united in their confidence that the two patent theatres – ‘splendid edifices’ – represented the pinnacle of theatrical achievement, were intrinsically linked to the works of Shakespeare, and offered a reflection of Britain’s international success and prosperity. Such beliefs, along with a preoccupation with determining how Shakespeare himself would choose to present his plays in the contemporary theatre, formed the cornerstone of the nineteenth century iteration of bardolatry. This in turn was responsible for the growing concern with reading and performing Shakespeare in the ‘correct’ fashion.

These ideas had their origins in the eighteenth century, during what Gefen Bar-On Santor has termed the ‘Shakespeare Reformation’.⁴⁸ This movement, comprised of editors, critics, actors and managers, celebrated Shakespeare as a universal genius. They sought to renounce the adaptations that

⁴⁷ *SCDL*, p. 220.

⁴⁸ Gefen Bar-on Santor, ‘Shakespeare in the Georgian Theatre’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Georgian Theatre, 1737-1832*, ed. by Julia Swindells and David Francis Taylor (Oxford: OUP, 2014), pp. 213- 227.

had come to dominate the repertoire since the Restoration, revive Shakespeare on the stage, and reinstate his original texts. By the middle of the century there were signs of success: in 1741 a life-size marble statue of Shakespeare was installed in Westminster Abbey's Poet's Corner; in the 1740/41 theatrical season, one in four productions at the London patent theatres was Shakespearean – an unprecedented number.⁴⁹ David Garrick, who arrived in the capital that same year, founded his entire career on the principles of the Shakespeare Reformation, and Michael Dobson identifies Garrick as a key figure in Shakespeare's posthumous rise from 'artless rustic' to 'transcendent personification of a national ideal'.⁵⁰ As manager of Drury Lane, Garrick proclaimed a dedication to restoring Shakespeare's works, espousing an essentially patriotic loyalty to the playwright which brought him enormous success and did much to secure Shakespeare's status as an enduring national icon.

The events of the later eighteenth century offered ample opportunity for Garrick's nationalistic appropriation of Shakespeare. He staged *Henry V* every year during the Seven Years' War with France, and at the height of the War in 1759 produced *Harlequin's Invasion*, a pantomime that concluded with Harlequin's defeat and a procession of Shakespearean characters marching in his wake.⁵¹ The culmination of Garrick's efforts to embed Shakespeare in the national consciousness came in the form of his 1769 Jubilee, referenced at the outset of this thesis, which combined reverence with commercialisation and

⁴⁹ Bate, *Shakespeare Constitutions*, p. 25.

⁵⁰ Michael Dobson, *The Making of the National Poet: Shakespeare, Adaptation and Authorship, 1660-1769* (Oxford: OUP, 1992), pp. 13-14.

⁵¹ Bate, *Shakespeare Constitutions*, pp. 27-28.

placed the focus squarely on Shakespeare as icon rather than playwright. Held at a time when Britain was still buoyed from the victory over France, the Jubilee had distinctly nationalistic undertones: the *Ode to Shakespeare* that Garrick recited on the second day spoke of 'British gratitude' for 'him the first of poets, best of men', and elevated Shakespeare to 'the god of our idolatry'.⁵² The Jubilee can thus be seen to have been part of a wider cultural movement in the aftermath of the War and then the 1789 Revolution, in which Britain sought to rid itself of French influence and establish, or invent, a distinct culture of its own. As the association between Shakespeare and national identity grew, so too did the importance of protecting the man and his works from assault or injury.

Theatre managers were just as concerned by theatre's potential for social disruption as legislators, and as keen to avoid revolution and social upheaval. As such, the Shakespeare performed in the capital in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was determinedly conservative and anti-Jacobin.⁵³ John Philip Kemble, the manager of Drury Lane from 1788 to 1796, staged a series of Shakespeare productions that, as Moody has demonstrated, pushed a blatant pro-establishment agenda: '[i]n Kemble's hands, *Coriolanus* became a parable about the rightness of patrician rule; *Measure for Measure* a drama about the paternalistic care of rulers for their subjects, and *The Tempest* an eloquent justification of Prospero's benign authority'.⁵⁴ These features continued to define Shakespeare performances at the patent theatres long after the

⁵² David Garrick, *An Ode upon Dedicating a Building and Erecting a Statue, to Shakespeare, at Stratford Upon Avon* (London: T. Becket and P. A. de Hondt, 1769), pp.1, 15.

⁵³ Nicola J. Watson, 'Kemble, Scott, and the Mantle of the Bard', in *The Appropriation of Shakespeare*, ed. by Jean I. Marsden (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), pp. 73-92 (p. 74).

⁵⁴ Jane Moody, 'Romantic Shakespeare' in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Stage* ed. by Stanley Wells and Sarah Stanton (Cambridge: CUP, 2002), pp. 37-57 (p. 44).

revolutionary threat had faded, and by the time the Select Committee met in 1832 this style of performance was considered by many to be the proper form for works of this kind. When London's minor theatres – the homes of illegitimate drama – challenged the patent's monopoly on Shakespeare by staging their own versions in mime or musical form in the early nineteenth century, critics accused the managers of 'administering to the ignorance or depravity of the multitude'.⁵⁵ Attempts to break away from conventional Shakespeare as performed at Covent Garden and Drury Lane were thus interpreted as threats to the very fabric of society. This was a central concern for the Committee, who frequently discussed the state of the drama, and of Shakespeare in particular, in emotional terms, and repeatedly referred to it as in danger of degradation, injury, and neglect. As I will discuss in the next section, provincial theatres' freedom from metropolitan levels of critical scrutiny offered them possibilities of creative experimentation that were often absent from the Shakespeare performances on the London patent stages.

As the nineteenth century progressed, theatre managers had another reason for staging highly conservative Shakespeare productions besides preserving the political status quo. A number of influential critics, including Charles Lamb and William Hazlitt, felt that the stage was an inherently flawed medium for the reception of Shakespeare's works: they argued that theatrical conventions created a barrier between the audience and what they considered to be the sacred text. As a consequence of this opposition, managers at the patent theatres engaged with leading antiquarians to accord their productions

⁵⁵ *Theatrical Inquisitor* 2 (April 1813), p. 136 quoted in Moody, 'Romantic Shakespeare', p. 39.

historical accuracy, while leading actors often sought to justify their performances through close study of Shakespeare's texts.⁵⁶ Because of the importance accorded to engagement with the text, new interpretations of Shakespeare characters that were seen to offer an authentic representation of the author's intentions could propel an actor into stardom, and create a longstanding association with that role. It was almost exclusively London performers who were credited with such insight. Sarah Siddons, for example, was renowned for her Lady Macbeth, which she debuted in London at Drury Lane in 1785. Even Hazlitt was convinced by her performance, writing that, '[s]he was tragedy personified [...] to the retired and lonely student, through long years of solitude, her face shone as if an eye had appeared from heaven'.⁵⁷ Edmund Kean was similarly successful as Shylock and Richard III, first appearing in both roles in 1814, also at Drury Lane. Like Siddons, Kean was seen to have a personal connection with the characters he excelled in. Popular and critical approval granted performers ownership of their roles until their retirement from the stage, and in many cases their portrayals became the standard against which others were measured. Just as the London patents were seen by many as the only suitable venues for staging Shakespeare, so the London stars were considered the only performers capable of doing justice to the beauty of his works.

John Philip Kemble's *Coriolanus* serves as an example of the influence that one London production could have in provincial theatres. His production

⁵⁶ Moody, 'Romantic Shakespeare', pp. 40-42.

⁵⁷ William Hazlitt, *A View of the English Stage; Or, a Series of Dramatic Criticisms* (London: John Warren, 1821), p. 305.

debuted at Drury Lane in February 1789, five months after the actor became manager of the theatre. The play was an instant hit, and Coriolanus became the actor's most iconic role. On 1 January 1794, Kemble appeared in *Coriolanus* at the Theatre Royal Newcastle, which was managed by his brother, Stephen Kemble (Fig. 2).⁵⁸ The playbill noted that this play was 'never [before] acted here' which, rather than a marketing ploy, seems likely: *Coriolanus* had had several London revivals in the post-Restoration era, but none made an impact comparable to Kemble's. Rob Ormsby considers Kemble's production to be 'among the most significant in the play's career on stage', citing as evidence the endurance of Kemble's text and stage picture into the twentieth century.⁵⁹ Kemble's name and visit is emphasised on the Newcastle playbill, but the eye is drawn immediately to the title of the play, which is featured in the largest and boldest font. I would argue that this should not suggest that the Newcastle management considered the play to be a greater draw than Kemble; instead, it demonstrates the extent to which the actor had become associated with the role by this time. The production was evidently popular with the Newcastle audience, as Kemble reprised the role a second time three nights later, as the penultimate performance of his six-night engagement. In August 1795 Kemble returned for an eight-night engagement, and again performed *Coriolanus* alongside a selection of his other famous roles. The performance record for Newcastle is incomplete, but the next documented presentation of the play occurred in 1817, when Kemble was visiting on a farewell tour ahead of his retirement from the stage; *Coriolanus* was performed twice in a nine-night

⁵⁸ Playbill, *Coriolanus*, TR Newcastle, 01 January 1794, NCLLS L792 N536T.

⁵⁹ Rob Ormsby, *Coriolanus* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014), p. 18.

Mr J. KEMBLE's Second Night.

THEATRE-ROYAL, NEWCASTLE.

On WEDNESDAY Evening, January 1, 1794, will be performed,
A TRAGEDY, (never acted here,) written by Shakespeare, called

CORIOLANUS

Coriolanus, Mr J. KEMBLE.

Tullus Aufidius,	Mr	S I D D O N S.
Menenius Agrippa,	Mr	S P A R K S.
Cominius,	Mr	F O X.
Sicinius Velutus,	Mr	L A M A S H.
Junius Brutus,	Mr	C. K E M B L E,
Volucius,	Mr	B E L L.
Roman Officer,	Mr	W H I T M O R E.
Volfcian Officer,	Mr	M I L L S.
Principal Citizen,	Mr	N U N N S.
Volumnia,	Mrs	N U N N S.
Valeria,	Mrs	W A L C O T.
Gentlewoman,	Mrs	W H I T M O R E.
Virgilia,	Mrs	K E M B L E.

IN ACT SECOND,

A GRAND OVATION.

To which will be added, the much admired Piece, in Two Acts, called The

Babes in the Wood.

Lord Alford,	Mr BELL.	Sir Rowland,	Mr SIDDONS
Walter,	Mr C. KEMBLE.	Apathy,	Mr FOX.
Gabriel,	Mr LAMASH.	Oliver,	Mr NUNNS.
Servant to Sir Rowland,	Mr WHITMORE.	Servant to Lord Alford,	Mr MILLS.
Robbers,	Mr SPARKS	and Mr HOUGH.	
The Two Babes in the Wood,	Miss KEMBLE and Miss WALCOT.		
Josephine,	Mrs SPARKS.	Winifrid,	Mrs WALCOT.
Maud,	Miss FREEMAN.	Helen,	Mrs KEMBLE.

Doors to be opened at Five, and begin at Six o'Clock.

BOX-TICKETS to be taken at the Time of taking Seats.

TICKETS to be had at Bella's Coffee-house, on the Sandhill; Mrs Atkinson's, in the Groat-Market; Mr Humble's Circulating Library, Mosley-street; Mr Whitfield's, Bookfeller, Tyne Bridge End; Mr Tickle's, Watch-maker, Mosley-street; S. Hodgson, Printer, Union-street; and at Hall and Elliot's Printing-Office, Pilgrim-street.

On Friday, January 3, by Desire of the GENTLEMEN of the FOREST HUNT, EVERY ONE HAS HIS FAULT; with the Farce of the PRIZE; or, 2538.— And on Monday, January 6, will be brought forward, a New Play, (never acted here,) called The MOUNTAINEERS; the Part of Octavian, by Mr J. KEMBLE.

N. B. Mr J. KEMBLE's Engagement, is for Six Nights only; at the End of which, the Theatre will close for this Season.

£40 or 50

Figure 2 - Coriolanus, TR Newcastle, 01 Jan 1794 (NCLLS)

engagement. His dominance in the role was not unique to Newcastle, where his brother may have felt obliged to reserve the part for him, and was repeated at Theatre Royal Bath. A playbill for 26 December 1812 advertised Kemble in *Coriolanus* and, as in Newcastle, stated that the play had never before been acted at that theatre, suggesting again that it was Kemble's specific interpretation of the play that was felt to be the draw.⁶⁰ The piece was performed at Bath on three more occasions in the next five years, each time starring John Philip Kemble.

For those theatres that were not able to access the man himself, there were other ways to imitate Kemble's *Coriolanus*. The text that Kemble used, while advertised on playbills as Shakespeare's, was in reality an adaptation of his own creation, combining the first three acts of Shakespeare – heavily cut – with the last two acts of James Thomson's 1749 version.⁶¹ Furthermore, in its original Drury Lane incarnation, Kemble's production contained scenes of great pageantry with enormous casts: in his memoirs Charles Mayne Young, Kemble's colleague, asserted that two hundred and forty extras marched in the Ovation scene.⁶² In the absence of Kemble himself, it was these aspects of performance that the Theatre Royal Norwich attempted to reproduce in their 1807 production. The playbill stated,

⁶⁰ Playbill, *Coriolanus*, TR Bath, 26 December 1812, BLPBC vol. 178.1.

⁶¹ *John Philip Kemble Promptbooks*, ed. by Charles H. Shattuck (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1974), p. ii.

⁶² *A memoir of Charles Young*, ed. by Julian Young (2nd edition), cited in *John Philip Kemble Promptbooks*, p. i.

FOR THE BENEFIT OF MR AND MRS BOWLES. ON SATURDAY, MAY 9,
 1807, WILL BE PERFORMED SHAKESPEARE'S HISTORICAL PLAY OF
 CORIOLANUS; OR, THE ROMAN MATRON: ADAPTED TO THE STAGE,
 WITH ADDITIONS FROM THOMPSON, BY J. P. KEMBLE [...] In Act II A
 TRIUMPHAL PROCESSION - Soldiers bearing Banners, Trophies of
 Arms, Spoils, Mural and Civic Crowns. - Priests and Virgins
 conducting the Victims for the Sacrifice. - Lictors with Fasces,
 Senators, &c.⁶³

The production was repeated on the 26th of the month, but was simply advertised as *Coriolanus*; as the premiere was only two weeks prior, it is reasonable to assume that the public would have remembered the original description. Those performances in Bath and Newcastle starring Kemble would doubtless have also used his script and featured similar theatrics, and on occasion playbills from each theatre promised 'a grand ovation' in the second act.⁶⁴ However, the lack of detail on those bills in comparison to that of Norwich suggests that such description was considered unnecessary when the presence of John Philip Kemble was guaranteed. It is telling that, for the duration of Kemble's career, major provincial theatres such as Newcastle, Norwich and Bath did not attempt to stage *Coriolanus* without referencing what contemporaries considered the exemplary interpretation of the play. With such political importance placed upon Shakespeare performance in this period, it stands to reason that provincial theatre managers would desire, or feel obliged, to model

⁶³ Playbill, *Coriolanus*, TR Norwich, 09 May 1807, BLPBC vol. 296.

⁶⁴ See playbills for *Coriolanus*, TR Newcastle, 01 January 1794, NCLLS L792 N536T 1794-96, and *Coriolanus*, TR Bath, 14 January 1817, BLPBC vol. 178.2.

their productions on those staged in London. The sense of duty to their audience, as well as legislation which was designed to foster reverence of Shakespeare, created an environment in which provincial imitation of the capital was all but mandatory.

1.1.3 The Star Circuit

The star circuit was, I argue here, the third major factor in the construction of a London-centric culture of Shakespeare performance from 1769 to 1850. Resting on bardolatrous ideas about the superiority of London performance, the star circuit reinforced the idea that provincial theatres and actors should seek to imitate their metropolitan contemporaries. In this section I will outline the structure of the star circuit and the role that it played in provincial theatre, and analyse the impact that this had on provincial Shakespeare performance in terms of both the substance of productions and their reception in the local community.

The star circuit was a central component of the Georgian and early-Victorian theatre industry. Although turnpike trusts had carried out extensive developments on the national road network from the 1750s, travel to the capital remained time consuming, uncomfortable and expensive until the mid-nineteenth century. Only the wealthy had the opportunity to visit the London patents in person. A star performer visiting a provincial theatre offered a sample of the metropolitan theatrical experience to those who were unlikely to otherwise encounter it. The standard arrangement, established in the eighteenth century, concentrated on the stars of the London stage. In the summer months, when Covent Garden and Drury Lane were closed – and during the season if

their contracts allowed – metropolitan performers would undertake brief engagements with theatres outside the capital. Moody outlines the appeal of this system from the perspective of both centre and periphery:

Newspapers and other forms of print culture publicised the fame of metropolitan performers across the nation. Provincial audiences were eager to convert this second-hand knowledge into the sensuous (and sometimes sensational) experience of watching celebrated actors in the flesh. [...] Such 'expeditions' became the highlight of the cultural calendar: box offices were besieged, normal life all but suspended whilst provincial managers – who often charged 'London prices' for the week – made huge profits.⁶⁵

I would add that as well as financial benefits for managers and stars there were also less tangible rewards. The visiting actors expanded their celebrity and thus increased their negotiating power with their contracted theatres, while provincial theatres could raise – or maintain – their own status through a closer association with London.

Indeed, while the size of a theatre, prosperity of the locale and number of famous protégés all played a part in determining a venue's place in the provincial theatrical hierarchy, what mattered most of all was the strength of the connection to the London theatre scene. Michael R. Booth has outlined the structure of provincial theatre in the Victorian era, and describes a hierarchical, tiered framework that developed in the latter years of the eighteenth century as

⁶⁵ Moody, 'Dictating to the Empire', p. 31.

a result of the security of legal theatrical performances following the 1788 Representations Act.⁶⁶ It is necessary to provide a brief summary of Booth's structure here, as it illuminates a fundamental aspect of the provincial theatre industry that shaped the environment in which the Shakespeare performance discussed in this thesis was formed.

At the top of the provincial hierarchy were the theatres bearing the Royal title which, until the Theatres Act of 1843, could only be used if a patent had been granted by Parliament. After theatrical free trade removed such restrictions, many lower-tier theatres renamed themselves Royal, rendering the title meaningless. The pre-1843 Theatres Royal, however, retained their privileged status, and in many cases the prestige that they had enjoyed for decades persisted well into the twentieth century, just as it had for Covent Garden and Drury Lane. Most of the Theatres Royal maintained a relatively small resident stock company of actors with a designated player for certain character types; as in London, male managers typically took on the lead male roles, often accompanied by their wives as their leading lady. In the second tier,

was the circuit, a loose collection of towns, numbering from two to fifteen or sixteen, among which a single company (occasionally subdivided) moved with geographical convenience at appropriate times of the year, whenever potential audiences might be gathered in some numbers – at race meetings, fairs, assizes and other major social events. Each circuit had a home base – like York, at a Theatre Royal – and played its longest season there. There was a hierarchical

⁶⁶ Michael R. Booth, *Theatre in the Victorian Age* (Cambridge: CUP, 1991), pp. 16-20.

order among circuits, the prominent ones playing the larger towns, the lesser a smaller, more rural network.⁶⁷

In the final tier were the booth theatres and strolling companies that toured the smaller towns and villages which were without permanent playhouses. There has been relatively little study on these players, presumably due to a lack of extant documentation and what Helen Brooks identifies as a tendency of theatre historians to 'pass over' their performances 'on the grounds that they held little value for their contemporaries'.⁶⁸ Booth theatres were temporary, custom-built structures that would be erected for a specific season or occasion and then dismantled or left for another company to use; strolling companies either staged their performances within existing structures such as barns or else created their own makeshift theatres, 'composed of canvass, strained upon hoisted poles, which, when taken down [are] easily portable by hand'.⁶⁹ Working with minimal props and costume to allow for easy transportation, strollers moved on frequently in order to maintain the novelty of their acts; as I will discuss below, novelty was in fact a primary concern for all sections of provincial theatre.

Although not discussed by Booth, my research suggests that this provincial hierarchy was founded and sustained on the conviction that London patent theatres produced a superior theatrical product. The star circuit provided a connection to that product and as such both indicated and allotted a venue's

⁶⁷ Booth, *Victorian Age*, p. 16.

⁶⁸ Helen E. M. Brooks, 'Women and Theatre Management in the Eighteenth Century', in *The Public's Open to Us All: Essays on Women and Performance in Eighteenth-Century England*, ed. by Laura Engel (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), pp. 73-95 (p. 74).

⁶⁹ *German and Dutch Theatre, 1600-1848*, ed. by George W. Brandt (Cambridge: CUP, 1993), p. 81 and Josephine Harrop, *Victorian Portable Theatre* (London: Society for Theatre Research, 1989), p. 3; Winston, *Theatric Tourist*, p. 19.

place within the hierarchy. The Theatres Royal enjoyed longer and/or more frequent visits from stars on account of their higher earning potential, larger audience base, and superior facilities; circuit theatres also received visits, but these were more sporadic and much shorter in duration. My study of the playbills has revealed that the typical length of a star's visit to the Theatres Royal Bath, Brighton, Newcastle and Norwich was between four to six nights, although there were instances of much longer engagements. Newcastle occasionally secured performers for lengthy periods: during Stephen Kemble's management from 1791 to 1806 his siblings Sarah Siddons, Charles Kemble and John Philip Kemble regularly visited for weeks at a time, while in November 1838 the manager M. Penley engaged Mr and Mrs Ternan 'for one month previous to their return to the Theatre-Royal, Drury Lane'.⁷⁰ At Nottingham, a circuit theatre that, prior to 1843, operated on license rather than patent, the vast majority of stars performed for two or three nights before moving on, often to the circuit theatre in Derby where they would repeat their roles for the same duration. The itinerary of Edmund Kean's 1817 summer tour provides an example of this in practice: he spent eight nights at the Theatre Royal Newcastle, three weeks at the Theatre Royal Liverpool, and gave just two performances at the Theatre in Nottingham. Third-tier booth theatres and strolling companies had no means to attract stars, but operated under such different circumstances that this was not expected. They served the same purpose in rural communities as London performers did in larger or more prosperous towns: providing an

⁷⁰ Playbill, *The Merchant of Venice*, TR Newcastle, 05 November 1838, NCLLS L792 N536(I).

entertaining distraction and a glimpse of the fare enjoyed by those in more cosmopolitan settings.

Shakespeare performance was profoundly influenced by the star circuit. As visits were, with the odd exception, relatively brief, and because managers needed to maximise profits in order to compensate for performers' high appearance fees, the plays selected for performance tended to be those that were guaranteed hits, featuring the star in their most celebrated roles. In a climate that valued mastery of the English canon, it is unsurprising that Shakespeare was often well-represented in metropolitan stars' touring repertoires. This trend remained consistent throughout the period. In August 1798, for example, Alexander Pope and his wife Maria Anne Pope – leading actors at Covent Garden – were engaged at the Theatre Royal Newcastle for two weeks, during which they performed Shakespeare on three occasions: *Romeo and Juliet*, *Macbeth*, and *Cymbeline*; in 1836, Charles Kean visited the Theatre Royal Brighton for seven nights and played Shakespeare for all but one, taking on the lead roles in *Othello*, *Macbeth*, *Richard III*, *King Lear*, and *Hamlet* (twice); at the Theatre Royal Norwich in January 1844, James Robertson Anderson of Drury Lane played Shakespeare three nights out of six, consisting of two renditions of *Othello* and one of *Hamlet*.⁷¹

The frequency of visits from stars could, however, vary considerably from one theatre to another. The performance record as taken from the playbills examined for this thesis suggests that at Bath the majority of Shakespearean

⁷¹ Playbills: TR Newcastle, 06-17 August 1798, NCLLS L792 N536T '97-1800; TR Brighton, 31 October-07 November 1836, BLPBC vol. 202; TR Norwich, 29 January-03 February 1844, NFHC N792TR.

performances featured a touring actor, while at Newcastle they were more often performed by the stock company alone. As far as the records show, from 1802/03 to 1850/51 there were twenty-one seasons at Bath in which over eighty per cent of Shakespeare performances starred a touring actor, while in Newcastle there was only one. The poor transport links between London and Newcastle no doubt played a considerable role in restricting the number of visits the latter received: in 1821 there were three stage coaches a week to Newcastle and around twenty a day to Bath, with the average journey taking almost twenty hours to Bath and several days to Newcastle.⁷² The development of the railways shortened these times considerably, but although in 1845 it took around three hours to reach Bath, it was still more than ten hours to Newcastle. Brighton was closer still to London, and it was possible even in the early nineteenth century for actors to visit just for the night. Consequently, the theatre received one-off performances from top London actors. George Frederick Cooke, for instance, was a leading actor at Covent Garden whose performance as Iago in *Othello* in October 1805 was advertised as 'Being the only NIGHT of his PERFORMING'; in September 1807 Henry and Harriet Siddons, a married couple who were both engaged at Drury Lane, visited Brighton to perform Shylock and Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*, 'their only Appearance here this Season'.⁷³ This phenomenon was unique to Brighton amongst the five theatres sampled here, and I would argue that it is likely that Brighton was the only theatre in the

⁷² Michael Freeman, 'Transport', in *Atlas of Industrializing Britain 1780-1914*, ed. by John Langton and R. J. Morris (London: Methuen & Co., 1986), pp. 80-93.

⁷³ Playbills for *Othello*, Brighton Theatre, 30 October 1805 and *The Merchant of Venice*, Brighton Theatre, 07 October 1807, both Burney vol. 937.f.1.

country to experience visits of such brevity due to the exceptional accessibility of the town from London and its popularity as a resort for city-dwellers.

Despite such variation, the language used on the playbills advertising these performances was similar and sometimes even identical in the cases of Bath, Brighton, Newcastle, Norwich and Nottingham. In almost all cases, the metropolitan origins of the performer were announced, sometimes accompanied by a paragraph extolling the talents of the actor or the great cost of their engagement to the manager. This was true even on the earliest and least descriptive playbills: when Anna Brunton visited the Theatre Royal Norwich in August 1789, the playbills advertising her appearances in *Romeo and Juliet* and *Much Ado About Nothing* highlighted her association with London; in all-capitals, they noted that she was ‘of the THEATRE ROYAL, COVENT-GARDEN’.⁷⁴ By the nineteenth century, as playbills became more elaborate, there was opportunity for detailed endorsement and the limited period of a star’s visit was often emphasised, pressing a sense of urgency onto the reader and suggesting that this was a special event not to be missed. In 1845, a playbill for the Theatre Royal Norwich announced that the manager had ‘great pleasure’ in announcing that he had ‘succeeded in forming an Engagement for TWO NIGHTS ONLY With that highly Celebrated Tragedian, Mr MACREADY’, which began with a performance of *Hamlet*. A note at the bottom of the bill titled ‘NOTICE!!!’ read:

The Manager begs to state, that in consequence of the very HEAVY
EXPENCE attending the above arrangement, and as being one of

⁷⁴ Playbills for *Romeo and Juliet*, TR Norwich, 04 August 1789, and *Much Ado About Nothing*, TR Norwich, 08 August 1789, both Burney vol. 937.f.2/5.

those "SPECIAL OCCASIONS" particularly provided against when the Prices were Reduced, the Admission during Mr MACREADY's Engagement will be as follows [...] The Manager takes the liberty to further intimate, that the PRESENT is in all probability the LAST opportunity his Fello-citizens will have the gratification of seeing Mr Macready in Norwich, and he does therefore venture to indulge the hope, that he will be favored with their most liberal encouragement and support.⁷⁵

The playbill in Fig. 3 advertises *Richard III* at the Nottingham Theatre on 3 April 1820, and demonstrates a combination of all these traits. It announces that the manager, 'anxious to avail himself of any opportunity that may present itself, of engaging Talent that has received the decided approbation of a London Audience' has engaged 'Miss C. L. FISHER, (The celebrated and justly designated Theatrical PHENOMENON and her SISTERS!!)' from 'the Theatres Royal Drury Lane and Covent Garden', with Fisher performing the role of Richard III, 'which she performed TWENTY-ONE NIGHTS at the above Theatres, to the most brilliant and crowded Houses of the Season!!!'.⁷⁶ Fisher's patent heritage is stressed again in the cast list, when 'As performed by her 21 Nights at Theatres Royal Drury Lane and Covent Garden' is repeated below her name.

An 1843 bill for *Othello* at the Theatre Royal Bath took the referencing of actors' home theatres to the extreme with an exhaustive list that featured an 'extraordinary combination of talent', consisting of six performers and a bonus

⁷⁵ Playbill, *Hamlet*, TR Norwich, 02 June 1845, BLPBC vol. 296.

⁷⁶ Playbill, *Richard III*, Nottingham Theatre, 03 April 1820, BLPBC vol. 348.

EASTER WEEK.
THEATRE, NOTTINGHAM.

MISS C. L. FISHER,
(The celebrated and justly designated Theatrical PHENOMENON and
her SISTERS!!)

Mr. MANLY, anxious to avail himself of any opportunity that may present itself, of
engaging Talent that has received the decided approbation of a London Audience,
has the pleasure of announcing to the Ladies and Gentlemen of Nottingham and its
vicinity, and the Public in general, that he has engaged for **THREE NIGHTS** (on
her way to Edinburgh), the above celebrated Performer, from the Theatres Royal
Drury Lane and Covent Garden. Her first appearance here will be on Easter
Monday, in the Character of **RICHARD the THIRD**, which she performed **TWENTY-
ONE NIGHTS** at the above Theatres, to the most brilliant and crowded Houses of the
Season!!!

On **MONDAY Evening, April 3, 1820,**
Will be presented, Shakespear's historical Play of

Richard III.
Or, the Battle of Bosworth Field.

The Part of King Richard by Miss **CLARA FISHER,**
(As performed by her 21 Nights at the Theatres Royal Drury Lane and Covent Garden.)

Prince Edward, Mrs. **FROMOW**.—Duke of York, Miss **SIDNEY.**
Duke of Buckingham, Mr. **GRIERSON.**
Henry, Earl of Richmond, by Miss **CAROLINE FISHER.**
Lord Stanley, Mr. **M'DONNELL.**
Catesby, Mr. **BUTLER.** } (Their first appearance here.)
Tressell, Mr. **KENT,** }
Lord Mayor, Mr. **FROMOW.**
King Henry, by Miss **AMELIA FISHER.**
Queen Elizabeth, Mrs. **MANLY.**
Lady Anne, Mrs. **DAVIS**.—Duchess of York, Mrs. **SIDNEY.**

AFTER THE PLAY,
A NEW SONG, by Mr. M'DONNELL.
A SONG by Mrs. **FROMOW.**

The whole to conclude with a humorous **FARCE** (never acted here), called
THE
Actress of all Work,
OR MY COUNTRY COUSIN.

Manager, Mr. FROMOW .—Frederick (his Son),	Mr. BUTLER.
Maria (an Actress of Provincial Celebrity),	Mrs. DAVIES!
Bridget (a Country Gawkey),	Mrs. DAVIES!!
Flourish (a first-rate London Actress),	Mrs. DAVIES!!!
Louise (a Fop)	Mrs. DAVIES!!!!
Goody Stubbins (a deaf, amorous old Lady of Eighty),	Mrs. DAVIES!!!!!
Mademoiselle Josephine (an Opera Singer from Paris),	Mrs. DAVIES!!!!!!

☛ **THE THEATRE IS CONSIDERABLY IMPROVED, AND THOROUGHLY AIRED.**

Boxes, 3s.—Upper Boxes, 2s. 6d.—Pit, 2s.—Gallery, 1s.
HALF PRICE TO THE BOXES, TWO SHILLINGS.

Tickets to be had at the usual Places.—Doors to be opened at Six, and the Performance to begin
at Seven o'Clock.

☛ Miss **CLARA FISHER** will perform principal Characters on Tuesday and
Wednesday Evenings.

(G. Stretton, Printer.)

Figure 3 - Richard III, Nottingham Theatre, 03 April 1820 (BLPBC)

THEATRE ROYAL, BATH.

THE SEASON WILL COMMENCE WITH THE FOLLOWING
EXTRAORDINARY

Combination of Talent.

MR. ANDERSON, (from the Theatres-Royal Drury Lane and Covent Garden)

MR. PHELPS, (from the Theatres-Royal Drury Lane & Covent Garden)

MR. BALLS, (from the Theatres-Royal Drury Lane and Covent Garden)

MR. FRANK MATTHEWS, (from the Theatres-Royal Drury Lane and Covent Garden)

MR. HOSKINS, (from the Theatre-Royal Covent Garden)

MR. CORRIE, (from the New Strand Theatre)

MR. WIGAN, (from the Theatres-Royal Drury Lane & Covent Garden)

Mrs. WARNER, (from the Theatre-Royal Drury Lane)

Miss JULIA WALLACK, (from the Theatre-Royal Covent Garden)

Mrs. HOOPER,
And **Miss FANNY TERNAN**, (the Infant Prodigy!)

<p>Mr. C. MELVILLE</p> <p>Mr. REDFORD</p> <p>Mr. COLLIER</p> <p>Mr. MORETON</p> <p>Mr. FORD</p> <p>Miss FRANCIS</p> <p>Miss TEMPLE</p> <p>Miss HILTON</p> <p>Miss WALTON</p> <p>Miss COOKE</p> <p>Miss JAMES</p> <p>Miss WARD</p>	<p>Mr. R. POWER</p> <p>Mr. WADE</p> <p>Mr. LINGHAM</p> <p>Mr. ASBURY</p> <p>Miss E. WARD</p> <p>Mrs. C. MELVILLE</p> <p>Mrs. R. POWER</p> <p>Mrs. COOKE</p> <p>Mrs. CORRIE</p> <p>Mrs. COLLIER, and</p> <p>Mrs. DARLEY.</p>
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Mr. and Mrs. KEELEY
ARE ALSO ENGAGED, AND WILL SHORTLY APPEAR.

THE BAND WILL BE NUMEROUS AND COMPLETE.
Leader, Mr. GUY.

THEATRE ROYAL, BATH.

UNDER THE MANAGEMENT OF MR. HOOPER.

EXTRAORDINARY COMBINATION OF TALENT.

MR. ANDERSON,
(From the Theatres-Royal Covent Garden and Drury Lane);

MR. PHELPS,
(From the Theatres-Royal Covent Garden and Drury Lane);

MR. HOSKINS,
(From the Theatres-Royal Covent Garden and Drury Lane);

MR. BALLS,
(From the Theatres-Royal Covent Garden and Drury Lane);

Mrs. WARNER,
(From the Theatre-Royal Drury Lane, her first appearance);

Miss FRANCIS,
(From the Theatre-Royal, Dublin); and

Miss FANNY TERNAN,
(The Infant Prodigy! (Daughter of Mrs. TERNAN, late Miss JARVIS).

This present MONDAY, NOVEMBER 13, 1843,
ON THE BELL.

HER MAJESTY'S SERVANTS WILL PERFORM SHAKESPEARE'S TRAGEDY OF

OTHELLO.

<p>Othello..... Mr. ANDERSON</p> <p>Iago..... Mr. PHELPS</p> <p>Cassio..... Mr. HOSKINS</p> <p>Roderigo..... Mr. BALLS</p> <p>Montano..... Mr. COLLIER</p> <p>Antonio..... Mr. R. POWER</p> <p>Paulo..... Mr. JONES</p> <p>Desdemona..... Mrs. FANNY TERNAN</p>	<p>Brabantio..... Mr. REDFORD</p> <p>Luciano..... Mr. LINGHAM</p> <p>Leonardo..... Mr. KIMBER</p> <p>Marco..... Mr. JACKSON</p> <p>Giovanni..... Mr. FORD</p> <p>Emilia..... Mrs. COLLIER</p> <p>Barbano..... Mr. ASBURY</p> <p>Cludio..... Mr. WADE</p>
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AFTER WHICH SECOND TIME A NEW DRAMMA, CALLED THE

YOUNG ACTRESS!

Mr. Rant, the Manager..... Mr. REDFORD | Henry, the Prompter..... Mr. JACKSON

The Tragedian of a Country Corp Dramatique..... Mr. R. POWER | The Comedian of ditto, ditto..... Miss WALTON

Fanny, the Tragedian's Daughter..... Miss FANNY TERNAN | Victor, a French Interpreter, Organist..... Miss FANNY TERNAN

The Tragedian's Son..... Mr. COLLIER | The Tragedian's Sister..... Mrs. COLLIER

The Tragedian's Servant..... Mr. ASBURY | The Tragedian's Friend..... Mr. FORD

TO CONCLUDE WITH A NEW COMIC BALLET, ENTITLED

PERPETUAL MOTION.

Written and produced under the Direction of Mr. R. POWER

Farmer Leggett..... Mr. ASBURY | Jane..... Mrs. COLLIER

Andrew..... Mr. JACKSON | Peter..... Mr. R. POWER

Jenny..... Mrs. COLLIER | Thomas..... Mr. LINGHAM

Maggie..... Miss WARD | Peter..... Miss E. WARD | Willie..... Miss COOKE

PAS SEUL, BY Mrs. R. POWER.

PAS CROQUISSE, BY Mrs. R. POWER.

FINALES, BY Mr. COLLIER.

Figure 4 - Othello, TR Bath, 13 November 1843 (BLPBC)

infant prodigy (Fig. 4).⁷⁷ So desirable were these London performers that their names and metropolitan provenance dominated the printed page and necessitated a landscape playbill, a relatively unusual format for the period. The cast is repeated across both sides, altogether taking up more space than that accorded to the play and two afterpieces. In this instance, it seems that the manager expected audiences to be attracted more by the volume of celebrity on offer than the performance of a Shakespeare play. Indeed, on occasion it appears that an individual star's fame and desirability was so great as to overshadow the performance itself, as the playbills in Figures 5 to 10 demonstrate.⁷⁸ In each case, the star's name is printed in a larger, and often bolder, print than the title of the play being performed, and dominates the page. The message to those reading these bills is clear: the opportunity to see Miss Foote, or Miss Duncan, or Mr Kean is more valuable than the opportunity of seeing *As You Like It*, or *Much Ado About Nothing*, or *The Merchant of Venice*. Shakespeare could be demoted by the force of London celebrity, and so too could the value of the regular provincial stock company.

Before 1850 it was not possible to transport an entire cast around the country, so stars generally toured solo. On occasion, they would travel with a partner, usually their husband or wife, as with Charles and Maria Theresa Kemble, Alexander and Maria Anne Pope, and Henry John and Maria Wallack.

⁷⁷ Playbill, *Othello*, TR Bath, 13 November 1843, BLPBC vol. 182.1.

⁷⁸ Playbills for; *Much Ado About Nothing*, TR Newcastle, 21 June 1811, NCLLS L792 N536T 1811-13; *Romeo and Juliet*, TR Newcastle, 16 August 1817, BLPBC vol. 260; *As You Like It*, Nottingham Theatre, 16 June 1826, BLPBC vol. 297; *The Merchant of Venice*, Nottingham Theatre, 12 November 1829, BLPBC vol. 297; *Henry IV*, TR Bath, 03 March 1841, BLPBC vol. 182; *Richard III*, TR Bath, 20 February 1843, BLPBC vol. 182.

THEATRE-ROYAL, NEWCASTLE.
By Desire of the
Stewards of the Races.
FIFTH NIGHT OF
Miss Duncan's
Engagement.
This Evening, FRIDAY, June 21, 1811,
Will be presented Shakespeare's celebrated Comedy of
Much Ado About
Nothing.

Mr. FAULKNER.	Balthazar,	Mr. WATSON.
Mr. H. KEMBLE.	Friar,	Mr. FAWCETT.
Mr. LOMBE.	Borachio,	Mr. DARLEY.
Mr. WOOD.	Conrad,	Mr. BLAND.
Mr. HOLMES.	Dogberry,	Mr. LANCASTER.
Mr. STANFIELD.	Verger,	Mr. BROWN.

The Part of Beatrice by Miss Duncan.
 Hero, Miss MARSH.
 Mrs. DARLEY. | Ursula, Mrs. STANFIELD.

In Act 2d. a MASQUERADE.

To which will be added the favourite Entertainment of
Three weeks after
Marriage.

Charles Racket,	Mr. FAULKNER.	Woodley,	Mr. DARLEY.
Drugget,	Mr. LANCASTER.	Servant,	Mr. BLAND.

The Part of Lady Racket by Miss Duncan.
 Mrs. Drugget, Mrs. BLAND.
 Mrs. DARLEY | Nancy, Mrs. STANFIELD.

BOXES 3s.—PIT 2s.—GALLERY 1s.
 Doors to be opened at 6, and the Performance to begin as soon as the Race is over.
 On Saturday, The SOLDIER'S DAUGHTER.—The Part of Widow Cheerly by Miss DUNCAN.
 With The ROMP.—The Part of Priscilla Tomboy by Miss DUNCAN.

Mitchell, Printer, Newcastle.

Figure 5 - Much Ado About Nothing, TR Newcastle, 21 June 1811 (NCLLS)

Theatre-Royal, Newcastle.

Mr KEAN's
BENEFIT,
And last Night of performing here this Season.

Miss S. BOOTH,
From the Theatre-Royal, Covent-Garden,
WILL PERFORM FOR
THIS NIGHT ONLY!
On SATURDAY, August the 16th, 1817,
Will be presented, Shakespeare's Tragedy of
Romeo and Juliet.

The Part of Romeo, by Mr KEAN,
And the Part of Juliet, by Miss S. BOOTH,
Of the Theatre-Royal, Covent-Garden, being her first Appearance here these five Years.

Mercutio	Mr JOHNSON	Benvolio	Mr VINING
Capulet	Mr KILNER	Tibalt	Mr VILLARS
Friar Lawrence	Mr HOLMES	Peter	Mr RILEY
Prince	Mr I. POPE	Balthazer	Mr LEWIS
Paris	Mr MERCER	Page	Miss LEWIS
Lady Capulet	Mrs KILNER	And Nurse	Mrs MARA

In Act 1st, A MASQUERADE.

To which will be added, the favourite Farce of The
SPOIL'D CHILD.

The Part of Little Pickle, by Miss S. BOOTH,
IN WHICH SHE WILL INTRODUCE THE SONG OF
"THE SAILOR BOY CAPERING ON SHORE,"
And her admired Hornpipe.

Old Pickle	Mr VILLARS | John	Mr RILEY
Maria	And Tag, (the Author,) Mr KILNER.	
	Mrs JOHNSON | Margery	Mrs KILNER
	And Miss Pickle, Mrs MARA.	

NO SECOND PRICES DURING THIS WEEK.
Edward Walker, Printer, Newcastle.

Nights of performing the ...

Figure 6 - Romeo and Juliet, TR Newcastle, 16 August 1817 (BLPBC)

Theatre, Nottingham.
FOR THE BENEFIT OF

Miss Foote,

And last Night of her performing here.

On FRIDAY the 16th of JUNE, 1826,
Will be acted, Shakspeare's Play of

AS YOU LIKE IT

Rosalind, - - - - Miss FOOTE.
IN WHICH CHARACTER SHE WILL SING
"THE CUCKOO SONG,"
And speak the original Epilogue.

The Duke,	Mr. PALMER.
Duke Frederick,	Mr. WILTON.
Amiens (with Song),	Miss STRUTT.
Le Beau,	Mr. THOMAS.
Sylvius,	Mr. ELLIS.
Jaques,	Mr. FREER.
First Lord,	Mr. HOWARD.
Second Lord,	Mr. SMITH.
Oliver,	Mr. CARROL.
Jaques de Bois,	Mr. HAZLETON.
Orlando,	Mr. MARSTON.
Adam,	Mr. GRAY.
Dennis,	Mr. KING.
Corin,	Mr. WILTON.
William,	Mr. LASSELLS.
Touchstone,	Mr. FROMOW.
Celia,	Miss CHERRY.
Phoebe,	Miss SIDNEY.
Audrey,	Mrs. SIDNEY.

SINGING BY MISS STRUTT.
A COMIC SONG BY MR. FROMOW.
Dancing by Mr. Lassells.

The whole to conclude with the Farce of

Matrimony.

Clara, - - - - - Miss FOOTE,
In which character she will introduce the popular Song of
"ROSE D'AMOUR,"

Baron de Limberg,	Mr. FROMOW.
Delaval,	Mr. FREER.
O'Clougherty,	Mr. CARROL.
Lisetta (with Song),	Miss STRUTT.

Boxes, 3s.—Upper Boxes, 2s. 6d.—Pit 2s.—Gal. 1s.
Doors to be open at Six, and the performance to commence at Seven o'Clock.
Tickets to be had of G. Stutton, Printer hereof.

Figure 7 - As You Like It, Nottingham Theatre, 16 June 1826 (BLPBC)

THEATRE, NOTTINGHAM.

FOR THE BENEFIT OF

MR. KEAN,

And last Night of his performing here.

On Thursday Evening, Nov. 12, 1829,

Will be acted, The

**Merchant
OF VENICE.**

The part of Shylock (the Jew), by Mr. KEAN.

Duke of Venice,.....Mr. BODDIE.
Anthonio,Mr. HAZLETON.
Bassanio,.....Mr. PRESTON.
Salarino,Mr. CLINTON.
Salarino,.....Mr. ROGERS.
Gratiano,.....Mr. GREEN.
Lorenzo,.....Mr. RIGNOLD.
Tubal,Mr. JONES.
Launcelot,Mr CARROL.

Portia, Mrs. MANLY.

Nerissa,.....Miss NOEL.—Jessica,.....Mrs. MANGEON.

END OF THE PLAY,

Singing by Mrs. Mangeon.

A COMIC SONG by Mr. CARROL.

The whole to conclude with the new Melo Drama of

**THE SERJEANT'S
Wife.**

Old Cartouch,.....Mr. HAZLETON.

Frederick Cartouch, Mr. GREEN.

Serjeant Louis,.....Mr. CLINTON.

Serjeant George, Mr. RIGNOLD.—Dennis, Mr. PRESTON.

Gaspard, Mr. CARROL.—Robin, Mr. BODDIE.

Lisette,.....Miss HILTON.—Margot,.....Mrs. MANGEON.

On Monday next, a Play and Entertainment, being for the benefit of Mrs. PETERS.

Boxes, 3s.—Upper Boxes,—2s. 6d.—Pit, 2s.—Gallery, 1s.

SECOND PRICE :—Boxes, 2s. ; Upper Boxes, 1s. 6d. ; Pit, 1s. ; Gallery, 6d.—Doors to be open at Six, and the Performance to commence at Seven o'Clock.—Tickets and Places in the Boxes may be had at the Theatre, each Day from Eleven o'Clock till Two. Tickets likewise may be had of G. Stretton, Printer hereof.

Figure 8 - The Merchant of Venice, Nottingham Theatre, 12 November 1829 (BLPBC)

THEATRE-ROYAL, BATH.

LAST NIGHT but TWO of the Re-Engagement of

MR. KEAN.

This present **WEDNESDAY** Evening, **MARCH 3, 1841,**
WILL BE PERFORMED SHAKSPERE'S HISTORICAL PLAY, OF

HENRY THE 4th.

King Henry the Fourth.....Mr. RANSON	Earl of Northumberland.....Mr. WILSON
Prince of Wales.....Mr. EDMUND GLOVER	Earl of Douglas.....Mr. JONES
Prince John of Lancaster.....Miss STOYLE	Earl of Westmoreland.....Mr. LECLERCQ

Hotspur - (first time) - Mr. KEAN

Earl of Worcester.....Mr. BETHWAY	Sir Richard Vernon.....Mr. HARRY
Sir Walter Blount.....Mr. WATKINS	Sir John Falstaff.....Mr. W. H. ANGEL
Poins.....Mr. STIRLING	

Bardolph.....Mr. LAWLER	Peto.....Mr. WEBB
Francis.....Mr. WOULDs	First Carrier.....Mr. GERRISH
Gadshill.....Mr. KIMBER	Second Carrier.....Mr. LODGE
Raby.....Mr. THOMAS	Sheriff.....Mr. LODI

Lady Percy.....Miss LACEY
Hostess.....Miss HIBBERD

TO CONCLUDE WITH THE LAUGHABLE FARCE OF THE

TWO GREGORIES.

Mr. Gregory.....Mr. STIRLING
Gregory.....Mr. WOULDs
La Franc.....Mr. LECLERCQ
John Bull.....Mr. HARRY

Mrs. Gregory.....Mrs. LECLERCQ
Fanchette.....Miss AYRES

Acting and Stage Manager, Mr. STIRLING.

THURSDAY, The Pocket Book. The Youthful Queen—Christine, Mrs. LOVELACE,
(her first appearance.) And **Bacchus and Ariadne.**

FRIDAY, the Tragedy of BRUTUS—Brutus, Mr. KEAN.

Tickets and Places for the Boxes to be taken of Mr. BROWNELL, at the Box-Office, from 11 till 4.
Doors open at Half-past Six; the Performance will commence at Seven o'Clock. The whole to conclude
as near to Eleven o'Clock as possible.—BOXES, 4s. PIT, 2s. GAL. 1s.

Second-price at a Quarter before Nine o'Clock: Boxes, 2s. 6d. Pit, 1s.

It is particularly requested that, in the event of the Play Bills not being regularly delivered, notice of
such neglect be given to Mr. BROWNELL, at the Theatre.

JOHN AND JAMES KEENE, PRINTERS, KINGSMED STREET, BATH.

Figure 9 - Henry IV, TR Bath, 03 March 1841 (BLPBC)

THEATRE  ROYAL, BATH.

Under the Management of Mr. HOOPER,
Late of the Theatres-Royal Drury Lane, and St. James's, London.

SECOND APPEARANCE OF
MR. and MRS.
CHARLES KEAN

This present **MONDAY, FEBRUARY 20, 1843,**
HER MAJESTY'S SERVANTS WILL PERFORM SHAKSPERE'S TRAGEDY OF
RICHARD THE THIRD
OR, THE
BATTLE OF BOSWORTH FIELD.

King Henry the Sixth...Mr. FREDERICK WASS | Duke of Buckingham... Mr. HARRINGTON
Prince of Wales...Miss WARD | Duke of York Miss E. WARD
Richard, Duke of Glo'ster.....Mr. KEAN
Lord Stanley.....Mr. WADE | Tressel Mr. NICHOLLS
Earl of RichmondMr. BRAID
Sir William Catesby...Mr. LINGHAM | Sir Richard Ratcliffe.....Mr. CLARK
Duke of Norfolk Mr. HORN | Lieutenant of the Tower.....Mr. R. COLLIER
Lord Mayor Mr. COLLIER | Tyrrell Mr. NORTH
Queen Elizabeth.....Mrs. KEAN
Lady Anne.....Miss C. ATKINSON | Duchess of York Mrs. R. COLLIER

IN THE COURSE OF THE EVENING,
The Band will Perform Two favorite Overtures.

TO CONCLUDE WITH THE HIGHLY SUCCESSFUL FARCE OF THE
British Legion

WRITTEN BY THE LATE THOMAS HAINES BAILY, ESQ.
Colonel Davenport Mr. HOOPER
Captain Ranger.....Mr. BRAID | Ensign Harcourt...Mr. HORN | Timothy.....Mr. CLARK
Maria Mrs. HOOPER
Louisa....Miss C. ATKINSON | Barbara ..Mrs. HORN | SusanMrs. COLLIER.

Wednesday, MACBETH. Macbeth, Mr. KEAN. Lady Macbeth, Mrs. KEAN.
Friday, HAMLET. Hamlet, Mr. KEAN. Ophelia, Mrs. KEAN.
On Saturday, the New Play of The ROSE of ARRAGON,
And a favorite Comedy, in which Mr. and Mrs. KEAN will perform;
Being for the Benefit of Mr. and Mrs. CHARLES KEAN, and positively their Last
Appearance this Season.

Tickets and Places for the Boxes to be taken of Mr. BROWNELL, at the Box-office, from Eleven till Four o'Clock.
BOXES, 4s.; second price, 2s. 6d.—PIT, 2s.; second price, 1s.—GALLERY, 1s.; no second price.
Doors open at Half-past Six o'Clock—the Performance will commence at Seven. **Half-price at a Quarter before Nine.**

JOHN and JAMES KEENE, Printers, 7, Kingsmead Street, Bath.

Figure 10 - Richard III, TR Bath, 20 February 1843 (BLPBC)

The resident stock companies at the theatres they visited would take the rest of the roles. With limited rehearsal time – Arnold Hare estimates that there was just one rehearsal per production – the stock company needed to fit their performance around the stars’ with as little adjustment as possible.⁷⁹ It therefore seems reasonable to conclude that stock company productions of Shakespeare must have followed those of London as closely as possible in order to better accommodate cameos from visiting stars.⁸⁰ As I have discussed in the case study of John Philip Kemble’s *Coriolanus*, the critical respect accorded to London productions motivated provincial theatres to imitate specific productions, and frequent visits from London stars provided further impetus for imitation, or at the very least dissuaded innovation for the most frequently performed plays of the canon. Producing a new interpretation of *Hamlet*, for example, or *As You Like It*, two of the most popular choices for touring stars, would have caused countless difficulties. In order for star visits to succeed and generate profits, play texts and arrangements had to follow those used on the London stage.

As well as inhibiting local creativity, the intrusion of star visits could have a more insidious impact on stock companies. The very fact that the stock’s leading man or lady was forced to step into a secondary role whenever a London star appeared would have devalued his or her abilities in the eyes of the audience and presented a visual reminder of the subservience of the local before the metropolitan.⁸¹ The playbills from Master Betty’s engagement at the

⁷⁹ Arnold Hare, ‘Shakespeare in a Victorian Provincial Stock Company’, in *Shakespeare and the Victorian Stage*, ed. by Richard Foulkes (Cambridge: CUP, 1986), pp. 258-270 (p. 262).

⁸⁰ Foulkes, ‘Shakespeare in the Provinces’, p. 171.

⁸¹ As discussed in Hare, ‘Provincial Stock Company’, pp. 262-264.

Nottingham Theatre in 1807 provide an example of the type of demotion that was common, even in the service of a less-than-stellar performer. Also known as the 'Young Roscius', William Henry West Betty was born in September 1791, and made his first appearance onstage as a leading player at the Belfast Theatre when he was twelve years old, playing Osman in Aaron Hill's *Zara*.⁸² After tours of Ireland, Scotland and England he was engaged at the Theatres Royal Covent Garden and Drury Lane in December 1804. 'Bettymania' soon followed; the public delighted in his delicate, youthful looks.⁸³ By 1807, Betty's popularity had begun to wane, but he was still able to secure substantial engagements at second-tier provincial theatres such as Nottingham.

The layout of the playbill advertising his performance in *Romeo and Juliet* clearly indicates that Master Betty is a star attraction (Fig. 11): his name headlines the bill in large font, is top of the cast list and larger than those of the stock performers, and appears a third time in a note at the bottom reminding the public that he will appear the following night as Osmond in *The Castle Spectre*.⁸⁴ However, certain omissions indicate his declining fame. In October 1806 Betty had undertaken a similar engagement in Nottingham: the playbill from his performance as Tancred in *Tancred & Sigismunda* featured his name prominently as in the 1807 bill, but the ticket prices were also listed in an enlarged font to emphasise that they had increased (Fig. 12).⁸⁵ Boxes were five

⁸² Paul Ranger, 'Betty, William Henry West (1791-1874)', *OXDNB*, OUP, 2004; online edn, January 2008 <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/2315>>. 'Roscius' was an appellation awarded to, or adopted by, numerous actors in the eighteenth and nineteenth century and supposedly denoted extraordinary talent, although in reality too many performers were labelled Roscius for the title to hold any true significance.

⁸³ Ranger, 'Betty, William Henry West'.

⁸⁴ Playbill, *Romeo and Juliet*, Nottingham Theatre, 06 October 1807, BLPBC vol. 348.

⁸⁵ Playbill, *Tancred and Sigismunda*, Nottingham Theatre, 22 October 1806, BLPBC vol. 348.

SECOND NIGHT OF
Master Betty's
 ENGAGEMENT.

Theatre, Nottingham.

On TUESDAY EVENING, OCTOBER 6, 1807,

Will be presented, Shakespear's celebrated PLAY of

Romeo and Juliet.

Romeo,....MASTER BETTY.

Benolio,	-	-	-	Mr PRITCHARD
Tibalt,	-	-	-	Mr DANIELS
Friar,	-	-	-	Mr RYDER
Capulet,	-	-	-	Mr SIDNEY
Paris,	-	-	-	Mr WALLIS
Peter,	-	-	-	Mr D. PRITCHARD
Mercutio,	-	-	-	Mr MANLY
Apothecary,	-	-	-	Mr WALKER
Balthazar,	-	-	-	Mr EARL
Friar John,	-	-	-	Mr O'BRIEN
Juliet,	-	-	-	Miss WOODFALL
Nurse,	-	-	-	Mrs SIDNEY

Incidental to the Play,

In Act 4th, an EPI TALAMUM,

Choristers, Miss Chapman, Miss Robertson, Mr. Wallis, and Mr. Daniels.

A MASQUERADE AND DANCE.

End of the Play, a Comic Song by Mr. Robertson.

To which will be added, the favourite FARCE of

The Farm House.

Modely,	. . . .	Mr PRITCHARD
Freehold,	. . . .	Mr SIDNEY
Shackelfigure,	. . . .	Mr ROBERTSON
Heartwell,	. . . .	Mr WALLIS
Sir John English,	. . . .	Mr DANIELS
First Constable,	. . . .	Mr WALKER
Second Constable,	. . . .	Mr EARL
Aura,	. . . .	Mrs PRITCHARD
(Her first appearance here.)		
Flora,	. . . .	Miss CHAPMAN
Country Men and Women, by the rest of the Company.		

Doors to be opened at Six o'Clock, and to begin at Seven.

Boxes 3s.—Upper Boxes 2s. 6d.—Pit 2s.—Gallery 1s.

Tickets to be had of Messrs. Burbage and Stretton, Printers hereof, Long Row: of Mr Earl, at the Theatre.

To-morrow Evening, *THE CASTLE SPECTRE.*

The Part of Osmond, by MASTER BETTY,
 And positively his last Appearance.

Figure 11 - Romeo and Juliet, Nottingham Theatre, 06 October 1807 (BLPBC)

For the Benefit
OF THE
Young Roscius,
AND THE
Last Night of his performing.
Theatre, Nottingham.

On WEDNESDAY Evening, the 22d of October, 1806,
Will be presented, a favourite TRAGEDY, called

Tancred & Sigismunda.

The Part of Tancred, by the Young Roscius.

Siffredi, - - -	Mr KEITH.
Rodolpho, - - -	Mr DANIELS.
Officers, Messrs. O'BRIEN and COLLINS.	
Earl Osmond, - - -	Mr GLADSTANES.
Sigismunda, - - -	Miss WOODFALL.
Laura, - - -	Miss CHAPMAN.

After which, a favourite FARCE, called

THE
Weathercock.

As performed at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, with universal applause.

Tristram Fickle, - - -	Mr ADCOCK.
Old Fickle, - - -	Mr SIDNEY.
Timothy Whim, - - -	Mr WALKER.
Gardener, - - -	Mr J. ADAMSON.
Tommy Suds, - - -	Mr DANIELS.
Briefwit, - - -	Mr ROBERTSON.
Mrs Ready, - - -	Mrs O'BRIEN.
Miss Variella, - - -	Miss CHAPMAN.

Boxes 5s. Pit 3s. Gallery 2s.

Nothing under full Price will be taken.

In order to prevent confusion at the Doors, the Gallery will be open at FIVE, and Pit and Boxes at half past Five.—To begin at seven o'clock.

It is requested, that those Ladies and Gentlemen who have Seats in the Private Boxes will enter at the Stage Door.

N. B. The Managers will esteem it a favour if such as conveniently can, will provide themselves with Tickets, to be had of Mr. Earl, at the Theatre; and of Messrs. Burbage and Stretton, Printers hereof.

Figure 12 - Tancred and Sigismunda, Nottingham Theatre, 22 October 1806 (BLPBC)

shillings, rather than three; the pit was three shillings, rather than two; and the gallery was two shillings, rather than one. Furthermore, a note at the bottom announced that '[i]n order to prevent confusion at the Doors' the gallery would open an hour earlier than usual, suggesting that the management anticipated high demand. In contrast, a statement from the managers on the playbill for Betty's first night in 1807 explained that there would be no price rise, 'in consequence of the very liberal Patronage the Theatre has experienced'. As previously discussed, inflated seat prices were a standard feature of star visits, and in most cases were necessary to ensure that the takings justified the actor's fees. Considering that few provincial theatres enjoyed financial stability and that Nottingham was neither a top-tier theatre nor a particularly large or prosperous town, it seems unlikely that this was an act of altruism on the part of the managers. They would surely have been aware from their contacts in London that Betty's popularity was in decline, and so may have eschewed price increases to avoid the risk of empty seats.

Whether or not their reputation was in decline, once engaged there was no question of a star actor playing anything less than the lead role in their provincial appearances. When Betty played Romeo in 1807, the stock company actors were pushed down the casting hierarchy, and forced to take on smaller roles than they were accustomed to. The records for the 1806/07 and 1807/08 season at Nottingham are incomplete, and there are no cast lists from company productions of Shakespeare to compare with Betty's *Romeo and Juliet*. There are, however, several playbills from August, September and October of 1807. Mr Manly, one of the theatre managers, had played the lead male roles during Sarah Siddons' visit the previous month, including *The Stranger* in August von

Kotzebue's *The Stranger*, Pierre in Thomas Otway's *Venice Preserved* and, most notably, Macbeth to Siddons' Lady Macbeth.⁸⁶ During Betty's visit Manly was relegated, playing Mercutio on the night of *Romeo and Juliet*; on the playbill, his name appeared seventh in a list of twelve. The impact of seeing Manly, who was not just the stock company's lead male but, as manager, the figurehead for the theatre, so reduced in status went beyond those sat in the auditorium to all those who had encountered the playbills. Christopher B. Balme has argued that playbills were 'part of the public space of any community', and that their content reached not just audiences but the 'theatrical public sphere', comprised of all those who engaged with the playbills in the public spaces that they occupied.⁸⁷ As such, the stock company's demotion each time a star actor joined the cast was felt by the entire community, further diminishing the value of provincial performance and enhancing the image of London theatre.

1.2 A Provincial Identity

So far, this chapter has concentrated on establishing the grounds upon which London's place at the centre of the theatrical industry was based. Legislation orientated the theatre industry around Covent Garden and Drury Lane; bardolatry advanced the notion that Shakespeare's works required certain performance conditions to do them justice, conditions that could only be found at the London patent theatres; and the star circuit disseminated London

⁸⁶ Playbills, Nottingham Theatre, 7-9 September 1807, BLPBC vol. 348.

⁸⁷ Christopher B. Balme, 'Playbills and the Theatrical Public Sphere' in *Representing the Part: Studies in Theatre History and Culture*, ed. by Charlotte M. Canning and Thomas Postlewait (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2010) pp. 37-62.

practices to the provinces and cultivated admiration of the metropolitan over the local. However, my research from the playbills has found that in practice, performance conditions in the periphery created productions that often deviated in significant ways from those in the capital. In the following section, I explore how two key elements shaped Shakespeare performance: the two-way model of cultural exchange between centre and periphery, and the importance of novelty in provincial theatre.

1.2.1 Two-Way Cultural Exchange

While the theatre industry may, as I have shown, have been structured in a manner that encouraged the outward emanation of London ideas and influence across the nation, I would argue that it also contained mechanisms that allowed the flow of influence to reverse. The cultural and political importance ascribed to performances of Shakespeare on the London stage meant that actors cast in those productions needed to be capable of meeting the expectations of critics and audience members alike. Although a small number of performers – usually members of acting dynasties – launched their careers in London, many began as strolling players and worked their way up through the circuits and Theatres Royal, mastering the canonical roles as they did so, until they were ready for the London patents. As London star Edmund Kean explained to the 1832 Select Committee, Londoners expected to ‘see the perfection of the art, not the school itself’.⁸⁸

Provincial performances were effectively considered training opportunities for actors, and the provincial theatres ‘schools’ or ‘nurseries’ for

⁸⁸ *SCDL*, p. 89.

developing talent. Bath in particular was considered a 'very great nursery' for producing the likes of Sarah Siddons, and received regular visits from London audiences and actors on account of its status as a fashionable resort town.⁸⁹ The Select Committee witnesses referred numerous times to the importance of maintaining this system. Some, such as the actor Charles Kemble or James Kenney, a playwright, felt that theatric free trade would enable the minor theatres of London to provide a greater pool of legitimately-trained actors for Covent Garden and Drury Lane to draw upon.⁹⁰ Others, including William Dunn, the Drury Lane treasurer, opposed relaxing the restrictions on legitimate drama primarily because he believed the training system would collapse, resulting in a deterioration of standards.⁹¹ It was not only those in the capital who conceived of provincial theatres in such terms: two of the three witnesses working in the provinces discussed this system. William Wilkins, proprietor of the 'Norfolk theatres', evidently took the 'nursery' status of provincial theatres as a matter of pride, and offered it as proof of the quality of acting talent outside London.⁹² Edward William Elton, a provincial actor, was more critical of the system. He stated:

There are so many theatres in the country which demand the first-rate talent, that not one-sixth part of these actors [...] that are necessarily demanded by provincial theatres, can ever hope to get engagements at Covent Garden or Drury Lane; and yet a country

⁸⁹ *SCDL*, p.148.

⁹⁰ For examples of opinions on this subject see the testimonies in *SCDL* of J. Payne Collier, pp. 32-33; Charles Kemble, p. 46; Mr S. J. Arnold, p. 58; T. P. Cooke, p. 148; W. Wilkins, p. 211-213; and Mr James Kenney, pp. 230-231.

⁹¹ *SCDL*, p. 73.

⁹² *SCDL*, p. 211.

actor's life is considered but as a state of necessary probation, and in most cases is one of positive endurance and deprivation. [...]

[C]ountry actors are always looking to the metropolis as the end and aim of their ambition, and their provincial engagements are considered by them merely as a means of attaining that end.⁹³

Certainly, there were disadvantages from a provincial perspective: not only was there, as Elton discussed, no guarantee of progression from a 'nursery' to London, but such infantilising language worked to devalue the country theatres and their productions. Furthermore, it encouraged a worldview that treated the metropolis as distinctly 'other' from the rest of the nation. Moody analyses the language used by David Garrick in his 1775 letters to a friend regarding Sarah Siddons, then an up-and-coming provincial actress, and notes that he employed colonial and military terms when enquiring about Siddons' suitability for the London stage: in particular, he asked whether 'she seems in Your Eyes worthy of being *transplanted*' to the capital for a trial.⁹⁴ Moody determines that this was likely influenced by popular contemporary discourse surrounding the ongoing war between Britain and America; I would further contend that this choice of words betrays a generally unspoken but widespread metropolitan attitude to the provinces. Over fifty years later, Edmund Kean used similar language in his testimony, and stated that if theatric free trade was established, the managers of Covent Garden and Drury Lane 'must take care to *cull* the best talent from the provinces'.⁹⁵ To Garrick, Kean and their ilk, the provinces were just another part

⁹³ SCDL, p. 234.

⁹⁴ *The Letters of David Garrick*, ed. by David M. Little and George M. Kahrl, 3 vols. (London: OUP, 1963), vol. III, p. 1021, cited in Moody, 'Dictating to the Empire', p. 26. Emphasis added.

⁹⁵ SCDL, p. 88. Emphasis added.

of the British Empire, supplying goods – in this case, performers – to London, the imperial capital.

However, this training system also facilitated cultural exchange between London and the provinces, and allowed for the circulation of talent and ideas across the country. Just as colonial nations maintained their own cultures and exerted an influence on British culture, so too did provincial theatres maintain a distinct performance culture of their own, and exert an influence on the London stage. A broader two-way model of cultural exchange was first posited by Peter Borsay, who criticises the top-down version of cultural dissemination that, in essence, ‘postulates that ideas and fashions are formulated in the metropolis and then, because of the capital’s size and authority, filter down the urban hierarchy’; this model has been propagated by a number of influential urban historians including Roy Porter, Peter Clark and Paul Slack.⁹⁶ I would add that this view has also been present – ‘implicitly if not always explicitly’, as Borsay writes – in the more recent work of theatre historians such as David Worrall and Görel Garlick.⁹⁷ While acknowledging that ‘nobody who explores the British provinces in the eighteenth century can fail to register the powerful and pervasive impact of the metropolis’, Borsay identifies three major flaws in the one-way model: the pro-London bias of the majority of eighteenth-century commentators; the actively protective localism of regional life; and the failure of this model to accommodate cultural flows that originated outside the capital.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ Peter Borsay, ‘The London Connection: Cultural Diffusion and the Eighteenth-Century Provincial Town’, *London Journal*, 19:1 (1994), 21-35 (p. 26).

⁹⁷ David Worrall, ‘How Local is Local? The Cultural and Imperial Politics of Georgian Provincial Theatre’ in *Radical Cultures and Local Identities*, ed. by Krista Cowman and Ian Packer (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010). pp. 95-106; Görel Garlick, ‘Theatre outside London’.

⁹⁸ Borsay, ‘London Connection’, p. 27.

To replace the dominance model, he proposes a pluralist one which recognises that ideas flowed into the metropolis as well as out of it; that provincial towns were able to bypass London and operate in independent urban systems; and that the balance between the capital and the provinces fluctuated over time. Overall, he states, the pluralist model must accommodate 'the vitality and resilience of provincialism and reflect the complex reality of cultural exchange'.⁹⁹ Borsay applied his model to eighteenth-century culture as a whole, but wrote specifically about it in the context of architecture and town planning. Here, I will demonstrate that it is equally valid when applied to the theatre industry.

For English theatre, the reality was that innovation may have become manifest on the grand stages of the capital, but was the product of a process that in many cases began in the most rudimentary of performance spaces in rural England. The training process was said to take around seven years, and although well-established performing families tended to dominate particular theatres, a level of professional mobility was still present. The actor William Dowton testified to the Select Committee that he had begun his career 'in a barn at Ashburton in Devonshire, or cow-house; I believe it was not so good as a barn', and had risen through the ranks, ultimately spending thirty-six years performing at Drury Lane.¹⁰⁰ Personal anecdote is, of course, unreliable, but not without worth as a historical source. Jacky Bratton argues that anecdotes purport 'to reveal the truths of society, but not necessarily directly: its inner truth, its truth to some ineffable "essence", rather than to proven facts, is what

⁹⁹ Borsay, 'London Connection', p. 31.

¹⁰⁰ *SCDL*, p. 92.

matters most'.¹⁰¹ Whether or not Downton did indeed first perform amongst cattle is thus immaterial: his anecdote reveals that such humble origins were not only a point of pride in a prestigious actor's public biography, but were entirely plausible. I would attribute the potentially high levels of mobility to the existence of tiers within tiers in the theatrical hierarchy, which allowed experience to be gained gradually as performers advanced their careers.

Shakespeare was a staple of every performer's repertoire, however transient their company. Leading roles would have been saved for the more experienced members of the cast, but the generally small size of provincial companies meant that even the least practised actors would find a place in most productions. Josephine Harrop's study of Old Wild's portable theatre, which operated in Yorkshire and Lancashire in the mid-1800s, shows that *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Othello* and *Richard III* were in the top ten most frequently performed plays; a further six Shakespearean plays were part of the repertoire, but appeared less often.¹⁰² These were not 'abbreviated fairground performances' but full-length productions, albeit with significant cuts and additions made in order to 'emphasise [...] the action and excitement while cutting down proportionately on the words'.¹⁰³ Similarly, Thorne's booth theatre in North Shields also presented Shakespeare with regularity during their 1845 summer season, although Harrop does not detail which specific plays were performed.¹⁰⁴ Limited though Wild's selection of the canon may have been, it was by no means out of step with that performed at larger theatres. My examination of

¹⁰¹ Jacky Bratton, *New Readings in Theatre History* (Cambridge: CUP, 2003), p. 102.

¹⁰² Harrop, *Portable Theatres*, pp. 60-62.

¹⁰³ Harrop, *Portable Theatres*, p. 62.

¹⁰⁴ Harrop, *Portable Theatres*, p. 74.

Shakespeare playbills from this era suggests that taste in Shakespeare was consistent throughout both geography and time, so it seems likely that actors in strolling companies would have received schooling in a reasonable portion of the most popular plays at the permanent provincial theatres. According to the playbills, the most frequently performed plays in the Shakespeare canon were *As You Like It*, *Hamlet*, *Henry IV*, *Macbeth*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Othello*, *Richard III* and *Romeo and Juliet*. Occasionally, a lesser-known play would be introduced to the core repertoire. At the Nottingham Theatre in 1810 *Cymbeline*, ‘not acted here for many Years’, was performed for the benefit of Mrs M’Gibbon, née Woodfall, the leading lady; in 1827 *Julius Caesar* was staged for the benefit of company actors Mr Freer and Mr Carrol, ‘for the first time these 20 years’; and at the Theatre Royal Brighton *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *The Tempest*, and *Twelfth Night* were each produced during the nineteenth century.¹⁰⁵ Because the records for these theatres are inconsistent, it is not possible to estimate how frequently new or unusual Shakespeare plays appeared, but from the complete seasons that have been established using newspapers and playbills, it would appear that productions of non-core Shakespeare plays appeared about once a season, but not necessarily every season.

If, therefore, a lucky provincial actor was ‘culled’ from their home theatre and ‘transplanted’ to serve in the London patent theatres, they would have been

¹⁰⁵ Playbills for *Cymbeline*, Nottingham Theatre, 20 June 1810, BLPBC vol. 348; *Julius Caesar*, Nottingham Theatre, 05 November 1827, BLPBC vol. 297.1; *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, TR Brighton, 10 September 1805, Burney 937.f.1.; *The Tempest*, TR Brighton, 01 November 1820, The Keep TRB 2/1/1/5; *Twelfth Night*, TR Brighton, 29 November 1843, The Keep TRB 2/1/1/19.

prepared for the stock Shakespeare plays as well as some of the more obscure pieces. Many actors who moved from the provinces to the capital would have performed Shakespeare's leading roles numerous times, and witnessed multiple incarnations of the likes of Hamlet, Desdemona, Macbeth and Rosalind during their provincial careers. Despite the narrow view of character interpretations and a general resistance to innovation shared by critics and audiences alike, new performers did introduce their own approaches to Shakespearean roles, approaches that I would argue were influenced by their experience in provincial theatre. In February 1785, three years after her second debut at Drury Lane, Sarah Siddons made her first London appearance as Lady Macbeth. Her performance included a highly controversial break with tradition: instead of keeping hold of the candle during the sleepwalking scene as her illustrious predecessor Hannah Pritchard had, she set it down so as to use her hands more freely.¹⁰⁶ Siddons' innovation was ultimately a success – winning her the admiration of Hazlitt, amongst others – and her Lady Macbeth was regarded as definitive for much of the nineteenth century. She had, however, performed for sixteen years in the provinces prior to her stint at Drury Lane, starting with her parents' travelling company in Worcester and going on to join the stock companies at Cheltenham, Birmingham, Bath, and Bristol.¹⁰⁷ Siddons' portrayal of Lady Macbeth therefore demonstrates that provincial performers were not restricted to the metropolitan mould of Shakespearean characters but could bring their own interpretations which might in turn become the new national

¹⁰⁶ Robert Shaughnessy, 'Siddons, Sarah (1755-1831)', *OXDNB*, OUP, 2004; online edn., May 2008 <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/25516>>.

¹⁰⁷ Shaughnessy, 'Siddons, Sarah'.

standard. In this way, influence can be seen to have flowed from the periphery into the centre.

Playbills advertising the addition of new cast members at Covent Garden and Drury Lane further suggest that a degree of value was placed upon an actor's provincial provenance. George Frederick Cooke, for example, joined Covent Garden in October 1800, having begun his career as a strolling player in the early 1770s and worked his way up to the Theatre Royal Dublin, a venue of as strong repute as Bath. Helen Burke has criticised theatre historians who conclude 'that the Irish theatre of this period was either a provincial theatre or a British colonial institution', and instead argues that 'Irish theatre is better characterised as a subaltern site [...] a space in the Irish colonial past which was capable of bringing into being new, non-“English” states of culture and practice'.¹⁰⁸ Whilst Burke paints a vivid picture of the subversive activities at play in Irish theatre, I maintain that, from the London-centric perspective of those in England, Dublin theatre would have been categorised as provincial, however inaccurate this may have been. By 1800, Cooke had established a national reputation as a talented actor with an expertise in Shakespearean roles, and was dubbed the 'Dublin Roscius' by the London press.¹⁰⁹ His forthcoming appearance at Covent Garden was advertised on the theatre's playbills from 20 October, when he was listed as 'Mr Cooke, From the Theatre Royal, Dublin'; his provincial origins were listed again on the playbill for his debut performance as

¹⁰⁸ Helen Burke, 'Acting in the periphery: the Irish theatre', in *The Cambridge Companion to British Theatre, 1730-1830*, ed. by Jane Moody and Daniel O'Quinn, pp. 219-231 (p. 219).

¹⁰⁹ Don B. Wilmeth, 'Cooke, George Frederick (1756?-1812)', *OXDNB*, OUP, 2004; online edn., January 2008 <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/6164>>.

Richard III on 31 October, and on his second, third, and fourth performances.¹¹⁰ By his fifth appearance on 17 November, the Dublin connection was dropped and instead it was emphasised that this was 'his 3[rd] Appearance in that Character[Richard III]'; this was repeated again for his performance as Shylock on 20 November.¹¹¹ On his seventh performance, when he played Richard III for the fourth time, there was no additional commentary to his name: presumably, audiences were not enticed by a new actor's fourth appearance in their favourite role.¹¹²

Cooke was, however, an exceptional case in that his name was well known throughout the country prior to his arrival in London. Most actors moved to the capital earlier in their careers, before they had established themselves beyond the towns in which they performed. Consequently, less was made of their provincial experience. Eliza O'Neill joined Covent Garden from the Theatre Royal Dublin in October 1814. Like Cooke, her debut appearance was previewed on the playbills and from 26 September she was listed as 'Of the *Theatre Royal, Dublin*'. Her first appearance was on 6 October in *Romeo and Juliet*, and the playbill noted that O'Neill was '(Of the *Theatre Royal, Dublin*), being her first appearance in London'.¹¹³ After this, the Dublin connection was dropped, and when she next performed, on 7 and 10 October, it was simply recorded that these were her second and third appearances. Another young woman, Fanny Jarman, was engaged at Covent Garden in 1827, having worked at the Theatres

¹¹⁰ Playbills: *The Rival Queens; Or, Alexander the Great*, 20 October 1800; *Richard III*, 31 October 1800; *Richard III*, 05 November 1800; *The Merchant of Venice*, 10 November 1800; *The Merchant of Venice*, 13 November 1800. All TR Covent Garden, BLPBC vol. 88.

¹¹¹ Playbills: *Richard III*, 17 November 1800; *The Merchant of Venice*, 20 November 1800. Both TR Covent Garden, BLPBC vol. 88.

¹¹² Playbill, *Richard III*, TR Covent Garden, 24 November 1800, BLPBC vol. 88.

¹¹³ Playbill, *Romeo and Juliet*, TR Covent Garden, 06 October 1814, BLPBC vol. 93.

Royal Dublin and Bath. Her appointment, and her prestigious provincial history, were listed on playbills from 25 January onwards: 'From the Theatres Royal, Dublin and Bath' appeared on the bill for her first performance, in *Romeo and Juliet*, on 7 February, and on those for her second and third performances on the 9th and 12th of the same month.¹¹⁴ Though both women were from acting families, had started performing as young children and were a similar age – around twenty four – Jarman had a great deal more experience than O'Neill, had worked with William Charles Macready at Dublin and was a favourite at Bath.¹¹⁵ I would suggest that these factors accounted for the persistence of her heritage on her playbills, particularly the latter, as at that time Bath was still a fashionable resort town for Londoners and so her name may well have been familiar to genteel audience members who had visited the Theatre Royal Bath during the summer season.

Indeed, the prestige of a performer's past engagements appears to have dictated whether or not they would appear on their first playbills. Harriet Deborah Taylor had spent two years playing leading roles at Bath before her debut at Covent Garden in *The Carnival at Naples* on 30 October 1830.¹¹⁶ She was listed as 'from the Theatre Royal, Bath – her first appearance in London' on her first night playbill, but her upcoming appearance was not advertised in advance of her premiere, most likely because she was not sufficiently well-established to warrant recognition. The Theatre Royal Liverpool was also

¹¹⁴ Playbill, *Romeo and Juliet*, TR Covent Garden, 07 February 1827, BLPBC vol. 102.

¹¹⁵ Claire Tomalin, 'Jarman, Frances Eleanor (1802-1873)', *OXDNB*, OUP, 2004 <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/14666>>; K. D. Reynolds, 'O'Neill, Elizabeth (1791-1872)', *OXDNB*, OUP, 2004 <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/1892>>.

¹¹⁶ Playbill, *The Carnival at Naples*, TR Covent Garden, 30 October 1830, BLPBC vol. 103; Thomas Secombe, 'Lacy, Harriett Deborah (1807-1874)', rev. J. Gilliland, *OXDNB*, OUP, 2004 <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/15850>>.

considered worthy of mention, as seen on the playbill advertising Mr Parry's debut at Covent Garden as Durimel in *The Point of Honour* in October 1830.¹¹⁷ In contrast, less-experienced actors heralding from non-Royal theatres had their provincial pasts omitted. Miss Mordaunt, aka Louisa Nisbett, made her London debut at Drury Lane on 16 October 1829 as Widow Cheerly in *The Soldier's Daughter*.¹¹⁸ Her first appearance was previewed on playbills from the 10th onwards, but her previous engagements at Greenwich, Bristol, Cardiff, Stratford-upon-Avon, Northampton, Southampton, and Portsmouth were omitted.¹¹⁹ Similarly, seventeen-year-old Maria Foote had performed leading roles at the Plymouth Theatre for four years prior to her engagement at Covent Garden in 1814, but her name did not even appear on her first London playbill; instead, she was listed as 'a young lady, (being her first appearance)'.¹²⁰ Her role was a lowly one in *The Child of Nature*, an afterpiece, and when her name did begin to appear that season, it was in minor roles.

What is notably absent from the playbills that did include details of an actor's background was any comment on their reception in the provinces. As I have previously discussed, metropolitan actors' successes were often featured on playbills during their visits to provincial theatres, but this was not generally the case when actors of provincial repute moved to London. This seems to indicate that audiences in the capital were simply not interested in

¹¹⁷ Playbill, *The Point of Honour*, TR Covent Garden, 28 October 1830, BLPBC vol. 103.

¹¹⁸ Playbill, *The Soldier's Daughter*, TR Drury Lane, BLPBC vol. 66.

¹¹⁹ Joseph Knight, 'Nisbett, Louisa Cranstoun (1812-1858)', rev. J. Gilliland, *OXDNB*, OUP, 2004, online edn, January 2008 <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/20204>>.

¹²⁰ Joseph Knight, 'Foote, Maria [married name Maria Stanhope, countess of Harrington] (1797-1867)', rev. K. D. Reynolds, *OXDNB*, OUP, 2004; online edn, May 2013 <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/9807>>; Playbill, *Richard Coeur de Lion*, TR Covent Garden, 26 May 1814, BLPBC vol. 93.

recommendations from those who lived beyond the city. Furthermore, the tendency to note a new actor's provenance only if they came from a provincial Theatre Royal suggests that this information was included as a mark of quality control, informing the audience that the new addition to the cast had been properly trained in a respectable provincial 'nursery'. There is, however, evidence that on occasion provincial star power was used to attract London audiences: in advance of Covent Garden opening for the season on 1 October 1828, playbills were issued announcing that the first performance would be one of Shakespeare's plays, and that '[t]he Dramatic Corps has been strengthened by the addition of Provincial Performers of the greatest celebrity'.¹²¹ The next bill, which specified that the chosen play was *As You Like It*, further emphasised the provincial additions, informing the public that 'the Talents of Mr. KEAN, Mr. C. KEMBLE, AND MADAME VESTRIS' would be 'SUPPORTED BY THE Strength of the Company of the Last Season, WITH MANY NEW PERFORMERS of PROVINCIAL CELEBRITY' (Fig. 13).¹²² Although the playbill includes a full cast list, it does not indicate which performers are new to London. In this case, the addition of provincial actors to an already impressive cast – Edmund Kean, Charles Kemble and Madame Vestris were highly regarded and the leading actors of the day – seems to be serving a particular purpose: it would appear that the management was using novelty in order to create interest. A 'provincial celebrity' was a curiosity, not commonly seen at the London patent theatres. Novel elements could thus be found even in the conservative Shakespeare

¹²¹ Playbill, 'Theatre Will Open', TR Covent Garden, 01 October 1828, BLPBC vol. 102.

¹²² Playbill, *As You Like It*, TR Covent Garden, 01 October 1828, BLPBC vol. 102.

Theatre Royal, Covent-Garden

The Public is respectfully informed that the Talents of

Mr. KEAN,
Mr. C. KEMBLE,
 AND
MADAME VESTRIS,

SUPPORTED BY THE

Strength of the Company of the Last Season,
WITH MANY NEW PERFORMERS, of PROVINCIAL CELEBRITY.
 will be called into zealous exertion, to render the Performances of this Theatre worthy of the
 Patronage of a liberal Public.

This present WEDNESDAY, October 1, 1828.

The Opening Play will be SHAKSPEARE'S

As You Like It.

The Duke, Mr. EGERTON, Duke Frederick, Mr. EVANS,
 Amiens, (with Songs) Mr. WOOD, (his first appearance in that character.)
 Jaques, Mr. WARD, Louis, Mr. HOLL,
 Le Beau, Mr. HORREBOW, Eustace, Mr. TURNOUR, Mr. C. KEMBLE,
 Orlando, Mr. IRWIN, Adam, Mr. BARTLEY, Charles, Mr. CRUMPTON
 Oliver, Mr. DIDDEAR, Jaques de Bois, Mr. IRWIN, Touchstone, Mr. FAWCETT,
 William, Mr. BLANCHARD, Corin, Mr. ATKINS,
 Silvius, Mr. HENRY, (her first appearance in that character)
 Rosalind, Miss JARMAN, Miss HUGHES,
 Celia, (with Songs) Miss HUGHES,
 Phoebe, Miss HENRY, Audrey, Mrs. GIBBS, Hymen, Miss H. CAWSE.
In act V. a DANCE incidental to the Piece.
 After which,

PETER WILKINS.

Peter Wilkins, Mrs. VINING, John Adams, Mr. HORREBOW, Phelim O'Scud, Mr. POWER,
 Nichodamus Crowquill, Mr. KEELEY, The Nondescript, Mr. E.J. PARSLÖE,
 Yourawkee, Miss GOWARD, Hallycarrie, Miss J. SCOTT.

Tomorrow, Rossini's popular Opera of The BARBER of SEVILLE.

IN WHICH

Mr. GREEN, and Miss FORDE,

From the Theatre Royal Bath, will make their first appearance in the characters of Figaro & Rosina.
 Count Almaviva, Mr. WRENCH, Doctor Bartolo, Mr. FAWCETT.
 Fiorello, Mr. THORNE, (by permission of S. J. Arnold, Esq.)

To be followed by the Comedy of

CHARLES the SECOND.

King Charles, Mr. C. KEMBLE, Lord Rochester, Mr. WRENCH, Capt. Copp, Mr. FAWCETT.
 Mary Copp, Miss GOWARD.

To which will be added, WEBER'S Opera of

DER FREISCHUTZ.

On FRIDAY, the Tragedy of ROMEO and JULIET.

Romeo, Mr. C. KEMBLE,
 Juliet, Mrs. PINDAR.

(her first appearance on this Stage)

On SATURDAY, the Comic Opera of LOVE in a VILLAGE.
 Young Meadows, by Mr. BIANCHI TAYLOR.

(his first appearance on this Stage)

After which, the melo-Drama of

THE FORTY THIEVES.

In the interval of vacation no industry or expence has been spared to render this favoured place
 of amusement worthy of the British Public. The whole of the interior has been newly decorated,
 Chandeliers have been added to the second circle, and every thing that can contribute to the comfort
 as well as the entertainment of the audience, has been carefully considered, and anxiously carried
 into effect. **MR. GRIEVE, MR. GRIEVE, JUN. AND MR. W. GRIEVE,**
 have been engaged on a variety of new and splendid STOCK SCENERY; and

A Magnificent New Act Drop-Curtain

has been designed and executed by

MR. ROBERTS:

The intent of which is to harmonize with the general effect of the decorations. The design—
 A Temple, supposed to be erected in the Metropolis, in honour of

SHAKSPEARE.

In order to keep the Lower Circle of Boxes perfectly select, no
 places will be kept but such as are paid for at the time of taking.

BOXES, 7s.—PIT, 3s. 6d.—GALLERY 2s.—UPPER GALLERY 1s.

Second Price will be admitted at the end of the third act of Plays, and at the
 end of the second act of Operas. The Time will vary from a Quarter before
 Nine o'clock, till a Quarter after.

PLACES for the BOXES to be had at the Box-Office, Hart-street, from Ten till Four; where Private Boxes
 can also be had for the Season, or Nightly.

The DOORS to be opened at Half-past Six o'clock, and the Play to begin exactly at Seven. **VIVAT REX**
 All complaints and applications respecting the delivery of the Play-bills, to be addressed (post paid) to Mr. T. Cooper,
 Stage Door, Hart-Street.

Printed by W. Reynolds, 9, Denmark-Court, Strand.

Figure 13 - As You Like It, TR Covent Garden, 01 October 1828 (BLPBC)

productions of Covent Garden and Drury Lane but, as I argue in the following section, novelty was found more frequently in provincial productions.

1.2.2 Novelty

The same cultural and political importance ascribed to Shakespeare performance at the London patent theatres that necessitated training actors in the provinces also, as I have noted above, produced creatively conservative productions that were loaded with expectations of proper interpretation and presentation. While provincial actors and managers sought to imitate these as far as possible, performance conditions were in many ways incomparable and as such town and country operated under divergent business models. This had major implications for the ways in which Shakespeare was performed, received, and understood. Ultimately, as I argue here, provincial theatres often incorporated novelty within, or alongside, Shakespeare performance.

Novelty became integral to the very fabric of provincial theatre because of the disparity in population size between centre and periphery. In London, the restriction of legitimate performances to the patent theatres under the 1737 Licensing Act meant that demand outstripped supply. Enterprising managers and performers capitalised on this with the development of illegitimate forms of entertainment which, as Moody has argued, led to the creation of alternative social spaces and an alternative performance culture.¹²³ However, as discussed above, such divisions were untenable outside the city. Despite the development of provincial towns in the Georgian era, many areas did not have large enough populations to support even one permanent theatre, let alone multiple venues

¹²³ Jane Moody, *Illegitimate Theatre in London, 1770-1840* (Cambridge: CUP, 2004).

catering to different tastes. Furthermore, provincial theatres were incapable of sustaining the long runs that were seen at all major London theatres. There, the same play could run on consecutive nights, sometimes for weeks or even, by 1850, months at time. In the provinces, the annual pantomime was the only piece that drew repeat visits in sufficient numbers to justify a long run; otherwise, the pool of potential theatre-goers was simply too small to support re-runs. The main piece was usually changed nightly, the afterpiece only slightly less frequently, and fresh entertainments were required each season in order to accompany the usual favourites and keep audiences returning. Whilst novelty was also found in London productions, it took a different form in the provinces and was influenced by the peripheral theatrical environment, rather than that of the centre.

Novelty could manifest within provincial Shakespeare performance in a number of ways. On occasion, managers might choose to stage more obscure Shakespearean pieces, perhaps in the hope of awakening curiosity. In the course of my research I have found very few examples of productions that were not influenced in some way by revivals at the London patents – although the provincial versions would, of course, have differed from the originals – and all are from the Theatre Royal Newcastle. It may be that there were instances of home-grown revivals in the other sampled theatres that have not survived. However, because Newcastle was relatively isolated geographically, it is also possible that the theatre needed to develop its own productions in order to compensate for the less frequent visits from London stars. In January 1813, for

example, the rarely-staged *Richard II* was revived (Fig. 14).¹²⁴ At the top of the playbill and in capitals it was emphasised that this was ‘the first time’ the play was performed, and a few lines below reiterated that *Richard II* was ‘NEVER ACTED HERE, and not acted for these many Years in any Theatre in England’, an assertion that stressed that the production was a local initiative and not an imitation of a successful London revival. It continued,

The Public are respectfully assured that every endeavour has been made in the Decorative Departments of the Theatre, and all attention paid to the several Rehearsals through which it has passed, in order to give EVERY EFFECT POSSIBLE to the Representation of this beautiful WORK of our immortal Bard, which has so long been lost to the Stage.

This text acknowledged the importance of presenting Shakespeare in the highest possible terms, and even went so far as to insinuate that this production had actively assisted in preserving the playwright’s work. Theatre-goers were thus provided with an extra incentive to attend: not only would they be impressed by the quality of the production, but they would be accomplishing an act of patriotism in the process. The production was evidently a success, as it was repeated for a further five nights over the next six weeks.¹²⁵

¹²⁴ There were only two London productions in the eighteenth century: ‘*Richard II* in Performance: The RSC and Beyond’ in William Shakespeare, *Richard II*, ed. by Jonathan Bate and Eric Rasmussen (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2010), pp. 126-166 (p. 128). Playbill, *Richard II*, TR Newcastle, 25 January 1813, BLPBC vol. 423.

¹²⁵ It was performed on 27 January, 05 & 12 February, and 05 & 12 March. Playbills in BLPBC vol. 260 and NCLLS L792 N536T 1811-13.

FIRST TIME OF
Shakespeare's Richard II.
 With New Scenery, Dresses, Decorations, Machinery, &c.
On MONDAY Evening, Jan. 25, 1813, will be revived, (NEVER ACTED HERE, and not acted for these many Years in any Theatre in England,) the HISTORICAL TRAGEDY of

KING Richard II.

BY WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE.

The Public are respectfully assured that every endeavour has been made in the Decorative Departments of the Theatre, and all attention paid to the several Rehearsals through which it has passed, in order to give EVERY EFFECT POSSIBLE to the Representation of this beautiful WORK of our immortal Bard, which has so long been lost to the Stage.

Richard the Second, King of England, by Mr WILLIAM M'CREADY.
 Edmund of Langley, Duke of York, } sons of Edward the Third, { Mr EVATT.
 John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster, } and Uncles to the King, { Mr GOLD.
 Henry, surnamed Bolingbroke, Duke of Hereford, Earl of Derby, &c. Son to John of Gaunt, afterwards King Henry IV. Mr GOMERSAL.
 Thomas Mowbray, Duke of Norfolk, Mr LOMBE.
 Duke of Aumerle, afterwards degraded to the rank of Earl of Rutland, Son of the Duke of York, Mr T. SHORT.
 Henry Percy, Earl of Northumberland, Mr WOOD. Henry Percy, his Son, surnamed Hotspur, Mr GRAY.
 Lord Willoughby, Mr JONAS. Sir Stephen Scroop, Mr LANE. Earl of Salisbury, Mr CUFFLEY.
 Bagot, } Servants and Favourites of the King, { Mr FALKNER.
 Sir Pierce of Exton, Mr CARR. And Bishop of Carlisle, Mr M'CREADY.
 Duchess of Gloster, (Widow of Gloster, brother to Edward the Black Prince, and Uncle to the King,) Miss DESMOND.
 Duchess of York, Mrs EVATT. And Isabella, Queen to King Richard, Miss SULLIVAN.
 Ladies attending on the Queen, Lords, Herald, Officers, Soldiers, Keeper of the Prison at Pomfret Castle, Groom, Messenger, &c. &c.

The principal NEW SCENERY and INCIDENTS consist of the

PALACE,

The Lists at Gosforth Green,
 And Preparations for the Combat between Bolingbroke and Norfolk.
 THE RETURN OF KING RICHARD FROM IRELAND.
A MAGNIFICENT HALL,
 With the Deposition of King Richard, and the Usurpation of Bolingbroke.
A Street in London, &c.
 With the Procession of Richard to his Confinement in Pomfret Castle.
End of the Play, A NEW PAS SEUL by Miss Parr.
 To conclude with the third representation of the New Farce of The

Sleep Walker;

OR,
Which is the Lady?

(As nightly received with so much laughter and applause.)

Somno, (the Sleep Walker) Mr M'CREADY.
 Sir Patrick Macquire, Mr GOMERSAL. Squire Rattlepate, Mr T. SHORT. Alibi, Mr FALKNER.
 John, Mr WOOD. Thomas, Mr GRAY. Spy, Mr CUFFLEY.
 Mrs Decorum, Mrs MARA. Sophia, Miss SULLIVAN. Maria, Mrs JONAS.

On Tuesday Evening will be brought forward Hugh Kelly's elegant and interesting Comedy of the SCHOOL FOR WIVES, not acted here these 7 years. After which the musical Farce of OF AGE TO-MORROW.

Doors to be opened at six o'Clock, and the Performance to begin at seven.
 Boxes 3s—Pit 2s—Gallery 1s.

Tickets to be had of Mr Humble, and of Mr Hodgkinson, at the Theatre, where places for the Boxes may be taken.

MITCHELL, PRINTER, NEWCASTLE.

Figure 14 - Richard II, TR Newcastle, 25 January 1813 (BLPBC)

The same theatre also staged an independent production of *The Winter's Tale* – a play which had only been staged in a shortened and adapted form in the eighteenth century – in January 1816.¹²⁶ This production had first been performed by the stock company in 1808 following a popular revival in London; the playbills for that production boasted of 'new and appropriate Scenery, Dresses, and Decorations, as revived this Season at the Theatre-Royal, Covent-Garden, with universal Applause'.¹²⁷ The production ran for five consecutive nights, an astonishing feat at a time when the most frequently performed pieces such as *Hamlet*, *Macbeth* and *Othello* were rarely played that many nights over the course of an entire season. Playbills for the 1816 production made no reference to London, but did state that this was a revival and that it would be performed '[w]ith the Original Music, Splendid Scenery, Dresses, and Decorations'. I would suggest that this time, the appeal may have been founded on nostalgia for the company's earlier production, rather than the metropolitan connection. Once again the production proved popular. It was performed three times in two weeks, with an additional presentation a few months later that was advertised as 'positively the last' of the season.¹²⁸ Although not over consecutive nights, this number of performances of an obscure play in such a short space of time suggests a genuine local demand, which may well have been based on local memory of the 1807/08 production.

¹²⁶ 'The Winter's Tale in Performance: The RSC and Beyond', in William Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale*, ed. by Jonathan Bate and Eric Rasmussen (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 132-180 (pp. 133-135); Playbill, *The Winter's Tale*, TR Newcastle, 17 January 1816, NCLLS L792 N536T 1814-16.

¹²⁷ Playbill, *The Winter's Tale*, TR Newcastle, 16 February 1808, BLPBC vol. 260.

¹²⁸ Playbill, *The Winter's Tale*, TR Newcastle, 29 January 1816, NCLLS L792 N536T 1814-16.

The second way that novelty manifested in provincial Shakespeare was in the cross-casting of female performers in male roles, which occurred with greater frequency in the provinces than in the metropolis. Cross-casting was distinct from the breeches roles in which a female character disguises herself in male dress for a large part of the play, such as *Twelfth Night*'s Viola and *As You Like It*'s Rosalind. Breeches roles ultimately upheld the status quo, as the audience was aware throughout that the character was, essentially, feminine, not least by the fact that her figure was often revealed in tight-fitting costumes. Cross-casting was potentially far more transgressive, as it allowed women to break with contemporary ideals of femininity and venture into the masculine realm. Tony Howard has identified Charlotte Charke's 1755 account of performing 'somewhere in the provinces with her small touring company' as the earliest 'first-hand account of a woman playing Hamlet', and argues that although there were occasional instances of female Hamlets on the London stage, 'most of Charke's successors [...] performed the role far from London, in comparative obscurity but relative freedom': freedom from the repercussions of an act that was, Howard suggests, perceived as a 'provocation' against societal norms.¹²⁹

Sarah Siddons' experience certainly supports Howard's theory. Siddons played Hamlet throughout her career, before and after she found fame in London, but only ever took the role in provincial theatres. Celestine Woo has documented nine performances over a thirty-year period: one in Worcester in 1775; two in Manchester in 1777; one in Bristol in June 1781; two in Liverpool

¹²⁹ Tony Howard, *Women as Hamlet: Performance and Interpretation in Theatre, Film and Fiction* (Cambridge: CUP, 2007), pp. 36-38.

on unknown dates but likely before 1782; and two in Dublin, once during the season of 1802/03 and again in 1805.¹³⁰ Woo's research concentrates on the motivations behind Siddons' decision to play Hamlet, and the nature of her performance. She notes that Siddons' costume, as sketched by Mary Sackville Hamilton at Dublin on 27 July 1802, was 'a black toga-like garment that was neither conventionally male nor female'.¹³¹ Woo attributes this to Siddons' determination to maintain her public image of an un-sexualised wife and mother, whilst simultaneously drawing attention to her gender, as 'only a woman would play Hamlet without breeches'.¹³² She adds that a reviewer in the *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal* on 23 June 1781 wrote that, 'numbers might go merely out of curiosity, yet never were audiences more agreeably disappointed, or better satisfied, with an attempt of that nature'.¹³³ From this, and an understanding that cross-casting women in Shakespeare was rare in England and unheard of in the London patent theatres, it appears that novelty was indeed the initial draw for audiences, however skilled the performance turned out to be. But while this explanation accounts for Siddons' performances prior to 1782, it is not wholly satisfactory for those following her stardom in London. As discussed, stars tended to play popular roles, or those that they were particularly associated with, when touring the provinces. Perhaps, as Howard suggests, Siddons found creative fulfilment in these rare opportunities of

¹³⁰ Celestine Woo, 'Sarah Siddons's Performances as Hamlet: Breaching the Breeches Part', *European Romantic Review* 18:5 (2007), 573-595 (pp. 574-575).

¹³¹ Woo, 'Breaching the Breeches', p. 578.

¹³² Woo, 'Breaching the Breeches', p. 580.

¹³³ Woo, 'Breaching the Breeches', p. 584.

‘androgyny not of the sexualised body but of the mind’.¹³⁴ Only outside the theatrical centre did such opportunities arise.

The examples that I have found of cross-cast stock company productions of Shakespeare provide further evidence that novelty was the motivating factor in their creation, and extend this beyond *Hamlet* to *Henry IV*. The earliest, a production of *Henry IV part 1*, was performed on the 25 April 1787 at the Theatre Royal Norwich on a benefit night for Mrs Ibbott, a member of the stock company.¹³⁵ On benefit nights the performer in question selected the play and their role, and would take home all profits, so it was in their interest to choose something that would bring in as full a house as possible. Sometimes that meant playing a role that was a favourite with the local crowd, while on other occasions it was judged that novelty would entice more into the theatre. For this benefit, Mrs Ibbott chose the latter: the playbill advertised that she would, ‘for that night only’ play Sir John Falstaff. I would suggest that this may have been intended to heighten the comic effect of that character, but it could also demonstrate Ibbott’s level of confidence in both her abilities as an actress and the willingness of the Norwich audience to accept a woman playing one of the most beloved characters in the canon. Indeed, Ibbott may have been able to make such a bold choice because of her popularity amongst the local community: in 1790, a theatre review in the *Norfolk Chronicle* noted that she was ‘a well known theatric favourite’ who, ‘after a long absence from the stage’, had performed the role of

¹³⁴ Howard. *Women as Hamlet*, p. 40.

¹³⁵ Playbill, *Henry IV part 1*, TR Norwich, 25 April 1787, Burney 937.f.2/4.

Mrs Heidelberg in *The Clandestine Marriage* 'in her usual style, and received the most unbounded plaudits'.¹³⁶

A second example comes from the Nottingham Theatre. On 10 June 1796, it was advertised that *Hamlet* would be played, with 'Hamlet attempted by Mrs Taylor'.¹³⁷ Once again, the unconventional casting is noted, albeit in a different tone. The choice of the word 'attempted' sets modest expectations for Taylor's performance and, as she was married to the theatre manager, William Perkins Taylor, we may assume that this unusual turn of phrase was inserted with at least her consent, and perhaps even her insistence. The motivation behind the use of such humble language may have been an uncertainty of her ability to succeed in this challenging role, or perhaps a desire to win over an audience who might be sceptical that a woman was suited to one of the most admired roles in the English canon. It may even have been a clever marketing ploy, tempting the audience with the thought that the performance could go disastrously wrong, which, combined with the novelty of a female Hamlet, could be entertaining in itself. As with Mrs Ibbott, Mrs Taylor was a prominent member of the stock company – it seems unlikely that cross-casting, with all the associated risks, would be attempted by inexperienced players – and by 1796 the Taylors were well-established in Nottingham. William had managed the Nottingham circuit since the 1780s, although the couple took engagements elsewhere throughout the 1780s and 1790s.¹³⁸ There is reason to suggest that

¹³⁶ 'Home News', *The Norfolk Chronicle*, 07 August 1790, p. 3.

¹³⁷ Playbill, *Hamlet*, Nottingham Theatre, 10 June 1796, BLPBC vol. 297.1.

¹³⁸ The couple married in 1787; Mrs Taylor's maiden name was Harriet Henrietta Robinson. *A Biographical Dictionary of Actors, Actresses, Musicians, Dancers, Managers & Other Stage Personnel in London, 1660-1800, volume 14* ed. by Philip H. Highfill, Jr., Kalman A. Burnim and Edward A. Langhans (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991), p. 385.

Mrs Taylor was, or became, a popular figure in the local community as, when her husband died in 1800, she took over the management and ran the Nottingham company and circuit for six seasons.¹³⁹ In 1802, the *Monthly Mirror*, which regularly reported on provincial theatre, wrote that 'her powers are everlasting'.¹⁴⁰ If she established this reputation before 1796 this may well have provided her with the confidence to attempt the role; if not, she may have chosen to play Hamlet in an attempt to make a name for herself.

Moody has suggested that Siddons' provincial performances, 'like those of other female Hamlets in this period, are a sign of the liberties occasionally taken by the provinces: the freedom of those stages from, or simply their ignorance of, the conventions of Drury Lane and Covent Garden'.¹⁴¹ I agree that Shakespeare in the provinces was, in many ways, liberated from the constraints of the London scene for the reasons I have outlined above, but would argue that this was absolutely the result of freedom rather than ignorance. Firstly, the playbills for Ibbott and Taylor's productions acknowledged that these performances were unusual, and it is unlikely that the audiences for Siddons in large towns such as Manchester, Bath, and Dublin would have been less informed than those in Nottingham and Norwich. Secondly, the fact that so few examples of cross-casting in provincial Shakespeare productions have been found indicates that this was so rare as to immediately register as a novelty, whether performed by a star or stock actress. Finally, once Siddons found fame in London her repertoire would have been well-known throughout the country,

¹³⁹ Frederick Burwick, *British Drama of the Industrial Revolution* (Cambridge: CUP, 2015), p. 47.

¹⁴⁰ *The Monthly Mirror: Reflecting Men and Manners, with Strictures on Their Epitome, The Stage*, vol. 13 (London: Vernor and Hood, 1802), p. 428.

¹⁴¹ Moody, 'Dictating to the empire', p. 28.

and it would have been recognised that she did not regularly or even occasionally play Hamlet in the city. It therefore appears that provincial audiences did indeed enjoy a degree of freedom from London conventions and that their theatres accommodated a wider spectrum of performance than that of the capital. This was not a solely eighteenth-century phenomenon: I have found two further examples of cross-casting in the first half of the nineteenth century. Women played Hamlet on benefit nights at the Nottingham Theatre in December 1838 and at the Theatre Royal Newcastle in April 1844; in both instances, the playbills noted that the casting was only ‘on this occasion’.¹⁴² The idea that provincial theatres acted as ‘nurseries’ for training actors may have ensured that there was an expectation – or perhaps a tolerance – of experimentation that sat alongside a desire to see ‘traditional’ performance as dictated by the London theatres.

Audience interest in more unconventional theatre was crucial for the third manifestation of novelty in provincial Shakespeare performance: the appearance of performers who failed to meet the strict standards of the London stage. Child ‘stars’ fall most obviously into this category. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the children of professional actors frequently joined their parents’ companies as soon as they could follow direction; the roles of the princes in *Richard III*, Arthur in *King John* and the fairy servants in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* were, where possible, performed by children. Child stars, however, were different. They took on demanding adult roles and usually performed alongside an otherwise adult cast: an undated

¹⁴² Playbills, *Hamlet*, Nottingham Theatre, 03 December 1838, BLPBC vol. 297.2; *Othello/Hamlet*, TR Newcastle, 22 April 1844, BLPBC vol. 262.

playbill, almost certainly from the 1770s, advertised 'Miss Charlotte USHER, the infant Prodigy' playing Richard III at Fletcher's Long Room in Newcastle's Bigg Market.¹⁴³ Child stars were by no means absent from the stages of respectable London theatres: as we have already seen, William Henry West Betty, the 'Infant Roscius', was engaged at both Covent Garden and Drury Lane from 1804 to 1806, and Clara Fisher performed regularly at both theatres from 1817 to 1827, beginning her career when she was just seven years old. However, child stars were more numerous on the provincial stages. In large part because of the sensation that Betty and Fisher caused, there were countless child stars working the provincial circuits throughout the early nineteenth century in the hope of breaking into London. They often performed under stage names featuring 'Infant' or 'Roscius' and youth was their major selling point. Master Mangeon, the 'American Roscius', played Richard III, Shylock and Othello at the Theatre Royal Brighton in November 1833, whilst the 'celebrated Infant Kean' played Macbeth at the Nottingham Theatre in March 1830.¹⁴⁴

Because so few child stars found enduring success – their appeal was, after all, predicated on the novelty of their youth – their provincial theatrical careers can be difficult to trace. There are, however, significant similarities between the careers of the Infant Kean and Master Mangeon that may well apply to other provincial stars. Kean – so named after his supposed resemblance to Edmund Kean – toured the provinces relentlessly from 1830 to 1835. There are records of performances at Coventry, Manchester, Leeds, Leicester, Portsmouth,

¹⁴³ Playbill, *Richard III*, Fletcher's Long Room, undated, BLPBC vol. 262.

¹⁴⁴ Playbills, TR Brighton, 14-16 November 1833, BLPBC vol. 202. Playbill, *Macbeth*, Nottingham Theatre, 15 March 1830, BLPBC vol. 297.1.

Ramsgate, Macclesfield, Chesterfield, Leamington-Spa, and Nottingham; his manager Dr Smyth claimed that they visited most of the provincial theatres during these years.¹⁴⁵ Both Kean and Mangeon focused their repertoire on Shakespeare, although Mangeon added Young Norval in John Home's *Douglas* to his range, while Kean appears to have only ever played Macbeth, Richard III, Hamlet and Shylock. Furthermore, both boys were managed by their guardians: Mangeon was, according to a newspaper article from 1888, 'forced' onto the stage by his mother, a performer herself, while Kean was trained and toured by his adoptive father.¹⁴⁶ Finally, both saw their careers end after attempts at the London stage. Kean performed at Sadler's Wells and the Strand Theatre in May 1835 to little success: the Sadler's Wells engagement ended in a court case, during which Kean's acting skills were ridiculed by influential industry figures.¹⁴⁷ Similarly, Mangeon played Young Norval at the Victoria Theatre in February 1834, earning himself a biting review in the *Morning Chronicle* which detailed his faults, complaining that, 'his emphasis is annoyingly elaborate [...] We are inclined to recommend that he should be taken from the stage and sent to some school, the discipline and the instruction of which would not be thrown away'.¹⁴⁸ Mangeon secured at least one more trial, playing Richard III at the Royal Pavilion Theatre, but as this is the last extant record it can be assumed that this was also unsuccessful.¹⁴⁹ What is notable about both child stars is that,

¹⁴⁵ 'Sheriff's Court – Tuesday, July 14', *Morning Post*, 15 July 1835, p. 7.

¹⁴⁶ For Mangeon, see T. Allston Brown, *A history of the New York stage from the first performance in 1732 to 1901*, vol. 1 (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1903), p. 31. Details of the Infant Kean's life can be found in his adoptive father's autobiography: Thomas Provis, *The Victim of Fatality, or the Claimant of Ashton Court* (Bristol: J. Hewitt, 1854), pp. 33-37.

¹⁴⁷ 'Sheriff's Court', *Morning Post*.

¹⁴⁸ 'Victoria Theatre', *The Morning Chronicle*, 08 February 1834, p. 3.

¹⁴⁹ Playbill, *Richard III*, Royal Pavilion Theatre, 10 March 1834, *JISC East London Theatre Archive project* 38041007513203 <<http://www.elta-project.org/browse.html?recordId=1225>>.

despite their apparent shortcomings, each had still found sustained employment in the provinces and had taken engagements at respected theatres: only disapproval from the London critics cut short their careers. The provinces were, evidently, more accommodating than the capital; it is possible that, had their managers not succumbed to a desire for fame and fortune, both boys could have continued performing in the provinces until their juvenile charm wore off.

Novelty was also present in provincial Shakespeare performance in a fourth and final form. In London and the provinces alike, Shakespeare's plays were at times overshadowed by the afterpieces that accompanied the main piece. Bratton provides an example from Drury Lane in November 1831, when the playbill for a performance of *Macbeth* devoted most of its space to a spectacle called *Hyder Ali, or the Lions of Mysore*.¹⁵⁰ What marked the distinction between centre and periphery, however, was that those who performed alongside Shakespeare in the provinces were often consigned to the illegitimate stages in the capital, as in the cases of *Sieur Sanches* and *Monsieur Gouffe*. *Sanches*, an acrobat, performed at the Theatre Royal Newcastle for one week in July 1815, coinciding with a visit from actor William Macready, during which two Shakespeare plays were performed: *Henry V* and *Othello* (Figures 15 and 16). In both cases, *Sanches*' act vies for and even dominates the space on the

¹⁵⁰ Bratton, *New Readings*, p. 41.

THEATRE ROYAL, NEWCASTLE.
 SECOND NIGHT OF
MR WILLIAM M'CREADY'S
 ENGAGEMENT,
 AND OF
SIEUR SANCHES'
Wonderful Performance.
 On **TUESDAY** Evening, July 4, 1815,
 PREVIOUS TO THE PLAY,

Sieur Sanches
 Will exhibit, in a most astonishing Manner, his wonderful
Antipodean Powers;—He will

Walk against the Ceiling!
Over the Stage, with his Head downwards!
 Exhibiting, in various Forms, A FLAG IN EACH HAND; and, when at the Extremity of his Walk, will
 suspend on one Leg, turn on his Heel, and walk back, &c. &c.
 After which will be presented Shakespeare's celebrated TRAGEDY of

OTHELLO,
MOOR OF VENICE.
 The Part of Othello, (Moor of Venice) by Mr WILLIAM M'CREADY
 Iago, Mr MUNRO Brabantio, Mr WOOD Rodrigo, Mr LANCASTER Lodovico, Mr HUCKEL
 Cassio, Mr HUDSON Montano, Mr GRAY Duke of Venice, Mr MELVILLE
 Gratiano, Mr YOUNG Officer, Mr LEWIS
 Emilia, Mrs DESMOND
 And Desdemona, Mrs DOUGLAS
 (Being her second Appearance on this Stage.)

END OF THE PLAY,
 SIEUR SANCHES WILL PERFORM
The wonderful Modulation of the
HUMAN VOICE,
 He will perform on the SPANISH GUITAR several FOREIGN AIRS, which he will name, as follows:—
The Spanish Fandango, the Coronation of the King of Prussia, and the Don Cossack Air.
 He will then perform on the Mandolina, and will imitate
VARIOUS MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS,
 Particularly the Clarinet and Flute, and will accompany himself on the Spanish Guitar only; he will also perform
 an Overture on the Spanish Guitar, introducing the NOTES OF VARIOUS SINGING BIRDS, naming the
 Birds, which he imitates separately, viz. the Nightingale, Robin, Thrush, Canary, and Skylark.

A PAS SEUL, by Mrs George, her first Appearance on this Stage.
 After which SIEUR SANCHES' unparalleled Exhibition on the

SLACK ROPE,
 On which he will throw himself, at two Feet Distance, (never before attempted by any other Person) his Head
 downwards, the Rope in full swing, which, while it astonishes as an Exertion of Strength and Agility beyond
 Imagination, excites the strongest Sensations of Pleasure, derived from the confident Security of the Performer.
 HE WILL ALSO
BALANCE FIVE BOYS,
 On different Parts of his Body, at the same Time supporting one Row

Figure 15 - Othello, TR Newcastle, 04 July 1815 (NCLLS)

THEATRE-ROYAL, NEWCASTLE.

**MR WILLIAM M'CREADY'S
NIGHT,**

And positively the last but one of his Engagement here.

On **MONDAY** Evening, July 10th, 1815,
PREVIOUS TO THE PLAY.

Sieur Sanches

Will exhibit, in a most astonishing Manner, his wonderful
Antipodean Powers;—He will
Walk against the Ceiling!
Over the Stage, with his Head downwards!

After which will be revived (not acted here these twelve Years) Shakespeare's historical PLAY of

**KING
HENRY V.**

Or, The Conquest of France!

With appropriate Decorations, Scenery, &c. &c.

ENGLISH.

The Part of Henry the Fifth, (King of England) by Mr WILLIAM M'CREADY,
Being his first Appearance in that Character on this Stage

Thomas Beaufort, Duke of Exeter, (Uncle to the King) Mr MUNRO
John, Duke of Bedford, (Brother to the King) Miss DESMOND Earl of Westmoreland, Mr HUCKEL
Henry Chicheley, Archbishop of Canterbury, Mr WOOD
Richard, Earl of Cambridge, }
Henry, Lord Scroop of Malham, } Conspirators
Sir Thomas Grey, } against the King, { Mr LEWIS
Captain Fluellen, Mr GEORGE } Lieutenant Bardolph, Mr DARLING
Ancient Pistol, Mr LANCASTER Boy, Miss MACKIE
And Williams, Mr M'CREADY
Heralds, Officers, Soldiers, Lords, &c. &c.
Mrs Quickly, Mrs WHALEY

FRENCH.

Charles the Sixth, King of France, Mr HUDSON Lewis, the Dauphin, Mr GRAY
Duke of Burgundy, Mr BROWN Montjoy, Mr WILLIAMS
Isabel, Queen of France, Mrs GEORGE
And The Princess Katharine, (Daughter of Charles the Sixth) Mrs GARRICK
Lords, Attendants, Soldiers, Heralds, &c.

In the Course of the Play will be exhibited the following NEW SCENES, painted by that eminent Artist,
Mr DIXON:—

**A NEW SPLENDID GOTHIC SCENE—A TENT—
AN AUDIENCE CHAMBER.**

END OF THE PLAY, SIEUR SANCHES WILL PERFORM
**The wonderful Modulation of the
HUMAN VOICE.**

After which, DIXON's favourite FARCE of The
Hunter of the Alps

Figure 16 - Henry V, TR Newcastle, 10 July 1815 (NCLLS)

THEATRE-ROYAL, BATH.

Under the Management of Mr. DAVIDGE.

Tremendous sensation created by the Wonderful Feats of the
MAN MONKEY.

2nd Appearance of Mons. GOUFFEE in Bath,

Whose extraordinary Performances have been witnessed by crowded audiences not only in England, but in every Theatre on the vast Continent of America, for the last four years. The spirit and confidence with which this Phenomenon performs his Evolutions, keep the spectator in continual wonder! His Feats are performed with that decided ease which characterizes the ANIMAL, of whose eccentricity Mons. GOUFFEE is so happy in his illustration.

NOTICE.—To the Ladies of Bath and its Vicinity.—In consequence of the great sensation created in London during the last Winter, by the formation of a **Ladies' Club**; the Management, ever anxious to please their Patrons, propose to establish at the Theatre-Royal, Bath, a **Ladies' Matrimonial Club**, which will commence its Sittings To-Morrow Evening. Mr. BROWNELL will be in daily attendance, from Eleven till Four, to receive Subscribers' Names, Subscriptions, &c. The Members will be elected by Ballot each evening the Club meets.

This present **TUESDAY** Evening, November 24, 1840,
WILL BE PERFORMED SHAKSPEARE'S TRAGEDY OF

ROMEO & JULIET.

Romeo	Mr. E. GLOVER	Tybalt	Mr. BENSON
Paris	Mr. WILSON	Friar Lawrence	Mr. RANSON
Capulet	Mr. JOHNSON	Friar John	Mr. REDFERN
Mercutio	Mr. H. HOLL	Apothecary	Mr. W. H. ANGEL
Benvolio	Mr. BETHWAY	Peter	Mr. WOULD
Lady Capulet	Miss HIBBERD	Juliet	Miss LACY
		Nurse	Mrs. W. H. ANGEL

After which, (second time in Bath,) a DRAMA, to be called

JOCKO! THE BRAZILIAN APE!

Marco (an Overseer)	Mr. JOHNSON	Fabioletta (his Son)	Mr. W. H. ANGEL
Governor of the Province)	Mr. RANSON	Julian (Son of the Governor)	Master ANGEL
Jocko	(the Brazilian Ape)	Mons. GOUFFEE	
Sailor	Mr. REDFERN	Slaves	Messrs. BETHWAY and LODGE
Lauretta (the Governor's Ward)	Miss M. WOULD	Mysa (Female Slave to Lauretta)	Miss SMITHSON
Governor's Lady	Miss BARTLETT		

Scenery & Incidents.—Governor's House in India—Interruption of the Sports—Marco's Charge—Artful Plan to secure a Bride for his Son—Lauretta's Inquiries—the Retort—the Governor's Directions—**Grotesque Appearance of the Brazilian Ape!**—Mysa's meeting with Lauretta—Production of the Bird of Paradise—Arrangement to receive Fabioletta—His Arrival—Poetry Charms the Soul—Flights of Fancy—Lauretta's promised Introduction to the Monkey that has SEEN the World—The March of Intellect—Fabioletta's Adventure in the Wrong Box—The Mistake—**Mons. Gouffee's Wonderful Feats on the Bamboo Tree and the Rope!** concluding with **Hanging himself by the Neck!** (a Feat that is acknowledged to surpass any thing ever attempted in this Country)—Indian View, with Distant Village—Fabioletta's on his Wanderings—His Dislike of his Father's Treatment—His Affection for the lovely Mysa—Mysa's generosity—Cupboard love—Many a slip 'twixt the cup and the lip—Rocks near the Sea Coast—Interview with the Governor and Lauretta—Her grateful acknowledgments—Sudden interruption—Dreadful fate of the Vessel—**Death of Jocko!**

Acting and Stage Manager, Mr. STIRLING.

WEDNESDAY, (first time in Bath,) a **LADIES' MATRIMONIAL CLUB**; and a New Drama, called **The ISLAND APE**, in which **Mons. GOUFFEE** will perform.

JOHN AND JAMES KEENE, PRINTERS, KINGSMEAD STREET, BATH.

Figure 17 - Romeo and Juliet, TR Bath, 24 November 1840 (BLPBC)

playbills. His blurb advertises 'his wonderful Antipodean Powers': 'He will Walk against the Ceiling! Over the Stage, with his Head downwards!', 'the wonderful modulation of the human voice' and his 'unparalleled Exhibition on the slack rope'.¹⁵¹ The motivation behind combining Sieur Sanches' act with these Shakespearean pieces is as ambiguous as that of Monsieur Gouffe's appearance after *Romeo and Juliet* at the Theatre Royal Bath in November 1840 (Fig. 17).¹⁵² The playbill boasted of the

tremendous sensation created by the Wonderful Feats of the MAN MONKEY [...] Whose extraordinary Performances have been witnessed by crowded audiences not only in England, but in every Theatre on the vast Continent of America, for the last four years. The spirit and confidence with which this Phenomenon performs his Evolutions keep the spectator in continual wonder! His Feats are performed with that decided ease which characterises the ANIMAL, of whose eccentricity Mons. GOUFFEE is so happy in his illustration.

Monsieur Gouffe (not Gouffee as he was listed in Bath) was one of several 'man monkeys' performing at the time. In 1825, the Surry Theatre advertised his act in the *Morning Post*, describing,

[M]ost extraordinary Leaps, Features of Agility, and Gymnastic Displays; Horizontal Balancings, particularly one from the top of a high column, extending himself horizontally by his feet, and in that unprecedented position lifting a boy from the ground, suspending

¹⁵¹ Playbills, *Othello* and *Henry V*, TR Newcastle, 04 and 10 July 1815, NCLLS L792 N536T 1814-16.

¹⁵² Playbill, *Romeo and Juliet*, TR Bath, 24 November 1840, BLPBC vol. 181.2.

him in the air, and then supporting him on his shoulders. He will conclude his performances by running round the fronts of the boxes and gallery, supported only by minute mouldings.¹⁵³

Gouffe seems to have been extremely successful in London, and was such a recognisable figure that papers printed gossip about his private life and early years.¹⁵⁴ His performances, however, were restricted to those spaces that were traditionally classed as 'illegitimate': the Surrey, White Conduit House, Sadler's Wells, and the Royal Victoria Theatre. The London engagements of Sieur Sanches, who did not achieve the same levels of celebrity as Gouffe, appear to have been limited to the Surrey alone. At the illegitimate theatres, Gouffe's and Sanches' acts followed melodrama rather than Shakespeare, and appeared amongst pieces of ballet, song and dance. Their acts demonstrate that the absence of an alternative performance culture in the provinces created an environment in which Shakespeare was juxtaposed with performances that would not have co-existed in the capital. Whether found in the play text, the cast, or the afterpiece, novelty was one way that provincial Shakespeare performance was independent of the metropolitan model. Along with the influence that the provinces could exert on the London stage, it is clear that theatres on the periphery innovated as well as imitated.

Throughout this chapter I have outlined the landscape of provincial Shakespeare performance from 1769 to 1850 and challenged conventional narratives that obscure the provincial experience in favour of the capital. I have

¹⁵³ 'New Surrey Theatre', *Morning Post*, 17 October 1825, p. 1.

¹⁵⁴ See 'Police: Union Hall', *London Evening Standard*, 23 April 1828, p. 4; 'Astley and Ducrow', *Bell's New Weekly Messenger*, 03 August 1834, p. 14.

elucidated the legal and cultural frameworks that placed London at the centre of the theatre industry and of Shakespeare performance, and analysed provincial theatres' responses to this, commenting on the effect of the theatrical hierarchy on the substance and structure of peripheral Shakespeare. I have argued that the provinces developed a series of creative strategies that enabled them to circumvent licensing laws where necessary and to present Shakespeare performance that, whether aligned to or distinguished from London, had a distinctly provincial flavour. Finally, I have shown that provincial performance was not limited to reacting to London trends but that it also exerted a degree of influence on the capital. Through the pursuit of novelty in particular, it developed facets which flourished in spaces less constrained than the capital by ideas of propriety.

In doing so, I have complicated existing narratives and shown the need for ongoing attention to the local and to specific meanings of Shakespeare as manifest in individual theatres. As the nineteenth century progressed, however, and as cultural connections within the country grew stronger, this narrative would become more complicated again, and prompt a major shift in the way that Shakespeare was performed and received in provincial England.

Chapter 2

1850-1900: Railways and the Rise of Touring Companies

From 1850 to 1900, the processes of industrialisation wrought major changes to England's economic, social, political and material landscapes in ways that would, directly and indirectly, have a transformative effect upon provincial theatre. By the end of the century, locally produced performances of Shakespeare were a rare occurrence: outside the capital, few theatres maintained a permanent stock company, and instead imported touring productions to fill their seasons. The shift from producing to receiving occurred so swiftly and completely in the provincial theatres that, by 1880, there were already signs of nostalgia for that which had been standard practice just a decade or so earlier. An August edition of the *Era* from 1880 contained a sentimental article on line-learning that reminisced about the days, 'years ago', when

there was hardly a faculty more indispensable to a provincial performer than that of being able to learn the words at short notice. Many and various were the modes of getting the words into their heads practised by different people [...] Some would pocket their parts and go off for a rustic stroll, postponing their perusal of them until they got away from the hurry and talk of the town, committing the precious words to memory amidst the buzzing of insects and

under the rich foliage of trees made musical by the feathered
flutterers of the air.¹

The author's poetic invocation of the sights, sounds, and textures of the natural world encountered by the provincial performer is matched with a palpable sense of loss for this way of life. They add that, at the time of writing, 'the exactions in the way are, to a great extent, modified, and in many cases, notably our London Theatres, reduced to a pretty bearable condition', but appear to regard the new, less onerous professional environment with more than a hint of regret. The author cites the experience of an unnamed contemporary actor, popular on the Strand and currently touring America, who had struggled as a young stock company member to master a typically extensive repertoire of roles but, 'like most examples of perseverance, [this] brought its reward': his successful career.² I would suggest that this idealised view of the recent past owed more to late-Victorian anxieties about the increasingly urbanised environment than to a genuine appreciation of the merits of the stock company system. London remained the arbiter of taste for the nation, and as long as the provinces looked to the capital as the centre of the theatrical world, stock companies and their inherent 'peripheralness' remained unvalued.

In this chapter I examine the decline of the provincial stock companies and the concurrent rise of, firstly, the itinerant actors known as 'provincial tragedians' in the 1860s, and, secondly, touring companies in the 1870s. It is my argument that the readiness to disregard local performances and embrace

¹ 'Quick study', *Era*, 01 August 1880, p. 11.

² 'Quick study', *Era*.

touring Shakespeare performers and productions was directly related to the broader history of provincial Shakespeare performance. Unlike melodrama and other staples of the repertoire, Shakespeare came weighted with expectations and cultural baggage that were informed by an ever-increasing importance attached to the playwright as a national figurehead. The desire to conform to a centralised performance model was therefore more compelling with regard to Shakespeare than to other playwrights or genres, and was as much the product of bardolatry as it was the influence of the centre upon the periphery. This structural shift away from the local was facilitated by a major nineteenth-century innovation: the railway. Several scholars, including Tracy C. Davis, Michael R. Booth and Claire Cochrane, have asserted that the railways played a central role in transforming theatre and theatregoing during this period, but none have examined in detail the interaction between the two with a focus on provincial England.³ In the first section of this chapter, I contextualise the theatrical changes of the later nineteenth-century by analysing statements about provincial theatre made by the witnesses to the 1866 Select Committee on Theatrical Licenses and Regulations, and by exploring the impact of railway travel on provincial theatre and Shakespeare performance. I maintain that the railway network not only provided the means to transport performers and productions across the country, but, along with the other forces of industrialisation, expanded the model of cultural exchange outlined in the previous chapter to include intra-provincial trade. This development disrupted

³ Michael R. Booth, *Theatre in the Victorian Age* (Cambridge: CUP, 1991), pp. 14-16; Tracy C. Davis, *The Economics of the British Stage 1800-1914* (Cambridge: CUP, 2000), pp. 204-205, 215; Claire Cochrane, *Twentieth-Century British Theatre: Industry, Arts and Empire* (Cambridge: CUP, 2011), pp. 29-32.

the pre-existing dynamic between centre and periphery and altered Shakespeare performance at the most fundamental level.

2.1 The State of Play in 1866

On 28 May 1866, the admired Shakespearean actor Charles Kean was called to testify before a parliamentary Select Committee. Formed in February that year, the Committee consisted of a cross-party selection of fifteen politicians who were appointed 'to inquire into the working of the Act of Parliament for Licensing and Regulating Theatres and places of Public Entertainment in Great Britain', and were headed by George Goschen, Liberal MP for the City of London.⁴ Their investigation, as recorded in the accompanying *Report*, clearly focused upon levels of satisfaction – from those within the industry and without – with the 'double jurisdiction' practice of licensing music halls separately to theatres, as well as more general matters of safety and security.

There was a very real, and pressing, need for such an investigation into legislation. The 1843 Theatres Act may have made theatrical licences more freely available, but it maintained the restriction of the performance of Shakespeare and all 'theatrical entertainments' to venues licensed by the Lord Chamberlain. Music halls, which had soared in popularity in the 1850s and 1860s, had not existed when the 1843 Act was established, and thus were instead licensed by local magistrates under the 1751 Disorderly Houses Act which lacked the capacity to enforce censorship or permit dramatic

⁴ *Report from the Select Committee on Theatrical Licenses and Regulations* (London: House of Commons, 1866), p. ii. Hereafter referenced as *SCTLR*.

performances of any genre, be that Shakespeare, ballet, melodrama or burlesque. Just as managers of legitimate and illegitimate theatres in London had clashed prior to the 1843 Act, so theatre managers and music hall proprietors in the 1850s and 1860s found themselves at odds as the former sought to prevent the latter from staging dramatic works and thus establishing themselves as market competitors. In an attempt to settle the matter, the 1866 Committee looked to establish whether the legislative distinctions between theatre and music hall were defensible or even desirable. In the course of their investigation, thirty-four witnesses gave testimony; as in 1832, these testimonies frequently contained extensive discussion on all manner of issues connected with the theatre industry in London and the provinces, issues that ranged far beyond the ostensibly narrow remit of the Committee's inquiry. Many theatre historians have recognised the value of the 1866 Select Committee *Report*, but none have previously used it to analyse attitudes towards provincial theatre or the changes wrought by the growing railway networks.

During his testimony, Charles Kean gave a damning impression of the state of theatre in the provinces. He identified an overall decline in audience attendance, most noticeably from the lucrative dress-boxes, and asserted that in many small towns this had resulted in the theatres closing permanently:⁵

[Goschen:] Has not the patronage of the theatre very much diminished in the country towns?

⁵ Kean and Goschen identify the theatres on the Boston, Lincoln and Exeter/Guilford circuits as having closed, as well as the Doncaster Theatre.

[Kean:] Yes, greatly; so far as the dress-boxes are concerned, it has diminished in an extraordinary manner, because in former days the dress-boxes were as full as the pit and gallery; but that is probably due to the railways; people can now come up to town, and they reserve themselves for the London theatres.

[...]

[Goschen:] But people in the provinces have become very serious of late years, and some people would not put their feet in a theatre now (though they would go to concerts); there is more of that kind of feeling in the country of late years, is there not?

[Kean:] Yes, a great deal more.

[Goschen:] More people like what we saw in that piece called “The Serious Family”?⁶

[Kean:] Yes; that arises in a great measure from the acting not being so good as it was, and from other causes.

[...]

[Goschen:] In many of the small town[s], in England the theatres have been entirely shut up, have they not?

⁶ *The Serious Family* was a comedy by Morris Barnett which debuted at the Theatre Royal Haymarket on 30 October 1849. The plot followed a young man who marries into a ‘serious’ family who ‘condemn all pleasurable amusements’ including the theatre. See reviews: ‘Theatres, etc.: Haymarket’, *Era*, 04 November 1849, p. 11; ‘Haymarket Theatre: The Serious Family’, *Morning Post*, 31 October 1849, p.6; and ‘Haymarket Theatre’, *London Evening Standard*, 31 October 1849, p. 1.

[Kean:] Yes, many have been.

[Goschen:] Then there can be no school for acting where there is no theatre?

[Kean:] There are very few large towns where there is no theatre, but the small ones are absorbed in the large ones.⁷

Together, Kean and Goschen touched on three factors that had contributed to the putative provincial decline: growing anti-theatrical sentiment; poorer standards of acting; and the development of the railway networks, which had greatly increased access to London for those who could afford the fare. As I will go on to demonstrate, these points were raised repeatedly by witnesses and MPs alike, and were often implicitly connected with concern over the safeguarding of Shakespeare's works and legacy as symbol of national identity. Statements from the Select Committee hearings will be used as a starting point from which to survey the changes taking place in provincial theatre in 1866, although the inherent bias of those involved in the investigation must be taken into consideration: all parties concerned were pursuing their own agendas, which at the broadest level were to either support or denounce the extension of dramatic free trade to the music halls.

As their remarkably leading questions indicate, the MPs serving on the Committee were also far from neutral observers. Richard W. Schoch has attributed this to the approaching mass-enfranchisement that was shortly to

⁷ *SCTLR*, p. 234.

take place with the 1867 Reform Act.⁸ This had been championed by the Liberals and would double the size of the electorate, granting the vote to many working-class men for the very first time, but this prospect was not without its opponents. Schoch writes that,

the Committee (or at least its dominant faction) saw its task not to turn music halls into middle-class theatres, but into better versions of what they already were: the place where the soon-to-be enfranchised working class maintained a peaceful public sphere.⁹

Thus, Schoch argues, Goschen and his fellow Liberals accordingly sought to foster a shared national culture that all classes had a stake in: they ‘understood culture as a project of transcendence, as an escape from a determinant, class-based view of society’, the success of which would ensure national peace and stability.¹⁰ As I explore in greater depth below, the Committee’s ideology may have obscured the reality of the ways that audiences and communities were responding to changes in theatrical practice. Through close examination of the contradictions and underlying assumptions made by the Select Committee and its witnesses, I challenge elements of their narratives and suggest alternative readings of their accounts which illuminate the influence of wider societal issues upon theatrical change and Shakespeare performance.

⁸ Richard W. Schoch, ‘Shakespeare and the Music Hall’ in *The Performing Century: Nineteenth-Century Theatre’s History*, ed. by Tracy C. Davis and Peter Holland, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) pp. 236-249 (p. 240).

⁹ Schoch, ‘Music Hall’, p. 241.

¹⁰ Schoch, ‘Music Hall’, p. 246.

2.1.1 Select Committee Concerns

The decline of acting standards in the theatre preoccupied many of the Select Committee witnesses, as did the implications of this decline for Shakespeare's legacy. Seven individuals attributed a supposed decline to the fact that the practice of training actors in the provinces to prepare them for the prestigious stages of the capital had broken down: The Right Hon. Viscount Sydney, Lord Chamberlain; John Knowles, proprietor of the Theatre Royal Manchester; Benjamin Webster, sole proprietor and manager of the Adelphi Theatre, London; Shirley Brookes, dramatic author; Edward Tyrrell Smith, lessee of Astley's Music Hall, London; John Baldwin Buckstone, lessee and manager of the Theatre Royal Haymarket and part lessee of the Bradford Theatre; and Charles Kean, who had managed the Princess's Theatre, London from 1850 to 1859, and toured extensively across the UK, USA and Australia. All agreed that, as a result of the patent theatres no longer holding exclusive rights to the performance of legitimate drama, there had been an increase in the number of venues in which such performance took place; although the overall number of actors had risen accordingly, the proportion of talented actors had not. The sole voice of discord came from Horace Wigan, manager of London's Olympic Theatre, who actively opposed Buckstone and Webster. He stated:

With regard to the prosperity of the stage, I understand that the tenour [sic] of their evidence was that the school of acting, which is a thing I never heard of as existing anywhere, has died out, and that there are no actors, and no prospect of getting any. I should like to say in contradistinction to that, from what I have learnt, and I can

give you the most positive information, and point out where you can get more, that the salaries of actors in the country have very much risen, and that actors are more independent and more litigious. [...] I think they are not so illiterate as they were, and that altogether their position is very much higher than it was, and the prospects of the stage are therefore better.¹¹

It is difficult to discern an ulterior motive in Wigan's dissent, as the Olympic was a well-regarded theatre and not a music hall. His claim to have 'never heard' of the informal school for acting is, however, dubious, given the widespread recognition it received from London and provincial witnesses alike in the 1832 Select Committee, as outlined in the previous chapter. Regardless of the veracity of his statement, Wigan's opinion was in the minority: the other witnesses were unwavering in their belief that the consequence of theatrical free trade was a rapid decrease in theatrical quality.

On the subject of decline, Kean testified that,

The number of patent theatres might have increased with the increase of population, but in consequence of doing away with patent rights, you have no school for acting. [...] [A]ctors cannot spring into experience without going through a training. In my boyhood, we never considered that a man had gone through his probation until he had been on the stage for seven years; but now an actor plays the

¹¹ *SCTLR*, p. 165.

leading parts of Shakespeare before he has been on the stage two years.¹²

As an experienced performer who enjoyed the limelight, it seems likely that Kean selected his words with precision in order to craft a persuasive argument. Like the rest of the theatrical community, he sought to maintain the status quo and prevent music halls from expanding their reach, and I would argue that in repeatedly referencing Shakespeare throughout his testimony, Kean was attempting to highlight that what was under discussion had far-reaching consequences for the national playwright. When asked to expand on his view of theatrical decline, Kean stated:

[Inexperienced actors performing Shakespeare] is in consequence of there being more theatres, and worse actors; you cannot play pieces as you did 35 years ago. I have seen the old comedies played with a completeness that you could not touch now. Take *Julius Caesar*: you had Mr Young, one of the most celebrated of actors, Mr Macready, and Mr Charles Kemble, with Mr Fawcett, in what would now be considered the subordinate part of Casca; or you would, in *Othello*, have my father [Edmund Kean] as Othello, Mr Young as Iago, and Mr Kemble as Cassio. These are impossibilities now, even supposing the talent existed, because each of these artists would be a centre of attraction at a separate theatre.¹³

¹² *SCTLR*, p. 231.

¹³ *SCTLR*, p. 231.

This had clear implications for the Committee's core question as, if they accepted Kean's evidence, allowing music halls to stage Shakespeare would dilute the quality of productions even more than had the 1843 Act. The flaw in Kean's argument – and he was one of many to draw Shakespeare into the Committee hearings – was that the music hall proprietors expressed no interest whatsoever in staging Shakespeare. Schoch observes that,

something of a parallel universe was created in the hearings, for time and again the Committee referred to purely hypothetical cases: 'a person [i.e. a music hall proprietor] who desires to act Shakespeare' or 'a person who wishes to represent Shakespeare'.

'Such persons', suggests Schoch, 'did not exist'.¹⁴

The impetus for this hypothetical desire to see Shakespeare performed in the music halls can be traced back to the Committee's dedication to improving the quality of working-class entertainment, and drawing it into mainstream English culture. While the testimonies of the 1832 Select Committee made it clear that Shakespeare's plays set the benchmark for quality in drama, by the later nineteenth century Shakespeare's works had become more widely available outside the theatre and this had cemented his role in everyday Victorian life. As detailed by Gary Taylor, technological advancements had made the printing of cheap editions possible, so that,

between 1821 and 1853 average book prices declined by 40 per cent, with the decline led by reprints – including, of course, reprints of

¹⁴ Schoch, 'Music Hall', p. 243.

Shakespeare. [...] Between 1709 and 1810 sixty-five editions of Shakespeare's works were published; a mere ten years from 1851 to 1860 witnessed the production of at least 162.¹⁵

This, alongside rises in real wages and literacy rates, created a wider audience for Shakespeare's texts than ever before, a trend that would continue to increase in the 1870s with the introduction of English Literature as a subject of academic study both in the newly-compulsory state schools and at university level. It was not only in printed matter that Shakespeare's presence was felt. He was increasingly invoked as a symbol of Britishness and a shared touchstone of the empire, and this was never more evident than at the 1864 celebrations for the tercentenary of Shakespeare's birth, which took place in British territories across the globe. Linda Colley argues that 1864 was at least as significant as the 1769 Jubilee: while the earlier event, as discussed in Chapter 1, was 'largely confined to Stratford and the London theatres', 1864 was celebrated worldwide, with an emphasis on Shakespeare as a British, rather than English, figurehead.¹⁶ Colley cites a speech made by Joseph Howe, a Canadian politician, in which he made an explicit connection between Shakespeare and British civilisation:

All over the empire [...] in the great provinces of the East - in the Australian Colonies - at the Cape - in the West Indies - in the neighbouring Provinces of Canada and New Brunswick... wherever

¹⁵ Gary Taylor, *Reinventing Shakespeare: A Cultural History from the Restoration to the Present* (New York: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1989), pp. 183-184.

¹⁶ Linda Colley, 'Shakespeare and the Limits of National Culture', *Hayes Robinson Lecture Series*, no. 2 (Egham: Royal Holloway, 1999), pp. 17-18.

British communities have been formed and British civilisation has been fostered, will this day be honoured.¹⁷

Similarly, Richard Foulkes notes that the political endorsement accorded to Shakespeare after 1864 had implications for the expression of provincial civic pride. Shakespeare's status 'was often an important attraction for [theatre] managers who wished to gain approval and acceptance amongst the local city fathers', thus further securing Shakespeare's place in the dramatic repertoire.¹⁸ As respect for the man and his works grew, so too did the public appetite for information and accuracy. This led to the creation of societies such as Frederick James Furnivall's New Shakspeare Society, founded in 1874, which dedicated itself to applying new scientific methods of analysis to Shakespeare's works, and to the staging of pictorial, historically accurate productions of his plays at the London theatres of William Charles Macready, Charles Kean, Samuel Phelps, and Henry Irving.¹⁹ Finally, the development of Stratford-upon-Avon as a centre of pilgrimage for bardolators can also be considered a consequence of the Victorian desire to build a closer, more personal connection to Shakespeare.

The 1866 Select Committee's regard for Shakespeare and ambition to see his works accessed by all members of society did not always manifest in a positive manner. Time and again Committee members and, to a lesser extent, their witnesses, juxtaposed the supposed benefits of enjoying Shakespeare and other 'good pieces' against the corrupting influence of what MP James Lyster

¹⁷ *Shakspeare: Oration delivered by the Honourable Joseph Howe... 23rd April, 1864* (Halifax, N.S, 1864), pp. 3, 10, in Colley, 'National Culture', p. 17.

¹⁸ Richard Foulkes, 'Shakespeare in the Provinces', in *Shakespeare and the Victorian Stage*, ed. by Richard Foulkes (Cambridge: CUP, 1986), pp. 255-257 (p. 256).

¹⁹ Richard W. Schoch, 'Pictorial Shakespeare', in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Stage*, ed. by Stanley Wells and Sarah Stanton (Cambridge: CUP, 2002), pp. 58-75 (p. 59).

O'Beirne termed 'the nigger class of entertainment', a term which, in this context at least, encompassed actual black performers as well as whites in blackface.²⁰ In one example of this, Sir Arthur Buller MP asked Sir Richard Mayne, Chief Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police,

Would it not be an advantage to have a decent play, or even
Shakespeare performed [in music halls]?

[Mayne:] Yes, I think so.

[Buller:] It would be better to see Shakespeare than to see a nigger
grinning with the bones?

[Mayne:] Yes.²¹

As Mayne had already shown himself to be firmly in favour of uniting theatres and music halls under one license, Buller's determination to draw a contrast between Shakespeare and 'nigger entertainments' seems more connected to bolstering the Committee's wider narrative of social improvement than to establishing Mayne's position on the matter at hand. A more explicit link between license reform and working-class emancipation was made by John Locke MP in his examination of Henry Pownall, Chairman of the Middlesex bench of Magistrates and anti-reformist. Locke asked Pownall if he could see 'any objection to a person [outside a licensed theatre] acting a scene out of Shakespeare?', and when Pownall's reply reinforced his belief that such performances required 'a proper license', Locke responded,

²⁰ *SCTLR*, p. 59.

²¹ *SCTLR*, p. 48.

But whether he has a proper license or not, do you not think it is very much more desirable that persons should be enabled to go to a place (and even, if they choose, to eat and drink at the time) to witness a reasonable performance, than that they should be restricted to nothing else but a man singing, with his face blacked, and jumping about like a nigger; would not your course restrict it to that, instead of a more reasonable entertainment?²²

Here, Locke appears to be implying that Pownall's resistance to extending free trade to music halls is in some way tantamount to denying 'persons' – and by that he clearly means the working class – access to reasonable entertainment such as Shakespeare, thus contributing to their alienation from mainstream society.

It is possible to detect similar fears about national stability in witnesses' statements on the breakdown of the system of training actors in the provinces. I would argue that this fear, however, stemmed as much from the possible disruption of the approaching enfranchisement as it did from the collapse of long-standing systems of control that had already begun to take place within both the theatre and wider society; certainly the pre-existing balance of power outlined in the previous chapter, in which London managers plucked talent from the provinces as and when they required it, had been overturned. Witnesses frequently gave the impression that actors were taking advantage of the greater number of performance venues by seeking – and attaining – leading roles before they were ready. This was discussed in subtle language that suggested such

²² *SCTLR*, p.22.

behaviour was not just (negatively) affecting acting standards, including of course the ability to correctly perform Shakespeare, but was in some way indicative of wider social upheaval. Benjamin Webster of the Adelphi Theatre, for example, testified that ‘the school of acting was formerly in the country, and an actor *remained there* until there was a chance for his talent of an opening in London’: now, though, there was no school, as it had been ‘destroyed in consequence of free trade in the drama’.²³ The sense that provincial actors no longer knew their proper place was voiced in more explicit terms by dramatic author Shirley Brookes when committee chair Goschen asked him how he accounted for ‘the fact that the number of good actors has fallen off’. Brookes replied, ‘because you have no school for the art in London. Formerly the country was your school, and a man *did not dare* to present himself to a London audience unless he had gone through the course’.²⁴ John Knowles, proprietor of the Theatre Royal Manchester, echoed this sentiment in his testimony, in which he noted that,

[now] you do not get men of education on the stage; there was [before the 1843 Act] an ambition to get to the two patent theatres in London; they served their time in the country on 3l. and 4l. a week, in order to fit themselves to get to London; they *served their apprenticeship*, but now there is nothing of the sort.²⁵

John Baldwin Buckstone even went so far as to suggest that promising actors were debasing themselves by their impatience to secure a London engagement.

²³ *SCTLR*, p. 107: emphasis added.

²⁴ *SCTLR*, p. 160: emphasis added.

²⁵ *SCTLR*, p. 218: emphasis added.

After agreeing with the Committee that theatre companies were of a lower standard than '40 or 50 years ago', Buckstone was asked if he thought this was in consequence of the deterioration of the human race.

[Buckstone:] No; I think the race of actors has deteriorated

[Goschen:] At all events the human race has deteriorated in such a way that they are not fit to be actors?

[Buckstone:] Nowadays, when a young man can sing a song he will not wait to see if he can get a footing on the stage, but he goes to a music hall, and then he is not worth admitting into a theatre; his style becomes vulgar, and he is *unfit for the drama*.²⁶

As these witnesses saw it, men – there was no mention of women performers – were unwilling to bide their time in the country until a metropolitan manager decided that they were qualified to perform in the capital, and their selfish pursuit of fame and fortune in London was actively harming the city's theatre. In each statement, there is the sense that in losing the informal training school system of earlier decades the provinces had become in some way uncontained. Indeed, by 1866, the rapid acceleration of urbanisation and the growing railway network had rendered the boundaries between the metropole and the provinces increasingly blurred. Large industrial centres such as Liverpool, Birmingham and Manchester could hardly be considered provincial in terms of population size or economic power by the later nineteenth century, and this had considerable ramifications for the structure of cultural exchange. In the

²⁶ *SCTLR*, p. 124: emphasis added.

following section I examine in greater detail the changes to the national landscape that had taken place and consider the effect that these had on provincial theatre and on the relationship between centre and periphery, before turning in subsequent sections to the broader implications of this for provincial Shakespeare performance.

2.1.2 Railway Networks, Cultural Networks

Throughout the reign of Queen Victoria urbanisation transformed the living and working habits of the nation, most notably through the boom in population and settlement size. In 1841, there were only seven communities with more than 100,000 inhabitants, and forty-eight with between 20,000 and 100,000; by 1901 there were thirty-three communities with more than 100,000 inhabitants and 141 with at least 20,000.²⁷ The proportion of people residing in cities grew at an equally steady rate: in England and Wales, just under twenty per cent of the population lived in cities of more than 100,000 in 1831; by 1911 it had increased to forty-four per cent.²⁸ The cities, however, wielded influence over more than just those living within their boundaries, as Richard Dennis argues:

Given increasing geographical and social mobility, we can conclude that by the end of Victoria's reign, most of the population had experience of living in big cities at some stage in their lives, and even those who remained in rural areas would have encountered city life in numerous ways: through demands that cities placed on agricultural production, the circulation of newspapers and magazines

²⁷ Richard Dennis, 'Urbanising Experiences' in *The Victorian World*, ed. by Martin Hewitt (London: Routledge, 2012), pp. 241-258 (p. 241).

²⁸ Dennis, 'Urbanising Experience', p.241.

that originated in cities, the periodic 'invasion' of countryside by city dwellers seeking retreat from the pressures of urban life, but unconsciously bringing urban values with them.²⁹

The gradual dissolution of long-standing geographic frontiers was compounded by the continual expansion of the railway network throughout the 1800s, which made the population increasingly mobile and encouraged country-wide transit on a scale that would have been unimaginable at the beginning of the century. The connection between the theatre industry and the railways is well-established: Cochrane notes that '[a]ll histories of turn-of-the-century British theatre cite the way the extensive rail network facilitated the movement of touring theatre companies across Britain'.³⁰ However, touring companies travelling with entire productions – including cast, costume and (often) scenery– did not become common until the 1870s, whereas the railways were developed decades earlier. When the Select Committee met in 1866, the railways were nearing the end of a period of considerable expansion that saw most major settlements connected to the national network. Ian Gregory and Jordi Marti Henneberg write that,

²⁹ Dennis, 'Urbanising Experience', p. 241.

³⁰ Cochrane, *British Theatre*, p. 29.

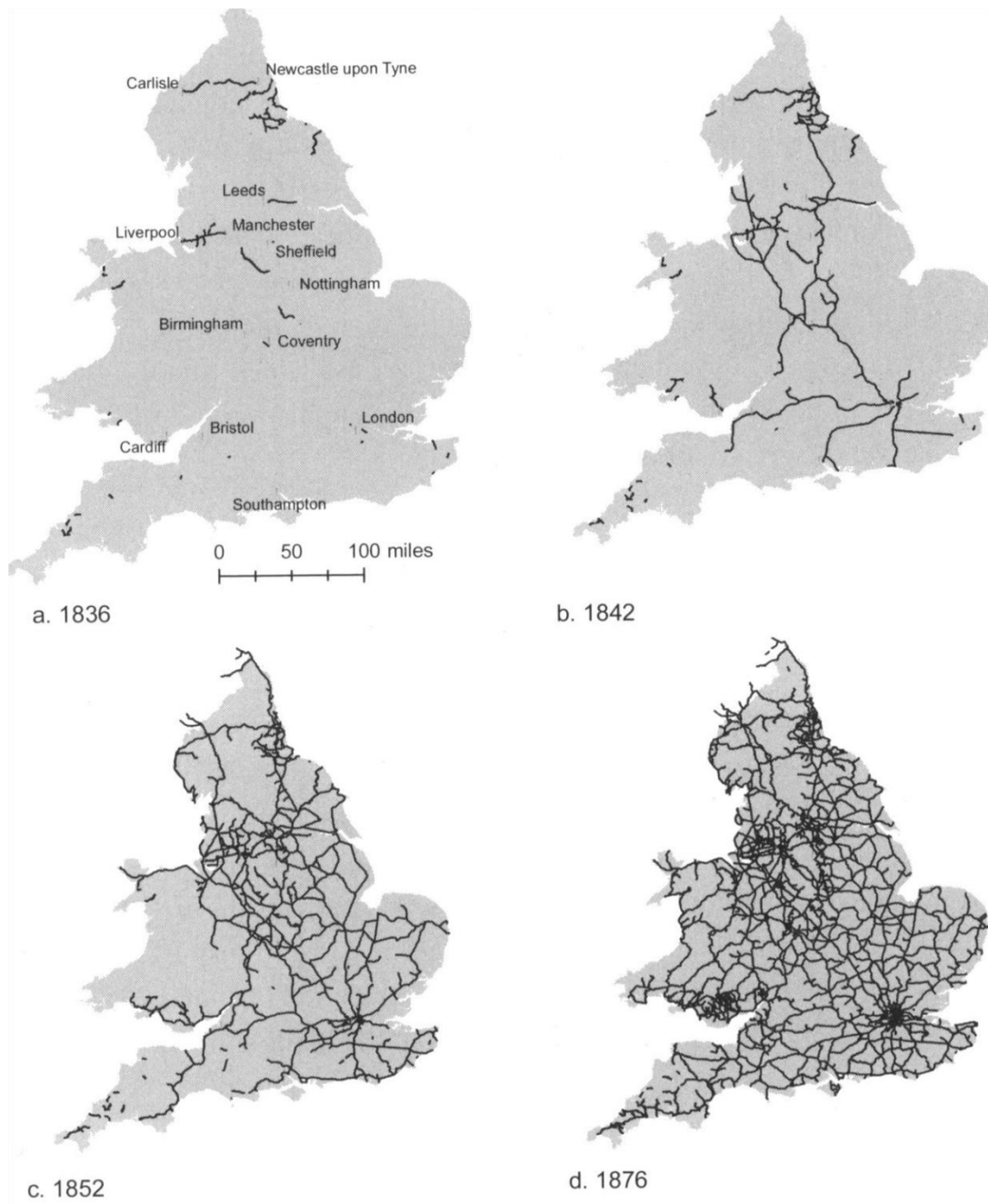


Figure 18- The National Network at four stages of its development (Gregory & Henneberg, 'Railways 1825-1911')

The growth of the railways in the period prior to World War I can be split loosely into three main stages: a short infancy period during which the railways were primarily used to move bulky goods short distances; the rapid growth of the network from the late 1830s to the 1860s or 1870s; and maturity from the 1870s on.³¹

By 1852, as Figure 18 illustrates, the trunk system was 'basically complete'; from that point onwards, 'railway companies increasingly concentrated on constructing lines between smaller centres and branch lines to connect towns to the main lines'.³² Many of the basic comforts of railway travel, such as on-board toilets and dining cars, would not be introduced until the 1880s and yet, by the late 1860s, passenger demand had grown so much that many stations had to be re-built to allow for greater capacity.³³

In Jack Simmons' comprehensive survey *The Railway in Town and Country, 1830-1914*, he cautions against generalising about the impact that the railways had on communities in England and Wales, noting;

The railway did not necessarily produce growth, in population or business. It might take people or business away. All this is easily illustrated: Bath was on the main line in 1840-1, Cambridge in 1845; yet in the immediately succeeding years the population of both towns fell. [...] as for the smaller country towns, their population rose and fell, very often as it seems without reference to railways at all. A town

³¹ Ian N. Gregory and Jordi Marti Henneberg, 'The Railways, Urbanisation and Local Demography in England & Wales, 1825-1911', *Social Science History*, 34:2 (2010), 199-228 (p. 201).

³² Gregory and Henneberg, 'Railways 1825-1911', p. 203.

³³ David Turner, *Victorian and Edwardian Railway Travel* (Oxford: Shire Publications, 2013), pp. 7, 10, 27.

left off a main line will clamour for a branch, get it, and then sometimes dwindle in size. The railway usually coincided with growth, and made some contribution towards producing it. That is clear enough. But there is no natural law in the matter. Towns and villages are as individual, as unpredictable, as human beings, and generalisations of this kind will seldom fit them at all.³⁴

Simmons allows that railways were 'an agent of change' and contributed to a range of developments including fluctuations in population, the growth of suburbs, advancement of industry and material environmental improvements; but, he argues, it was impossible to 'assess exactly the quantity of that change, still less its quality'.³⁵ These developments undoubtedly affected provincial theatre, most markedly in widening access to the capital while at the same time allowing provincial towns and cities to cultivate their own spheres of influence. Certainly the 1866 Select Committee was aware of, and at times concerned with, the effect that these changes had wrought on the country and on the entertainment industry. Causality between the railways and change was, however, as complex for theatre as it was for communities.

The first evidence of the 1866 Committee's responsiveness to developments encouraged by the railways was the widening of its focus. In 1832 the Committee's inquiry was orientated entirely around London, but in 1866 six witnesses with extensive experience in the provinces were called to give evidence, and most of these were specifically asked to discuss the state of the

³⁴ Jack Simmons, *The Railway in Town and Country, 1830-1914* (Trowbridge: David & Charles Publishers plc, 1986), p.16.

³⁵ Simmons, *Town and Country*, p. 17.

entertainment industry in their towns: the aforementioned John Baldwin Buckstone and John Knowles, of the Haymarket and Bradford Theatres and the Theatre Royal Manchester respectively; William Simpson, a provincial player with thirty years' experience; Major John James Greig, head constable of the Liverpool police force; John Jackson, head constable of Sheffield; and Daniel Saunders, manager of Davy's Music Hall in Birmingham. With the exception of Simpson, these witnesses hailed from some of the largest and most economically powerful towns in the country: Manchester, Liverpool and Birmingham each had a population of around half a million in 1871, with Bradford and Sheffield not far behind at around 300,000 apiece. This study's sample towns were dwarfed in comparison: Newcastle, the most populous, had c. 140,000 residents; Norwich, the smallest, had c. 75,000.³⁶ In selecting representatives from the country's thriving provincial towns, I would argue that the Committee was both acknowledging their success and showing recognition of the fact that the definition of 'provincial' was becoming rather strained, particularly in the cases of Manchester, Liverpool and Birmingham.

Furthermore, several witnesses were asked about, and commented on, the ways in which the railways had changed theatre-going habits, though not all who discussed this hailed from the provinces. One pertinent observation made by several witnesses was that, for the first time, the railways regularly brought audiences from outside the city into London theatres. Booth writes that visitors from the provinces started arriving in the capital en masse when the Great

³⁶ Population data is taken from the 'Total Population' table of the relevant districts at *A Vision of Britain Through Time* <www.visionofbritain.org.uk> [accessed 01 December 2017]. N.B. Unless stated otherwise, all other websites referenced in this chapter were accessed and live as of 01 December 2017.

Exhibition opened in 1851, and their numbers only increased with the growth of the rail network: by the 1860s, Euston, Paddington, Waterloo, King's Cross, London Bridge, St Pancras and Liverpool St were all established London termini, drawing visitors from all corners of the country.³⁷ Booth notes that,

[s]ince the volume of rail passenger travel in England trebled between 1850 and 1870, it seems reasonable to assume that the number of visitors from the provinces to London increased greatly in the same period. Such visits could be made for the day from suburban stations or country stations near London, as well as from much further away.³⁸

He points to the increase in long runs in West End theatres as evidence, observing that in the 1850s only thirteen productions ran for more than 100 nights; in the 1860s this rose to forty-five; and in the 1870s, 107 productions reached their centennial, one of which, H. J. Byron's *Our Boys*, ran for an astonishing 1,362 nights at the Vaudeville Theatre.³⁹ Such numbers, Booth argues, can be attributed to an 'enlarged [London] population, greater public and notably middle-class affluence, and significant numbers of provincial visitors'.⁴⁰ Thanks to London's position as the central point of the national network, the latter group were no longer restricted by their geographic proximity to the capital.

³⁷ Booth, *Victorian Age*, p. 14.

³⁸ Booth, *Victorian Age*, p. 14.

³⁹ Booth, *Victorian Age*, p. 13.

⁴⁰ Booth, *Victorian Age*, p. 13.

This view was shared by at least two Select Committee witnesses as well as the chairman Goschen: Charles Kean's declaration – cited at the beginning of this chapter – that wealthy patrons of the provincial dress-boxes 'can now come up to town, and they reserve themselves for the London theatres' was echoed by Buckstone. He attributed the disappearance of provincial circuit theatres to the railways, explaining that 'people can come to London to see a play and then get back so soon that they prefer to come to London to see good acting'.⁴¹ Their exchange continued:

[Goschen:] That is the case with other things as well as with regard to theatres; the people get the best article, and they come to London for it?

[Buckstone:] Yes; at the Haymarket I can always tell when a quantity of people have come from the surrounding districts; at a certain hour you can see them moving away to catch the trains to go home.

[Goschen:] Do you think it diminishes the number of theatres in small places, when people can easily come to a London theatre and go back by the last train?

[Buckstone:] Yes; the last train to Croydon from the City is a quarter past twelve at night.

[Goschen:] That would hardly apply to places at a great distance from London; say to the North of England?

⁴¹ *SCTLR*, p. 123.

[Buckstone:] They come up from Manchester and Liverpool, not purposely to go to the theatre, but if business calls them to London, many of those gentlemen do visit the theatres.

[Goschen:] They come more frequently to London than they used to do in former days?

[Buckstone:] Yes.⁴²

Evidently both Kean and Goschen were of the opinion that ease of access to the more prestigious London theatres not only reduced the number of potential theatre-goers in provincial towns, but could deter them from attending their local theatre altogether, as exposure to the better-financed and correspondingly higher-quality productions of the capital created dissatisfaction with the efforts of the local stock company. After the turn of the twentieth century, London would exert an ever-greater pull on provincial audiences as late-night overground and underground services were implemented: according to Simmons, by 1914 ‘no sizeable place within 25 miles of London was without a late service for theatregoers, nightly or once or twice a week’.⁴³ Within Buckstone’s broader testimony, however, there is evidence of a more nuanced, and at times contradictory view of the state of theatre in the provinces. The above exchange continued with Goschen asking if, ‘the same necessity for theatres in their [provincial visitors’] own localities does not exist?’, and Buckstone responding that, ‘at Manchester they have two more theatres than they used to have’.⁴⁴ Indeed, prior to agreeing that ready access to London was

⁴² *SCTLR*, pp. 123-124.

⁴³ Simmons, *Town and Country*, p.54.

⁴⁴ *SCTLR*, pp. 123-124.

diminishing theatre in 'small places', Buckstone had already stated that the number of theatres had 'increased in the larger towns, but [...] diminished in the small towns', again using Manchester's new venues as an example of growth in 'great towns'; after discussing which theatres had disappeared and which were booming with John Locke MP, he then added, 'in a great many small towns they are building theatres where they were never known before'.⁴⁵ Thus, within twenty questions from the Committee, he had asserted that theatre in 'small towns' was both diminished and expanding.

The inconsistencies within Buckstone's testimony – and those of others – can be attributed at least in part to the wording of the Select Committee's questions, which unintentionally set up witnesses to contradict themselves. The Committee would at times ask about provincial theatre with great specificity, naming individual towns or theatres, while at others would request a general assessment of 'country' theatre. This displayed an assumption, also seen in the 1832 Committee hearings, that all of provincial England shared the same characteristics. An exchange between the 1866 Committee and Major Greig, head constable of the Liverpool Police Force, revealed each party to be unfamiliar with major cultural institutions of the other's locale: Greig had never heard of London's infamous Alhambra Music Hall, and the Committee were similarly ignorant of the existence of the Liverpool Philharmonic.⁴⁶ Although the railways were shrinking national space, there was still a significant lack of communication between London and the rest of the nation.

⁴⁵ *SCTLR*, p. 123.

⁴⁶ *SCTLR*, pp. 247-248.

The reliability of Kean's and Buckstone's evidence must also be considered carefully. Though both men had regular contact with provincial theatres, they resided in London and enjoyed so high a status that their visits were hardly conducted in typical conditions. An appearance from a leading Shakespearean actor or the company from one of London's oldest and most prestigious theatres would be a cause of excitement in any provincial town, no matter how large, and would likely fill the house wherever they went. As such, Kean and Buckstone would have been expensive engagements, and it is surely possible that provincial managers in smaller towns claimed to be struggling financially in order to attempt to negotiate a lower fee. In addition, Kean showed his knowledge of provincial theatre to be flawed: despite beginning his career in 1827 and claiming to have 'been in all the towns in England, Scotland, and Ireland where there is a theatre', he revealed ignorance of the pre-1843 patent system when he incorrectly stated that the Theatre Royal Liverpool did not hold a patent, and that 'the only patent theatre that I knew of was Dublin'.⁴⁷ He was not alone in this fundamental misconception, as throughout the Committee's investigation MPs and witnesses alike used the term 'patent theatre' as shorthand for the London patents; it is unclear if this was from a casual disregard of the provincial patent theatres or a genuine lack of awareness that theatres outside London operated with parliamentary approval before the 1843 Act.

The impression given by Kean and Buckstone's evidence – however confused the latter may have become – that it was towns with rail connections

⁴⁷ *SCTLR*, pp. 234-235.

to London that were in theatrical decline was not shared by all witnesses. Joseph Stirling Coyne, a playwright and journalist, had been appointed secretary of the Dramatic Authors' Society in 1856, and held the position until his death in 1868.⁴⁸ Although he lived and worked in London, he was in regular communication with agents in the provinces who ensured that managers paid author fees, and as such may be considered to have enjoyed a more informed overview of theatre across the country than his peers. When asked if theatres were 'increasing or decreasing in the country', Coyne provided a careful response:

In large towns, where they can afford to play pieces moderately well, I am pretty certain that the theatres are in a prosperous condition; but there are many theatres in small towns which are going back and are disappearing. For instance, in many places where there are no railroads, and which places are at a great distance from London, the population does not support a theatre. The audiences occasionally see London pieces, or see pieces in Manchester or Birmingham, and they are not satisfied with the performances that can be given in those very small theatres, as they used to be in former years, when one scene, with a table and two or three chairs, was thought sufficient. The theatres decay in those towns, but they are improving vastly in the large towns.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ John Russell Stephens, 'Coyne, Joseph Stirling (1803-1868)', *OXDNB*, OUP, 2004 <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/6544>>.

⁴⁹ *SCTLR*, p. 210.

In other words, Coyne took the opposite stance to Kean and Buckstone: he believed that it was the absence of a connection to the national network that led to the closure of certain provincial theatres. In fact, the prosperity of individual provincial theatres cannot be solely attributed to their proximity, or lack thereof, to a railway station. As the quote from Jack Simmons at the beginning of this section states, 'towns and villages are as individual, as unpredictable, as human beings, and generalisations of this kind will seldom fit them at all'.⁵⁰ Rather, I would argue that these witnesses were cognisant that greater provincial stratification had created a complex web of competing theatrical centres, but were unable to articulate these changes, limited as their vocabulary was to describing provincial settlements as 'large', 'small' or 'very small'. In what follows, I aim to develop a more carefully nuanced delineation that details the effect of the railways upon the provincial theatrical structure. This will serve as the foundation of my argument throughout this chapter.

Although industrialisation created the circumstances under which some provincial towns were able to flourish, it was the railways that enabled these towns to expend their sphere of cultural influence. In 1866, and indeed until the late nineteenth century, only a privileged minority of provincial citizens had the time and money to make regular trips to London theatres, but their neglect of their local theatre may well have encouraged the aspirational middle classes to do the same, and look elsewhere for their evening entertainment. Crucially, the railways enabled theatre-goers who lacked the means to visit London but still enjoyed a disposable income to travel to what I will term the 'urban provincial

⁵⁰ Simmons, *Town and Country*, p.16.

centres': towns and cities of varying sizes that attracted visitors from their 'local provinces', or surrounding areas. Prior to the 1850s, only out-of-town residents with their own carriages would have been able to travel to attend the theatre, which meant that theatres were recruiting from a strictly limited pool of potential audience members. Competition occurred within and between each stratum; as Coyne's testimony suggests, powerful industrial cities such as Manchester, Birmingham and Liverpool were considered the regional equivalents of London and would have attracted audiences from a far greater radius than the likes of Nottingham and Norwich, on account of the number of different venues they offered, the fact that they could rely on visitors to the city on business as well as leisure, and their immensely well-situated position on the national railway network.

The appeal of theatres in these major urban provincial centres was widely recognised by Select Committee witnesses, including Dion Boucicault, a playwright, actor and theatre manager who had worked in and toured Britain extensively throughout his career, and who testified that the drama was 'very flourishing indeed in the principal large cities'.⁵¹ Theatre did indeed appear to be flourishing in certain parts of the country, especially in industrialising areas: the *Era Almanack* of 1868 lists a total of 133 non-London theatres, 110 of which were in England.⁵² Cochrane notes that these listings 'may have been dependent on managers' promotional efforts', and that there could be some venues missing, but they provide a useful overview nonetheless.⁵³ When the towns in which

⁵¹ *SCTLR*, p. 154.

⁵² *The Era Almanack 1868*, ed. by Frederick Ledger (The Era: London, 1868), pp. 50-51.

⁵³ Cochrane, *British Theatre*, p. 19.



Figure 19 - English theatres as listed in *The Era*, 1868

these theatres were located are plotted on a map, it is clear that there was an enormous concentration of theatrical activity in parts of the North, particularly in the Liverpool-Leeds corridor and the Newcastle conurbation (Fig. 19).⁵⁴ Many of the locations were industrial towns, such as Rochdale, Warrington, Barnsley and Stockton-On-Tees. Until the mid-nineteenth century these towns had not been large enough to support a theatre; now, they required leisure facilities for their ever-expanding populations, despite the fact that they were within relatively close reach to larger urban provincial centres and their longer-

⁵⁴ The towns named in *The Era Almanack* have been plotted rather than individual theatres.

established theatres.⁵⁵ That proprietors believed there was sufficient demand to sustain a permanent theatre in these towns further supports the notion that it was a relatively small proportion of the provincial population that travelled to larger locales to attend the theatre.

In terms of influence, my case study towns – all of which can be classified as urban provincial centres – sat below the behemoths of Manchester, Birmingham and Liverpool, but were of sufficient size and reputation to draw in visitors from their own local provinces. Provincial theatres had long sought to engage audience members from beyond the town boundaries: earlier nineteenth century Shakespeare playbills from Newcastle, Nottingham, Bath and Norwich frequently appealed to those in the ‘vicinity’ of the town to attend the theatre (Fig. 20).⁵⁶ I have found no evidence of this in the Brighton playbills, which may be due to the theatre’s standing as a diversion for Londoners visiting ‘the premier seaside resort in England’, rather than the local populace, for much of the early nineteenth century.⁵⁷ From the mid-century onwards the development of the railway network into small towns (many of which were still without a theatre of their own) presented an invaluable opportunity to my case study towns.

⁵⁵ For more on the development of working-class entertainment in this period, see the work of Peter Bailey, in particular *Leisure and Class in Victorian England: Rational Recreation and the Contest for Control, 1830-1885* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978).

⁵⁶ Playbill, *Henry IV*, TR Newcastle, 20 July 1809, NLSL L792 N536T 1808-10.

⁵⁷ Sue Berry, ‘Myth and Reality in the Representation of Resorts’, *Sussex Archaeological Collections*, 140 (2002), 97-112 (p. 98).

THEATRE-ROYAL, NEWCASTLE.

MR M'CREADY has the Honor of announcing to the Ladies and Gentlemen of Newcastle and its Vicinity, that he has engaged

Mr Stephen Kemble

To perform FOUR NIGHTS, the first of which will be
On *THURSDAY EVENING*, July 20, 1809,
When will be performed Shakespear's Historical Play of

KING HENRY IV.

The Part of Sir John Falstaff by Mr S. KEMBLE	
King Henry,	Mr REMINGTON
Prince of Wales,	Mr CONWAY
Earl of Worcester,	Mr RYAN
Poins,	Mr RADFORD
Carrier,	Mr BARNES
Francis,	Mr ATKINSON
Peto,	Mr CORNWALL
Bardolph,	Mr P. RYAN
Gadshill,	Mr W. REMINGTON
And Hotspur,	Mr FOOTE
Lady Percy,	Miss REMINGTON
Hostess,	Mrs DAWES.

End of the Play,
A PAS SEUL, to the KEEL ROW,
By Miss S. BOOTH.
A favorite AIR, by Miss King.

To which will be added, the admired Farce of

THE ROMP;
OR,
A Cure for the Spleen.

Watty Cockney,	Mr ATKINSON
Captain Sightly, (<i>with an additional Song</i>)	Mr PAYNE
Old Cockney,	Mr P. RYAN
And Barnacle,	Mr REMINGTON
Priscilla Tomboy, (the Romp)	Miss S. BOOTH
Miss La Blond,	Mrs BEVERLEY
And Penelope,	Miss REMINGTON.

On FRIDAY, the Comedy of THE RIVALS—the Part of Sir Anthony Absolute by Mr S. KEMBLE. With THE FARMER.

Doors to be opened at Six, and to begin precisely at Seven o'Clock.

BOXES 3s.—PIT 2s.—GALLERY 1s.

Places in the Boxes to be taken of Mr Hodgkinson from Eleven o'Clock till Two each Day.

No Person to be admitted, on any Account, behind the Scenes, except on Business.

J. Thompson, Printer, Newcastle.

Figure 20 - Henry IV, TR Newcastle, 20 Jan 1809 (NLSL)

This began as early as 1847 in Newcastle, which was the first provincial city to establish a railway ‘designed expressly for the carriage of passengers to and from outlying communities’.⁵⁸ The Newcastle & North Shields Railway was opened in 1839 and extended in 1847 to Tynemouth, and carried a great number of passengers in and out of the city: 690,000 in 1842/43, rising to 1,120,000 in 1845/46. By 1861 there were twenty-five trains each way daily between Newcastle and Tynemouth.⁵⁹ The theatre was apparently swift to capitalise on its new accessibility: in April 1847 the London star Helen Faucit was engaged for five nights, performing in *Isabella*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Patrician’s Daughter*, and *The Lady of Lyons*. The playbills advertised at the top of the bill that ‘A SPECIAL TRAIN Will leave for North Shields and Tynemouth on THURSDAY Evening, at the conclusion of the Performances’ and featured a train graphic to emphasise that fact (Fig. 21).⁶⁰ As the special train was only laid on for one night, it seems likely that in 1847 this was still a rare occurrence. Thursday was the night that *The Patrician’s Daughter* was performed, and it is interesting that this, a relatively new piece which had debuted at Drury Lane with Faucit in the lead role in 1842, was the production selected for the special service. Perhaps this performance was identified as an opportunity for the Theatre Royal to capitalise on its ability to offer new plays with famous performers earlier than the theatres in its local provinces: North Shields had had its own theatre since the eighteenth century, and regularly

⁵⁸ Simmons, *Town and Country*, p. 112.

⁵⁹ Simmons, *Town and Country*, p. 112.

⁶⁰ Playbill, *Much Ado About Nothing*, TR Newcastle, 27 April 1847, BLPBC vol. 262.

THEATRE ROYAL,
NEWCASTLE UPON TYNE.
 Lessee, Mr E. D. DAVIS, 34, Blackett Street,

A SPECIAL TRAIN
 Will leave for North Shields and Tynemouth, on THURSDAY Evening, at the conclusion of the Performances.
Doors open at half-past 6, Performance to commence at 7.

SECOND APPEARANCE
 THIS SEASON OF THE CELEBRATED TRAGIC ACTRESS MISS HELEN

FAUCIT,
 WHO IS ENGAGED FOR POSITIVELY
5 NIGHTS ONLY!
TUESDAY EVENING, APRIL 27.
 Will be performed the inimitable Comedy of
MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING.

Don Pedro.....	Mr JAMES JOHNSTONE	Leonato.....	Mr MILLS.
Don John (on this Occasion).....	Mr J. M. DAWSON.	Claudio.....	Mr EVERETT.
Balthazar.....	Mr H. DEVAL.	Benedick.....	Mr DAVIS.
Verges.....	Mr SUTER.	Antonio.....	Mr GUY.
Sexton.....	Mr ROBSON.	Conrade.....	Mr C. F. MARSHALL.
		Seacoal.....	Mr STOKES.
			Mr PATTISON.
			Mr PURRAY.

Beatrice, - Miss HELEN FAUCIT.
 Hero..... Mrs MARSHALL. Margaret..... Miss REYNOLDS. Ursula..... Miss MURRAY.

To conclude with the elegant Petite Comedy of
NAVAL ENGAGEMENTS.

Admiral Kingston, R. N.....	Mr C. F. MARSHALL.	Lieutenant Kingston, R. N.....	Mr SIDNEY DAVIS.
Short (the Landlord).....	Mr JONES.	Bennis (the Waiter).....	Mr SUTER.
Miss Mary Mortimer.....	Miss FANNY WALLACE.		Mrs Pontifex.....
			Mrs HENRY.

→ On Wednesday Evening, Shakspeare's Tragedy of "Romeo and Juliet," Juliet, Miss Helen Faucit. And the Drama of "Raymond and Agnes."
 → On Thursday Evening, "The Patrician's Daughter," Lady Mabel Lynterne, Miss Helen Faucit. And "Scenes in India."
 → On Friday (positively the Last Night of Miss Helen Faucit's Engagement), the "Lady of Lyons," Pauline, Miss Helen Faucit. And "A Day in Paris."
 On Monday, May 3d, a variety of Entertainments for the Benefit of Mrs DAVIS, and positively the Last Night of the Season.

Newcastle Printed by M. Benson, 8, Dean Street.

Figure 21 - *Much Ado About Nothing*, TR Newcastle, 27 April 1847 (BLPBC)

staged productions of Shakespeare as well as melodramas – *The Lady of Lyons* was staged at least as recently as 1842 – but this could have been the first time many in the area had had the opportunity to see *The Patrician's Daughter*.⁶¹ Alternatively, Newcastle's manager may have been less confident of filling the house with city residents for this lesser-known piece, forcing him to look further afield. There would have been no such concerns for at least three of the other pieces: Faucit was renowned for her Shakespearean roles of Beatrice and Juliet, and Pauline in *The Lady of Lyons* was, according to biographer Carol J. Carlisle, Faucit's most popular role.⁶²

Similarly, in June the following year the Edinburgh Company were engaged at the theatre for two weeks, during which they played a mixture of Shakespearean favourites – *Othello*, *Henry IV part 1*, *Hamlet* and *Much Ado About Nothing* – along with popular melodrama. On their penultimate night they performed *Much Ado* under the patronage of Capt. Weatherley, the Sherriff of Newcastle, as a benefit for company member Mr Lloyd; the support of a high-status officer such as Weatherley would have been sure to attract theatre-goers of a similar social standing. The playbill for this night advertised that there would be a 'Special Train For North and South Shields, Tynemouth, &c. after the Performances', and once again employed the train illustration (Fig. 22).⁶³

⁶¹ Playbill, *The Lady of Lyons*, TR Newcastle, 20 January 1845, BLPBC vol. 296.

⁶² Carol J. Carlisle, 'Faucit, Helen [real name Helena Faucit Saville or Savill; married name Helena Martin, Lady Martin] (1814-1898)', *OXDNB*, OUP, 2004
<<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/9200>>.

⁶³ Playbill, *Much Ado About Nothing*, TR Newcastle, 09 June 1848, BLPBC vol. 262.

Theatre Royal, Newcastle.

UNDER THE MANAGEMENT OF MR E. GLOVER & MR LLOYD.
WHO HAVE RENTED THE ABOVE ESTABLISHMENT FOR A FEW NIGHTS OF THE
 Lessee, Mr. E. D. DAVIS, Blackett Street, Newcastle.


Under the Distinguished Patronage of CAPT. WEATHERLEY,

SHERIFF
OF NEWCASTLE.

LAST NIGHT BUT ONE OF THE
Edinbro' Company.

The Nobility, Gentry, and Public are respectfully informed this Evening is fixed for

MR. LLOYD'S BENEFIT,
ON WHICH OCCASION
MISS FITZPATRICK
Has kindly volunteered her services.

Special Train

 For North and South Shields, Tynemouth, &c. after the Performances.

ON FRIDAY EVENING, JUNE 9,
Will be presented Shakspeare's celebrated Comedy entitled

MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING!

D on Pedro, Prince of Arragon, by Mr WYNDHAM. Don John, his Brother, Mr POWER.
 Claudio, a Young Lord of Florence, Favourite to Don Pedro, by Mr W. H. EBURNE.
 Benedic, a Young Lord of Padua, Favourite likewise to Don Pedro, by Mr EDMUND GLOVER.
 Leonardo, Governor of Messina, by Mr WEEKLEY. Antonio, his Brother, by Mr ALEXANDER. Borachio, by Mr FREEMAN.
 Conrade, by Mr VAUDREY. Balthazar, by Mr H. VIVASH. Priest, by Mr BAIN. Sexton, by Mr S. LAKE.
 Dogberry, an Officer of Police, by Mr LLOYD. Verges, another Officer of the Watch, by Mr HONEY.
 Oateake, by Mr C. BLAND. Seacoal, by Mr MELROSE.
 Beatrice Niece to Leonato, by Miss FITZPATRICK. Hero, Daughter to Leonato, by Miss VIVASH.
 Margaret and Ursula, Gentlewomen attending on Hero, by Miss H. COVENEY and Mrs W. H. EBURNE.

Comic Song, "The Humours of a Country Fair," by Mr Lloyd.
 REDOWA POLKA, BY MISS HARTLEY & MR GILBERT.
 Duet, "What's a' the Steer, Kimmer," Misses Coveney.

The whole to conclude with the celebrated Farce called

HIGH LIFE BELOW STAIRS ;
OR THE SERVANT'S HOLIDAY.

Lovel, by Mr E. GLOVER. Freeman, by Mr VAUDREY. My Lord Duke, by Mr WYNDHAM.
 Sir Harry, by Mr LLOYD. Philip, by Mr ALEXANDER. Tom, by Mr HONEY.
 Kingston, by Mr S. LAKE. Coachman, by Mr H. VIVASH.
 Lady Charlotte, by Miss NICOL. Lady Bab, by Miss HARRIET COVENEY. Cook, by Miss JAMES
 Mistress Kitty, by Mrs TELLET.

On Saturday Evening, "The Momentous Question," "An Object of Interest,"
 a Variety of Singing and Dancing, and "The Golden Farmer."
— This Evening, Gallery Sixpence from the commencement.

On Monday Evening, the 12th instant,

Mr. Edmund Glover's Benefit,
 and positively the Last Night of the Edinburgh Company.

Doors open at Seven—The Performances commence at Twenty Minutes past Seven precisely.
Second Price at Nine o'clock, or as nearly as possible, to prevent any interruption to the progress of the Performances.

NEWCASTLE: PRINTED BY M. BENSON, NO. 8, DEAN STREET.

Figure 22 - Much Ado About Nothing, TR Newcastle, 09 June 1848 (BLPBC)

Notably, the number of towns that the theatre was recruiting from had increased, but special trains were evidently still only engaged for particularly significant performances.

In the later nineteenth century, as railway engineering improved and journeys became faster and more comfortable, taking the train home from the theatre became a regular, rather than special, event in certain areas. By 1890, the Theatre Royal Brighton regularly printed a list of late train times and the stations they called at at the bottom of their playbills, under the title 'IMPORTANT NOTICE TO COUNTRY RESIDENTS' (Fig. 23).⁶⁴ The use of the term 'country' to refer to Brighton's local provinces may have been employed in this way because the town had never considered itself to be 'country' due to its special relationship with the capital. However, I would suggest that it is also possible that usage of the term had shifted from earlier in the century, when Select Committee members had used it to refer to the provinces as a whole, and may now have been applied to the local provinces alone, reflecting the recognition attributed to urban provincial centres in a fully-industrialised society. Brighton enjoyed a greater level of prestige than most, which Jack Simmons credits to the transformative effect of the railways, noting that their arrival in 1841 lifted the town from an economic and cultural depression and gave it a new lease of life by binding it more closely to London.⁶⁵ Brighton's

⁶⁴ Playbill, *Romeo and Juliet; The Hunchback; The Lady of Lyons*, TR Brighton, 27 October 1890, The Keep BH600831.

⁶⁵ Simmons, *Town and Country*, pp. 236-238.

Sir Thomas Clifford	Mr E. H. VANDERFELT	Master Gaylove	Mr GILBERT YORK
Master Walter	Mr GEORGE WARDE	Master Wilford	Mr F. WEATHERSBY
Modus	Mr HENRY ARNCLIFFE	Stephen	Mr R. de FONBLANQUE
Fathom	Mr GILBERT TRENT	Thomas	Miss C. PAUNCEFORT
Lord Tinsel	Mr ARTHUR GRENVILLE	Helen	AND
Master Heartwell	Mr W. R. STAVELEY	Miss Fortescue	JULIA

FRIDAY, October 31st,

THE LADY OF LYONS

Claude Melnotte	Mr E. H. VANDERFELT	1st Officer	Mr ARTHUR GRENVILLE
Colonel Damas	Mr GEORGE WARDE	2nd Officer	Mr R. de FONBLANQUE
Beausant	Mr HENRY ARNCLIFFE	3rd Officer	Mr F. WEATHERSBY
Glavis	Mr GILBERT YORK	Madame Deschappelles	Miss KATE HODSON
Deschappelles	Mr JOHN GIBSON	Widow Melnotte	Miss CLAIRE PAUNCEFORT
Gaspar	Mr GILBERT TRENT	AND	PAULINE
Landlord	Mr W. R. STAVELEY	Miss Fortescue	

Preceded, for the First Time on any Stage, by a New Play, called

BABY-A WARNING TO MESMERISTS

By LADY VIOLET GREVILLE.

In which **MR ARTHUR BOURCHIER** will appear.

General Manager - (for Miss Fortescue) - Mr H. H. MORELL

Treasurer	For Miss FORTESCUE	Mr E. WHITTY
Assistant Stage Manager		Mr F. WEATHERSBY
Stage Manager		Mr FITZROY MORGAN

Doors open at SEVEN o'clock. The Performance to commence at Half-past.

MORNING PERFORMANCE. Doors open at 1.30. Performance to commence at 2.

Private Boxes, £1 ls., £1 1ls. 6d., and £2 2s. Orchestra Stalls (Bonnets not allowed), 6s.

Dress Circle (Bonnets can be worn in the Three Back Rows), 5s. Pit Stalls (Reserved, Bonnets allowed), 4s.

Upper Circle, 2s. 6d. Pit, 1s. 6d. Amphitheatre, 1s. Gallery, 6d. Children in arms not admitted.

Side Entrance to Pit only at 1 and 6.30, 6d. extra. Box-office open from 10 till 6, under the direction of Mr A. WHEELER.

Stage Manager.....Mr F. J. WATTS. Musical Director.....Mr W. SOMMERLAD. Scenic Artist.....Mr T. PILBEAM.

IMPORTANT NOTICE TO COUNTRY RESIDENTS.

LATE TRAINS LEAVE BRIGHTON (CENTRAL STATION) Every Evening as follows :-

10.35. Stopping at Hassocks, Burgess Hill, Hayward's Heath, Red Hill, East Croydon, and London Bridge.
EVERY THURSDAY a SPECIAL LATE TRAIN leaves BRIGHTON at 11.30, Stopping at Hassocks, Burgess Hill, and Hayward's Heath.

10.50. (10.53 from LONDON ROAD STATION). Stopping at Lewes, Polegate, Eastbourne, St. Leonards, and Hastings.

11.0. Stopping at West Brighton, Portslade, Southwick, Shoreham, Lancing, and Worthing.

SPECIAL MATINÉE,
THURSDAY, October 30th, at 2.30,
THE BOOKMAKER.

MONDAY, NOV. 3rd,
PINK DOMINOS.

T. PHILLIPS "Caxton Printing Works," 13, New Road, Brighton.

Figure 23 - Romeo and Juliet; The Hunchback; The Lady of Lyons, TR Brighton, 27 October 1890 (The Keep)

social season, which had formerly run from October to March, was now year-round, and it became a destination for day-trippers as well as a home for London commuters: E. L. Blanchard, the author of the 1848 *Adams's Illustrated Guide to the Watering-Places of England* observed that 'merchants who formerly made Dulwich or Dalston the boundaries of their suburban residences now have got their mansions on the south coast, and still get in less time, by a less expensive conveyance, to their counting-houses in the City'.⁶⁶ As a result Brighton was, notes Simmons, one of only three English towns (as opposed to cities) that 'generated suburbs large or numerous enough to justify intensive [railway] services to them', the others being Plymouth and Stoke-on-Trent.⁶⁷

It is therefore unlikely that the theatres of Norwich, Nottingham or Bath exerted a comparable influence on the inhabitants of their local provinces, as in each case they had a less prosperous relationship with the railways than Newcastle and Brighton. Before 1900, Nottingham's stations were on the outskirts of the city and its suburban railway, which opened in 1889, was poorly planned, and never thrived. Jo Robinson has found that select playbills for the 1865/66 pantomime at the Theatre Royal Nottingham did advertise excursion and special trains calling at nearby towns and villages, but I would argue that pantomimes occupied a special place in the theatrical calendar and are therefore unrepresentative of regular theatregoing behaviours and activities.⁶⁸ Bath, though well connected to the national network, maintained a static population of

⁶⁶ E. L. Blanchard, *Adams's Illustrated Guide to the Watering-Places of England* (1848), p. 95; referenced in Simmons, *Town and Country*, p. 237.

⁶⁷ Simmons, *Town and Country*, p. 151.

⁶⁸ Jo Robinson, 'Mapping the Place of Pantomime in a Victorian Town', in *Victorian Pantomime: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by Jim Davis (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 137-154 (p. 151).

50,000 residents from the mid-century onwards and avoided industrialisation, resulting in a gradual decline in its national standing. Although Norwich worked hard to maintain its role as the centre of commerce and industry for Norfolk, the council rejected developing their lines westward, leading the city to mirror Bath's wane in status.⁶⁹

In this section, I have revealed the competing spheres of theatrical influence that developed outside London as a result of the twin forces of the railways and urbanisation. Some towns withered, lost audience shares to more desirable competition and closed down their theatres, while others flourished economically and built new theatres that attracted audiences from further afield. A select few major urban provincial centres even became powerful theatrical centres in their own right and exerted a considerable influence on their surrounding areas. There were, however, further implications of the railway age that, in conjunction with those outlined above, deeply affected provincial Shakespeare performance. The ease with which performers could now travel around the country gave rise to the subject of my next section: the phenomenon of the provincial tragedian.

2.2 The Provincial Tragedian and the Decline of the Stock Company

In the previous section, I outlined the structural changes that took place within the provincial theatre industry in the latter half of the nineteenth century; here, I

⁶⁹ Simmons, *Town and Country*, pp. 104, 115, 141, 145, 239.

examine the ways in which the railway network affected change in provincial theatres in the period after the founding of the railways but before the advent of touring companies in the 1870s. This interim period has received little attention from scholars, with the exception of Foulkes and George Rowell, who both focus on provincial audiences' increasing dissatisfaction with stock company efforts in the mid-nineteenth century, an issue that Foulkes regards as a factor in the arrival of a type of performer commonly characterised as the 'provincial tragedian'.⁷⁰ Although, as I discuss below, provincial tragedians are worthy of further attention, they were by no means the only distinguishing feature of provincial theatre in this era: missing from both accounts is the broadening of influences that provincial theatres both drew upon and exercised, as well as the rise of extra-theatrical Shakespeare readings, which served the anti-theatrical and bardolatrous sections of society.

When Kathleen Barker wrote her 1982 thesis, *Provincial Entertainment 1840-1870: The Performing Arts in Five Provincial Towns*, she noted that the phenomenon of the provincial tragedian 'deserves a thesis to itself'.⁷¹ Thirty-five years later, her work remains the most prominent examination of this topic and few articles have been written on the subject since. Defining an artist as a provincial tragedian is difficult, as the term does not appear to have been used by performers themselves, or at least by Shakespearean actors: in my sample of 2,421 Shakespearean playbills from theatres across the country between the late eighteenth century and the early twentieth, there are no uses of the term

⁷⁰ Foulkes, 'Provinces', pp. 174-175.

⁷¹ Kathleen Barker, 'The Performing Arts in Five Provincial Towns, 1840-70' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Leicester, 1982), p. 358.

‘provincial tragedian’. It was, however, applied by the press: the *Era*, for example, sporadically referred to performers in this way throughout the nineteenth century. A search through the *Era*’s digitised back catalogue on British Newspapers Online finds that the phrase was used seven times from 1840 to 1849, twice from 1850 to 1859, eleven times from 1860 to 1869, and four times from 1870 to 1879.⁷² Digitisation is not a perfect tool and it may not pick up every usage, so these figures are not necessarily meaningful. The context in which the term ‘provincial tragedian’ is used in each decade does, however, indicate who in the theatre industry was using that phrase.

Of the seven articles from 1840 to 1849, ‘provincial tragedian’ is used in reviews and adverts for theatres in various locations: London, Dublin, Bolton, and the Cumbrian towns Kendal and Ulverston. From 1850 onwards, however, only listings for London theatres use this term, from relatively well-established and respected venues such as Drury Lane, the Princess’s, Sadler’s Wells and the Royal Surrey, to the less salubrious Marylebone, National Standard and Elephant and Castle. This seems to suggest that, after 1850, tragedians only became classified as ‘provincial’ when they performed in the capital. That touring actors preferred to define themselves as simply ‘tragedians’ when appearing in the provinces is documented in the playbills as well as the press: in the first half of the nineteenth century, the term ‘tragedian’ appears on playbills for a small number of performers, and seems to be particularly associated with William Charles Macready and Charles Kean, both of whom were often billed as ‘the great’ or ‘the celebrated’ tragedian. From 1850, as playbills became generally

⁷² *British Newspapers Online* <<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/>> [accessed 07 March 2016].

more descriptive, the term appears with increasing frequency. I would suggest that this may be the result of increasing competition: as the overall number of touring actors increased, those performers – or the managers of the theatres that they visited – were moved to describe themselves in grandiose terms as a way to generate interest amongst potential theatre-goers. For the purposes of consistency, I will use ‘provincial tragedian’ to refer to those performers that spent the majority of their time touring the provinces, ‘star’ for those with permanent London engagements, and ‘visiting performer’ as a blanket term for both groups. Though the credentials of stars and provincial tragedians may have varied, both types of visiting performer based their appeal on their connection to the theatrical centre and typically operated in a similar fashion, as I detail below.

In George Rowell and Anthony Jackson’s 1984 monograph, *The Repertory Movement: A History of Regional Theatre in Britain*, Rowell dedicates a brief chapter to nineteenth century theatre.⁷³ By way of an explanation of the change from producing to receiving that overcame almost all provincial theatres in the final decades of the 1900s, Rowell states that;

Visiting stars were an effective if expensive attraction, but provincial audiences became increasingly critical of a [William Charles] Macready supported by born asses and actresses drinking brandy. They looked for a carefully rehearsed ensemble and staging up to London standards. The reform and refinement of theatrical

⁷³ George Rowell and Anthony Jackson, *The Repertory Movement: A History of Regional Theatre in Britain* (Cambridge: CUP, 1984).

presentation following the [1843] Theatre Regulation Act had established those standards, and the rapid growth of the railways made them available to the provinces.⁷⁴

The characterisation of provincial performers as ‘born asses’ and alcoholics is drawn from Macready’s *Diaries*, in which he was frequently scathing about the companies he worked with during his provincial visits from the 1830s to the 1850s.⁷⁵ The *Diaries* are also used by Foulkes in his chapter ‘Shakespeare in the Provinces’, which covers the entirety of the nineteenth century.⁷⁶ Like Rowell, Foulkes refers to Macready’s verdict on stock companies, although he is less immediately accepting of Macready’s characterisation and notes that Macready recorded times when he felt provincial actors helped him develop his roles as well as instances when he was frustrated by incompetence.⁷⁷ Relying on such a source for an accurate picture of theatre in the provinces is, however, somewhat problematic: not only is Macready’s motivation in keeping diaries unknown – he may, like many actors of the period, have held the intention to publish as he was writing and therefore exaggerated his experiences to entertain his future readers – but, in the period covered by his diaries, he only encountered provincial theatre as a visiting star, meaning he had extremely limited rehearsal time with each provincial company. Productions performed by the stock company alone would have been well-practised, and consequently likely to be carried out to a higher standard. Furthermore, Macready was of course judging

⁷⁴ Rowell and Jackson, *Repertory*, pp. 10-11.

⁷⁵ See William Toynbee, (ed.), *Diaries of William Charles Macready, 1833-1851*, 2 vols (London, 1912).

⁷⁶ Richard Foulkes, ‘Shakespeare in the Provinces’ in *Shakespeare in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Gail Marshall (Cambridge: CUP, 2012), pp. 169-186.

⁷⁷ Foulkes, ‘Provinces’, p. 174.

provincial theatres against those in the capital, whereas the majority of provincial theatre-goers would not have been able to do so before the advent of the railway age. Consequently, narratives such as Macready's cannot solely account for the changes in provincial presentation that emerged in the 1850s and 1860s, although they have evidently coloured later views of the period.

Foulkes cites the trend for pictorial Shakespeare in the London theatres as the main stimulus for changes to the star-and-stock model of cultural exchange between London and the provinces outlined in the previous chapter. He writes that,

[t]he natural tendency was to follow the lead of London where elaborate, and in the case of history plays, painstakingly researched, antiquarian sets appealed to the audiences of Macready, Samuel Phelps, Charles Kean, Henry Irving and Herbert Beerbohm Tree with the result that Shakespeare's plays were performed with the unstinting apparatus of the pictorial stage in a manner greatly at odds with the simple style of the public theatres for which most of them had been written. There were practical considerations that prevented the wholesale adoption of London practices in the provinces. Even with the spread of the railway, transporting full-scale productions was a challenge [...] Therefore for a time at least provincial theatres generally lagged behind London and the phenomenon of the 'Provincial Tragedian' took centre stage.⁷⁸

⁷⁸ Foulkes, 'Provinces', pp. 174-175.

In other words, advances in stage technology in London theatres meant that imitation was out of the question for most provincial theatres, but provincial tragedians appeared as a form of compensation. Kathleen Barker has similarly traced the development of this class of performer back to the 1850s, which matches my own findings from the playbills, but she attributes their rise to the lack of 'serious actors of national status who could spend any appreciative time in the provinces'.⁷⁹ By Barker's reasoning, the lifting of restrictions on performing Shakespeare following the 1843 Act worked to democratise theatre by producing more actors who had experience playing Shakespeare in London, but created fewer bona fide stars. While Foulkes and Barker both make sound arguments, I would argue that the railways also contributed to this phenomenon, primarily through allowing performers to travel around Britain with greater speed and ease than was possible in the horse-powered era. This in turn encouraged more performers to capitalise on provincial audiences' ever-present desire to transcend the local and experience a performance that offered the possibility of a taste of London quality, even if, in Barker's words, the tragedian in question had come 'no nearer the West End than the City of London or the Victoria [former illegitimate theatres]'.⁸⁰

The rise of the provincial tragedian had marked consequences for provincial Shakespeare performance. Shakespeare was more revered than ever, and his characters were still core features of any aspiring star's repertoire: a mastery of Hamlet, Othello, Macbeth and Shylock was practically mandatory for

⁷⁹ Kathleen Barker, 'The Performing Arts in Five Provincial Towns, 1840-70' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Leicester, 1982), p. 358.

⁸⁰ Barker, 'Five Provincial Towns', p. 358.

all touring performers, be they stars or provincial tragedians. Therefore, the number of provincial Shakespeare productions with a non-local lead may have risen disproportionately against the more gradual rise in the overall number of provincial performances featuring a visiting performer. The consequence of this was that stock actors had fewer opportunities to take leading roles themselves. This was exacerbated in the late 1860s when, as Barker has observed, some provincial managers began to shorten the stock company season to allow for longer engagements of touring companies – usually operatic rather than dramatic – that had formerly been restricted to the summer months.⁸¹ With a shorter season, there were fewer performances overall, but the frequency of visits from touring stars did not decrease. By the end of the 1860s, the stock companies in my sample towns rarely – if ever – performed Shakespeare without a visiting performer in a leading role.

This trend can be illustrated by the performances recorded in the playbills consulted for this thesis. I have collected data from 465 playbills covering the theatrical seasons from 1850/51 to 1859/60. These cover more than that number of individual performances, as from 1850 the Theatre Royal Norwich began advertising multiple pieces in one bill and repeating productions close together, so one playbill could cover a week or a fortnight of performances. Of those 465 playbills, seventy, or fifteen per cent, advertise a Shakespearean production; just twelve of that seventy feature a visiting star performer. Between the 1860/61 and 1869/70 seasons, there are 723 playbills – again covering more than that number of performances, as Brighton joined Norwich in

⁸¹ Barker, 'Five Provincial Towns', pp. 282-289, 305-311.

advertising multiple dates and productions – seventy-two of which were for Shakespearean pieces. Of those, forty-one listed a visiting performer. In summary, on the evidence of the available playbills, seventeen per cent of Shakespeare productions from 1850 to 1860 featured one or more stars, compared to fifty-seven per cent from 1860 to 1870.

There are a number of weaknesses with the data used to make these calculations. If we estimate that the average theatre in the five sample towns opened their theatrical season from October to April and played five nights a week, and take into consideration the fact that the data includes summer performances from operatic touring companies, there are evidently hundreds of productions unaccounted for in the 1850s, and a smaller but still considerable number in the 1860s. Furthermore, the number of playbills is not equally distributed between each theatre, and so it is possible that one or more towns bucked this trend. However, the proportion of the season dedicated to Shakespeare in each decade is similar – fifteen per cent in the 1850s, ten per cent in the 1860s – which suggests that the selection is not skewed in favour of or against a particular genre of performance in either case. More importantly, the trend of the stock company becoming gradually squeezed out by touring stars in the mid-Victorian era as identified here supports the observations made by Foulkes and Barker. Therefore, it seems reasonable to assert that provincial audiences did in fact become gradually more accustomed to seeing Shakespeare productions led by visitors rather than their local stock actors over the 1850s and 1860s.

Novelty remained key to attracting audiences to Shakespeare performances, but, as a consequence of the rise of the touring tragedian, this was now more likely to come from the performer rather than the play itself. Provincial tragedians, like their London counterparts and indeed actor-managers throughout the country, favoured roles that granted them ample stage-time, and so their repertoires tended to mirror those of stars from the earlier nineteenth century. The plays that recur in the playbills again and again are *Hamlet*, *Richard III*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Othello*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *Macbeth*. There were, of course exceptions to this rule, such as Charles and Henry Webb, twin brothers who toured as the Dromios in *The Comedy of Errors*, a play that was otherwise seldom staged in the nineteenth century.⁸² Jonathan Bate, Eric Rasmussen, David Bevington, Stanley Wells and Andrew Dickson have all written about the Webbs' production in relation to performances in 1864 at the Princess's Theatre and in Stratford for the tercentenary celebrations, but in fact the Webbs had toured their piece on the theatrical periphery for years before appearing in the centre. They made their first appearance as twin Dromios in 1860 at the Queen's Royal Theatre Dublin, where Henry Webb was manager.⁸³ That year they took their production to the Queen's Theatre and Opera House Edinburgh and the Theatre Royal Glasgow, and from 1860 to 1864 toured to the Theatre Royal Birmingham, the Prince of

⁸² 'The Comedy of Errors in Performance: The RSC and Beyond', in William Shakespeare, *The Comedy of Errors*, ed. by Jonathan Bate and Eric Rasmussen (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 92-93.

⁸³ See *Comedy of Errors*, ed. by Bate and Rasmussen, p. 93; David Bevington, *This Wide and Universal Theater: Shakespeare in Performance, Then and Now* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2007), p. 67; Stanley Wells, *Shakespeare: For All Time* (Oxford: OUP, 2003), p. 319; Andrew Dickson, *The Globe Guide to Shakespeare: The plays, the productions, the life* (London: Profile Books, 2016), p. 50.

Wales in Liverpool, and the Theatre Royal Belfast.⁸⁴ The brothers continued to visit provincial theatres after gaining national attention with their 1864 performances, and made sure to emphasise their new metropolitan credentials. During a twelve night engagement at the Theatre Royal Nottingham in May 1866, the playbills commanded readers to 'Read the Opinions of the Principal Newspapers on the revival of this COMEDY in LONDON'.⁸⁵ After Henry's sudden death in January 1867, Charles continued to tour the production until at least 1873, performing Dromio with younger Webb brother Blanchard Henry and, on at least one occasion, Charles junior (presumably Charles' son).⁸⁶ The extent to which their production had penetrated the popular imagination is attested to by the inclusion of an impersonation of Henry Webb's Dromio at Sunderland's Victoria Hall in March 1879: Mr Joseph Eldred's other impressions included Henry Irving as Hamlet, John Clarke as Othello, and Barry Sullivan, a prominent provincial tragedian, at rehearsal.⁸⁷ The Webbs' success demonstrates that, as earlier in the century, innovative Shakespeare productions could emerge from the provinces and transfer to the capital, although their origins were often ignored or overlooked by contemporaries and by later historians.

The Webbs were in many ways atypical, as their appeal was concentrated on one particular Shakespearean piece rather than the broad repertoire that

⁸⁴ Earlier listings of the Webb's production can be found in: 'Public Amusement: The Queen's Theatre, Dublin', *The Irishman*, 04 February 1860, p. 16; 'Amusements: Queen's Theatre & Opera House, Edinburgh', *Caledonian Mercury*, 14 May 1860, p.1; 'Popular Entertainments: Theatre-Royal, Glasgow', *Glasgow Herald*, 06 June 1860, p.1; 'Public Amusements: Theatre Royal, Birmingham', *Birmingham Journal*, 22 March 1862, p.4; 'Public Amusements: Prince of Wales Theatre', *Liverpool Mercury*, 28 April 1862, p. 1.

⁸⁵ Playbills, TR Nottingham, 14-16, 18, 19 May 1866, NLSL.

⁸⁶ 'Death of Mr Henry Webb', *The Birmingham Daily Gazette*, 21 January 1867, p.4.

⁸⁷ 'Amusements: Victoria Hall, Sunderland', *Sunderland Daily Echo and Shipping Gazette*, 21 March 1879, p.1.

most provincial tragedians were obliged to master if they were to secure regular engagements. A more representative case study can be found in Charles Dillon, who was the subject of a chapter by Kathleen Barker.⁸⁸ Barker writes that Dillon's career 'may be taken in many respects as typical of a phenomenon which lasted effectively less than thirty years, but which during that time was a major factor in the survival, and later revival, of the theatre outside London'.⁸⁹ Her study charts the development of Dillon's life as an actor, following his engagements at London's minor theatres from 1835 to 1845; time as a provincial actor-manager from 1846 to 1855; success at the prestigious Sadler's Wells, Drury Lane and Lyceum from 1855 to 1858; provincial touring from 1858 to 1860; and travels across the USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South America from 1861 to 1867. The next fourteen years of his life were spent primarily in the provinces, with occasional seasons in London: Barker writes that 'the last years [1878-1881] were sad', referring to the *Illustrated Sporting & Dramatic News's* opinion that 'changes in dramatic fashion had made [his] method of Shakespearean interpretation seem "somewhat antiquated" to the new generation'.⁹⁰

Throughout his career, Dillon maintained a mix of melodramatic and Shakespearean roles, a practice that was common amongst provincial tragedians on account of the popularity of both genres, but that brought with it the risk of being dismissed by London critics who often showed contempt for contemporary drama. Dillon's Shakespearean repertoire grew steadily over a

⁸⁸ Kathleen Barker, 'Charles Dillon: A Provincial Tragedian', in *Shakespeare and the Victorian Stage*, ed. by Richard Foulkes (Cambridge: CUP, 1986), pp. 283-294.

⁸⁹ Barker, 'Charles Dillon', p. 283.

⁹⁰ Barker, 'Charles Dillon' p. 292.

number of decades, and by the end of his career he had played Bassanio, Romeo, Macbeth, Othello, Hamlet, Richard III, King Lear, Bottom, Timon, Falstaff, Shylock, Coriolanus and Leontes.⁹¹ Despite this considerable catalogue of roles, only a small proportion would have been played at each of Dillon's engagements during his tours of the English provinces from 1858 to 1860 and 1867 to 1881. My research has found that provincial tragedians, like the touring stars of the earlier nineteenth century, would typically perform for one or two weeks at a time before moving on to their next stop: popular pieces would often be repeated multiple times, and only occasionally did any visitor, star or otherwise, play an entirely Shakespeare-focused repertoire. As an example, during a two-night visit to Nottingham in May 1867, when he had just arrived back from his travels abroad, Dillon played the parts of Shylock and Richelieu.⁹² He returned in November for five nights to play King Lear twice, as well as roles in melodramas *Belphegor* and *A Hard Struggle*; I have not been able to establish his final performance, but it is certainly possible that Dillon played another Shakespearean piece during his Nottingham visit, as a report in the *Leicester Journal* in the same month noted that he played Othello and Macbeth (as well as Belphegor) at the Leicester Theatre.⁹³

The *Leicester Journal* heaped praise upon his performance, writing that, 'Mr Dillon's conception of Othello is original; he has departed altogether from the stage notion and appears not as the actor of talent only, but of genius – true,

⁹¹ Barker, 'Charles Dillon', pp. 284-292; Victor Emeljanow, 'Dillon, Charles (1819-1881)', *OXDNB*, OUP, 2004 <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/49701>>.

⁹² Playbill, *The Merchant of Venice*, TR Nottingham, 27 May 1867, NLSL.

⁹³ Playbills, TR Nottingham, 12-14 and 15 November 1867, NLSL; 'Local news: Theatre', *Leicester Journal*, 15 November 1867, p. 5.


perfect, and creative genius'.⁹⁴ The promise of innovation was a fundamental element of provincial tragedians' appeal, as long as they had legitimised their originality with the stamp of extra-provincial approval. For Dillon, as for many provincial tragedians and indeed their more eminent metropolitan colleagues, this distinction came from his years spent performing in the Americas and Australasia. On the propensity of provincial tragedians to tour abroad, Foulkes comments that 'it could be said that the English provinces had expanded to the subcontinent', but I would argue that, instead, it was as if a number of surrogate Londons had sprung up in foreign lands.⁹⁵ Theatrical engagements abroad were given just as much credit on playbills as metropolitan appearances, as the two examples below demonstrate. The first is from Dillon's visit to the Theatre Royal Norwich in May 1857, and repeatedly stresses Mr and Mrs (Clara) Dillon's London credentials. By this time, Dillon had established himself as a critical and popular success in the West End, although this was more for melodramatic roles and productions than those of Shakespeare.⁹⁶ The claim at the top of the playbill that 'the entire press' of London had acknowledged him as 'the first tragedian of the day' is therefore highly dubious (Fig. 24).⁹⁷ The second is from Dillon's aforementioned engagement at the Theatre Royal Nottingham in May 1867, when the playbills declared that:

⁹⁴ 'Local news: Theatre', *Leicester Journal*, 15 November 1867, p. 5.

⁹⁵ Foulkes, 'Provinces', p. 176. The other performers he names are G. V. Brooke, James Anderson, Daniel Bandmann, Walter Montgomery, William Hoskins, and J. B. Howe.

⁹⁶ Barker, 'Charles Dillon', pp. 287-288.

⁹⁷ Playbill, *Othello*, TR Norwich, 18 May 1857, NFHC N792TR.

THEATRE,  NORWICH.

LESSEE, - - - - - **MR. W. SIDNEY.**

MR. CHAS. DILLON!

LESSEE & MANAGER OF THE THEATRE ROYAL, LYCEUM, LONDON.

Where he has been acknowledged by the entire Press, as **THE FIRST**
TRAGEDIAN of the day, will have the honor of appearing with

MRS. CHAS. DILLON!

(THE FAVORITE ACTRESS OF THE LAST LONDON SEASON.)

FOR THREE NIGHTS ONLY!

Private Boxes, 3s., Dress Boxes, 2s. 6d., Upper Boxes,
1s. 6d., Pit, 1s. Gallery, 6d. Half-price at Nine o'clock to
Dress Boxes, 1s. 6d. Upper do. 1s.

On **MONDAY EVENING, MAY 18th, 1857,**

The Entertainments will commence with Shakespeare's Tragedy of

OTHELLO!

Othello As performed by him for 30 nights at the Lyceum **Mr. CHARLES DILLON**

Iago	Montano	Duke of Venice	Brabantio	Roderigo	Desdemona	Emilia
Mr. H. COURTE	Mr. BASSANO	Mr. E. WALTON	Stage Manager of the Theatre Royal, Lyceum.	Mr. BENTLEY	Mrs. CHARLES DILLON	Mrs. COURTE
Cassio	Ludovico	Julio	Mr. BARRETT			
Mr. J. C. SMITH	Mr. T. MORTON	Mr. W. ABEL				

SARAGOSSA, BY MISS A. MALCOLM.

To conclude with the Laughable Farce entitled THE

DEAD SHOT

Captain Cannon	Hector Timid	Wiseman	Louisa Lovetrick	Chatter
Mr. BENTLEY	Mr. T. MORTON	Mrs. CHARLES DILLON	Miss C. ELTON	
Frederick	Williams			
Mr. BARRETT	Mr. WILLIAM ABEL			

ON **TUESDAY EVENING, MAY the 19th,**

Will be presented the celebrated Drama of French construction entitled

BELPHEGOR!

THE MOUNTEBANK!

Belphegor - As performed by him for 60 nights at the Lyceum - **Mr. CHARLES DILLON**

Madeline - his Wife - **Mrs. CHARLES DILLON**

Henri - his Son - Miss E. JAMES

Fanfaranade	Hercule	Count de Blancy	Grelia	Madame Vornaudois	Zepherina
a Clown	Mr. J. C. SMITH	De Courgemont	Mr. H. COURTE	Mr. BASSANO	Mr. STEVENS
Mr. BENTLEY	Mr. T. MORTON	D'Arpignol	Duperon	Catherine	Miss J. SMITH
Mr. BARRETT	Mr. LORTON	Mrs. SENNETT	an Opera Dancer	Miss C. ELTON	

PAS SEUL, BY MISS A. MALCOLM.

To conclude with the Paris Comedy entitled

Figure 24 - Othello, TR Norwich, 18 May 1857 (NFHC)

The GREATEST RECEPTION ever awarded to any modern Tragedian, Nightly Greet MR. CHARLES DILLON Who after seven years' absence in America, California, Australia, &c. has returned to the scenes of his former triumphs, crowned with laurels gleaned from the principal Capitals of those three great Countries.⁹⁸

While the enthusiasm for Dillon's time in Australia and America could be attributed to standard playbill hyperbole, and confusing reference to California as a 'great country' aside, it remains notable that the Nottingham manager considered these foreign experiences to be a selling point worthy of featuring on marketing materials: the range of influences that provincial theatres were susceptible to had widened considerably.

In certain cases, performers from the major urban provincial centres could expect an equally warm welcome when visiting theatres in their local provinces. The most prominent example of this in regard to Shakespeare performance comes from Charles Calvert at the Prince's Theatre in Manchester. Born in London, Calvert trained in the provinces from 1852 before securing an engagement at London's Surrey Theatre in 1855, and then ran his own touring company, the Allied Metropolitan Dramatic Company, from 1857 to 1858.⁹⁹ Although he returned to the Surrey after his company failed, the contacts that Calvert made during his time on tour ultimately led to his being invited, in 1864, to manage the new Prince's Theatre, a position he would hold for eleven years. There, he staged a series of Shakespearean revivals which were, in the words of

⁹⁸ Playbill, *The Merchant of Venice*, TR Nottingham, 27 May 1867, NLSL,

⁹⁹ Richard Foulkes, 'Calvert, Charles Alexander (1828-1879)', *OXDNB*, OUP, 2004; online edn, January 2008 <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/4415>>.

his biographer Foulkes, the ‘cornerstone’ of his managerial achievements.¹⁰⁰

Calvert’s productions were heavily influenced by Charles Kean’s pictorial approach to Shakespeare at the Princess’s Theatre, and were accordingly characterised by high investment and long runs. Calvert’s 1864 *Tempest* ran for almost two months, a duration that would have been unusual in London at that time and was almost unheard of in the provinces; such an achievement was, of course, only made possible by the railways.¹⁰¹

Calvert’s reputation at Manchester was such that in September 1867 he was engaged at the Theatre Royal Newcastle for a month, during which he produced *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Henry IV part 1*. This residency was far more substantial than that of provincial tragedians or London stars: the playbills for his first production, *Antony and Cleopatra*, promised that the play would be staged in ‘the same magnificent style as at the Prince’s Theatre, Manchester’ and, according to newspaper reports, this was indeed delivered.¹⁰² The *Newcastle Journal* wrote that,

those who seek culture from the drama as in the best sense an educator, will appreciate with as great a relish the production of “Antony and Cleopatra” as of the best of the Shakespearian revivals. What enhances the pleasurable feeling from the revival of “Antony and Cleopatra” is the amazing fidelity in scenery, in dress, in stage up-get, which Mr Charles Calvert observes.¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ Foulkes, ‘Calvert’.

¹⁰¹ Foulkes, ‘Provinces’, p. 179.

¹⁰² Playbill referenced in Barker, ‘Five Provincial Towns’, p. 305.

¹⁰³ ‘Mr Charles Calvert in “Antony and Cleopatra” at the Theatre Royal’, *Newcastle Journal*, 03 September 1867, p. 2.

That Calvert brought his scenery with him from Manchester is confirmed by a description, in the same article, of the curtain rising to reveal 'Cleopatra's palace at Alexandria, from the pencil of the talented artist, Mr T. Grieve'.¹⁰⁴ This was a reference to either father or son of the famous Grieve family of theatrical painters, who supplied scenery to London's most prestigious theatres, including Charles Kean's.

Calvert's efforts were received with enthusiasm by the Newcastle residents. The *Newcastle Journal* featured several adulatory reviews over the course of the month, as well as contributions from readers: one sent in an acrostic poem that praised the Roman plays and spelt out 'Charles Calvert' in alternating lines, while another cited Calvert's 'admirable representations' as refutation against a local clergyman's anti-theatrical lecture on theatres, which he had referred to as 'Synagogues of Satan' and 'caterpillars of the state'.¹⁰⁵ In a lengthy review of the opening night of *Henry IV* on 24 September, the same night that Newcastle's second theatre, the New Theatre, opened, the newspaper touched on Calvert's popularity, writing that,

as Sir John Falstaff, Mr Charles Calvert has added another laurel to the wreath he has already woven for himself in Newcastle. [...] [The forthcoming performance] can scarcely be presented to a more appreciative and delighted audience than that of last night, and a Newcastle audience has rarely had a finer Shakespearian treat.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Pieter van der Merwe, 'Grieve family (per. 1794-1887)', *OXDNB*, OUP, 2004; online edn, January 2008 <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/76607>>.

¹⁰⁵ 'Acrostic', 27 September 1867, p. 4; 'The Drama', 28 September 1867, p. 3; both *Newcastle Journal*.

¹⁰⁶ 'Henry IV. At the Theatre Royal, Newcastle', *Newcastle Journal*, 24 September 1867, p. 2.

Calvert's visit was unusual in terms of both scale and success: when touring productions became widespread in the 1870s it remained highly unusual for Shakespeare productions to transfer from one provincial theatre to another, even from cities as economically and cultural powerful as Manchester. Calvert's time in Newcastle does, however, demonstrate that major urban provincial centres could generate a level of influence to rival that of London, and that the two-way model of cultural exchange had by this point been extended to include intra-provincial exchange, a process that would have been enhanced by the continuous transfer of provincial tragedians from one theatre to another, disseminating their own approaches to Shakespeare as they went.

One further development in provincial Shakespeare performance took place in the age of the provincial tragedian: the advent of Shakespeare readings. These were typically performed in town halls and assembly rooms rather than established theatres and thus appealed to anti-theatricalists who considered the theatres to be dens of iniquity, as well as bardolators looking for a more direct connection to Shakespeare's works unimpaired by, as they saw it, the excesses of theatrical productions. Fanny Kemble, the daughter of Charles and Maria Theresa and niece of Sarah Siddons, was renowned for her Shakespearean monologues, which she performed from 1849 to 1863 in venues across Britain and America. Gerald Khan argues that most readings were conducted by performers who saw them as 'spinoffs from their stage work, favours to friends, experiments or brief encounters'; but, for Fanny, 'reading was a serious business, indeed her very subsistence'.¹⁰⁷ She had been pushed onto the Covent

¹⁰⁷ Gerald Kahan, 'Fanny Kemble Reads Shakespeare: Her First American Tour, 1849-50', *Theatre Survey*, 24 (1983), 77-98 (p. 77).

Garden stage in 1829 at the age of nineteen by her father, in an attempt to turn around the theatre's fortunes and save himself from bankruptcy. Fortunately for Charles, her performance as Juliet, played against his Mercutio and Maria Theresa's Lady Capulet, was a resounding success.¹⁰⁸ Although Fanny continued performing with her father until her marriage to American plantation owner Pierce Butler in 1834, she reportedly did not enjoy life in the theatre, writing in her journal in 1831 that,

I do not think it is the acting itself that is so disagreeable to me, but the public personal exhibition, the violence done (as it seems to me) to womanly dignity and decorum in thus becoming the gaze of every eye and theme of every tongue. If my audience was reduced to my intimates and associates I should not mind it so much, I think; but I am not quite sure that I should like it then.¹⁰⁹

Her career as a Shakespeare reader began out of necessity, following the breakup of her unhappy marriage to Butler, but, according to her memoirs, came to bring her 'so much pleasure'.¹¹⁰ Kemble's repertoire consisted of twenty-four plays: *Antony and Cleopatra*, *As You Like It*, *Coriolanus*, *Hamlet*, *Henry IV, Parts 1 & 2*, *Henry V*, *Henry VIII*, *Julius Caesar*, *King John*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Measure for Measure*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Othello*, *Richard II*, *Richard III*, *Romeo*

¹⁰⁸ Robert Bernard Martin, 'Kemble, Frances Anne (1809-1893)', *OXDNB*, OUP, 2004 <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/15318>>.

¹⁰⁹ Frances Anne Kemble, *Records of a Girlhood* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1883), p. 432.

¹¹⁰ Frances Anne Kemble, *Further Records 1848-1883* (New York: B. Blom, 1972), I, p. 129, cited in Kahan, 'Fanny Kemble', p. 86.

*and Juliet, The Tempest, Twelfth Night, and The Winter's Tale.*¹¹¹ While this presents a greater selection of the canon than was regularly explored by stock companies or provincial tragedians, she noted that her audiences were most responsive to the old favourites, noting;

The public always came in goodly numbers to hear 'Macbeth', 'Hamlet', 'Romeo and Juliet', and 'The Merchant of Venice'; and Mendelssohn's exquisite music, made an accompaniment to the reading of the 'Midsummer Night's Dream', rendered that a peculiarly popular performance. But to all the other plays the audiences were considerably less numerous, and to some few of them I often had but few listeners.¹¹²

Most Shakespeare readers were far less ambitious in their approach, and tended to specialise in the most popular pieces or characters. Mark Lemon, founder and editor of *Punch* magazine, presented a more typical series of readings in 1868/69. Billed as a 'remarkable representation of Sir John Falstaff', Lemon's act, as described in the *Nottinghamshire Guardian*, consisted of,

a series of 12 representations of the scenes in which *Sir John Falstaff* plays a leading part; and the ground on which these selections is based is, that *Falstaff* is a creation of Shakespeare so independent of the plays, that they cannot be considered as unwarrantable

¹¹¹ Kahan, 'Fanny Kemble', p. 78.

¹¹² Frances Anne Kemble, *Records of Later Life* (New York: Henry Holt, 1882), p. 633, cited in Kahan, 'Fanny Kemble', p. 80.

mutilation of the drama in which this remarkable character is introduced.¹¹³

Unlike Kemble, who performed alone and with minimal stage dressing, Lemon 'departed from the prevailing fashion of readings', and incorporated supporting actors, period-appropriate costume and tapestries hung to set the scene. After a successful run at London's Gallery of Illustration in the autumn of 1868, Lemon took his readings on an exhaustive tour of the provinces – travelling, of course, by rail – visiting minor and major towns across England, including Birmingham, Bristol, Liverpool, Grantham, Rugby, Plymouth, Bradford, Leamington Spa, Worcester, Coventry, Boston, Clifton, Derby, Lincoln, Northampton, Stamford, Hull, Leeds, Dover and Tunbridge Wells; of the case study towns, he performed at the Mechanic's Hall in Nottingham, the Assembly Rooms in Bath, the Town Hall in Newcastle and the Pavilion Dome in Brighton.¹¹⁴ Lemon did not appear at Norwich or any of the surrounding towns, and may have bypassed East Anglia entirely. At each new engagement the local papers praised his readings, but they were not without opposition. At Newcastle, the council were reluctant to issue Lemon a license and questioned whether there was sufficient demand or a more appropriate venue available, although they eventually acquiesced; at Exeter, theatre lessee Mr Neebe appealed to the local magistracy to withhold permission from Lemon's advertised performance at the town's Victoria Hall on account of the 'great injury' this would cause his own venue.¹¹⁵ The magistrates

¹¹³ 'Mr Mark Lemon as Falstaff', *Nottinghamshire Guardian*, 16 October 1868, p. 7.

¹¹⁴ 'Mr Mark Lemon as Falstaff', *Nottinghamshire Guardian*, 16 April 1869, p.5; 'Mr Mark Lemon as "Falstaff"', *Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette*, 07 January 1869, p. 4; 'Application for theatricals in the town hall', *Newcastle Journal*, 01 January 1869, p. 4; 'Mr Mark Lemon in Brighton', *Brighton Gazette*, 09 December 1869, p. 5.

¹¹⁵ 'Mr. Lemon's Falstaff Threatened', *Manchester Times*, 06 November 1869, p. 6.

advised Neebe that they would not issue a license and that he should warn Lemon of his intention to prosecute if the reading went ahead. When Lemon performed at Exeter and at Plymouth unlicensed, he was duly fined twenty shillings in each town, prompting the *Grantham Journal* to comment on the 'absurdity of our present restrictions on theatrical entertainments'.¹¹⁶

Neebe and his Plymouth counterpart's hostility to Lemon's readings is somewhat understandable when placed in the wider context of challenges faced by provincial theatres in this period. Local stock company productions still buttressed the entire provincial theatre industry, but, with the exception of major urban provincial centres like Manchester, their value to the local population had declined, at least in regard to Shakespeare performance. As well as engaging provincial tragedians on a regular basis in order to satisfy the more well-travelled members of the audience, and therefore forcing the local lead to drop down to supporting roles, provincial managers also had to compete with Shakespeare performances in venues that had traditionally hosted musical concerts and educational lectures. It was not only travelling performers that staged readings: many towns in the later nineteenth century had their own local Shakespeare societies, which would usually meet in the type of halls visited by Lemon and hold readings and discussions on Shakespeare's texts. In Nottingham, for example, the Nottingham Shakespeare Club was founded in 1864 as part of the Shakespeare tercentenary celebrations.¹¹⁷ Six meeting reports published in the *Nottinghamshire Guardian* between November 1864

¹¹⁶ 'Prosecution of Mr. Mark Lemon', *Clerkenwell News*, 16 November 1869, p. 2; 'The Journal', *Grantham Journal*, 20 November 1869, p. 4.

¹¹⁷ 'Local Happenings', *Nottingham Evening Post*, 05 October 1932, p. 5.

and March 1867 detail the Club's proceedings, which appear to have followed a set pattern. Club members would meet at the Mechanics' or Assembly Hall for around two hours, during which the same seven or eight members would read extracts from a particular Shakespeare play, linked together with commentary from the chairman. The performers were always men – it is unclear if women were permitted to attend meetings – and the plays were popular pieces: *Othello* (twice), *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *As You Like It* and *Richard III*.¹¹⁸ The extent to which Nottingham's cultural institutions had become saturated with Shakespeare is exemplified by a note in the *Nottinghamshire Guardian* in February 1866 on 'Local and District News':

We understand that the "Nottingham Shakespeare Club" intend to give their next reading on Friday evening, Feb. 23rd. "Hamlet" is the play to be read. "My Lord Hamlet" is in the ascendant just now, as he is to be represented at the Theatre to-morrow evening, and is to form the subject of a paper to be read by Mr. Hicklin before the Nottingham Literary and Philosophical Society on Thursday next.¹¹⁹

These extra-theatrical societies may have been the final nail in the coffin for local stock companies, removing as they did the necessity for fans of Shakespeare to attend the theatre in order to enjoy his works.

This section has demonstrated that, throughout the 1850s and 1860s, provincial Shakespeare performance underwent considerable change due to an

¹¹⁸ See articles titled 'Nottingham Shakespeare Club' in *Nottinghamshire Guardian* dated: 25 November 1864, p. 3; 23 December 1864, p. 5; 02 March 1866, p. 5; 21 December 1866 p. 5; 01 March 1867, p. 5; 29 March 1867, p. 5.

¹¹⁹ 'Local and District News', *Nottinghamshire Guardian*, 16 February 1866, p. 5.

increase in the number of travelling performers and competition from local venues and neighbouring urban provincial centres. Audiences had long appreciated outsiders joining their local stock companies, but in this era the practice became so widespread that imported performers gradually became the norm rather than the exception. London production values remained desirable, as indicated by the claims of metropolitan success found on provincial tragedians' playbills, but novelty in the shape of performer or production was, it seems, an equal draw. As I have noted, the originality of provincial tragedians' approaches to Shakespeare was recognised and appreciated by the provincial press, and Shakespeare readers such as Fanny Kemble and Mark Lemon found audiences despite offering the same selection of the canon that stock companies had been producing for decades. Indeed, Kemble's experience of widespread disinterest in the lesser-staged Shakespearean plays is a testament to the fact that while the structure of provincial theatre was shifting and popular interest in Shakespeare was growing, the texts that audiences wished to see – or that managers chose to stage – remained constant, a trend that continued in the final phase of nineteenth century theatre.

2.3 The Rise of Touring Companies

The last decades of the 1800s saw one last development in provincial performance: the rise of travelling companies, which took entire productions on tour. The conditions that enabled their emergence and the effect that such companies had on provincial theatre have been documented by historians, but studies have tended to concentrate on tours of West End hits rather than

classical playwrights such as Shakespeare. In this section, I delineate the nature of touring Shakespeare companies and their productions, and analyse their impact on the pattern of Shakespeare performance established by the stock companies and provincial tragedians. I argue that earlier elements of novelty and celebrity remained ever-present, and that the success found by touring companies was the ultimate manifestation of a century of conditioning audiences to consider their local stock productions inferior to those from elsewhere. This process began with touring stars, accelerated with provincial tragedians, and found a natural conclusion with travelling repertory companies. Although the external conditions of performance changed, I suggest that key elements remained consistent throughout the nineteenth century.

The first company to tour a full theatrical production hailed from Marie Wilton's Prince of Wales's Theatre in London. In 1867, having established a reputation 'for over-all standards of acting, staging, dressing and interpretations which were the envy of her competitors, both in London and the provinces', Wilton sent a company production of Tom Robertson's popular new play *Caste* on tour.¹²⁰ This, Rowell notes, 'was a revelation to provincial playgoers but struck a further blow at the stock company, already demoralised by the popularity of visiting stars'.¹²¹ Rowell goes on to quote statistics that support his assertion that the ascendancy of the touring companies led to the decline of the stocks: in November 1871, when Henry Irving sent out a secondary company from his Lyceum theatre to tour the popular hit *The Bells*, there were only twelve touring companies on the road, and stock companies occupied the

¹²⁰ Rowell and Jackson, *Repertory*, p. 11.

¹²¹ Rowell and Jackson, *Repertory*, p. 11.

majority of provincial theatres; 'thirty years later, in November 1901, the columns of the theatrical paper, the *Era*, list 143 touring companies on circuit, and do not name a single stock company'.¹²² Booth cites similar numbers, also taking *The Bells* as his starting point, and 1896 as his end, when the *Era* listed 158 companies; Cochrane refers to *The Stage* of October 1900, which listed 218 companies on the road.¹²³ All three agree that improvements in railway technology facilitated this change: Booth describes touring companies as an 'offshoot of the railway age', an idea that Cochrane shares and develops, noting that 'theatre entrepreneurs simply piggybacked' on the back of economic activity stimulated by the growth of the railway networks.¹²⁴

These accounts, while accurate, are necessarily brief: touring companies are not the focus of Booth's, Cochrane's or Rowell's work. Comparing the number of companies from 1870 to 1900 may give the impression that the stock companies' decline took place gradually over a thirty-year period, but my research suggests that there was a considerable difference between the two types of touring company identified by Booth. He explains,

One sort was structured to tour the latest West End hit and travelled with a single comedy, comic opera, or drama until the tour was over, then disbanded [...] The other kind of company toured with a repertory of several pieces, whether melodrama, comedy, Irish

¹²² Rowell and Jackson, *Repertory*, p. 12.

¹²³ Booth, *Victorian Age*, p. 20; Cochrane, *British Theatre*, p. 29.

¹²⁴ Booth, *Victorian Age*, p. 18; Cochrane, *British Theatre*, p. 29.

drama, Shakespeare, farce or a mixture, and it remained in existence as long as finances and management permitted.¹²⁵

Although Shakespeare continued to be staged in the West End, London Shakespearean productions rarely, if ever, toured. Shakespeare was, therefore, predominantly performed by touring repertory companies. Some focused exclusively on Shakespeare, while others presented a mixed bill. These companies were really an evolution of the provincial tragedian model outlined above, and operated in a different manner to the West End tours. As with tragedians, repertory companies usually claimed some kind of connection to London theatres in their names or on their playbills, and unlike West End companies, they operated without a home theatre in the capital. In my five case study towns, there were no stock company productions of Shakespeare by 1875 evidenced on available playbills: the vast majority were by that date performed by touring companies, although provincial tragedians did continue to find engagements in an ever-decreasing number of theatres until the 1880s, after which most formed their own companies. Provincial managers and/or audiences appear to have been keen to embrace an opportunity to see Shakespeare performed by anyone other than their stock company, just as they were twenty years earlier when provincial tragedians began to appear. The very fact that some touring companies were led by former tragedians who appear to have simply taken the opportunity afforded to them by advancements in railway travel in order to avoid reliance on provincial stocks, with all the difficulties that

¹²⁵ Booth, *Victorian Age*, p. 18.

that brought, is a testament to the close alignment of the two phases in theatre history.

One such case was the German-American actor Daniel E. Bandmann and his English wife Millicent Palmer, who performed as 'Herr and Mrs Bandmann'. The two had met when they were cast together during Daniel's first British engagement at the Lyceum theatre in February 1868, and had commenced touring together almost immediately, playing Hamlet and Ophelia at the Theatre Royal Manchester in April that same year. They married in 1869, and toured extensively across Britain, the Americas and Australasia for around ten years, playing a number of Shakespeare pieces in their repertoire. As well as those from *Hamlet*, their pairings included Shylock and Portia, Othello and Desdemona, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, Juliet and Mercutio, and Richard III and Lady Anne/ Queen Margaret. Playbills suggest that the Bandmanns switched from touring as a couple to touring with a company between 1875 and 1876. They were engaged from 6 to 20 December 1875 at the Theatre Royal Norwich, and were advertised as 'celebrated artistes' in the typical language of the provincial tragedians: Daniel was referred to as a 'celebrated tragedian' and Millicent an 'eminent tragedienne'.¹²⁶ Six months later they appeared at the Theatre Royal Nottingham for six nights, but this time they were 'supported by a powerful company specially selected from the best London and provincial theatres', a proclamation that both claimed a metropolitan connection and referenced the concept of provincial celebrity outlined in Chapter 1.¹²⁷ During their Nottingham visit, Shakespeare was the main piece five out of six nights; on

¹²⁶ Playbills, TR Norwich, 06, 13, 20 December 1875, NFHC N792TR.

¹²⁷ Playbills, TR Nottingham, 05-07, 08-10 June 1876, NLSL.

the evening that the Bandmanns performed a non-Shakespearean play, *The School for Scandal*, their afterpiece was the trial scene from *The Merchant of Venice*. The Bandmanns continued playing with their company until their divorce in the late 1870s, after which Millicent ran her own ‘specially selected London company’, in which she played the role of Hamlet amongst other, more modern, characters. Mrs Bandmann-Palmer, as she was now known, visited the Theatre Royal Norwich at least three times from 1896 to 1906, and on each occasion her playbills feature a ringing endorsement of her portrayal of Hamlet from the *Liverpool Courier*, which suggests that a woman playing the Prince was still considered questionable and in need of defence (Fig. 25):

It is certainly curious to contemplate a lady impersonating such a character as Hamlet, but it is equally surprising to witness the faultless portrayal which Mrs. BANDMANN-PALMER is capable of submitting. Her performance last evening was nothing short of brilliant, and the presentation of the great Shakespearian Tragedy as given was probably one of the ablest seen in Liverpool for years.

Liverpool Courier, May 1st, 1895.¹²⁸

This review was still found on playbills in 1906, although the original date had been dropped by then, presumably to conceal its age. The *Hamlet* playbills also referenced how often she had played the role – 151 times in 1896, 470 in 1906 – perhaps in order to reassure the public that this was a reliable portrayal rather than an experiment.¹²⁹ Writing in 1964, critic J. C. Trewin noted – in a somewhat

¹²⁸ Playbill, *Hamlet*, TR Norwich, 26-31 October 1896, NFHC N792TR.

¹²⁹ Playbills, *Hamlet*, TR Norwich 26 October 1896, 08 May 1899 and 07 May 1906, NFHC N792TR.

MONDAY,

OCT. 26th.

Shakespeare's Sublime Tragedy, in Five Acts,

HAMLET

It is certainly curious to contemplate a lady impersonating such a character as Hamlet, but it is equally surprising to witness the faultless portrayal which Mrs. BANDMANN-PALMER is capable of submitting. Her performance last evening was nothing short of brilliant, and the presentation of the Great Shakespearian Tragedy as given was probably one of the ablest seen in Liverpool for years. *Liverpool Courier*, May 1st, 1895.

Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, 151st time	...	...	Mrs. BANDMANN-PALMER
Claudius (King of Denmark)	Mr. MELVILLE BICKFORD	First Actor	... Mr. ALFRED HARVEY
Laertes	...	Second Actor	... Mr. FIELDING
Horatio	...	Messenger	... Mr. CYRIL CRUX
Polonius	...	First Gravedigger	... Mr. HUBERT NASH
Rosencrantz	...	Second Gravedigger	... Mr. SMITH
Guiltenstein	...	Ostric	... Miss L. FIELDING
Marcellus	...	Gertrude, Queen of Denmark	... Miss HELENA HEAD
Bernado	...	Player Queen	... Mrs. J. M. WARD
Ghost	...	Opheelia	... Miss K. M. ROBINSON

Figure 25 - Hamlet, TR Norwich, 26-31 October 1896 (NFHC)

patronising tone – that ‘many occasional Edwardian playgoers in remote towns must have known Hamlet as a short, squat woman of nearly sixty, found generally on the dark circuits of the manufacturing North [...]’ and recalled Millicent’s ‘powerful voice’, ‘which she used in the theatre as though she were addressing the Isle of Man from Fleetwood’.¹³⁰

It is notable that the Bandmanns’ repertoire remained unchanged when they first formed their company. It seems reasonable to assume that this would be the case for other tragedians that followed the same route; like the Bandmanns, they would have established their reputations with specific roles – usually the old favourites – and forming a company was such a minor adaptation of the existing model that it provided no impetus for adjustment. In contrast, Millicent’s later decisions seem motivated by a desire to ensure that she remained in the spotlight and retained full control over her career. Tony Howard notes that by the late nineteenth century it was not unheard of for a woman to play Hamlet but, as the *Liverpool Courier*’s review demonstrated, this remained a bold and unconventional choice.¹³¹ With regard to Millicent’s portrayal, Howard references Jill Edmunds’ suggestion that ‘taking over Hamlet after [Daniel’s] death might have been Millicent’s act of revenge’ against her ex-husband, who was reportedly prone to ‘volcanic’ violence against women.¹³² Certainly, Millicent’s publicity materials and professional decisions appear to present her as an independent woman. Her playbills all stated that ‘Every Play is produced

¹³⁰ J. C. Trewin, *Shakespeare on the English Stage 1900-1964* (London: Barrie and Rockliff, 1964), p. 14.

¹³¹ Tony Howard, *Women as Hamlet: Performance and Interpretation in Theatre, Film and Fiction* (Cambridge: CUP, 2007).

¹³² Jill Edmunds, ‘Princess Hamlet’ in *The New Woman and Her Sisters*, ed. by Viv Gardner and Susan Rutherford, (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), pp. 59-76, quoted in Howard, *Women as Hamlet*, pp. 84-86.

under the personal direction of Mrs BANDMANN-PALMER, and with every attention to detail', and the other plays that she toured with included *Jane Shore*, *Sapho*, *Mary Queen of Scots*, *Masks and Faces* and *East Lynne*, all of which focused upon a female lead. In this context, it is unsurprising that Millicent dropped her former Shakespearean roles from her repertoire, as none offered the same degree of stage-time: she asserted her right to take centre-stage, and was evidently unconcerned with conforming to mainstream expectations of subservient femininity.

The number of touring companies performing Shakespeare from 1875 to the turn of the century was considerable. I have identified around thirty different companies in my case study towns from my sample of playbills, which is far from complete and, as such, can only be considered indicative of activity rather than representative. Of those, ten companies played Shakespeare almost exclusively and/or advertised themselves as Shakespeare specialists: Adelaide Moore's Shakespearian Company; Barry Sullivan, 'The Famous and Unrivalled Shakespearean'; Frank Benson's Shakespearian and Old English Comedy Co.; the Harbury-Mathews Shakespearian-Company; Herman Vezin, Laura Johnson and London Company 'in Shakespearian and Standard Plays'; Herr and Mrs Bandmann; Laurence Smythe's Shakespearian Dramatic Company; Miss Alleyn and Mr Charles Bernard's Shakespearian and English Comedy Company; Mr Osmond Tearle and Company; and The Haviland and Lawrence Dramatic Company. Other non-specialist companies performed Shakespeare alongside melodrama or 'English classics' from the eighteenth century such as *She Stoops to Conquer* and *The Wonder; or, a Woman Keeps a Secret*, but in reality few of the Shakespearean companies resisted dipping into post-seventeenth century

productions, particularly the wildly popular modern plays. *The Lady of Lyons*, for example, was found in the repertoire of Osmond Tearle, Barry Sullivan, and the Vezin/Johnson Company, as well as non-specialists such as Miss Ada Ward's Comedy and Dramatic Company, H. M. Pitt's Comedy-Drama Company, Miss Mary Anderson and Special London Company, Wilson Barrett and Company, the May Fortescue London Company, and the Charles Melville Repertoire Company.

Although companies were free to create their own repertoire and no longer had to rely on plays that stock company members would be familiar with, this did not necessarily translate into a greater exploration of the Shakespearean canon. For the companies that mixed Shakespeare pieces with other genres, a reliance on favourites is somewhat understandable. When Mr W. J. H. Robinson's Comedy and Burlesque Company appeared at the Theatre Royal Norwich for a six-night engagement in May 1880, they played *Romeo and Juliet* once, and modern plays *Weak Women*, *Old Soldiers* and *The Ticket of Leave Man* the other five nights. The inclusion of *Romeo and Juliet* would appear to be the result of Rosa Kenney joining the company, who was described on playbills as,

the Young and Talented Tragedienne, whose appearance at the Drury Lane, Princess's, and Court Theatres, met with such unqualified approval from the London Press and Public, and pronounced by them to have 'at once thrown herself into the foremost rank of English Actresses'.¹³³

¹³³ Playbill, *Romeo and Juliet/As You Like It/Much Ado About Nothing/The Merchant of Venice*, TR Norwich, 10-15 May 1880, NFHC N792TR.

In truth, the reception to Kenney's performance in London was warm but did not quite meet the 'unqualified approval' that the playbills claimed. The London *Evening Standard* praised her intelligence and dramatic instinct, and thought that her weaknesses, including her 'crude' gestures, over-enunciation and lack of passion, were due to her youth and inexperience rather than lack of talent.¹³⁴ As with provincial tragedians, touring companies would stretch the truth and exaggerate the strength of their connection to London in order to boost their attractiveness outside the centre.

Romeo and Juliet was a popular choice for other companies with a leading lady at the helm. Anne Alleyn and Charles Bernard consciously linked their company to Shakespeare: at the Theatre Royal Nottingham in October 1883 and the Theatre Royal Norwich in February 1884 the playbills boasted that 'Miss ALLEYN and Company have the honour of being selected by the Committee of the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre for the Annual Series of SHAKESPERIAN BIRTHDAY FESTIVAL PERFORMANCES At STRATFORD-UPON-AVON, in April Next', and by an 1887 visit to Nottingham they had re-cast themselves as a 'Shakespearean and English Comedy Company', retaining that title until at least 1889. In 1894 at Norwich their name had changed to the 'Alleyn-Bernard Comedians', and, in another example of the prevalence of external endorsements, the playbills now featured a blurb recounting that Miss Alleyn had performed before the Prince of Wales, who had written her a personal note of congratulations.¹³⁵ *Romeo and Juliet* was her company's most frequently

¹³⁴ 'Miss Rosa Kenney as Juliet', *London Evening Standard*, 24 January 1879, p. 6.

¹³⁵ Playbill, *The Taming of the Shrew/The Ironmaster's Wife/A Footlight Favourite/East Lynne/Sweet Nancy/Romeo and Juliet*, TR Norwich, 05-10 November 1894, NFHC N792TR.

performed piece, but aside from their 1883 visit to Nottingham, when they were presumably preparing for the Birthday Festival at Stratford, their repertoire was consistently mixed with nineteenth century plays, such as *The Lady of Lyons*, *The Ironmaster's Wife*, and *East Lynne*. They innovated with their uncut production of *The Taming of the Shrew*: when it was performed at Nottingham in March 1889 the playbills explained that,

a very much abridged, emasculated, and farcical arrangement of the Play, by David Garrick, in Two Acts, is frequently performed, but as arranged from the Text of Shakespeare, with the Famous Introduction Scene, this will be the FIRST REPRESENTATION IN THIS TOWN.¹³⁶

The same production appeared at Norwich in 1894, containing the explanatory note but lacking the claim that they were the first to present it, perhaps on account of an earlier visit. Novelty thus remained integral to provincial Shakespeare, even if it was not to be found in the choice of play but in the performance itself.

Even the most renowned Shakespearean operators such as Ben Greet's Comedy Company and Frank Benson's Shakespearian and Old English Comedy Co. limited their exploration of the Shakespeare canon. Peter Holland writes that Benson was

prepared to experiment with the text, performing a virtually uncut Folio text of *Hamlet* in 1899 by splitting the play between matinee

¹³⁶ Playbill, *The Taming of the Shrew/The School for Scandal/As You Like It/Woman's Love*, TR Nottingham, 25-30 March 1889, NLSL.

and evening performances. He was also not prepared to restrict his work to the conventional and limited canon of the most popular plays: in the course of his career he produced thirty-five Shakespeare plays.¹³⁷

A significant proportion of these new productions were, however, only staged at the annual Shakespeare Festival in Stratford, which Benson directed from 1886 to 1916. J. P. Wearing notes that 'several plays [...] received only a solitary production', and Trewin suggests that the 'conservative' tastes of provincial audiences meant that Benson's company 'could seldom keep [unfamiliar plays] in their tour lists'.¹³⁸ Furthermore, Benson's career spanned over thirty years, meaning that those innovative productions which did make it out of Stratford may well have been delivered to the provinces on a somewhat measured basis. Joanna Duncan's study of Benson's provincial tours found that 'a rarity from Stratford' such as *Antony and Cleopatra*, *King John* or *Timon of Athens* would 'sometimes be supplemented' to Benson's standard repertoire.¹³⁹ According to the playbills that I have consulted, this repertoire largely consisted of the same hits that the stock companies and provincial tragedians had performed. From 1891 to 1897, for example, Benson made annual visits to the Theatre Royal Nottingham that typically consisted of six nights and a Saturday matinee, during which at least four different Shakespeare plays were presented.¹⁴⁰ In a

¹³⁷ Peter Holland, 'Touring Shakespeare', in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Stage*, ed. by Stanley Wells and Sarah Stanton (Cambridge: CUP, 2002), pp. 194-211 (p. 205).

¹³⁸ J. P. Wearing, 'Benson, Sir Francis Robert (1858-1939)', *OXDNB*, OUP, 2004; online edn, January 2011 <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/30714>>; Trewin, *English Stage*, p. 16.

¹³⁹ Joanna Duncan, 'Benson's *Dream*: Touring a "Grand Production" to the Provinces', *Theatre Notebook*, 69:3 (2015), 165-176 (p. 168).

¹⁴⁰ There were two exceptions to his standard pattern: Benson made two separate visits in April and September 1891, and was engaged for a fortnight in the autumn of 1894.

combined total of nine weeks of performances over seven years, eight plays dominated Benson's repertoire: he staged *Much Ado About Nothing* six times; *Hamlet*, *Richard III*, *The Taming of the Shrew* and *The Merchant of Venice* five times; and *Twelfth Night*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *Romeo and Juliet* four times.¹⁴¹ The visits in 1891 and 1892 consisted entirely of repertoire selected from those plays, but in every other year the standard repertoire was supplemented with one lesser-seen play. In 1893, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was played on four occasions; in 1894, *Julius Caesar* was staged on three consecutive nights; in 1895 the special play was *Macbeth*; in 1896 it was *Othello*; and in 1897 it was *Henry V*. This pattern of rotating set favourites with a more novel piece again has parallels with the earlier stock company approach to Shakespeare, and illustrates that while those providing the performances had changed, the fundamental approach to Shakespeare had not.

Duncan argues that Benson's very reliability devalued his work in the eyes of his audiences, who 'knew that Benson would be back again, the following year, or the year after, and his productions did not change: miss the *Dream* this time round, there'd always be other chances'.¹⁴² Although that particular play was brought as a novelty to Nottingham audiences in 1893, the production remained in Benson's repertoire until the 1930s, by which point the forty-year-old set looked 'distinctly old-fashioned and moth-eaten in the glare of electric lights'.¹⁴³ The decline of the model of touring and repetition practised by Benson

¹⁴¹ Playbills: 06-11 April 1891; 07-11 September 1891; 14-19 November 1892; 20-25 November 1893; 21-26 October 1895; 19-24 October 1896; 27 September-02 October 1897. All NLSL. 1894 visit as recorded in the *Nottingham Evening Post*, 29 October-10 November 1894.

¹⁴² Duncan, 'Benson's *Dream*', p. 173.

¹⁴³ Duncan, 'Benson's *Dream*', p. 174.

and his ilk, and the implications of this for provincial Shakespeare, are analysed in Chapter 3. It is worth noting here that although the appeal of touring companies was apparently predicated on their ability to provide greater variety and productions that met the supposedly superior standards of the London stage, there is little evidence that this was what they delivered.

There was, however, at least one case in which a touring company trialled a production in the provinces prior to a London engagement. Booth has commented that companies began the practice of out-of-town openings in the 1860s, and though he refers to productions of new plays such as Tom Robertson's *Ours* and Tom Taylor's *New Men and Old Acres*, there is no reason to believe that this was not practised by Shakespearean actors too, especially if their production was innovative in some way, as in the case of Mary Anderson and her 'Special London Company'.¹⁴⁴ Anderson was a celebrated American actress who had found fame in Britain during a two-year engagement at the Lyceum Theatre from 1883 to 1885, at the end of which she performed Rosalind in *As You Like It* at the Stratford Memorial Theatre and returned to the USA to tour this production with her London company.¹⁴⁵ In January 1887 it was announced that she was engaged once more at the Lyceum, and the London papers speculated about the roles that she would play before part of the programme was eventually released in March.¹⁴⁶ *The Winter's Tale* was Anderson's new Shakespearean venture, and one in which she would make

¹⁴⁴ Booth, *Victorian Age*, p. 18.

¹⁴⁵ Donald Roy, 'Anderson, Mary (1859-1940)', *OXDNB*, OUP, 2004
<<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/51450>>.

¹⁴⁶ See speculation in 'Music and the Drama', *Weekly Freeman's Journal*, 05 February 1887, p. 11, and announcement in 'The Theatre', *St James's Gazette*, 01 March 1887, p. 7.

history as the first actress to play both Perdita and Hermione in the same production.¹⁴⁷ Before appearing at the Lyceum, however, she tested her production on the stages of provincial theatres, choosing the Theatre Royal Nottingham as the site of her debut. She performed at the theatre from 21 to 23 April, saving *The Winter's Tale* for the final night and announcing on the playbills that it was staged 'in commemoration of Shakespeare's birthday'; on 21 and 22 April she performed *Pygmalion & Galatea* and *The Lady of Lyons*, plays that were tried and tested hits with theatre-goers on both sides of the Atlantic.¹⁴⁸ There was keen anticipation for her appearance, with the *Era* reporting that when tickets were released for sale at nine o'clock on the morning of 4 April,

a large number of people were in waiting at that hour, and for some time those anxious to secure seats had to form *queue* and wait their turn [...] Within little over an hour nearly every seat – especially for the 23d inst., when *A Winter's Tale* is to be produced – was taken, and this in spite of the special prices of admission that will be charged during the visit.¹⁴⁹

That Anderson chose to launch and practise her new production in the provinces is understandable, as it afforded her the opportunity to polish and test the piece away from the scrutiny of the London critics, but her specific choice of Nottingham is worthy of further examination. From 12 to 16 April Anderson was engaged at Birmingham's Prince of Wales Theatre, and in early May she

¹⁴⁷ Roy, 'Anderson, Mary'.

¹⁴⁸ Playbill, *Pygmalion & Galatea/ The Lady of Lyons/ The Winter's Tale*, TR Nottingham, 21-23 April 1887, NLSL.

¹⁴⁹ 'Theatrical Gossip', *Era*, 09 April 1887, p. 8.

performed at the Alexandra Court Theatre in Liverpool, but she did not stage her new production at either of these venues.¹⁵⁰ This may be indicative of the higher status that these larger towns enjoyed – perhaps a bad review from an urban provincial centre could be as damaging as one from the capital – or that smaller towns like Nottingham were more open to new interpretations, as they were a century earlier when Sarah Siddons performed her Hamlet.

With the exception of the likes of Anderson and Benson, whose productions appeared in London and Stratford, most Shakespearean touring companies seldom staged their productions in the capital. The Shakespeare performances seen in the provinces were, therefore, crafted to cater specifically for the periphery, although this may not have been advertised to or appreciated by provincial audiences. As I have asserted throughout this chapter, touring companies and the provincial tragedians that came before them thus occupied a new space in mainstream theatre, between centre and periphery. While this complicated the bilateral relationship between London and the provinces, it did not diminish the allure of celebrity, novelty or the metropolitan. Indeed, my research suggests that the narrative of loss surrounding the disappearance of stock companies, as set out in the *Era*'s 1880 article (cited at the outset of this chapter) and reiterated in many accounts of the late nineteenth century stage, was unrepresentative of contemporary attitudes.¹⁵¹ Instead of a deprivation arising from the destructive forces of industrialisation and the railway, I have

¹⁵⁰ 'Theatre Royal Birmingham', *Birmingham Daily Post*, 13 April 1887, p. 1; 'The Theatres', *Liverpool Mercury*, 10 May 1887, p. 6.

¹⁵¹ E.g. Arnold Hare, who cites the loss of the Theatre Royal Bath's stock company as 'sad' and representative of the 'Decline and Fall of Georgian Theatre': 'Shakespeare in a Victorian Provincial Stock Company', in *Shakespeare and the Victorian Stage*, ed. by Richard Foulkes (Cambridge: CUP, 1986), pp. 258-270, (p. 270).

argued that the roots of the move from local to peripheral productions lay in attitudes established a century beforehand, and were deeply connected to Shakespeare's unique place in national culture, as illustrated by the testimonies of the witnesses to the 1866 Select Committee. By the end of the nineteenth century, technology had enabled theatregoers across the country to transcend their geographic provincialism and, by accident rather than design, a coherent provincial theatrical culture heavily influenced by – but not entirely derivative of – London was beginning to take form. Touring Shakespeare would continue to flourish in the twentieth century, but under very different circumstances, with the introduction of government funding and a new centre of influence in the shape of the Royal Shakespeare Company in Stratford.

PART TWO:1900-2016

Chapter 3

1900-1960: Change and Consistency in the Age of Repertory

One of the defining features of twentieth-century British theatre was the emergence of the repertory movement. This was, from its earliest years, a political as well as an artistic approach to performance; its champions sought to 'revolt against the Edwardian theatrical establishment' and 'took sustenance from local pride and local disillusion with London hallmarks'.¹ In her chapter 'Provincial Stages, 1900-1934', Viv Gardner summarises the progress of the movement in the first decades of the new century:

At the end of the [first world] war only two [...] companies were in existence, Birmingham and Liverpool. [...] These were joined in the 1920s by a significant number of other companies whose ethos was that of the traditional repertory – a commitment to a 'dramatists' theatre', a mixed repertoire of plays, a non-star company and accessible price structure. Various called repertory or little theatres, they were to be found throughout the British Isles. And by the end of the decade many of the older local theatres, increasingly starved of touring fare and threatened by the cheaper cinema, had

¹ George Rowell and Anthony Jackson, *The Repertory Movement: A History of Regional Theatre in Britain* (Cambridge: CUP, 1984); Claire Cochrane, *Twentieth-Century British Theatre: Industry, Art and Empire* (Cambridge: CUP, 2011), p. 3.

returned to the idea of a 'stock company', but one based on the newly established repertory principle.²

Gardner argues that this had a seismic effect on the theatrical structure outlined in my previous chapters, writing that by the mid-1930s,

whilst it would be untrue to say that London was no longer 'the centre of the theatrical universe', a significant shift had taken place in the theatrical axis, and the 'provincial stage' was no longer a mere satellite of the metropolis.³

Although I disagree with the characterisation of pre-repertory provincial theatre as a 'mere satellite' of London, my previous chapters have demonstrated that this was indeed the prevailing view within the theatre industry. Here, I consider the dual effects of the repertory movement and of the 'significant shift' towards a more powerful provincial theatre upon Shakespeare performance, and contend that the practices of the previous century continued alongside major changes in the theatrical structure.

I begin with a survey of repertory theatre in the early twentieth century, examining the treatment given to Shakespeare in this new movement and the experience of rep in my case study towns. I consider how and to what extent repertory disrupted the theatrical hierarchy, and explore the ways in which the centre/periphery divide was challenged and reinforced by a movement that replicated, to some extent, the model of nineteenth-century stock companies.

² Viv Gardner, 'Provincial Stages, 1900-1934' in *The Cambridge History of British Theatre Volume 3: Since 1895*, ed. by Baz Kershaw (Cambridge: CUP, 2008), pp. 60-85 (pp. 82-83).

³ Gardner, 'Provincial Stages', p. 85.

The second section follows the transition of the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre from periphery to centre, revealing the limits of the repertory movement's decentralising powers through the SMT directors' struggles to assert the value of their provincial theatre up to the point, in 1961, when the theatre was reborn as the Royal Shakespeare Company. In the third and final section I look to performances of Shakespeare outside the repertory theatre in this period, arguing that touring companies continued to serve as the primary providers of Shakespeare for the vast majority of theatregoers and that their productions were largely unaffected by the practices of the repertory movement.

3.1 Repertory Shakespeare

The first permanent repertory theatre in England was Miss Horniman's Gaiety Theatre in Manchester, which opened its doors on 7 September 1908. Although there had been earlier experiments with repertory seasons in London, the movement was predominantly provincial in nature. Rebecca D'Monté writes that managers believed 'that repertory would work better' outside the capital, where 'cheaper theatre buildings were available and audiences more open to new ideas'; I have demonstrated the truth of the latter statement in earlier chapters.⁴ By 1914 there were three more English reps, all of which were, like the Gaiety, located in major urban provincial centres: the Liverpool Star Music Hall (later the Playhouse), established in 1911; Barry Jackson's Repertory Theatre in Birmingham, built in 1913; and the short-lived Theatre Royal Bristol company,

⁴ Rebecca D'Monté, *British Theatre and Performance 1900-1950* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 48.

which was established in 1914 under Muriel Pratt's leadership but closed the following year after an initially 'muted' response from Bristolians 'grew predictably weaker as the War fastened its grip on the public mind'.⁵ The provincial identity of the movement was, however, more than a matter of practicality: it was also indicative of a particular strain of political and cultural thought that arose from a socialist and/or Labour Party concern for social equality. The repertory movement sought to fight back against the dominance of commercial theatre across the nation and against 'the exploitation of the provincial theatre as the market for metropolitan products'.⁶

The domestic political tensions that fuelled repertory did not typically manifest in productions of Shakespeare. Steve Nicholson argues that major representatives of class struggle, such as the *Sunday Worker* and the Workers' Theatre Movement, 'generally saw Shakespeare as irrevocably on the side of the ruling class' on account of the playwright's sympathy to the establishment and mockery of the working class.⁷ The WTM preferred to create new scripts, or adapt existing works to better promote their cause and connect to their audience. Commercialism had, however, further entrenched the inequalities of the theatrical hierarchy. As Claire Cochrane has detailed, the economic climate of the late nineteenth century had encouraged the proliferation of corporate chains of theatre management: from a positive perspective, this 'offered more inclusive access to a wider range of high-quality resources to a greater proportion of the population' but, 'more controversially [...] the growth of the

⁵ Rowell and Jackson, *Repertory*, p. 48.

⁶ D'Monté, *British Theatre*, p. 48; Rowell and Jackson, *Repertory*, p. 3.

⁷ Steve Nicholson, 'A critical year in perspective: 1926', in *Cambridge History of British Theatre* vol. 3, pp. 127-142 (pp. 136-139).

corporate economy from earlier joint stock origins thrived on opportunistic tendencies to centralise, homogenise and, above all, monopolise resources'.⁸ It was against this homogenised culture that the first repertory practitioners sought to define themselves, prioritising work by continental and contemporary British playwrights over the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century dramas and comedies that had long been the mainstay of commercial theatre. Shakespeare remained in the early reps' repertoire but, as discussed below, the percentage of the season dedicated to his works varied considerably from one theatre to the next.

Repertory theatre waxed and waned in popularity in the early 1900s. The first wave of repertory theatres faced setbacks during the First World War, when a lack of government support for the entertainment industry and the introduction of Entertainment Tax saw profits squeezed and managers forced to return to long runs of safer old favourites in order to survive: only Birmingham and Liverpool remained in operation by 1918. In the 1920s and 1930s the old provincial touring circuits shrank as audiences defected to the new medium of cinema, and in response repertory theatre underwent something of a 'renaissance'.⁹ New repertory companies of professional actors were established in Oxford, Cambridge, Plymouth, Bristol, Sheffield, Northampton and Hull; commercial repertory – driven by profit rather than political or artistic ideals – also emerged as a response to the decline of touring and the revived popularity of locally-produced theatre.¹⁰ The repertory renaissance 'survived and even

⁸ Cochrane, *British Theatre*, p. 48.

⁹ Rowell and Jackson, *Repertory*, p. 3.

¹⁰ Rowell and Jackson, *Repertory*, pp. 4, 54-71.

flourished in the siege conditions of the Second World War', and new networks of regional theatres were established and extended into previously theatre-less areas by the government-funded Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (CEMA). As a result, from 1945 to 1955 repertory underwent a further expansion that was halted only by the popularisation of home entertainment in the form of television.¹¹

What, then, was the impact of this new approach to performance upon provincial Shakespeare? In addressing this question, it is important to emphasise that only a small minority of companies practised what Rowell and Jackson have defined as 'true repertory': staging plays in rotation and,

building over a period of a year or more a store of productions that [were] offered to the public on a regularly changing basis, each play being performed no more than a week at a time but brought back at frequent intervals according to public demand.¹²

Companies that did meet those requirements, however, had the capacity to significantly disrupt the theatrical hierarchy. Dennis Kennedy argues that Barry Jackson's Birmingham Repertory Theatre and Terence Gray's Cambridge Festival Theatre (1926-1933) produced 'Shakespeare more consistently engaged with the world' during the inter-war period than did their competitors in London and Stratford, who 'backed away from connecting the national dramatist to the conditions of the contemporary world'.¹³ As evidence, Kennedy

¹¹ Rowell and Jackson, *Repertory*, p. 4.

¹² Rowell and Jackson, *Repertory*, p. 1.

¹³ Dennis Kennedy, 'British Theatre, 1895-1946', in *Cambridge History of British Theatre* vol. 3, pp. 3-33 (pp. 29-31).

cites William Bridges-Adams' 1933 production of *Coriolanus* at the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre (SMT) in Stratford, staged just three months after Hitler's accession to power:

Aware of the topicality of a play about a fascist Roman general with dictatorial inclinations, Bridges-Adams refused to allow politics to enter his interpretive field. He thought it 'shockingly improper' when an artist 'turns his stage into a platform and takes sides in the temporal issues that divide us'. [...] He cut most of the political speeches, attempting to show it as 'a very simple play', aligning himself with the growing conservative opinion that strove to keep art out of politics and politics out of art.¹⁴

Even Theodore Komisarjevsky's modernist productions for the SMT shied away from social or political themes, focusing instead on brilliant visual effect.¹⁵ In contrast, Gray and Jackson both introduced the contemporary into their Shakespeare productions. I would argue that by creating high-profile Shakespeare that deliberately bore no relation to that of the West End or anywhere else in the country, the two men contributed to the destruction of the image of provincial theatre as a 'mere satellite of the metropolis' and helped to create a climate in which it was possible to consider provincial Shakespeare performance genuinely ground-breaking and a valuable national asset.

Gray's personal mission was to bring the European avant-garde to the UK and 'sweep away the cobwebs of external reality which were choking the

¹⁴ Kennedy, '1895-1946'; Kennedy quotes from W. Bridges-Adams, *Looking at a Play* (London: Phoenix House, 1947), p. 32.

¹⁵ D'Monté, *British Theatre*, p. 144.

theatre', by which he meant the naturalistic, pictorial style that still dominated the stage.¹⁶ His 'producer's theatre' was one of the earliest of its kind, and prioritised the artistic authority of the director above textual fidelity and performer prominence.¹⁷ Norman Marshall, who directed several productions at the Festival under Gray, described a stage that was deliberately designed to make 'conventional realistic production [...] almost impossible': instead of the usual proscenium arch 'isolating the actors from the audience', 'at the Festival it was difficult to find any definite point at which the stage ended and the auditorium began'.¹⁸ With abstract sets and expressionist direction, Gray created Shakespeare productions that were, according to Kennedy, 'unlike any others in Britain'.¹⁹ In 1928, for example, Gray's *As You Like It* featured Rosalind disguised as a Boy Scout and Celia as a Girl Guide; his 1929 *Romeo and Juliet* 'used flamenco costumes and seemed to be inspired by the films of Rudolph Valentino'.²⁰ These 'violently modern' Shakespearean pieces attracted 'violent criticism' from national critics; in Marshall's estimation, Gray's seven-year experiment at Cambridge had 'practically no effect upon the English theatre', with none of Gray's principal co-workers incorporating his artistic approach into their subsequent work.²¹ He had, however, proved popular with the town's student population – many of whom would go on to hold influential roles in

¹⁶ Terence Gray, 'This Age in the Theatre', *The Bookman*, 83 (1932), p. 11, cited in Billy J. Harbin, 'Terence Gray and the Cambridge Festival Theatre: 1926-33', *Educational Theatre Journal*, 21.4 (1969), 392-402 (p. 392).

¹⁷ Norman Marshall, *The Other Theatre* (London: John Lehmann, 1947) 2nd edition, pp. 53, 64.

¹⁸ Marshall, *Other Theatre*, p. 54.

¹⁹ Kennedy, '1895-1946', pp. 30-31.

²⁰ Kennedy, '1895-1946', pp. 30-31.

²¹ Marshall, *Other Theatre*, pp. 55, 63, 66; Harbin, 'Terence Gray', p. 401.

politics and the arts – and demonstrated that the theatrical periphery was a space in which radical experimentation could take place.

In Birmingham, Jackson developed a theatre more sustainable and with a higher national profile than Gray's, and regularly produced Shakespeare that was both progressive *and* influential. When the Birmingham Rep opened in 1913 it was the first purpose-built repertory theatre in Britain, and from the outset 'it set its own artistic standards often far above those of London'.²² Like Gray, Jackson's private income allowed him to pursue art over commercial success, but where the former had delighted in modifying Shakespeare's plays to fit his creative vision, the latter chose to focus on adjusting casting and design to best serve the text. One of Jackson's greatest innovations was his experiments with modern dress in the 1920s. *The Times* reviewed his very first modern-dress production, an April 1923 staging of *Cymbeline* at the Birmingham Rep, and concluded that it was important,

for the lead it gives. A living dramatist, who is also a poet, may know now that he can write in verse on modern themes – if he can write well enough. It opens a new possibility, not to Shakespearian producers, but to the contemporary theatre.²³

J. C. Trewin, a theatre critic and contemporary of Jackson, agreed that the production's impact on Shakespeare performance was limited, writing that it 'had not caused much stir beyond the auditorium of the Repertory in Station

²² J. L. Styan, *The Shakespeare Revolution: Criticism and Performance in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: CUP, 1977), p. 141.

²³ 'Cymbeline', *The Times*, 23 April 1923, p. 10, cited in Claire Cochrane, *Shakespeare and the Birmingham Repertory Theatre, 1913-1929* (London: The Society for Theatre Research, 1993), p. 103.

Street'.²⁴ Two years later, however, Jackson produced a modern-dress *Hamlet* at the Kingsway theatre in London which Kennedy states 'probably had more effect on twentieth century international performance than any other British production between the wars'.²⁵ After opening in half-darkness to avoid laughter at the incongruous site of officers in modern dress, the fully-lit court scene saw:

ambassadors, diplomats, and Polonius [...] dressed in white ties and tail-coats smothered in decorations, mingled with elegant women in *haute couture*. [...] Lounging on a bench, was 'the lord Hamlet' [...] in a rather shabby dinner-jacket and a soft shirt.²⁶

Critics were 'overwhelmed' by the implications of a revival which made *Hamlet* 'unexpectedly seem like a new play'.²⁷ Hubert Griffith, the *Observer's* theatre critic,

found it 'the richest and deepest *Hamlet* I have ever seen', delighted that he was able to judge the play 'as though, by some inconceivable flight of burning genius, a modern playwright, say Tchekhov, had written it'.²⁸

After Jackson's success, 'London looked for other experiments of the same kind', replicating patterns of two-way cultural exchange outlined in previous chapters.

²⁴ J. C. Trewin, *Shakespeare on the English Stage 1900-1964* (London: Barrie and Rockliff, 1964), p. 95.

²⁵ Dennis Kennedy, *Looking at Shakespeare: A Visual History of Twentieth-Century Performance* (Cambridge: CUP, 1993), p. 113, cited in Claire Cochrane, 'The Haunted Theatre: Birmingham Rep, Shakespeare and European Exchanges', *Cahiers Élisabéthains*, 96:1 (2018), 75-88 (p. 82).

²⁶ Styan, *Shakespeare Revolution*, p. 143.

²⁷ Styan, *Shakespeare Revolution*, pp. 145, 148.

²⁸ *The Observer*, 30 August 1925 quoted in Styan, *Shakespeare Revolution*, p. 148.

A run of modern-dress London Shakespeare followed: in 1928 Jackson presented *Macbeth* and *The Taming of the Shrew* at the Court Theatre; in 1929 Oscar Asche produced *The Merry Wives of Windsor* at the Apollo.²⁹ None matched the achievements of *Hamlet*, and indeed Herbert Farjeon found Asche's production so dire that the critic believed it would mark 'the end of these modern-dress rags' which, he hoped, would be looked back on 'as a transient fashion of the nineteen-twenties.'³⁰

Unfortunately for Farjeon, modern-dress rapidly became a permanent feature of Shakespeare performance, with productions following at London theatres the Westminster (*Troilus and Cressida*, 1938) and the Embassy (*Julius Caesar*, 1939). By the end of the 1930s even those who had criticised the practice came to adopt it: in 1938 Tyrone Guthrie directed *Henry V* in contemporary costume at the Old Vic, having apparently overcome the aversion to modern dress that he had publicly announced five years earlier.³¹ This production was particularly significant given the status enjoyed by the Old Vic, which under manager Lilian Baylis had been styled 'the home of Shakespeare'.³² From 1914 to 1923 Baylis had staged Shakespeare's complete works in celebration of the 300th anniversary of the First Folio, and during the First World War her company had been invited to Stratford to present at the SMT's Tercentenary summer festival. The Old Vic's Shakespearean authority had been further secured during the 1920s, when Baylis received an annual grant from the Shakespeare Memorial National Theatre Committee, the group campaigning

²⁹ Trewin, *English Stage*, pp. 110-112.

³⁰ Trewin, *English Stage*, pp. 110-112.

³¹ Trewin, *English Stage*, p. 177.

³² D'Monté, *British Theatre*, p. 90.

for a British national theatre. At the time of Guthrie's modern-dress *Henry V* the Old Vic remained the ostensible National Theatre, and thus his adoption of Jackson's practice stands as a tangible example of an innovation born in the periphery becoming adopted by the centre.

The modern-dress experiments were just one aspect of Jackson's broader pattern of cultural exchange between centre and periphery. He regularly worked in both Birmingham and London, creating new productions in one city which would often then transfer to the other.³³ Of his six 1920s modern-dress Shakespeare pieces, for example, half – *Cymbeline*, *All's Well That Ends Well* (1927) and *Othello* (1929) – were staged at the Rep alone, while the others premiered in London before appearing in Birmingham.³⁴ This system ensured that Jackson's work remained visible to the London-based critics and industry figures who were still reluctant to venture into the Midlands. The Rep also acted as a training ground for actors and directors who would go on to find stardom; Jackson preferred working with young, emerging talent that he could train in his own style. Echoing language used in the nineteenth-century Select Committee hearings, Trewin called the Rep 'a university of the stage', noting that 'today [1963] its graduates are everywhere in high place'.³⁵ Jackson's alumni included Peter Brook, Peggy Ashcroft and Laurence Olivier, and their successes both ensured that Jackson's approach to Shakespeare would continue through their own future engagements and raised the status of the Birmingham theatre through its association with these leading lights of the theatre. By the 1950s,

³³ Cochrane, *Birmingham Repertory*, pp. 97-101.

³⁴ Cochrane, 'Shakespeare and European Exchanges', p. 76.

³⁵ J. C. Trewin, *The Birmingham Repertory Theatre, 1913-1963* (London: Barrie & Rockcliff, 1963), p. xii.

after a brief stint as Director of the SMT from 1946 to 1948, Jackson had secured the Rep's position 'at the centre of an important network of artistic influence that extended far beyond Birmingham'.³⁶ As a result, he was able to mount daring work at the Rep, confident that London critics would now make the journey into Birmingham to see his latest creations. In the 1950/51 season critics were – to use Trewin's prejudiced terminology – 'lured' into the provinces on three occasions: twice to new translations of Jean Anouilh's French language plays, and once to Jackson's revival of the rarely-seen *Henry VI Part 2*, 'an astonishing collector's piece' that he had 'long wanted to stage'.³⁷ *Part Three* followed in spring 1952, and *Part One* in summer 1953, after which the complete trilogy ran for five weeks at the Rep before transferring to the Old Vic. These ground-breaking productions were 'the most complete versions of the original seen possibly since the late sixteenth century', and represented a major risk for Jackson: for most of its truncated history the *Henry VI* trilogy had been staged in compressed form, and *Part Two* had not been performed as a stand-alone piece for eighty-seven years.³⁸ Each part was received rapturously in London, marking a triumph for Jackson's artistic policies and his spirit of independence from the production values of the centre. In Birmingham, however, the reception was decidedly cooler. The difficulties in pleasing both local and metropolitan tastes would, as I discuss below and in Chapter 4, become a recurring issue for provincial repertory theatres.

³⁶ Claire Cochrane, *The Birmingham Rep: A City's Theatre 1962-2002* (Birmingham: Sir Barry Jackson Trust, 2003), p. 3.

³⁷ Trewin, *Birmingham Repertory*, p. 148.

³⁸ Cochrane, 'Haunted Theatre', p. 79; Trewin, *Birmingham Repertory*, p. 149.

For all their achievements, the Cambridge and Birmingham theatres were the provincial exception rather than the rule. Most towns engaged in repertory lacked a Shakespeare-orientated, high-profile producing theatre of the likes of Jackson's or Gray's; most managers did not enjoy the privilege of a private income to support their creative endeavours. As the case study towns demonstrate, far more common were the commercial ventures that stood alongside provincial receiving houses – the Theatres Royal and their kin – which continued to welcome touring companies on a weekly or fortnightly basis. These commercial reps operated along much the same lines as nineteenth-century stock companies, and were reliant on short weekly production runs to retain a regular audience. As a consequence, their repertoires were focused on popular drama but while that may have included Shakespeare, they lacked the financial freedom to produce experimental work.

Neither Newcastle nor Brighton established a professional repertory theatre in the first half of the twentieth century. In 1935 John Baxter Somerville had created a rep company at the Theatre Royal Brighton: they played *Hamlet* in their first season, and split their time between Brighton and provincial tours thereafter until the financial strains of wartime led the company to dissolve in January 1941, never to re-form.³⁹ In the south-west, the Theatre Royal Bath had been unseated as the leading regional theatre in favour of Bristol. This process had begun before repertory theatre reached either city: in the 1930s, major touring companies such as Harold V. Neilson's chose to visit the Prince's Theatre in Bristol and bypass the Theatre Royal Bath entirely, presumably because the

³⁹ Anthony Dale, *The Theatre Royal Brighton* (Stocksfield: Oriel Press, 1980), pp. 104-112.

short distance between the two cities meant audiences from one would travel to the other to see an appealing act.

Bristol's pre-eminence in Shakespeare performance was secured in 1943, when the Theatre Royal Bristol was purchased by CEMA and became the very first state-subsidised theatre. In 1946 the Bristol Old Vic Company was launched under the direction of Hugh Hunt who pursued a classical repertoire and had produced twelve Shakespeare plays by the end of 1950.⁴⁰ The 'provincial brother of the London Vic', as it was often called, benefited enormously from its Arts Council funding and its connection to one of London's most prestigious theatres, and quickly earned a reputation for quality.⁴¹ Writing in 1964, Trewin felt that the Bristol Old Vic's productions matched the standards of the Birmingham Rep's – essentially casting the two theatres as the new provincial centres of Shakespeare performance – but in the wider theatrical hierarchy they remained subservient to London: like Birmingham, Bristol operated as a training ground for future 'London luminaries' and acted as the penultimate step on the career ladder for directors who would 'move on nationally and internationally'.⁴² Nonetheless, Bristol remained a powerful theatrical force next to which Bath had little chance of sustaining its own classical repertory.

True, non-commercial repertory theatres were founded in the two remaining case study towns. Norwich had no professional producing theatre, but it did have the privately-funded Maddermarket. This Little Theatre was established in 1921 by Nugent Monck, an actor and director who had previously

⁴⁰ Trewin, *English Stage*, p. 209.

⁴¹ Trewin, *English Stage*, p. 209.

⁴² Trewin, *English Stage*, p. 201; Rowell and Jackson, *Repertory*, p. 83.

worked with William Poel and shared his interest in reproducing Elizabethan and Jacobean performance on the contemporary stage.⁴³ As was common for Little Theatres, the company was staffed and led by professionals, but operated with an amateur cast. In every other respect, the Maddermarket was unlike any of its peers on account of its longevity and specialisation, for most of its life, in early modern drama. Trewin rated the theatre equal to the Birmingham Rep in terms of provincial Shakespearean experimentation, writing that although the ‘anonymous amateur companies might vary in merit’, Monck’s firm creative policy produced Shakespeare that was entirely alien to conventional practice, and contemporary scholars have continued to recognise the theatre’s significance to the Little Theatre movement and to original practice.⁴⁴ The design of the Maddermarket was based on the seventeenth-century Fortune Playhouse in London and featured an apron stage and a balcony in an intimate space seating only a few hundred; the plays ‘flashed along [...] at astonishing speed, in texts that [Monck] did not hesitate to cut’.⁴⁵ Writing in 1947, Norman Marshall commended Monck for using his ‘Shakespearian stage exactly as Shakespeare intended it to be used, each scene following on the other without even an instant’s pause’, which was almost as radical a break from convention as Jackson’s modern-dress:

In the normal Shakespearian production it is amazing how much time is wasted between the innumerable scenes – half a minute here, a

⁴³ Eric Salmon, ‘Monck, (Walter) Nugent Bligh (1878-1958)’, *OXDNB* <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/57168>>. N.B. Unless stated otherwise, all other websites referenced in this chapter were accessed and live as of 01 December 2017.

⁴⁴ Trewin, *English Stage*, pp. 95-98.

⁴⁵ Trewin, *English Stage*, p. 97.

minute there, often still longer pauses while the orchestra is given the unnecessary task of attempting to create the atmosphere for the next scene. Until one has seen a production by Monck it is difficult to realise how essential it is for the full effect of any Shakespearian play that it should flow along without the slightest interruption.⁴⁶

By 1933, Monck had directed all thirty-seven plays in the Shakespeare canon, and Shakespeare continued to appear as a regular feature of the repertoire throughout the twentieth century. However, although the Maddermarket provided Norwich audiences with the opportunity to see a wide range of innovative, locally-produced Shakespeare, the theatre lies outside the scope of this thesis due to its fundamentally amateur identity.

In Nottingham, audiences experienced the full range of the repertory spectrum. The commercial Nottingham Repertory Theatre was opened in 1920 by the Comptons, a theatrical family who had toured throughout the provinces as the Compton Comedy Company.⁴⁷ Shakespeare was a frequent feature in their populist repertoire, and productions of his plays would likely have borne a marked similarity to those of stock companies in the early nineteenth century: performed by a resident group of actors with short rehearsal periods and generic costume and scenery that would be re-used again and again. The theatre closed after three years of low attendance, which John Bailey attributes to its unfortunate location 'well away from the city centre'.⁴⁸ Commercial repertory emerged again during the Second World War, when a former cinema was

⁴⁶ Marshall, *Other Theatre*, p. 96.

⁴⁷ John Bailey, *A Theatre for All Seasons: Nottingham Playhouse, The First Thirty Years 1948-1978* (Stroud: Alan Sutton Publishing Ltd, 1994), p. 2.

⁴⁸ Bailey, *Nottingham Playhouse*, pp. 1-2.

converted into a 460-seat performance space known as the Little Theatre, but financial difficulties after 1945 led to its re-formation and then eventual closure. A determined group of locals refused to let repertory disappear from Nottingham, and with the support of the city's Lord Mayor the Nottingham Theatre Trust was formed.⁴⁹ In 1948 the Trust took over the lease of the Little Theatre and created the Nottingham Playhouse, a not-for-profit theatre run on true repertory lines that earned, over the following decades, a national reputation for excellence.⁵⁰ Three Shakespeare plays were staged in the first season – *Othello*, *Twelfth Night* and *The Merchant of Venice* – and every season up to 1960 included at least one Shakespeare production. While these are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4, it is pertinent to note here that in its first fifteen years the Playhouse played an important role in the cultural life of the city and indeed the provinces at large: the Arts Council, for example, funded regional and national production tours.⁵¹ The Playhouse's early Shakespeare productions may not have asserted independence from the practices of the centre as those of Gray, Jackson and Monck did, but the positive critical attention they attracted from commentators and national newspapers nonetheless added weight to the repertory movement's aim of freeing the provinces from the cultural imperialism of the capital.

⁴⁹ Bailey, *Nottingham Playhouse*, p. 5.

⁵⁰ Rowell and Jackson, *Repertory*, p. 131.

⁵¹ Rowell and Jackson, *Repertory*, p. 132.

3.2 The Shakespeare Memorial Theatre

In the rural West Midlands another theatre was mounting its own challenge to the hegemony of the centre. The Shakespeare Memorial Theatre in Stratford upon Avon occupied a unique place in the theatrical hierarchy: its specialisation and physical connection to the playwright's home town gave it a claim to authority that set it apart from other provincial theatres, yet its geographic distance from London and largely conventional productions cast the theatre – for most of its life – firmly in the periphery. Indeed, until its final years the SMT's work was generally shunned by the national newspapers who were 'content to leave the reviewing of productions at Stratford to their provincial counterparts'.⁵² In this section I trace the development of the theatre from its opening in 1879 to the advent of Peter Hall's transformative directorship in 1960. My examination of the SMT's struggle to gain national recognition demonstrates the resistance faced by theatres outside London that strove to transcend their provincialism, and contextualises the company's transition to a state-funded, internationally-respected organisation in the later twentieth century, as discussed in Chapter 4.

Ruth Ellis' monograph on the history of the SMT, published in 1948, was as much a defence of the venue's Stratford location as an account of the life of the then-seventy-year-old organisation. She records snub after snub from the metropolitan theatrical elite, which began with opposition to the theatre's creation in both the local and the national press. The *Birmingham Town Crier* labelled the 1875 appeal for donations 'Stratford's latest folly', while the *Daily*

⁵² Sally Beauman, *The Royal Shakespeare Company: A History of Ten Decades* (Oxford: OUP, 1982), p. 23.

Telegraph expended considerable space on what Ellis terms a ‘curiously bitter attack’ one month before the Theatre’s opening in March 1879.⁵³ The paper protested ‘[this] paltry and impertinent business’ and took an overtly disdainful view of the organisers and their locale:

They have no mandate to speak in the name of the public or to invest with the attribute of a national undertaking a little mutual admiration club whose object is to endow Stratford-upon-Avon with a spick and span new Elizabethan building [...] The rest of the Governors and Council are respectable nobodies. The name of not one single noted representative of literature, of art, of Shakespearean scholarship, of the clergy or the law appears on the list. It is merely an estimable local clique, associated with three ex-theatrical managers and a deservedly successful comedian, who have the presumption [...] to ask the public to recognize this little friendly society as a national enterprise. To do so is an abuse of the public patience. It is an insult to the memory of Shakespeare.⁵⁴

The writer deliberately drew attention to the geographic location of the theatre and the lack of high-status individuals involved in order to ridicule what they evidently perceived to be a fundamentally inappropriate attempt to memorialise Shakespeare that abused the public and, by implication, threatened the playwright’s legacy. Such sentiments lingered for years: in the first few decades of its existence, audiences at the SMT’s annual Festival were mainly drawn from

⁵³ Ruth Ellis, *The Shakespeare Memorial Theatre* (London: Winchester Publications, 1948), p.10 (original references not supplied).

⁵⁴ Ellis, *Memorial Theatre*, p.10.

the local area and when London critics did visit they were often disappointed. During the 1885 season, for example, popular American star Mary Anderson performed for one night only but received a lukewarm reception from the reviewers sent from the national dailies, who 'were not unanimous in their praise and were unfavourably impressed by her supporting company'.⁵⁵ Later critics and historians have, however, considered the nineteenth-century supporting company one of Stratford's strengths: Trewin records that actor-managers Ben Greet (1895) and Frank Benson (1886-1916) shared a policy of hiring 'young actors of promise' in supporting roles, which established the theatre's early reputation as a nursery for talent.⁵⁶ As discussed in Chapter 1, the status of a 'nursery' theatre in the theatrical ecology is complex: while it brings the benefit of recognition from the centre, it also casts the theatre as categorically subservient to the venues that actors graduate to, thus maintaining the centre/periphery binary.

Attitudes towards the SMT began to soften during William Bridges-Adams tenure as Festival director (1919-1934). Bridges-Adams used a text-focused, ensemble approach that went against prevailing fashions and created productions that Trewin considered 'among the most distinguished of the century', but 'under-rated because too few London critics went regularly to the Memorial Theatre'.⁵⁷ Although national newspapers lost interest after the director's first few seasons, the theatre did gain international accreditation in 1922 when the SMT was invited to play at the Norwegian National Theatre, an

⁵⁵ Ellis, *Memorial Theatre*, pp. 15-18.

⁵⁶ Trewin, *English Stage*, pp. 13-14.

⁵⁷ Trewin, *English Stage*, p. 88.

event which Ellis argues granted the Stratford group ‘the full status of a National Theatre Company’.⁵⁸ While I would suggest that Ellis may have been exaggerating the implications of the Norway visit – the Old Vic enjoyed a far more prominent position in England than the SMT at that time – this high-profile engagement allowed the SMT to temporarily step outside the hierarchical centre/periphery model of theatre in the UK, and certainly worked to quell some of Stratford’s opponents. When the Stratford Festival Company toured a year later to the King’s Theatre in Hammersmith, their work ‘was seen – and praised – by London critics’.⁵⁹ The extent of the SMT’s progress was demonstrated in 1926, when the Theatre was destroyed by fire and a subsequent rebuilding campaign attracted significant public support. This time even old foe the *Daily Telegraph* created a fund to assist the efforts, although I would question the extent to which this was motivated by genuine respect for the work of the theatre rather than a desire to demonstrate loyalty to King George V, the recently-announced patron of the SMT, particularly as the paper did not commence regular reviews once the new auditorium was opened.⁶⁰

There remained many who continued to disparage Stratford and felt that ‘the only proper place for a Shakespeare Memorial Theatre was London, and that Stratford should hand over its insurance money and anything else collected for the Memorial to the National Theatre Committee’.⁶¹ Originally proposed by Effingham Wilson in his 1848 pamphlet *A House for Shakespeare*, the subject of establishing a national theatre had gained traction during the early twentieth

⁵⁸ Ellis, *Memorial Theatre*, pp. 45-46.

⁵⁹ Ellis, *Memorial Theatre*, p. 48.

⁶⁰ Ellis, *Memorial Theatre*, p. 51, 55.

⁶¹ Ellis, *Memorial Theatre*, p. 52.

century following the private publication of William Archer and Harley Granville Barker's *Scheme and Estimates for a National Theatre* in 1904.⁶² The national theatre had, as the title of Wilson's pamphlet suggests, been conceived from the very start as a monument to Shakespeare. In 1909, the recently-formed Shakespeare Memorial National Theatre General Committee (SMNTGC) issued a *Handbook* outlining their aims, the first of which was to establish a theatre that would 'keep the plays of Shakespeare in its repertory'.⁶³ Most felt that London – and in particular, the Old Vic – was the appropriate site for such a theatre, and that the SMT was an unworthy rival.

Ellis argued that the rural location of the SMT was in fact key to its continued and growing appeal, at least amongst its local provinces, describing Stratford as,

pre-eminently a holiday place, with the opportunity to explore Shakespeare's native country [...] To Midland people Stratford was a place to drive to on summer, with perhaps a picnic by the way and a great play to light their journey home.⁶⁴

Dependence upon tourists was not, however, healthy for the theatre. While domestic and international holidaymakers might have ensured the theatre's financial security, they provided no incentive to the Board to invest in its productions. In 1934, Bridges-Adams resigned as director from frustration at the Governors' prioritisation of profit over art and their refusal to spend money

⁶² Effingham Wilson, *A House for Shakespeare: A Proposition for the Nation* (London: Effingham Wilson, 1848); William Archer and H. Granville Barker, *A National Theatre: Scheme and Estimates* (London: Duckworth & Co., 1907).

⁶³ Daniel Rosenthal, *The National Theatre Story* (London: Oberon Books, 2013), p. 16.

⁶⁴ Ellis, *Memorial Theatre*, p. 52.

in order to raise the quality of the SMT's work to a national standard. In a letter to the Chairman he explicitly connected the physical distance between Stratford and London with the board's failure to meet contemporary production standards, writing:

I doubt [...] whether a Council which, for all its list of imposing names, often sits as a small quorum a hundred miles from London, is sufficiently in touch with the living art of today to control the policy of a theatre of even national or international pretensions.⁶⁵

Under his successor, Ben Iden Payne, the theatre became even further removed from contemporary trends. Like Nugent Monck in Norwich, Iden Payne was deeply committed to original practice as spearheaded by William Poel, but productions in Stratford attracted far greater critical attention than those of Norwich, and were often found wanting. Amidst Iden Payne's 'tedious' and 'serviceable' productions, guest director Komisarjevsky's modern work came as something of a relief, and yet his innovative use of dramatic lighting on otherwise minimal sets proved too experimental for most critics.⁶⁶

By 1942, when Iden Payne resigned, any hopes of competing with the Old Vic seemed to be dashed. Both theatres were restricted by equally small production budgets – a necessity at the money-starved Vic, but a deliberate choice made by the governors at the financially prosperous SMT – but the Shakespeare staged at the Vic 'could only highlight the shabbiness and second-rate quality of the majority of Stratford productions', making the London theatre

⁶⁵ Trewin, *English Stage*, p. 166.

⁶⁶ Trewin, *English Stage*, pp. 168-169; Beauman, *Ten Decades*, pp. 148-149.

‘the lodestar for any would-be classical actor.’⁶⁷ The issue, as Bridges-Adams saw it, was not the SMT’s location per se – although doubtless the Vic’s London home placed it at a considerable advantage – but rather the Governors’ parochialism: in a letter to a friend, he expressed his opinion that ‘Stratford has elected to go local rather than national, it must stew in its own juice until so big a storm is raised that Stratford will have to revise its policy altogether.’⁶⁸ That Bridges-Adams believed it was at all possible for the SMT to challenge the Old Vic for the title of top classical theatre demonstrates an adjustment in attitudes towards provincial theatre by at least some of those working within it by the 1940s, supporting Gardener’s statement – cited in the introduction to this chapter – that the repertory movement produced ‘a significant shift [...] in the theatrical axis’.⁶⁹

The storm Bridges-Adams had anticipated arrived in 1944, when Fordham Flower replaced his father Archie as Chairman and, the following year, appointed Barry Jackson the new artistic director. Empowered by Flower, Jackson immediately set about making sweeping changes of the kind Bridges-Adams – and to a lesser extent Iden Payne – had attempted. Instead of five weeks’ rehearsal for seven productions there was now a full month for each of the eight plays in repertory; each piece was directed by a different director; and, in a move that both symbolised a new beginning and reflected Jackson’s long-standing practice of casting young talent, only actors who had never before

⁶⁷ Beauman, *Ten Decades*, p. 156-157.

⁶⁸ ‘13 January 1938’, Bridges-Adams Papers, Special Collections Division, University of Calgary Libraries, 5.23.3, cited in Beauman, *Ten Decades*, p. 147.

⁶⁹ Gardner, ‘Provincial Stages’, p. 85.

worked in Stratford were engaged.⁷⁰ The first season was announced at a luncheon held at London's Savoy Hotel, 'the last venue on earth to which any journalist used to the old ways of the Memorial would expect to be invited', and attracted 'numerous celebrated actors, producers, and critics [...] all of whom had been conspicuous for their indifference to Stratford in the past'.⁷¹ Beauman has termed this 'an extraordinary occasion' for its break with tradition and because Flower made a speech in which he acknowledged the flaws in the theatre's past policies and promised that 'quality in acting and production should take precedence over profits'.⁷² I would add that the significance of bringing the SMT's director and governors from the provinces into the capital is one which has great significance to this thesis. The physical act of moving from the periphery into the centre can be read as an assertive statement of ambition from the SMT, but an ambition that adhered to the values of the conventional theatrical hierarchy. In choosing to meet influential metropolitan figures on their home ground, Flower implicitly accepted the superiority of London productions, seemingly overlooking the fact that much of the most challenging work of the pre- and inter-war years had been created and staged outside the capital. Furthermore, this act clarified the specific brand of success that Flower sought for the SMT: rather than create new and different standards of excellence, he looked to match those of the centre.

Jackson's first season was a critical success, attracting metropolitan audiences and launching two Birmingham Rep graduates – Peter Brook and Paul

⁷⁰ Beauman, *Ten Decades*, p. 173.

⁷¹ Beauman, *Ten Decades*, pp. 170-171.

⁷² Beauman, *Ten Decades*, p. 171.

Scofield – into the spotlight. National prestige, however, came at a cost to local relations. Beauman pinpoints the Flower/Jackson partnership as the starting point for the town/gown division that was still ‘extremely palpable’ when she wrote her history of the RSC in 1982, and which remains in place to this day.⁷³ The root of the issues lay in Stratford’s dependency on the Shakespeare tourist trade, which gave the SMT an unparalleled degree of economic influence over its local environment. Hoteliers objected to the new policy of staggered openings that left only three different productions playing each week, rather than the full season’s run, as visitors now had little incentive to stay in the town for several days to catch multiple plays; further bad feeling was generated when Jackson revealed plans to overhaul the SMT’s winter season, replacing the tradition of local amateur productions with imported, high-end touring shows.⁷⁴ While these changes were deemed necessary to improve the quality of the theatre’s reputation and its Shakespeare productions, they also threatened Stratfordians’ livelihoods and clearly relegated local interests beneath national aspirations.

After a lukewarm second season that failed to impress the critics or draw smart London audiences away from the star-studded Old Vic – even when the SMT brought three of their productions to His Majesty’s Theatre in the West End – and having heard nothing from the governors regarding a renewal of his contract, Jackson announced his resignation from the post of Artistic Director in January 1948.⁷⁵ His third and final season that same year was, however, a resounding success which set the tone for the next decade at the SMT under his

⁷³ Beauman, *Ten Decades*, p. 179.

⁷⁴ Beauman, *Ten Decades*, p. 174.

⁷⁵ Beauman, *Ten Decades*, pp. 184-185.

successor Anthony Quayle. Jackson's 1948/49 company was less youth-orientated than his others, contained only two guest directors – Quayle and Michael Benthall – and, significantly, included several stars. This last element went against Jackson's usual practice; as Trewin noted, he 'preferred to make stars than to import them'.⁷⁶ Quayle and Benthall, however, were determined to emulate the West End, and engaging London's leading actors was central to their vision. Beauman outlines the immediate impact this had on the theatre:

The whole atmosphere of the Memorial changed radically with the productions of the 1948 season in both small and large ways.

Suddenly telegrams and flowers began appearing in actors' dressing-rooms where, in the past, there had been a simple handwritten note from Jackson, and perhaps a single rose.⁷⁷

Four years after taking over as Chairman, Flower had finally achieved national recognition for his theatre. Ellis would no longer have to defend the SMT against those who found the concept of a Shakespeare theatre in Stratford inherently 'distasteful' but, as discussed below, the wholehearted embrace of the practices and practitioners of the theatrical centre would have detrimental long-term consequences for the SMT.⁷⁸

Over the course of the next decade, Quayle's star-centred approach to Shakespeare led the SMT to replace the Old Vic as 'the foremost classical theatre in the country'.⁷⁹ By 1955,

⁷⁶ Trewin, *English Stage*, p. 204.

⁷⁷ Beauman, *Ten Decades*, p. 190.

⁷⁸ Ellis, *Memorial Theatre*, p. 7.

⁷⁹ Beauman, *Ten Decades*, p. 190.

almost every major star actor on the British stage, including Olivier, [Ralph] Richardson, [John] Gielgud, Ashcroft, and [Michael] Redgrave, had played at least one Stratford season, working with some of the most gifted British directors, including Brook, [Tyrone] Guthrie, Glen Byam Shaw, and George Devine.⁸⁰

Some of the SMT's productions in the 1950s were exceptionally innovative. In 1951, Quayle produced a half-cycle of the History plays, comprised of *Richard II*, *Henry IV parts 1 & 2* and *Henry V*. Both individually and as a cycle the productions broke with convention: Tanya Moiseiwitsch's staging alone was 'astonishingly and uncompromisingly plain' in an age that favoured 'opulent and operatic sets'.⁸¹ This was the first time the sequence had ever been staged in chronological order as a continuing story, and the leading roles were given fresh interpretations that did not initially please the critics. Richard II, played by Redgrave, was less sympathetic than tradition; Quayle's Falstaff did not meet expectations of merriment and sentimentality; and Richard Burton's restrained performance of Henry V explored the King's insecurities rather than celebrating his bold courage.⁸² Audiences, however, flocked to the SMT for the cycle, and by the end of the season some critics had grown to appreciate Quayle's achievement.

More unanimous critical acclaim met Peter Brook's 1955 *Titus Andronicus*, a production that was no less daring than Quayle's history cycle. *Titus Andronicus* had been produced only twice since the eighteenth century and

⁸⁰ Beauman, *Ten Decades*, p. 197.

⁸¹ Beauman, *Ten Decades*, p. 208.

⁸² Beauman, *Ten Decades*, pp. 207-208.

was the only Folio play that the SMT had never staged. Brook's production starred Quayle as Aaron, Olivier as Titus and Vivian Leigh as Lavinia, and minimised gore: Lavinia's mutilation was depicted symbolically with red velvet ribbons. According to the *Evening Standard*, however, the 'nice scrunch of bone off-stage' when Titus cut off his hand still caused 'at least three people [to] pass out nightly', prompting the theatre to call in extra St John Ambulance volunteers.⁸³ Kenneth Tynan found Olivier's performance definitive, writing that his Titus 'ushers us into the presence of one who is, pound for pound, the greatest actor alive'.⁸⁴ Together, *Titus* and Quayle's History cycle represented the SMT at the height of its powers: presenting inventive new work that sought no precedence in the London theatre and instead exerted an influence of its own on critics, directors and academics.

Those productions were not, however, representative of the SMT's typical output. Most of the theatre's work followed convention and relied upon big-name talent imported from the capital, rather than a creative house style (as found, for example, at the Birmingham Rep), to draw in audiences. Beauman has argued that this dependency on star actors was essentially an unhealthy one which consumed the theatre's budget and forced Quayle to structure his seasons according to the roles that his visiting stars could – or would – play, rather than any overarching approach to Shakespeare's work.⁸⁵ I would further suggest that the SMT's star-centred approach prevented the theatre from engaging

⁸³ Samantha Ellis, 'Peter Brook's *Titus Andronicus*, August 1955', *Guardian* 25 June 2003 <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2003/jun/25/theatre.samanthaellis>>.

⁸⁴ Kenneth Tynan, *A View of the English Stage, 1944-63* (London: Davis-Poynter, 1975), pp. 157-158.

⁸⁵ Beauman, *Ten Decades*, p. 210.

meaningfully in cultural exchange with London or the more peripheral theatres, thus granting the SMT an uneasy space in the theatrical ecology. Although it offered a stage of equal prestige to those in the capital, the SMT could not claim a place at the apex of the theatrical hierarchy because its low fees, geographic distance from the centre and distinctly provincial environment deterred most actors from returning to Stratford for consecutive seasons. The SMT was not, therefore, the zenith of a leading actor's career as the elite London theatres were, but neither did it fulfil the 'nursery' role of theatres lower down the hierarchy; the focus on star actors left little space for directors to cultivate emerging talent. Broader dissemination of the SMT's work – which, as this and previous chapters have demonstrated, was another marker of theatrical prestige – was also lacking, as Quayle's attempts to build up a pattern of regular national and international tours and establish a base in London had chiefly failed. The SMT's high status, therefore, rested precariously on its ability to attract stars and guest directors from the centre. By 1960, Stratford had triumphed over the Old Vic as the authoritative home of Shakespeare performance, but had done little to mount a meaningful challenge to London's theatrical supremacy.

3.3 Touring Company Consistency

As the previous sections have demonstrated, repertory theatre developed somewhat unevenly in England. Here, I argue that the movement had little impact on the majority of provincial audiences due to the endurance of touring Shakespeare productions. As mentioned in the Introduction to this thesis, I draw

most of my examples from productions of *King Lear* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to allow for in-depth analysis.

The commercial theatre companies that toured their products to regional receiving houses operated on precisely the same lines as their nineteenth-century predecessors. As Cochrane has noted, the likes of Frank Benson 'were in a very real sense repertory companies carrying a stock of plays, a selection of which would be part of a week's or a fortnight's visit'.⁸⁶ What is notable is the longevity of these companies: whereas elsewhere the actor-manager system declined to the point of extinction during the 1910s, in the world of Shakespeare performance it survived until the 1950s. This can, as I discuss in greater detail below, be attributed primarily to broader changes in the popular repertoire that gradually reduced the space available for Shakespeare each season.

In my case study towns, four companies, managed by Charles Doran, Henry Baynton, Harold V. Neilson and Donald Wolfit, dominated the bookings. Doran, Baynton and Neilson all worked with Benson early in their acting careers, before each formed their own Shakespearean company in the 1920s; Wolfit trained with Doran before eventually forming his own in 1937. Given this context, it is unsurprising that all four followed Benson's model – set out in Chapter 2 – and presented several of the more popular pieces from the Shakespeare canon in week-long visits. A comparison of the repertoires of Doran's and Baynton's companies during visits in May 1922 to the Theatres Royal Bath and Nottingham respectively demonstrates their marked similarity. From 1 to 6 May, 'Mr Charles Doran and his Shakespearean Company' performed *The Merchant of Venice*,

⁸⁶ Cochrane, *British Theatre*, p. 74.

Henry V, The Taming of the Shrew, Macbeth, A Midsummer Night's Dream, Julius Caesar and Hamlet, while in Nottingham, from 5 to 10 May, 'The Henry Baynton Shakespearean Company' performed *The Merchant of Venice, Hamlet, The Taming of the Shrew, As You Like It, King Lear, Romeo and Juliet* and *The Comedy of Errors*, as well as popular 1871 drama *The Bells*.⁸⁷

Neilson appears to have styled himself as Benson's successor by adopting the latter's relatively traditional – perhaps even conservative in comparison to his contemporaries Jackson and Gray – approach to Shakespeare, and attempting to found a touring Shakespeare festival similar to that which Benson had created at the SMT from 1886 to 1916. An article in the Hull *Daily Mail* remarked upon the creation of Neilson's Shakespeare company in 1933, noting;

He recently organised and controlled the farewell tour of Sir Frank Benson, and he is now carrying on the best of the Benson traditions in endeavouring to establish an annual Shakespeare festival in each of the principal centres of population throughout the country. Next week his company comes to the Alexandra Theatre, and Hull will be given the opportunity of taking a permanent place in Mr Neilson's scheme. Among so much entertainment of a ephemeral kind there is, surely, room for at least one week a year to be devoted to the great classics of the theatre.

[...] In his staging of the plays Mr Neilson is influenced by a belief that Shakespeare's first object was to be entertaining, not simply to a

⁸⁷ 'Theatre Royal, Bath', *The Bath Chronicle*, 29 April 1922, p. 3; NLSL register of performances.

limited circle of literary specialists, but to the ordinary man and woman. [...] Consequently, not freakish staging, but the best available acting is what is required, and this is what Mr Neilson is endeavouring to supply.⁸⁸

The mention of ‘freakish staging’ can only be a reference to the work of the likes of Gray and Jackson and indicates that their productions, while winning over some critics, were resisted by, rather than influential upon, mainstream touring companies. Indeed, although Neilson styled his visits as ‘annual Shakespearean festivals’ in a transparent attempt to associate his work with the Shakespeare Festival in Stratford – providing further evidence of the SMT’s authoritative status as discussed in the previous section – and while he appears to have been the sole provider of Shakespeare in the 1930s to the Theatres Royal Nottingham and Newcastle, the substance of his festivals was practically identical to the standard touring repertoires of Benson, Doran and Baynton before him. From 2 to 7 March 1936, for instance, he visited Nottingham with *The Merchant of Venice*, *Twelfth Night*, *As You Like It*, *Macbeth*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, a repertoire that is notable only for its absence of perennial favourite *Hamlet*; when his company appeared in Newcastle two months later this play was back in rotation.⁸⁹ A review of Neilson’s ‘jolly’ *Dream* at the Leeds Grand Theatre in April 1936 provides an insight into the conventional aesthetics and characterisation of his work:

⁸⁸ ‘Week of Shakespeare’, *Hull Daily Mail*, 17 March 1933, p.12.

⁸⁹ NLSL register of performances; Programme, *Annual Shakespearean Festival*, TR Newcastle, 11 May 1937, NCLLS L792 N536T 1927-44.

The woodland setting was simple, consisting of the trunks of tall trees bathed in soft blue light. This was the keynote of the play. All the actors distinguished themselves in the lyrical passages. [...] The love scenes were carried through with great naturalness.⁹⁰

Although Neilson's company repertoire was indistinguishable in style to that which had dominated the touring companies of the late nineteenth century, the theatrical climate of the 1930s meant that his work was regarded by some parts of the provincial press as a highly topical substitute for the much-discussed – but as yet unmaterialised – Shakespeare-centred national theatre. In advance of Neilson's visit to Eastbourne in October 1934, the *Bexhill-on-Sea Observer* profiled the company, writing:

Although much money and more talk have been expended upon schemes for a national memorial to Shakespeare, it is still a fact that the majority of folks in Shakespeare's native land are dependent upon private enterprise for any chance they may have of seeing performances of the master dramatist's plays. In most of the principal centres of population this private enterprise is associated with the name of Harold V. Neilson, who is actively building up a scheme for annual Shakespeare festivals wherever there is sufficient support to justify the heavy expense entailed. Twenty-five of these festivals have been arranged, and one will be held at the Devonshire Park Theatre next week. The general level of the playing is very high. All the company speak their blank verse with accuracy, life and

⁹⁰ 'In Shakespearean Play at the Grand Theatre', *Leeds Mercury*, 22 April 1936, p. 7.

beauty – easily and without strain, as if it were their natural speech.

This is Shakespeare come to life, with much of the care-free spirit of the poacher he was. And if Mr Neilson can keep going long enough to kill the deeply engrained belief that Shakespeare is ‘dull’, he will have performed a mighty service.⁹¹

Here, Neilson’s company is lauded as an essential component of the movement to memorialise Shakespeare in a medium that was accessible for ‘the majority of folks’. In stark contrast to the companies of the later Victorian era, the fact that Neilson worked exclusively in the provinces is framed as a positive, democratic trait. The positive associations with the provinces are further revealed by the reference to Shakespeare’s (mythical) habit of poaching, which evokes the playwright’s provincial heritage and speaks to the widespread interest in biography as much as the works themselves by the early twentieth century. I would suggest that this shift in attitudes can be attributed to the campaign for a national theatre, which ensured that Shakespeare’s visibility in national culture rose higher still: the press, for example, produced countless articles in support or opposition to the project throughout the first fifty years of the twentieth century. To some extent, this climate framed all professional Shakespeare performances as a response to the on-going debate.

However, the added political impetus attributed to Shakespeare performance during the decades-long campaign for a national theatre did not have any conspicuous effect upon the nature of, or respect accorded to, the work of those who provided provincial theatres with the national playwright’s work.

⁹¹ ‘Devonshire Park Theatre, Eastbourne’, *Bexhill-on-Sea Observer*, 20 October 1934, p. 5.

Wolfit was the last of the peripatetic actor-managers, touring his Shakespeare-focused company in various incarnations from 1937 to 1963, although his activity in the English provinces peaked during the Second World War and declined steadily thereafter. Unlike the other twentieth-century actor-managers, Wolfit was already a well-known figure when he formed his company, having played Shakespearean roles for Baylis, Poel, Jackson and Iden Payne, the latter of which accorded him national recognition.⁹² Throughout his touring years he continued to work sporadically in London, and the maintenance of his (relatively) high profile, along with prodigious travelling and the remarkable longevity of his company, must account for the level of attention Wolfit's provincial performances drew in the metropolitan press. His outfit was, however, much like that of his predecessors: he visited each venue for a week at a time, presenting several different pieces from a core canon of favourites and taking the lead male roles for himself. A comparison of two visits made by Wolfit to the Theatre Royal Nottingham seven years apart demonstrate the consistency of his repertoire: from 16 to 21 November 1942, he presented *King Lear*, *Twelfth Night*, *Hamlet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; on his annual return in June 1949 the first three plays were once again presented, with *Dream* omitted but *Othello*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Macbeth* and *Much Ado About Nothing* added.⁹³

Reviews of Wolfit's productions contained little information about the specifics and instead focused on the quality of each cast member's performance, so it is difficult to establish how similar the 1942 and 1949 *Lears* may have been.

⁹² Ronald Harwood, 'Wolfit, Sir Donald (1902-1968)', *OXDNB* (Oxford: OUP, 2004) online edn. <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/36992>> [accessed 25 January 2017].

⁹³ Programmes, *King Lear*, TR Nottingham, 16 November 1942 and 18 June 1949, NLSL.

I would suggest, however, that critics' silence on the subject of interpretation may indicate a lack of innovation; in any case, constant touring would have left Wolfit little time to develop new pieces. In both 1942 and 1949 Wolfit was praised for his depiction of King Lear, which the *Stage* asserted was 'widely acknowledged as his greatest part'.⁹⁴ His earlier performance was reported as 'a poignant interpretation of the sorrows that weighted down and finally overwhelmed the tragic old King'; his latter 'illuminate[d] the entire production' through 'the power and subtlety of Mr. Wolfit's acting, [and] the imagination that flows from him'.⁹⁵ It was not only in the provinces that Wolfit was appreciated: the *Stage* reported that a 1949 engagement at The Bedford in Camden was well-received, with *Lear* playing to standing-room only and an 'atmosphere of expectation, of satisfaction, and finally of triumph'.⁹⁶ Wolfit had attempted to establish 'a people's classical theatre at popular prices' at the Bedford, where plays were presented on a stage 'stripped for action', but although he enjoyed some support from London's Shakespeareans, it was not enough to sustain the business.⁹⁷ Wolfit's biographer writes that the London theatrical establishment 'disdained him' on account of his supposed second-rate cast, battered scenery and shabby costumes, as well as his habit of 'holding onto the curtain for support' at the end of performances so as to appear physically exhausted by his onstage exertions.⁹⁸ Pursuing what were, by the 1940s, outdated practices undoubtedly damaged Wolfit's reputation in certain circles. He 'came to be

⁹⁴ 'The Bedford: King Lear', *Stage*, 10 March 1949, p. 7.

⁹⁵ 'Theatre Royal', *Nottingham Evening Post*, 17 November 1942, p. 3; 'The Bedford: King Lear', *Stage*.

⁹⁶ 'The Bedford: King Lear', *Stage*.

⁹⁷ Trewin, *English Stage*, p. 1949.

⁹⁸ Harwood, 'Wolfit'.

regarded as unfashionable, his productions [...] regularly savaged by the critics', despite the importance those same critics placed upon ensuring the British people had ready access to Shakespeare performance in the absence of a National Theatre.⁹⁹

Wolfit's decision to adopt the old-fashioned Bensonian model of a mixed Shakespearean repertoire may be attributed in part to the training he received at the outset of his career. His first professional engagement, from 1920 to 1921, was with Doran's company, and his second was with Alexander Marsh, another touring Shakespeare specialist. An examination of the nature of commercial theatre in the late 1930s and 1940s, however, suggests that practical considerations, rather than a sense of tradition, were the more likely driving force behind his setup. As new writing penetrated the mainstream and light comedies and thrillers came to dominate bookings, the proportion of a provincial receiving theatre's season allocated to Shakespeare, and indeed to pre-twentieth century drama as a whole, declined considerably. The Theatre Royal Brighton programmes illustrate just how far the standard repertoire changed in the post-war era. In 1946, for example, there was one week of various Shakespeare plays as provided by Wolfit, and forty-seven other productions. Forty of these were thrillers, comedies, dramas or revues created or written in the last fifteen years (and most within the last six); there were also three operas, one pantomime, two pieces from the 1920s, and just one other pre-1900 play: T. W. Robertson's *Caste*, written in 1867 and a regular feature in many nineteenth-century touring companies' repertoires.¹⁰⁰ Only the operatic

⁹⁹ Harwood, 'Wolfit'.

¹⁰⁰ Programmes, TR Brighton, 1946, The Keep TRB 2/2/13.

companies joined Wolfit in presenting several pieces during their week's engagement. A permanent shift towards modern writing was replicated in Theatres Royal across the country, and while the favoured genres may have changed over the course of the twentieth century, Shakespeare was only rarely seen more than once a year. This stands in stark contrast to the saturation of Shakespeare performance found during even the latter, melodrama-obsessed years of the 1800s. In this context of declining popular interest in Shakespeare performance – suggested, for example, in the *Hull Daily Mail*'s reference to 'a deeply engrained belief that Shakespeare is "dull"' – it appears that although some sections of the public demanded Shakespeare in their local theatre, there was simply not sufficient interest to support a weekly run of just one Shakespearean play.¹⁰¹ In order for Wolfit to sustain his company he had no choice but to present a repertory format.

Further evidence of the diminishing profitability of Shakespeare performance is the ever-shrinking pool of companies presenting his work. By the 1930s, the theatrical market was struggling to support multiple Shakespeare specialists. Neilson was still operating when Wolfit launched his company in 1937, but from 1938 onwards the annual Shakespeare week at the Theatres Royal Nottingham and Newcastle that Neilson had carved out was instead held by Wolfit, who was presumably the more attractive of the two given his reputation. Unlike Neilson, Wolfit could boast on publicity materials that he provided a 'full London company'.¹⁰² That phrase, as I have noted in the previous

¹⁰¹ 'Week of Shakespeare', *Hull Daily Mail*.

¹⁰² Programme, *Plays of Shakespeare*, TR Newcastle, 07 November 1938, NCLLS L792 N536T 1936-41.

chapter, was often adopted by the touring companies of the late nineteenth century, and the fact that Wolfit continued to apply it to his own group suggests that a London association retained its cachet well into the 1900s, despite the best efforts of the burgeoning repertory movement to assert the value of provincial theatre on its own terms. Neilson's Shakespearean company disappeared entirely after 1939, but he continued to work in the industry, managing the provincial tours of the Covent Garden Opera Company, and the similarity of this line of work surely suggests that the dissolution of his Shakespeare venture was forced upon him by Wolfit's monopoly, rather than being a voluntary decision. Wolfit's London affiliations were not enough, however, to ensure his survival. In the immediate post-Second World War years he too found himself subject to overwhelming competition from a more prestigious rival, and was denied bookings at the more prestigious venues. His final Shakespearean appearance at any of the case study theatres took place at the Theatre Royal Newcastle in 1950.¹⁰³

The cause of Wolfit's decline was the single most influential factor on Shakespeare performance in the twentieth century: the introduction of government funding for the arts. Amongst other things, this development allowed for a new, uncommercial approach to less-populist drama. Public financing began with CEMA in 1940. The primary objective was facilitating touring company visits to theatreless areas, particularly those in close proximity to 'the newly opened (and secretly sited) ammunition and related factories'.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ Programme, *The Taming of the Shrew*, TR Newcastle, 28 October 1950, NCLLS L792 N536T 1947-50.

¹⁰⁴ Rowell and Jackson, *Repertory*, p. 77.

With a dual focus on broad distribution and decentralisation, responsibility for planning and advertising within England was delegated from the London headquarters to ten small regional offices. The tours were a success, and by 1945 'sixty-nine hostels [factory workers' accommodation] were being regularly visited by C.E.M.A companies', who provided a mix of Shakespeare and modern classics.¹⁰⁵ Norman Marshall wrote in his contemporary account of 'the pioneer theatres in England' that CEMA made no attempt 'to play down to the audiences in the choice of plays'; *Twelfth Night* and *Hedda Gabler* were 'among the biggest successes'.¹⁰⁶ In addition to this provision, a small number of bricks-and-mortar theatres obtained state support, including London's Old Vic.

Forced to close during the Blitz, the Old Vic's London headquarters were relocated to the Victoria Theatre in Burnley and various iterations of the company were sent on a series of provincial tours, a selection of which were primarily Shakespearean.¹⁰⁷ These presented an unsurmountable challenge to Wolfit's operation. Marshall accused the Old Vic of seeing itself 'in the role of a kind of universal provider of The Better Drama to the provinces', and quotes as evidence for this the 'boastful' note included in their 1942 programme which stated that they 'have never been busier', having 'conducted no less than fifteen tours in two years'.¹⁰⁸ In April that year, the *Stage* advertised two Old Vic companies on tour, one of which was their 'Old Vic Shakespearean Company'.¹⁰⁹ This took *The Merchant of Venice*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *Othello* to

¹⁰⁵ Marshall, *Other Theatre*, p. 5.

¹⁰⁶ Marshall, *Other Theatre*, p. 229.

¹⁰⁷ Marshall, *Other Theatre*, pp. 133-134.

¹⁰⁸ Marshall, *Other Theatre*, p. 134.

¹⁰⁹ 'Chit-Chat: Vic-Wells Companies', *Stage*, 30 April 1942, p. 4.

number one venues including the Theatres Royal Bolton, Brighton and Norwich; the Grands of Halifax and Derby; the Cambridge Arts Theatre; and the Opera House, Buxton. The listing does indeed include a somewhat self-congratulatory note that also manages to remind the reader of the company's metropolitan home:

Since August 1940, the Old Vic and Sadler's Wells companies have covered about 18,000 miles in Great Britain, presenting plays of Shakespeare, Euripides, Goldsmith, Chekhov, and Bernard Shaw. They have visited small towns, 'blitz' towns, mining towns, cotton mill centres, large towns, and great cities. Periodically each company return[s] to London.¹¹⁰

The quality of the productions toured by these companies evidently pleased their provincial audiences. A review in the *Gloucestershire Echo* of the Old Vic's production of *Othello* at the Buxton Opera House made a point of celebrating the strength of the whole ensemble. They wrote that the audience,

was last night privileged to see an "Othello" that only the Old Vic Shakespearean Company could have given them. With the famed Continental actor, Frederick Valk, giving a great performance in the title role, went also a galaxy of fine acting from the rest of the accomplished cast. Therein lies the Old Vic's secret of success – not for them the solo playing of the one virtuoso, but he must have the support of a full, fine orchestra.¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ 'Vic-Wells Companies', *Stage*.

¹¹¹ 'Valk's Great Acting in "Othello"', *Gloucestershire Echo*, 07 October 1942, p. 3.

Wolfit, a lone star, could hardly compete with a government-funded galaxy.

In 1946 CEMA evolved into the Arts Council of Great Britain (ACGB), an organisation that retained both chairman – John Maynard Keynes – and a focus on touring that continued distributing a London-made theatrical product to venues around the country. Although Keynes promised autonomy to the ACGB regional offices, Cochrane argues that his ‘essentially metropolitan tastes and preference for circulating metropolitan excellence using commercial expertise operating on a not-for-profit basis [...] established the dominant funding agenda in the immediate post-war period’.¹¹² Keynes’ allocation of funds gave London a significantly disproportionate share that he justified by stating that institutions such as the Royal Opera House, Sadler’s Wells and the Old Vic ‘were *national* assets and thus should be valued irrespective of whether the bulk of the population would ever have the opportunity to enjoy them’.¹¹³ The effect of this policy upon Shakespeare performance can be seen in the sudden increase in the number of London productions – especially those from the Old Vic – that toured to provincial theatres. There had been the occasional visit from a metropolitan company before the war, but these had tended to follow the model of the actor-manager companies. During one such visit by the Old Vic Shakespeare Company to the Theatre Royal Newcastle in June 1929, several pieces were presented over the course of one week: *Macbeth*, *As You Like It*, and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.¹¹⁴ In contrast, in the years following the creation of the ACGB the Old Vic regularly toured single Shakespeare productions in weekly visits to

¹¹² Cochrane, *British Theatre*, p. 147.

¹¹³ Cochrane, *British Theatre*, p. 147.

¹¹⁴ Programme, ‘The Old Vic Shakespeare Co.’, TR Newcastle, 17 June 1929, NCLLS L792 N536T 1927-36.

provincial theatres, including *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in 1952 and *King Lear* in 1952/53.¹¹⁵ Wolfit, meanwhile, did not benefit from the new subsidies, finding his applications 'more often than not [...] rejected on the grounds that his productions were of poor quality in terms of casting and performance', a charge that Laurence Raw admits had 'a modicum of truth', but argues was less influential than the closed shop of the ACGB.¹¹⁶ Raw suggests that,

several members of the funding bodies – the British Council Drama Panel in particular – experienced a conflict of interest as they were heavily involved in the Old Vic's activities. Hence it was inevitable that they would look unfavourably on Wolfit's rival operation.¹¹⁷

The ACGB's metropolitan bias was evident in both word and deed. All regional offices were shut down by 1956, and in 1951 official policy changed from taking 'the best to the most' to supporting 'few, but roses'. Although this was to include 'regional roses', in reality, as Jen Harvie has argued, it was institutions in London and Stratford that were to receive the most support.¹¹⁸ Indeed, the first ten years of state provision set the tone for much that would follow, with the government voicing a desire to support drama in the provinces and yet perpetuating the privilege accorded to London as the theatrical centre, which I discuss further in Chapter 4. In defence of the shift towards the centre, Secretary-General William Emrys Williams wondered if it might not be better,

¹¹⁵ Programmes: *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, TR Brighton, 25 February 1952, The Keep TRB 2/2/19; *King Lear*, TR Newcastle, 12 May 1952, NCLLS L792 N536T 1950-55; *King Lear*, TR Brighton, 07 April 1953, The Keep TRB 2/2/19.

¹¹⁶ Laurence Raw, *Theatre of the People: Donald Wolfit's Shakespearean Productions 1937-1953* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2016), p. xiii.

¹¹⁷ Raw, *Donald Wolfit*, p. xiii.

¹¹⁸ Harvie, *Staging the UK*, p. 20.

‘to accept the realistic fact that the living theatre of good quality cannot be widely accessible and to concentrate our resources upon establishing a few more shrines like Stratford and the Old Vic’.¹¹⁹ By the end of the 1950s, the ACGB had ‘entrenched a bias of superiority, priority, and indeed productivity for the metropolis and one of inferiority and inactivity for the regions’, a bias that, as I argue below, would be played out to considerable effect in the world of Shakespeare performance.¹²⁰

¹¹⁹ *Arts Council Annual Report 1950/51* (London: ACGB, 1951), cited in Harvie, *Staging the UK*, pp. 18-20.

¹²⁰ Harvie, *Staging the UK*, p. 20.

Chapter 4

1960-2015: Subsidised Theatre and the RSC

‘Weekly rep’ is having a deplorable effect on the standard of English acting and production. It is literally impossible to rehearse a play properly in a week, especially when only a small part of the day can be devoted to rehearsals. [...] London managers and producers are more and more inclined to fight shy of the repertory actor. They know from experience that he may give an excellent reading and make rapid progress during the first days of rehearsal but it is likely that after a week he will be able to do no more with the part. By the first night what promised to be an excellent performance seems by comparison with the rest of the cast slick, superficial and shoddy.¹

Two years after the end of the Second World War, director Norman Marshall was dismayed by the state of British theatre. Of the one hundred repertory companies active in England and Scotland in 1946, he believed that ‘the number of these which achieve an adequate standard of acting and production does not reach double figures’.² Echoing the accusations of the 1866 Select Committee witnesses – who alleged that the 1843 Theatres Act had destroyed the quality of London theatre by disrupting the training system that saw actors perfect their art in the provinces – Marshall claimed that the commercial provincial repertory system had stunted the development of a generation of actors and directors,

¹ Norman Marshall, *The Other Theatre* (London: John Lehmann, 1947) 2nd edition, p. 192.

² Marshall, *Other Theatre*, p. 190.

rendering them incapable of meeting the demands of a London theatre. But whereas the 1866 Select Committee witnesses, convinced of decline, had sought to restrict the performance of legitimate drama to a select number of venues for its own protection, Marshall echoed the British Drama League's call for a 'Local and State subsidy' to support new regional theatres. This, he believed, would stimulate the creation of theatre companies throughout the nation and allow a greater variety of repertoire which would include more Shakespeare and more new writing.³ In practice, as I demonstrate in this chapter, the impact of government funding on the theatrical ecology and upon Shakespeare performance was far more complex than Marshall had anticipated, with no direct correlation between subsidy and prestige.

The Arts Council has been analysed extensively elsewhere – in Harvie's *Staging the UK*, the three volumes of *British Theatre Companies*, and Kate Dorney and Ros Merkin's *The Glory of the Garden*, amongst others – and so here I restrict my coverage to brief overviews and specific moments that had tangible effects upon provincial Shakespeare performance.⁴ I do, however, assert that the theatrical hierarchy and the model of cultural exchange between London and the provinces were both altered by the availability of subsidy in the latter half of the twentieth century. Decentralisation, for example, became a persistent political and cultural issue largely because of Arts Council policies that both intentionally and inadvertently drew attention to the imbalance between London and the rest

³ Marshall, *Other Theatre*, p. 206.

⁴ Harvie, *Staging the UK*; *British Theatre Companies 1965-1975*, ed. by Jon Bull (London: Bloomsbury, 2017); *British Theatre Companies 1980-1994*, ed. by Graham Saunders (London: Bloomsbury, 2015); *British Theatre Companies 1994-2014*, ed. by Liz Tomlin (London: Bloomsbury, 2015); *The Glory of the Garden: English Regional Theatre and The Arts Council 1984-2009*, ed. by Kate Dorney and Ros Merkin (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010).

of the nation. Changing social attitudes in the post-war era meant that, for the first time, those with power and influence began to acknowledge that the uneven state of affairs between centre and periphery was undesirable.

Related to this development was the gradual disappearance of the term 'provincial' in favour of 'regional' to describe theatre outside London. While this lexical shift had begun in the 1950s as a result of Miss Vincent Wallace's campaign to improve the status of repertory theatre by stressing local ties and the semi-permanency of its companies, my reading of press cuttings from the mid-twentieth century has found that it was in the 1960s that 'regional' began to be regularly applied in the press and by the theatre industry itself.⁵ I would suggest that 'regional', liberated from the negative associations of unsophistication that come loaded with the term 'provincial', may have encouraged the appreciation of non-London theatre on its own terms; at the very least, it reinforced the message of decentralisation pursued by those within and without the cultural sector throughout the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Comparisons between London and the provinces, however, remained a common feature of theatrical reviews even at the very end of this period, and so in order to emphasise the persistence of the centre/periphery divide I continue to use 'provincial' in this chapter.

The first section concentrates on the consequences of the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre's 1961 re-branding as the Royal Shakespeare Company. This act, as I detail below, marked the organisation's transformation from a West

⁵ George Rowell and Anthony Jackson, *The Repertory Movement: A History of Regional Theatre in Britain* (Cambridge: CUP, 1984), p. 87

Midlands-based independent operation to a publicly-funded and determinedly national institution. Led by visionary director Peter Hall, the new RSC would prove a critical and commercial success, with Gary Taylor deeming it in 1989 ‘the most influential and successful theatrical organisation in the [post-1950] Western world’.⁶ However, while the company’s origins in Stratford remained a central part of their brand identity under Hall and his successors, I would argue that there was neither an attempt nor a desire to develop the organisation as an explicitly provincial venture. Instead, the RSC deliberately shed the vestiges of its provincial identity in its early years and cultivated a deeply-rooted metropolitan image in order to attain an authoritative reputation. Once established, this allowed the company to exert its influence over the reception of Shakespeare at a national level, exercising a degree of cultural domination that surpassed even that of the nineteenth-century London patent theatres. In the second section, my focus turns to Shakespeare performance in regional producing theatres. Using the Nottingham Playhouse as a case study, I examine the impact of state subsidy on the theatre industry and on cultural exchange at a local level, and argue that while the culture of Shakespeare performance was inevitably altered by the creation of a permanent, professional and dedicated Shakespeare theatre in the form of the RSC, long-standing patterns of exchange between centre and periphery were not so readily revised.

⁶ Gary Taylor, *Reinventing Shakespeare: A Cultural History from the Restoration to the Present* (New York: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1989), p. 304.

4.1 A Stratford-centric Culture of Shakespeare Performance

At the March 1959 Theatrical Managers' Association quarterly meeting in Birmingham – recorded by the *Stage* as the first to be held outside London 'in all its 65 years' existence', and thus evidence of the industry's increasing interest in decentralisation – Peter Hall spoke about the importance of keeping 'provincial theatre [...] alive at all costs' in an 'Age of Entertainment' dominated by television.⁷ He criticised the practice of out-of-town openings which treated 'provincial playgoers as guinea pigs' as well as the theatres 'which exist solely to accommodate touring shows [...] [and are] not much of an asset to a town these days, when stars have come to the conclusion that touring has lost its sense of occasion'.⁸ Hall continued:

A theatre should really belong to the town in which it exists [...] and this is not possible under present touring conditions. I would like to see as many theatres as libraries in the country, theatres where actors can work creatively and develop their art. It is a mistake to look upon the provincial theatre as second-rate, just because it is not in London. The Shakespeare Memorial Theatre at Stratford upon Avon is a provincial theatre in the best sense of the word. The basic part of the audience comes from the Midlands. I am convinced that the best work on the stage is done by actors who belong to a theatre, which belongs to a town and it is up to us to create such theatres for them to work in.⁹

⁷ 'Peter Hall says don't make guinea pigs of playgoers', *Stage*, 26 March 1959, p. 1.

⁸ 'Guinea pigs' *Stage*.

⁹ 'Guinea pigs', *Stage*.

Hall's emphasis on the importance of cultivating repertory theatres outside of London and shedding the perception of provincial venues as 'second-rate' was doubtless motivated in part by his ambitious plans for the SMT. In December 1958, during a tour to Leningrad, Hall was asked by chairman Fordham Flower to take over the directorship. He had agreed, 'on the understanding that they should both try to transform the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre into one of the world's major permanent companies, on a size and scale not seen in Britain'.¹⁰ In the early 2000s, Hall recalled this conversation and acknowledged that the impetus for his plans had been the looming presence of a yet-to-be realised National Theatre, recounting that he told Flower, 'you've got to do this: within the next five or six years the NT will come, and [...] Stratford will become a very provincial repertory stuck out in the country, visited only by tourists'.¹¹ In other words, he wished to avoid becoming that which he publicly praised: a wholly locally-focused producing theatre. In due course, Hall would defect to the NT and then form his own, commercial, West End production company, a transformation of values that Taylor presents as the epitome of 'the shift from youthful socialism in the 1960s to the establishment privatization of the 1980s'.¹² In the same period the RSC, too, would undergo a transformation of similar proportions, moving from periphery to centre and coming to exert an unprecedented degree of influence over Shakespeare performance. In this section I explore the means by which the RSC achieved its authoritative status

¹⁰ John Elsom and Nicholas Tomalin, *The History of the National Theatre* (London: Jonathan Cape Ltd, 1978), p. 119.

¹¹ Richard Eyre, *Talking Theatre: Interviews with Theatre People* (London: Nick Hearn Books Ltd, 2009), pp. 41-42, quoted in Daniel Rosenthal, *The National Theatre Story* (London: Oberon Books, 2013), p. 41.

¹² Taylor, *Reinventing Shakespeare*, p. 305.

and how it wielded its new-found influence. I argue that conversion to a national company required a physical connection to the theatrical centre as well as culturally-imperialist behaviours and attitudes that mirror those of the nineteenth-century Covent Garden and Drury Lane, and demonstrate that, despite its provincial base, the RSC ultimately conformed to the metropolitan mould in order to attain success.

Several works cover the relationship between the two theatres that received national status in the 1960s, including Beauman's *The Royal Shakespeare Company: A History of Ten Decades*, Chambers' *Inside the Royal Shakespeare Company: Creativity and the Institution*, Elsom and Tomalin's *The History of the National Theatre*, and Rosenthal's *The National Theatre Story*.¹³ All tie the creation of the RSC to a desire to compete with the NT. As Hall saw it, securing public funding was key to ensuring that the SMT would not be overshadowed by the NT and could build a high-profile future for itself. Occupying the location of Shakespeare's birthplace would not be enough to guarantee a future for the Stratford company. In order to be eligible for subsidy it would be necessary to drain the SMT's account of its £175,000 funds and create a London base for the company, as Chambers explains:

Stratford [...] would go bankrupt by supporting the vastly expanded work of the new company [...] a Stratford-London company could

¹³ Sally Beauman, *The Royal Shakespeare Company: A History of Ten Decades* (Oxford: OUP, 1982); Colin Chambers, *Inside the Royal Shakespeare Company: Creativity and the Institution* (Oxford: Routledge, 2004); Elsom and Tomalin, *National Theatre*; Rosenthal, *National Theatre Story*.

mount a strong argument for similar treatment [to the NT] if it were so ambitious that it could not be ignored.¹⁴

Expanding into the capital would grant the SMT greater credibility within the resolutely metropolitan-centric halls of power. More importantly, it would provide justification for subsidy on the grounds that their work would now arguably be accessible to a wide swath of the population, rather than just the 'middle-class tourists' who visited Stratford from other parts of the UK and abroad.¹⁵ Although the reasoning behind this pragmatic decision was hardly confidential, the RSC's early mythologizing presented a more idealistic vision focussed on the organisation's provincial nature, as in the 1964 publication *Royal Shakespeare Theatre Company 1960-1963 (RSTC)*.¹⁶

The introduction to *RSTC* explained the volume's dual purpose: to 'mark the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's birth' and to record 'the four years of intense creative work that followed Peter Hall's appointment in January, 1960, as Director of the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon'.¹⁷ Edited by John Goodwin, a publicist for the RSC, the book contains essays from Hall and playwright Robert Bolt, production designs, photographs, and newspaper reports and reviews, all of which are highly complimentary. Essentially an extended piece of marketing material, *RSTC* provides a valuable insight into the quasi-provincial public image sought by the company in the immediate years

¹⁴ Chambers, *Inside the RSC*, pp. 9-10.

¹⁵ Charles Landstone, *Off-Stage: A Personal Record of the First Twelve Years of State Sponsored Drama in Great Britain* (London: Elek Books, 1953), p. 180, quoted in Rosenthal, *National Theatre*, p. 41.

¹⁶ *Royal Shakespeare Theatre Company 1960-1963*, ed. by John Goodwin (London: Max Reinhardt, 1964).

¹⁷ *RSTC*, Goodwin, p.6.

after the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre was reformed and rebranded with a Royal Charter. A two-page overview of 'The Royal Shakespeare Theatre' emphasises the imagined continuity between SMT and RSC, the high-society patrons and historical roots of the company, the reach of its productions, and Hall's forward-facing, innovative approach to Shakespeare:

Incorporated under Royal Charter, with the Queen as Patron, [the Royal Shakespeare Theatre] virtually belongs to the nation, and is watched over by a Board of Governors. The President is Lord Avon, and the Chairman is Sir Fordham Flower, grand-nephew of the theatre's founder; the Stratford family of Flower has supported and steered the RST throughout its history. [...] The RSC are divided between Stratford-upon-Avon and London playing at two theatres. For as well as the annual April-to-December Shakespeare season at Stratford, they give a continuous repertory of new and classic plays at the Aldwych. Each year, about 750,000 people pay more than £500,000 to see RSC productions [...] [The aim of the RSC is to] express [the richness of Shakespeare] so that it is immediate to modern audiences, an experience that reverberates with the thoughts and feelings of today. Such an aim must have certain instruments. One is a company built round a core of actors under long-term contract, playing constantly together, and thus able to explore a modern Shakespeare style. Another is a London repertory of mainly non-Shakespearean plays in which the actors can respond

to all the influences of modern and classic drama and use these influences in their Shakespeare repertory at Stratford-upon-Avon.¹⁸

In this text, Stratford, Shakespeare and the RSC are inextricably linked, and the company's activities in London are presented as if they were primarily intended to improve the work undertaken in the Midlands. The implication that performances in the capital were a development opportunity for actors who would then demonstrate their best work in Stratford was an overt reversal of the traditional theatrical training journey which ended on the London stage. This idea was reinforced in a chapter by Hall, titled 'Shakespeare and the Modern Director', in which he disingenuously claimed that the London base was necessary to establish his full-company ideal, omitting any mention of the NT or subsidy:

My proposal to work at the Aldwych Theatre as well as at Stratford had only one purpose: to create enough variety of employment to make a company. [...] I was clear from the outset that I could contribute little unless I could develop a company with a strong permanent nucleus. Everything – the Aldwych, the training of actors in a Studio, the modern experiments – has stemmed from this conviction.¹⁹

There were, however, acknowledgments that Stratford did not necessarily reap the benefits from the London branch. In the same piece, Hall wrote that, 'by the end of 1960 we had the start of a common spirit', but 'most of the actors then

¹⁸ *RSTC*, Goodwin, pp. 7-8.

¹⁹ Peter Hall, 'Shakespeare and the modern director', in *RSTC*, pp. 41-48 (p. 43).

went to London to open the Aldwych [...] throughout 1961 we still had a company at the Aldwych, although we didn't seem to be able to recreate one for Stratford'.²⁰ As in the 1950s, the problem was the provincial location itself: it was difficult to persuade actors, most of whom were London-based, to move to Stratford for months on end. Paul Scofield, a star who had been confirmed for the first season, 'dropped out a few weeks before rehearsals, "saying he could not face coming to Stratford"'.²¹ It would seem, then, that Hall's vision for the RSC was in many ways incompatible with the provincial; in the early, unsubsidised years his company was hampered from achieving its potential due to its association with Stratford. As I argue below, only by transcending its regional roots was the RSC able to fulfil Hall's ambition.

In October 1962, after months of uncertainty over whether the NT, the RSC or an amalgamation of the two would receive government funding, the Arts Council announced that the RSC would receive a grant of £47,000. Less than Hall had hoped for, and nearly three times smaller than the NT's award, the subsidy nonetheless placed the RSC in a position of 'comparative [...] centralised affluence', and set it apart from every other provincial – and indeed metropolitan – theatre in the country.²² Chambers writes that public funding ensured that the RSC was recognised 'as a national institution', and this does indeed appear to be the case, with countless articles appearing in the national press.²³ In 1963, for example, the *Stage* published an article on the subject of the RSC's need for more money which observed that 'the national papers are on the

²⁰ Hall, 'Modern director', p. 44.

²¹ Chambers, *Inside the RSC*, pp. 14-16.

²² Beauman, *Ten Decades*, p. 252.

²³ Chambers, *Inside the RSC*, p. 28.

side of the company' and suggested that they should therefore support an appeal on behalf of the RSC.²⁴ The moment of government funding can, therefore, be seen to have granted the RSC more than just a modicum of financial stability: it allowed the company to shed the last vestiges of its provincial identity and stand alongside the NT as one of the great pillars of the nation's cultural landscape.

A key component in the RSC's standing as part of the establishment was its connection to the capital. Regular, full seasons at London theatres – first the Aldwych and then, from 1982, the Barbican – ensured that the RSC's identity was tied as much to London as it was to Stratford. So important was the metropolitan base that when ACGB budget cuts hit in 1966, Hall chose to reduce the Stratford season and cancel touring plans rather than diminish his company's presence in the capital. Subsequent artistic directors varied in their approach towards managing the RSC's various geographical commitments, but the standard created by Hall remained fairly consistent. The exception to this was Adrian Noble's stewardship from 1991 to 2002, which was oriented more towards Stratford and touring. In 2002, Noble made the controversial decision to withdraw from the Barbican, which left the company without a permanent stake in the capital.²⁵ The relationship between that theatre and the company was re-established with the 2014 production of *Richard II*, and in the intervening years London was not entirely bereft of RSC productions: tours from their commercial branch continued to visit the West End. I would suggest that the RSC's London engagements ensured that the company's presence was felt even when it was not performing there. Marvin Carlson writes that, over time,

²⁴ 'Raising Funds for Royal Shakespeare', *Stage* 12 September 1963, p. 17.

²⁵ Trowbridge, *Rise and Fall*, p. 133.

theatre-goers develop 'specific and focused' associations and memories with 'specific theatre buildings';

In many periods of theatre history, East and West, this sort of physical association has been reinforced by cultural establishment of specific buildings devoted not simply to the theatre but to a specific genre or subgenre of theatre, even, on occasion, to the work of a specific theatre artist. [...] [These theatres'] very names evoke the spirits and images not only of particular types of drama but, particularly in the memories of their audiences, of specific great artists and productions associated with these spaces.²⁶

Carlson states that 'this dynamic is perhaps most clearly seen in the Western tradition in the opera', but the RSC's high-profile and long-standing London residencies also fit this pattern. The strength of association thus automatically raised the RSC's status by binding the company closer to the centre of theatrical activity. Despite the renaissance of the regional repertory movement in the post-war years, London remained the locus of the industry, where the best salaries and better-resourced productions were staged, where many influential cultural figures resided, and where audiences were drawn to from across the UK. Even the most successful regional theatres could not hope to equal the press exposure granted to the London producing theatres.

A prestigious London site was not, however, the sole marker of the RSC's establishment standing: a second, highly influential factor was the authority

²⁶ Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (Michigan: University of Michigan, 2001), pp. 143-144.

over Shakespeare assumed by, and offered to, the company. By beating the NT in the race to be the first to establish a large-scale national company, the RSC was assured virtual ownership of the Shakespeare canon and the NT adjusted their repertoire accordingly. Shortly after the National's founding in 1963, literary manager Kenneth Tynan explained to the *Stage* that, 'Shakespeare is a necessity, though not in bulk; we plan to present "Much Ado About Nothing" and "King Lear" but we are content to leave the lion's share of the bard to the Royal Shakespeare Company'.²⁷ True to Tynan's word, from 1963 to 2015 the NT only occasionally staged more than one Shakespeare play per season, and some years omitted his works altogether. In the event, *Much Ado* was produced in 1965 but it was not until 1986 that the NT finally staged their first *Lear*.²⁸ With no competition from their closest rival, it was perhaps inevitable that the RSC would dominate Shakespeare performance, just as Covent Garden and Drury Lane had in the previous century. As with those theatres, contemporaries were well aware of the RSC's extraordinary influence. In 1976, Eric Shorter wrote a programme essay questioning how much contemporary audiences cared about Shakespeare and noted that his plays 'have been more or less patented by the Royal Shakespeare Company'.²⁹ This concept was developed further in 1989 with Taylor's *Reinventing Shakespeare*, in which he argued,

[T]he RSC dominates Shakespeare production in London; by its standards other London companies are judged. And by the theatrical

²⁷ 'A National Theatre out of Chaos', *Stage*, 26 March 1964, p. 8.

²⁸ 'Appendix: National Theatre Productions, 1963-2013', Rosenthal, *National Theatre*, pp. 847-894.

²⁹ Eric Shorter, 'Bardolatry or Boredom', programme note *Tom Jones*, TR Brighton, 05 May 1976, The Keep TRB 2/2/44. Shorter wrote a weekly column that was printed in several theatres' programmes nationwide.

standards of London other cities, in and out of Britain, are judged. The RSC, unlike its rivals in the capital, operates nationally and internationally [...] The RSC runs two theatres in London and three in Stratford [...] In the second half of the twentieth-century the RSC is the most influential and successful theatrical organisation in the Western world.³⁰

Note that Taylor refers to the RSC first and foremost in relation to London rather than Stratford, and perceives the company's rivals to be those 'in the capital', rather than the larger provincial producing theatres – the Liverpool Everyman, for example, or the Manchester Royal Exchange – also established with the help of Arts Council funding in the years following the creation of the RSC. Writing in 1997, Peter Holland recorded the perspective that the RSC was 'dominant and imperialist, a cultural institution whose significance in the perception of Shakespeare in performance is out of proportion', but noted that he remained a fan of the company despite this, and sought to analyse the 'constrictions forced on it as well as its freedoms'.³¹ I would argue that those constrictions – the responsibilities attached to serving the nation – often manifested themselves as further expressions of cultural imperialism, perhaps most notably with the company's touring programme, a major aspect of their work which has been overlooked in previous studies but which reveals much about the RSC's approach to cultural exchange with the provinces.

³⁰ Taylor, *Reinventing Shakespeare*, p. 304.

³¹ Peter Holland, *English Shakespeares: Shakespeare on the English Stage in the 1990s* (Cambridge: CUP, 1997), p. xiii.

The RSC's unprecedented position of authority and influence enabled the institution to effect significant change over the culture and practice of Shakespeare performance in the latter half of the twentieth century. In the first instance, as noted by Taylor, the output of a permanent, dedicated theatre vastly accelerated the rate of production: whereas David Garrick 'originated only fourteen' productions in his entire career, the RSC produced more than that number of incarnations of *As You Like It* alone from 1961 to 2015.³² Patterns of Shakespeare consumption were thus irrevocably reconfigured, with audiences anticipating sustained levels of reinvention. Not since the stock company days had Shakespeare been so frequently performed, but while theatre-goers of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries were offered the same recycled *Hamlet* or *King Lear* year after year, their later-twentieth century equivalents came to expect fresh interpretations with each season. This new standard effectively limited the number of productions that provincial theatres could stage: no longer would it be possible to present a different Shakespeare play each night in week-long 'festivals', as none but the RSC had the resources to annually develop multiple concurrent productions. This is not to say, however, that the RSC was able to stage the full range of the canon. For much of the company's existence, its financial model required their main-house productions to sell well, and so lesser-known plays 'like *Timon*, *Two Gentlemen*, or even *All's Well*' were overlooked in favour of perpetual favourites such as *Hamlet*, *Henry IV* and *Richard III*.³³

³² Taylor, *Reinventing Shakespeare*, p. 306; 'RSC Performances: *As You Like It*', *Shakespeare Birthplace Trust Database* <http://collections.shakespeare.org.uk/search/rsc-performances/view_as/list/search/play_title:as-you-like-it/>.

³³ Holland, 'English Shakespeare', p. 8.

A second, associated consequence of the RSC's new-found influence was the propagation of the idea that there was a 'correct' way to perform Shakespeare. Never before had one company exerted such an effective ownership of Shakespeare that it transcended the individuals who performed and directed for it. The perception from within and without was that the institution formed the actor, in sharp contrast to the earlier ideal of the individual actor of genius who created their interpretations alone. Although, as discussed in previous chapters, the concept of the 'ideal' approach predated the RSC, most of the population only ever had the opportunity to witness the authoritative performances of Covent Garden or Drury Lane through the visits of star performers to their local theatres. But while there had since been other institutions and companies that laid claim to Shakespeare performance, none had received the official backing of the state or assembled a concentration of legitimacy comparable to that of the RSC. As of 1961, the RSC represented a fixed point of authority against which all other performances of Shakespeare would inevitably be compared. It is my argument that the RSC's touring activity effectively disseminated its methods and ideas across the country. By sending its productions to theatres across the UK, the RSC justified its generous subsidy whilst significantly expanding its influence to those communities that, for reasons of geography or cost, would not encounter them in London or Stratford.

The RSC was the only producing theatre outside London to regularly send their work on the road in the later twentieth century, a fact which lent the company yet another mark of metropolitan, rather than regional, identity. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s more provincial venues gained funding, especially after the 1964 appointment of Jennie Lee as the first ever Minister for

the Arts, who favoured a regions-focused approach. However, none received anything close to the RSC's subsidy, and nor were they tasked with the additional responsibility of serving not just their local communities but the nation.³⁴ Touring, then, originated as a means through which to fulfil the RSC's Arts Council-endorsed obligations to the country, but consequently contributed to the framework upon which the RSC's greater influence was built. Tours of principal productions to the larger provincial theatres were sporadic at best, and the RSC's archive at the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust contains little material from its performances outside London, Stratford or Newcastle, the last of which became a third RSC base from 1977 to 2010. I would cite this as evidence of the minimal value placed upon those engagements by the company, and of the continuing peripheral status of regional performance in the later-twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The failure of most receiving houses to maintain their own records of past productions makes it additionally difficult for researchers to reconstruct the reception and nature of the RSC's work on national tours. However, I have established that from 1960 to 2015 the RSC staged nine main-house productions of *King Lear* and ten of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. No *Lears* were toured provincially, but five *Midsummers* were, presumably because that particular play appealed to a broader audience and was thus more marketable. Examining their touring routes gives an indication of the limited nature of the RSC's full-scale touring activity and reveals the factors that affected their choice of venues.

³⁴ Harvie, *Staging the UK*, p. 21.

In 1963, a '4-week Royal Shakespeare spring tour of northern Britain' took a revival of Hall's 1959 *Dream*, along with 'smash hit' *The Physicists*, to Edinburgh, Newcastle, Manchester and Bradford.³⁵ Magic was muted in this production, which set the action on the grounds of a summer house and spared 'the conventional 19th-century romanticism and the RADA sing-song intensity' that, the *Stage* wrote, had become 'so closely associated' with the play.³⁶ A programme note explained that 'the tour continues the company's policy [...] of regularly visiting the country with principal productions from their twin theatres, the Royal Shakespeare at Stratford-on-Avon and the Aldwych in London'.³⁷ The company was indeed more wide-ranging and generous in touring their principal productions in the first few years than they would be in the following five decades. Brighton, for example, received three consecutive visits from the RSC at the Theatre Royal in 1965, 1966 and 1967, but I have found no record of any principal RSC tours to the town since. This may well be due to the town's proximity to London, as even in 1967 one of the two plays brought by the RSC, *Little Murders*, was an out-of-town premiere that moved to the Aldwych after eight performances.³⁸ This suggests that the decision to perform in Brighton was motivated at least in part by the desire to trial the production in a venue close to the capital.

From 1972 to 1973, the RSC toured a revival of Peter Brook's seminal 1970 production of *Dream*. Brook had swept aside tradition in favour of a

³⁵ Programme, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 20 May 1963, TR Newcastle, NCLLS L792 N536T 1960-69.

³⁶ 'Stuffiness blown away in Stratford "Dream"', *Stage*, 04 June 1959, p. 13.

³⁷ Programme, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 1963, TR Newcastle.

³⁸ Programme, *Ghosts*, 05 June 1967, TR Brighton, The Keep TRB 2/2/35.

revolutionary new approach that bore no resemblance to the pastoral settings which had dominated performances of the play for over a hundred years. He denied 'all stage illusion, leaving a sufficient vacuum to be filled by the imagination of the spectator', with characters dressed in primary colours, performing circus tricks in a sparse, all-white box set.³⁹ The original production had opened at Stratford to unprecedented critical and popular acclaim before transferring to London and then New York, earning the company over £70,000 at the latter engagement alone.⁴⁰ Altogether, the 1970 run gave the RSC its first surplus since the company's creation in 1960, and it seems likely that the 1972/73 revival was an attempt to capitalise upon the production's cultural capital. The tour travelled to twelve countries on four continents over the course of a year, including a return to the USA and visits to Japan and Australia; just four weeks were set aside for performances in provincial British theatres. The dates in Bristol, Southampton, Cardiff and Liverpool ensured that a greater proportion of the population had the opportunity to experience Brook's sensation, but also protected the company from the backlash that a purely commercial tour may well have generated. By 1972 the burgeoning alternative theatre movement was not infrequently criticising the RSC and the NT for the resources they consumed and for their failure to engage with the majority of the population.⁴¹ Accusations such as this would continue to haunt the RSC throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and doubtless influenced subsequent tour itineraries.

³⁹ J. L. Styan, *The Shakespeare Revolution: Criticism and Performance in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: CUP, 1977), pp. 224-231.

⁴⁰ Beauman, *Ten Decades*, p. 304.

⁴¹ Beauman, *Ten Decades*, pp. 309-310.

The next principal tour of *Dream* was not until 1989, when John Caird's 'punky Dream', set in a 'junkyard, filled with bicycle frames, an old piano and an iron bedstead which served Titania as her bower', undertook a tour of major regional theatres in between its April opening at the RST and December transfer to the Barbican.⁴² Royal Insurance co-sponsored the production: private sponsorship became commonplace for the RSC in the 1980s, but while it offered greater financial stability and allowed the company to undertake large-scale tours, questions were raised internally about the compatibility of this practice with the RSC's original risk-taking ethos.⁴³ As the size of the sponsorship department increased, so too did the 'tendency for the value of projects deemed worthy of backing to be judged by status and the size of the budget', with principal productions taking most of the company's energies as 'volume of output' became 'an end product in its own right and was now taken as the norm'.⁴⁴ In this context, the selection of regional venues on the 1989 tour can be better understood. Eight of the nine were well-established theatres and/or in towns and cities with longstanding traditions of theatre-going that were capable of drawing large audiences from the surrounding areas and thus offered minimal financial risk: the King's Theatre, Edinburgh; the Empire Theatre, Liverpool; the Theatres Royal Norwich, Newcastle, Nottingham and Bath; the Alhambra Theatre, Bradford; and The Grand Opera House, Belfast. The outlier was Southampton's Mayflower Theatre, which had been converted from a music

⁴² 'John Caird 1989 production', *RSC* <<https://www.rsc.org.uk/a-midsummer-nights-dream/past-productions/john-caird-1989-production>>; 'A Midsummer Night's Dream (1989)', *British Black and Asian Shakespeare Database* <<https://bbashakespeare.warwick.ac.uk/productions/midsummer-nights-dream-1989-royal-shakespeare-company-royal-shakespeare-theatre>>.

⁴³ Chambers, *Inside the RSC*, pp. 83-85.

⁴⁴ Chambers, *Inside the RSC*, pp. 83-85.

venue only two years earlier and did not share the characteristics of the others. It was, however, an extraordinarily large venue, seating 2270, which seems the likeliest reason for its place on the tour.⁴⁵

In 1996 commercial interests, combined with a re-orientated vision for the RSC, led the company to take artistic director Adrian Noble's 1994 production of *Dream* on an international tour to the New Theatre Cardiff, the Festival Theatre Edinburgh, and the Theatres Royal Newcastle, Bath and Plymouth, before moving onto Japan, Australia and New Zealand. The production explored 'the surreal strangeness of dreams' and used a simple box set with unexpected elements: the wood was 'evoked through a myriad of hanging light bulbs', Titania's bower 'a vast, suspended Magritte umbrella sumptuously lined with red quilt', and the lovers 'hoisted into mid-air' in 'stretcher-like body bags' when Puck sent them to sleep.⁴⁶ Noble's programme introduction emphasised his commitment to ensuring 'that the best of the RSC's work is seen as widely as possible throughout the United Kingdom', and acknowledged that,

our visits to the major United Kingdom centres of population have been less regular than we would wish, and the excellent work for larger, conventional stages [...] has not been seen as widely as it could have been. There is a huge need for the regular provision of

⁴⁵ 'About Us', *Mayflower Theatre* <<https://www.mayflower.org.uk/about-us/>>.

⁴⁶ Michael Billington, 'Design for Dreamers', *Guardian*, 05 August 1994, p. 11.

top-class touring Shakespeare. The RSC is best qualified, and will soon be best placed, to provide this.⁴⁷

They were not, however, providing it with this tour: the UK leg covered five venues from 12 November to 14 December, while the international visited nine venues from 17 January to 25 May. Even with travelling factored in, far more time was spent presenting this production overseas than to the 'UK taxpayers', referenced by Noble, who subsidised the company. Holland records that the production was 'extraordinarily successful, touring to great acclaim', but attributes this to the production's 'easy and undemanding style', rather than any 'consequence of its own merits'.⁴⁸

The inclusion of Plymouth alongside the RSC's longstanding partner in Newcastle and the prestigious theatre in Bath was the result of Noble's new 'access touring model', which reduced the company's presence in London in order to accommodate an annual residency in Plymouth, where the company would 'present a complete season [...] supported by a comprehensive programme of education work in local schools and colleges'.⁴⁹ Although Noble's introduction stressed that this was 'the right time to move the RSC's centre of gravity a little further from London and a little closer to the rest of the nation', he nonetheless dedicated considerable space to reassuring readers that London and Stratford remained at the centre of the RSC's work, writing;

⁴⁷ Adrian Noble, 'The Royal Shakespeare Company', programme note, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 12 November 1996, TR Newcastle, NCLLS L792 N536T 1996.

⁴⁸ Holland, *English Shakespeare*, p. 190.

⁴⁹ Chambers, *Inside the RSC*, p. 105; Noble, 'The Royal Shakespeare Company'.

We will continue to contribute with absolute regularity and at the very highest level to the cultural life of the capital [...] As now, the entire output of each of our three theatres in Stratford-upon-Avon will be available for London. New productions will also continue to be added to our London seasons, and our total repertoire will be some 24 productions each year.⁵⁰

That Noble stressed the RSC's ongoing presence in the twin centres of Shakespeare performance in a programme created specifically for the regional tour suggests that he felt that the RSC's legitimacy rested, at least in part, on its physical connection to those locations. Perhaps too he thought provincial audiences would feel cheated had the productions visiting them not first originated from the RSC. Equally, his statement could be read as an attempt to assuage the fears of those who were alarmed by Noble's relatively expansive adjustments to the company's standard practices. Of particular concern was his decision to shift the opening of the new Stratford season from March to November, which meant new productions would be launched in inhospitable winter weather, rather than tourist-friendly sunshine.⁵¹ His changes, however, were short-lived: by 1999 the opening had reverted back to March and the Plymouth residency dropped due to a lack of both funding and local support.⁵²

The final toured production of *Dream* in this period was staged in 2002, with an itinerary that better reflected Noble's ambitions. This time, six regional theatres were visited, a mix of established partners and newer venues: the

⁵⁰ Noble, 'The Royal Shakespeare Company'.

⁵¹ Chambers, *Inside the RSC*, p. 106.

⁵² Chambers, *Inside the RSC*, p. 107.

Alhambra Theatre, Bradford; the Regent Theatre, Stoke-on-Trent; The Lowry, Salford; the New Victoria Theatre, Woking; and the Theatres Royal Norwich and Plymouth. Unlike on previous tours, this time all theatres were located in England, presumably due to the Arts Council devolution of 1994 which created distinct funding bodies for each nation. Now that the RSC's obligations were first and foremost to the citizens of England rather than Great Britain, their touring schedules were adjusted accordingly. This production, directed by Richard Jones, was a far cry from Noble's brightly-coloured and energetic 1994 piece; Michael Billington's two-star review described it as 'a gothic nightmare', in which 'fast-breeding flies swarm over [Giles] Cadle's box set, hands emerge through the walls as in Polanski's *Repulsion* and the transformed Bottom sports a disfigured mask with phallic ears while Puck carries his original head tucked underneath his arm'.⁵³ Noble resigned from his role at the RSC that same year, 'hurt, he said, by constant criticism' of his reforms from those in the industry and the press.⁵⁴

It is clear, then, that the RSC's approach to touring varied considerably over the years, with no consistent patterns of engagement with the provinces. Such a sporadic presence suggests that the RSC acted more as a *provider* of Shakespeare to provincial theatres rather than a *partner* with them. The sole exception to this was the company's long-standing relationship with the theatres of Newcastle, a city lauded in publicity materials as the RSC's 'third home base

⁵³ Michael Billington, 'A Midsummer Night's Dream', *Guardian*, 21 February 2002 <<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2002/feb/21/artsfeatures5>>.

⁵⁴ Chambers, *Inside the RSC*, p. 111.

alongside Stratford upon Avon and London'.⁵⁵ There had been no such affiliation with the SMT: when the RSC first visited Newcastle in 1962 with productions of *Troilus and Cressida*, *Curtmantle* and *The Devils*, the programme noted that this 'tour of northern England' was 'the first the Royal Shakespeare has made in this country for seven years'.⁵⁶ The RSC had, of course, existed for barely a year at this point, and Hall's conflation with the SMT is further evidence that an imagined continuity between the two was wielded whenever deemed useful. Chambers cites the RSC's difficulties in touring large scale productions during the 1960s and 1970s as the prompt for the creation, in 1977, of an annual residency in Newcastle. Rather than struggling to fit a series of productions into variously-sized regional theatres that were often ill-equipped to deal with the RSC's demands, the company could now focus its energies on developing a meaningful relationship with one major provincial city.⁵⁷ Each year from 1977 to 2010, 'Campus Stratford' descended on Newcastle for five weeks at a time, bringing multiple productions to the Theatre Royal and the Gulbenkian Studio (part of the Newcastle Playhouse, later renamed Northern Stage).

Upon first inspection, this appears to have been a mutually beneficial arrangement which helped the RSC to fulfil its obligations to the nation and allowed Newcastle to benefit from the company's not-inconsiderable resources and creative energies. The residency was distinct from the usual touring format by bringing not just productions but a host of associated activities intended to

⁵⁵ Programme introduction, *King Lear*, TR Newcastle, 21 February 1983, NCLLS L792 N536T 1980-82.

⁵⁶ Programme introduction, *Troilus and Cressida*, TR Newcastle, 10 September 1962, NCLLS L792 N536T 1910-65.

⁵⁷ Chambers, *Inside the RSC*, p. 71.

reach out to as many in the local community as possible. This included school workshops and after-show discussions but also less-mainstream endeavours. In 1983, for example, the RSC hosted a supplementary fringe festival at the Gulbenkian Studio that provided lunchtime and late-night sessions of classical music, poetry, modern drama and musicals. In addition, each season the RSC brought multiple Shakespearean productions, meaning that Newcastle theatre-goers had the opportunity to experience a far broader selection of the canon than their peers in other provincial towns. All but *Pericles*, *Two Noble Kinsmen* and *King John* were performed at the Theatre Royal during the RSC's thirty-three-year residency, and there were eight productions each of *Dream* and *Lear*.⁵⁸ Finally, there is much to suggest that local politicians and residents alike valued the presence of the RSC in their city. In 1998, for example, Newcastle City Council granted the RSC the freedom of the city, 'in recognition of their outstanding contribution to the cultural life of the city and the Region in the last 21 years'; the announcement, in 2011, that the residency was cancelled until further notice due to funding cuts sparked considerable local dismay.⁵⁹

The residency's contributions to the cultural life of the city were not, however, uniformly positive, and I would argue that to some extent Newcastle fell victim to the RSC's habit of cultural imperialism. Whereas Stratford's modern identity was indistinguishable from that of the RSC and Shakespeare, and London so large that it was capable of supporting competing productions of

⁵⁸ *Dream* was performed by the RSC in 1963, 1982, 1989, 1995, 1996, 2002, 2005 and 2007; *Lear* in 1983, 1991, 1994, 2002, 2004, 2007, 2010 and 2012.

⁵⁹ 'Honorary Freeman- Citations', *Newcastle City Council* <<https://www.newcastle.gov.uk/your-council-and-democracy/councillors-and-democracy/lord-mayor/honorary-freemen-citations>>; Hansen and Smialkowska, 'Shakespeare in the North', p. 110.

Shakespeare in any given season, Newcastle – which, as demonstrated in earlier chapters, had a longstanding tradition of Shakespeare performance – found its theatrical culture engulfed by the force of the RSC. When the cancellation of the residency was announced in January 2011, statements from the RSC implicitly presented their ‘relationship with Newcastle and the North East’ as one in which they were the active partner and the city a passive recipient. They referred to their ‘regret that we are unable to bring a full season of plays to the City this autumn’ and stated that ‘our education and events departments are also exploring other ways of programming work in the region during 2011’.⁶⁰ That the residency had operated as a true partnership for much of the 1980s and 1990s, with productions ‘presented jointly and made possible by the Arts Council of Great Britain and Tyne and Wear County Council’, or ‘presented by the Theatre Royal Trust and the RSC and made possible by the ACGB and Northern Arts [a Regional Arts Board]’, went unacknowledged, effectively erasing the city’s agency from their own history.⁶¹ Another indication that the RSC viewed Newcastle as essentially provincial was the curious inclusion in their press statement that, ‘in the summer, our current ensemble who played to Newcastle audiences in the autumn of 2010 will be taking these productions to New York’.⁶² Given that this American tour was a commercial venture for the RSC and of no consequence to audiences in Newcastle or indeed anywhere else

⁶⁰ Maeve Kennedy, ‘Cuts mean Royal Shakespeare Company’s Newcastle season is not to be’, *Guardian*, 26 January 2011 <<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/culture-cuts-blog/2011/jan/26/cuts-royal-shakespeare-company-newcastle>>.

⁶¹ TR Newcastle programmes: *King Lear*, 21 February 1983; *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, 09 February 1987, L792 N536T 1987.

⁶² Gordon Barr, ‘Cash cuts force RSC to miss out Tyneside’, *The Newcastle Chronicle*, 25 January 2011 <<http://www.chroniclive.co.uk/news/north-east-news/cash-cuts-force-rsc-miss-1394166>>.

in provincial England, it might be assumed that this was intended to console those disappointed by the cancellation through the suggestion that they had received a production that would be seen by theatre-goers in one of the most glamorous cities in the world. It is difficult to imagine London audiences being presented with such a statement.

The notion – perpetuated by the RSC – that they were the city's sole connection to Shakespeare was further illustrated in 2013 when the company publicised their first Newcastle visit since 2010 with a bus advertisement that read 'Shakespeare returns to Newcastle'.⁶³ Hansen and Smialkowska's astute analysis of this notes that,

The return was, of course, welcomed by the city and the company. But if you were an educator, theatre practitioner or student working on or with Shakespeare in the city, you might have legitimately queried the claim that the adverts on the buses made: yes, the RSC's season had been missing, but does that mean Shakespeare was absent from Newcastle? Is the RSC Shakespeare? Is there no Shakespeare in the North without them?⁶⁴

Their chapter focuses on locally produced Shakespeare and provides more evidence of the negative impact of the RSC's presence in Newcastle through the suggestion that Northern professional companies in the early 2010s may have felt that 'experts and resources from elsewhere are needed to ensure an acceptable standard' of performance.⁶⁵ A reliance upon outsiders does not,

⁶³ Hansen and Smialkowska, 'Shakespeare in the North', p. 125.

⁶⁵ Hansen and Smialkowska, 'Shakespeare in the North', p. 123.

however, legitimise the RSC's notion that without their presence Shakespeare was absent from Newcastle. Throughout the 'partnership' era other theatre groups continued to visit the Theatre Royal with Shakespearean productions, albeit sporadically; my research has found that there were at least sixteen non-RSC productions staged by ten different companies from 1977 to 2011.

By 2014, the tone of RSC communications with Newcastle had changed, likely due to the appointment in January 2013 of Erica Whyman as deputy artistic director, a newly-created position within the organisation. Many of those who held influential creative positions with the RSC had been with the company for years, but Whyman had previously worked as Chief Executive of Northern Stage from 2005 to 2012 and brought insight into the workings of provincial theatre with her to the RSC.⁶⁶ When it was announced in September 2014 that no main house RSC productions would visit the city until at least 2017, Whyman's statement to the Newcastle *Journal* commented on the less constructive aspects of the residency for the local theatrical culture:

My perception from living in the city was that at that time, people went to three or four shows in a month and then they didn't go to the theatre much for the rest of the year.

I think a really healthy thing for Newcastle has been that people now go to the theatre at the Theatre Royal, at Northern Stage and at Live year round, because there's so much good work being presented and

⁶⁶ 'Erica Whyman, Deputy Artistic Director', RSC <<https://www.rsc.org.uk/about-us/whos-who/erica-whyman-deputy-artistic-director>>.

produced. Not many people are likely to come to six plays over a month now.⁶⁷

In addition, she explicitly acknowledged the collaborative nature of the company's 'special relationship', noting, 'as well as bringing productions here, there's been a long history of making interesting new work with Newcastle and I want to get back to doing that'.⁶⁸ Although Whyman's overall intention was, of course, to spin the news of the RSC's change in policy in a positive light, her Newcastle-focused approach may well mark a more authentically outward-facing approach from the RSC in an era in which the politics between metropolitan and provincial England are being considered with arguably greater attention than ever before. In Chapter 5 I explore this facet of the RSC's activity through their work in the quatercentenary year.

4.2 Not the RSC: Repertory Shakespeare in the Later Twentieth Century

So far, I have demonstrated that the creation of the RSC was a pivotal moment for Shakespeare performance. I have argued that while this split the centre of Shakespearean authority between London and geographically-provincial Stratford, the RSC's financial stature, cultural influence and self-determined policies ensured that the company acted – and was perceived – as a metropolitan, rather than a regional, organisation. Yet, despite the company's

⁶⁷ Sam Wonfor, 'Royal Shakespeare Company will not bring a major production to Newcastle in 2015', *The Newcastle Journal*, 23 September 2014
<<http://www.thejournal.co.uk/culture/culture-news/royal-shakespeare-company-not-bring-7712476>>.

⁶⁸ 'RSC will not bring a major production to Newcastle', *Journal*.

dominance in Shakespeare production, their touring activity was sporadic at best and consequently many theatregoers continued to encounter the national playwright through other companies. In this section, I examine Shakespeare performance at the local level, tracing the impact of government funding for the arts upon provincial repertory theatres and retaining the focus on productions of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *King Lear*.

As discussed at the outset of this chapter, Norman Marshall and other advocates for a publicly subsidised theatre believed that this would lead to an increased number of Shakespeare productions, amongst other benefits. However, Rowell and Jackson's analysis of the repertoires of subsidised repertory theatres from 1958 to 1983 found that government funding had failed to restore Shakespeare to his nineteenth-century position as a staple of the provincial stage. Their study established a 'basic outline' of the average repertory season, applicable to theatres of all sizes, which prioritised contemporary work and had barely changed over twenty years: two or three classic plays, 'often including a Shaw or an Arthur Miller, and only occasionally a Shakespeare where resources will allow'; two or three modern comedies and/or thrillers; one or two recent plays from the West End or the National Theatre; a new play or adaptation of a well-known novel or classic play; and, at Christmas, a family show.⁶⁹ New writing and Shakespeare featured far less prominently than Norman Marshall and his fellow campaigners had hoped, although, as

⁶⁹ Rowell and Jackson, *Repertory*, p. 123.

Rowell and Jackson noted, there were variations of these 'permutations within the broad pattern'.⁷⁰

The prevalence of Shakespeare productions at repertory theatres in the case study towns demonstrates some of the permutations found across the country. Brighton never established an independent professional repertory theatre at all. It seems likely that the proximity of London inhibited the development of a Brighton repertory theatre in the post-War era: instead, the town became the preferred home of a number of touring companies, none of whom specialised in Shakespeare. In Norwich, the Maddermarket remained in operation, and until 2006 all but two seasons (in 1985 and 1999) had at least one Shakespeare play.⁷¹ The company's commitment to Shakespeare began to wane in 2006, with none at all performed from 2008 to 2012, but after this intermission the playwright returned once more to the repertoire.⁷²

In Newcastle, the regular presence of the RSC from 1977 to 2010 appears to have inhibited Shakespeare productions at the city's producing theatre, the Newcastle Playhouse. Opened in 1962 as the Flora Robson Playhouse, the theatre was initially a model of the ideal repertory theatre. A front page article in the *Stage* reported that the owner, producer Julian Herington, regarded fortnightly rehearsal periods and runs as 'an essential factor in modern repertory', and that the 'backbone of the programme' would be formed of 'new plays, worthwhile revivals, and occasionally plays with music [...] rather than

⁷⁰ Rowell and Jackson, *Repertory*, p. 123.

⁷¹ 'Past in-house shows', *Maddermarket Theatre* <<http://maddermarket.co.uk/about/in-house-shows/>>.

⁷² 'Past in-house shows', *Maddermarket Theatre*.

“West End releases”’.⁷³ The paper noted that this was a ‘bold bid to put the North-East back on the theatrical map’ which would be ‘widely welcomed’ as there was ‘no major permanent professional company of this nature operating between York and Edinburgh’.⁷⁴ Through various iterations – as the University Theatre, Newcastle Playhouse and Northern Stage – the focus on producing work remained, but Shakespeare was never frequently performed, likely because the RSC’s lengthy annual visits to the city fulfilled audience demand for Shakespeare. Similar circumstances were to be found in Bath, where the Theatre Royal undertook producing alongside receiving, but did not regularly stage its own productions of Shakespeare. Once again, it seems that local competition may have supplied the area with its quota of Shakespeare: nearby Bristol was home to not only the Bristol Old Vic and its Shakespeare-heavy repertoire, but also the Tobacco Factory Shakespeare company, who quickly gained national acclaim for their productions after their founding in 2000.⁷⁵

The most successful repertory theatre in the case study towns was the Nottingham Playhouse, which ‘assumed a leading position among the regional reps’ in the fifteen years following the opening of its new theatre in 1963.⁷⁶ Although the theatre’s reputation waxed and waned after its first, unusually prosperous years, Shakespeare was performed regularly, as indicated by the nine productions of *Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *King Lear* alone over a sixty-year span. Here, I examine those productions in greater detail, using materials

⁷³ ‘Flora Robson Playhouse for Newcastle’, *Stage*, 21 September 1961, p. 1.

⁷⁴ ‘Flora Robson Playhouse’, *Stage*.

⁷⁵ ‘A Brief Chronology’, *Shakespeare at the Tobacco Factory* <<http://stf-theatre.org.uk/aboutus/history/>>.

⁷⁶ Rowell and Jackson, *Repertory*, p. 131.

held in the theatre's collection at the Nottinghamshire Archives, supported with additional newspaper research. I argue that the Playhouse productions reflect wider changes taking place in attitudes towards Shakespeare and provincial theatre more broadly, demonstrate the enduring appeal of celebrity in all forms in provincial Shakespeare performance, and reveal how subsidy and the work of the RSC impacted upon Shakespeare performance in Nottingham specifically.

1950s: Fortnightly Repertory

The history of the Playhouse began in 1948, when the Nottingham Theatre Trust was founded 'by a group of local and influential theatre enthusiasts, with the aim of providing Nottingham with a theatre that could stand comparison with those in Bristol, Birmingham, Liverpool and Glasgow'.⁷⁷ Funded by the city council and, from 1950, the ACGB, the Playhouse maintained fortnightly repertory and toured its work widely, 'to theatre-less towns in the North East' and to 'children in rural Nottinghamshire': 'these activities, along with the special school matinees, the lunch-hour and Sunday concerts and the Playhouse Club', were, write Rowell and Jackson, 'all part of the attempt to make the theatre into an essential ingredient of the city's and county's life'.⁷⁸ The repertoire policy remained consistent under three consecutive artistic directors – André van Gysegheem, John Harrison and Val May – and focused on 'high quality productions of Shakespeare, Shaw, Maugham, Anouilh, Coward and Peter Ustinov'.⁷⁹ In September 1951, Guy Verney directed the Playhouse's first ever production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* which, along with Sheridan's *The*

⁷⁷ Rowell and Jackson, *Repertory*, p. 131.

⁷⁸ Rowell and Jackson, *Repertory*, p. 132.

⁷⁹ Rowell and Jackson, *Repertory*, p. 131.

School for Scandal, formed part of the theatre's month-long Festival of Britain celebrations. As a local paper reported, these plays had 'been carefully chosen at the Government's behest, to provide something special for the public in the city's Festival week'.⁸⁰ Presumably, Gyseghem considered two traditional stalwarts of the repertoire suitable fare for such a patriotic occasion. Perhaps mindful of this, Verney's conservative production of *Dream* utilised techniques from earlier in the century and pursued a pictorial approach. Painted scenery recreated the forest, Athenian court, and the interior of Quince's home (with a nod to the contemporary audience in the 'Festival of Athens, 1951 B.C' sign hanging above it); the lovers wore elegant Athenian dress, the mechanicals vaguely Grecian peasant-style clothing, and the fairies gossamer costumes that, the *Nottingham Guardian* declared, were 'for once really [...] convincing'.⁸¹ Realistic magic was, for that reviewer at least, a desirable format for this particular play.

Local newspapers heaped praise upon the visuals of the piece, lauding its 'colour and verve', the 'Grecian columns wreathed with roses' that framed the proscenium arch, and the 'well planned' presentation that seemed to be constructed to ensure that, 'at any given moment the proscenium arch contains a picture which any artist would have been glad to have painted'.⁸² The sheer volume of articles dedicated to the production – the Playhouse archive's scrapbook contains eighteen clippings from four different newspapers – indicates that at the very least the editors anticipated a significant level of local

⁸⁰ Unknown newspaper clipping, NSA DD/NP/2/4/1/4.

⁸¹ 'This "Midsummer Night's Dream" is Delightful', *Nottingham Guardian*, 25 August 1951, NSA DD/NP/2/4/1/4.

⁸² 'This "Dream" has both colour and verve', *Nottingham Journal*, 25 August 1951; 'This "Midsummer Night's Dream" is Delightful'. Both NSA DD/NP/2/4/1/4.

interest in the production. The subject of these, however, suggests that it was the actors, rather than the play itself, that engaged the public. The main focus of pre-production publicity articles and reviews was the ‘strong Nottingham interest’ in the cast, which seems to have recast celebrity on a local scale. Several of the actors were Nottingham-born: four schoolboys from the Ellis Secondary School played Peaseblossom, Cobweb, Moth and Mustardseed; Doreen Kerr of Woodthorpe played Hermia; John Turner of Mapperley Road, who was studying at RADA, played Philostrate; and Brian Smith, ‘the 17-year-old Nottingham boy who has already made his name on both stage and screen’ played Puck.⁸³ The early Playhouse company was thus comparable to the Theatre Royals’ stock companies of the nineteenth century, when the local community saw familiar faces playing Shakespeare’s characters. Though later casts lost their ‘Nottingham interest’, the audience would continue to recognise members from previous productions as long as the repertory system was maintained.

Coverage of the Playhouse’s second *Dream* of the 1950s focused on visual elements over the actors’ performance and, in one instance, hinted at a lack of local appreciation for Shakespeare. Reviewing Val May’s 1959 production, the *Journal* suggested that there were ‘playgoers who might be tempted to avoid the Playhouse this time simply because it is Shakespeare [...] and not the greatest Shakespeare at that’, but warned that if they stayed away, they ran the risk ‘of missing a production as fresh and vivid as any premiere could be, lovely to look at, and with the play’s rich humour happily exploited’.⁸⁴ Once again, *Dream* ran

⁸³ ‘Nottingham boy to be Festival “Puck”’, *Nottingham Journal*, 12 September 1951; ‘[incomplete] in Playhouse Festival Play’, *Nottingham News*, 13 September 1951, both NSA DD/NP/2/4/1/4.

⁸⁴ ‘The Playhouse’, *Nottingham Journal*, 20 October 1959, NSA DD/NP/2/4/1/4.

for two weeks with twenty performances in total, eight of which were matinees set aside for schoolchildren: on one particularly busy day, there were performances morning, afternoon and evening in order to accommodate the demand. By this point, the Playhouse had become a pioneer in its work with local schools, and the *Journal* reported that other repertories were 'trying to get similar schemes established', most recently 'the Bristol Old Vic, which has written to Nottingham asking for details in the hope that local education authorities will adopt the idea'.⁸⁵ School matinees were presented as a form of civic duty in the press, with the three-performance day cited as 'a sort of round-the-clock service for the citizens of the district and their small fry'.⁸⁶ Evidently, the theatre had been successful in forging close ties with the community in its first decade, even if the cast had lost its direct connection to the local area.

That the production had to appeal to children as well as its usual adult audiences – who may, as suggested, have been reluctant to attend a Shakespeare piece – inevitably affected May's directorial decisions. A publicity article in the *Journal* outlined his approach:

[I]t is Val May's [...] very first handling of the "Dream". He intends to produce it in a non-gimmicky way, refreshingly determined to let the poetry speak for itself rather than saccharine it with over-rich physical images on the stage. Accordingly, there will be a simple permanent set, the costumes will tend towards light and airy classical

⁸⁵ Untitled, *Nottingham Journal*, undated. NSA DD/NP/2/4/1/4.

⁸⁶ Untitled, *Nottingham Journal*, 07 October 1959, NSA DD/NP/2/4/1/4.

drapes, and Frank Laming is arranging Mendelssohn's music for five instruments.⁸⁷

However, the end result, as recorded in reviews and production photographs, bore remarkable similarities to the 1951 pictorial version. Painted backdrops depicted the different settings, the mortals wore vaguely Athenian dress, Titania (Ann Bell) was dressed in a diaphanous gown, and Oberon (Robert Lang) wore an outlandish outfit that included an exaggerated collar and green tights with satin scales. The *Journal's* critics praised the result in an evocative review which emphasised the beauty of the stage picture:

Heavy with the bird calls of the wood, and with Mendelssohn's music surging through the leaves in sudden, elfin breezes, this production [...] has, wisely, a simple, pastoral beauty. [...] The designer, Graham Barlow [...] shows his true eye for delicate colour. Against glowing aquamarine, his glade is centred by a hint of an Attic temple, and his gauzes and flowers transform the mood with grace and ease. His costumes touch on the Athenian in the drapes of the mortals, and his filmy outfits of the Fairies range from the pink net and petalled cap of Peaseblossom to the peacock's-tail gown of Titania.⁸⁸

Although the Playhouse's educational activities may have been breaking new ground, their Shakespeare productions appear to have remained on more conventional territory.

⁸⁷ Untitled, *Nottingham Journal*, 07 October 1959.

⁸⁸ 'Marathon of enchantment goes on stage', *Nottingham Journal*, 14 October 1959. NSA DD/NP/2/4/1/4.

1960s: A Leading Repertory Theatre

When *Dream* was next produced, in 1967, much had changed for the Playhouse, not least its home: a new, purpose-built theatre had been paid for by the City Council, the Nottingham Theatre Trust and the Gulbenkian Foundation. Considered revolutionary at the time, the cylindrical auditorium designed by Peter Moro 'attempted to give some feeling of enclosure and intimacy to the actor-audience relationship' in an otherwise conventional proscenium arch layout.⁸⁹ The first artistic director was John Neville, who had played with the Playhouse company in its previous incarnation and gone on to make his name with engagements at the Old Vic.⁹⁰ With the RSC established as a benchmark for Shakespeare, and the Old Vic acting as a temporary home for the NT, Neville hoped to create in the Playhouse a provincial alternative: 'a pocket National Theatre for the region'.⁹¹ The use of the diminutive recalls the early-nineteenth century characterisation of the provinces as a theatrical training school, and emphasises that the RSC had not paved the way for other regional theatres to seek or attain full national status. In pursuit of this goal, Neville's repertoire mixed revivals of classics with new writing, presented in the true repertory system that ran multiple plays concurrently. In June 1967, *Dream* was scheduled alongside Molière's *The Miser*; *Bread and Butter*, a 1914 play by Eugene O'Neill; and Henry Livings' *Stop It, Whoever You Are*, which had premiered in 1961.⁹² Throughout the 1960s the Playhouse earned a reputation as one of the country's

⁸⁹ Rowell and Jackson, *Repertory*, p. 132.

⁹⁰ Rowell and Jackson, *Repertory*, p. 132.

⁹¹ Interview with John Neville, *Nottingham Evening Post*, 02 June 1967, quoted in Rowell and Jackson, *Repertory*, p. 133.

⁹² 'Theatre Programmes for the Month', *Derbyshire Countryside*, June 1967, NSA DD/NP/2/4/1/18.

leading regional repertory theatres for both the quality and popularity of its productions. Neville's 1965 *Richard II*, for example, played to sold-out houses for fifty-one performances, and during the 1967/68 season the theatre even managed a second site at the Newcastle Playhouse, introducing new audiences to Nottingham's work and expanding the theatre's sphere of influence along the lines of intra-provincial exchange outlined in Chapter 2.⁹³

David Scase's 1967 *Dream* thus reflected the Playhouse's bold ethos as well as new thinking on the play itself, prompted by Jan Kott's influential text *Shakespeare our Contemporary*. Published in English in 1964, Kott's work contained an essay, 'Titania and the Ass's Head', which discussed the dark sexual undertones of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, including the 'strange and fearful' bestial relationship between Titania and Bottom.⁹⁴ Though Scase did not explore this concept to the extent that later directors would, his production successfully established distance from the pastoral visions of the 1950s. The scenery gave 'an exotic Arabian Nights touch' to the Athenian forest, which was represented without painted backdrops and only a basic set. The costumes were striking: Demetrius and Lysander (Alan Dossor and John Shrapnel) wore thigh-skimming, deep V-necked tunics, while Helen and Hermia (Sarah-Jane Gwillim and Anni Lee Taylor) wore low-cut maxi dresses in contemporary prints; Hippolyta (Wendy Allnutt) 'slink[ed] sexily around in a gown slit to her waist' and Oberon (Terence Knapp) was practically naked, with only strategically-placed snakes to 'save his modesty'.⁹⁵ The sexual charge was present onstage, with Theseus (David Neal)

⁹³ 'More theatregoers at Nottingham', *The Times*, 17 December 1965, p. 15.

⁹⁴ Jan Kott, *Shakespeare our Contemporary* (London: W. W. Norton & Co., 1974), p. 228.

⁹⁵ John Coggan, "'Dream" has madness but no magic', *Evening Post*, 22 June 1967, NSA DD/NP/2/4/1/18.

and Hippolyta described as lingering ‘languorously with each other in an atmosphere full of Eastern promise’.⁹⁶ This was, of course, three years before Peter Brook’s landmark white box production of *Dream*, and reviews from the local papers suggest that Scase’s innovations were not universally appreciated. The *Guardian Journal* praised the ‘fun’ of a production that was ‘spirited as well as beautiful, gay as well as charming’, but John Coggan of the *Evening Post* was more critical.⁹⁷ Although he enjoyed variety comedian Bill Maynard’s performance as Bottom, Coggan’s overall verdict revealed a preference for more traditional interpretations:

Missing was magic. Richard Pickett’s settings, grouped in pillars of forest green looking as hard of concrete, lent no fantasy to the scene, and the little music heard in the production (taken from a Benjamin Britten ballet suite) was no match for the Mendelssohn whose score actually does fuse the magic, romance and rustic comedy of this play in a manner deliberately side-tracked in this show.⁹⁸

Coggan was not alone in disapproving of Scrase’s modern approach: even the University of Nottingham’s student paper, the *Gongster*, was unappreciative of the ‘originality’ of the piece, noting that ‘Scase [...] is prepared not only to play up the comedy in the play, but to hold a mocking finger towards the Immortal Bard himself’.⁹⁹

⁹⁶ Emrys Bryson, ‘Bard’s Magic – Fun, Too!’, *Guardian Journal*, 22 June 1967, NSA DD/NP/2/4/1/18.

⁹⁷ Bryson, ‘Bard’s Magic’, *Guardian Journal*.

⁹⁸ Coggan, ‘“Dream” has madness but no magic’, *Evening Post*.

⁹⁹ Richard Forrester, ‘Playhouse: The Mistakes of a Night’, *The Gongster*, 29 June 1967, NSA DD/NP/2/4/1/18.

The reception to the Playhouse's 1969 *King Lear* was incomparable in scale, if not enthusiasm. The theatre had been embroiled in controversy the year before when Neville tendered his resignation following disputes with the board over their attempts to take control over the repertoire. As Irving Wardle reported in *The Times*, this was a problem that plagued provincial repertory theatres throughout the country and seemed to be a 'heavy price to pay for the civic repertory boom'.¹⁰⁰ Wardle identified the root cause as the Arts Council's 'ambiguous' role in regional theatre management, which was 'most dangerous' when aligned with boards against directors. The issue – which, Wardle suggested, had affected repertories in Stoke-on-Trent, Liverpool, Northampton, Harrogate and now Nottingham – was that boards and Arts Council representatives joined forces to constrain artistic directors' creative control by 'supporting the principle that there should be administrative rather than artistic continuity: in other words, that directors should remain biddable employees who never stay for long in any job'.¹⁰¹ Relations between the City Council and the Playhouse were also strained as a result of what appeared to some as economic exploitation on the Council's part: by 1969, the Playhouse paid five thousand pounds more in rent than it received back in subsidy per year, an imbalance that the Nottingham *Evening Post and News* considered incompatible with the Council's eagerness to claim the successful theatre as their own.¹⁰²

It was in this challenging climate that new artistic director Stuart Burge staged the Playhouse's first ever production of *King Lear*, directed by Jonathan

¹⁰⁰ Irving Wardle, 'Behind the boardroom doors', *The Times*, 16 December 1967, p.17.

¹⁰¹ Wardle, 'Behind the boardroom doors', *The Times*.

¹⁰² Emrys Bryson, '21 Today... But still no key to the door', *Nottingham Evening Post and News*, 08 November 1969, p. 14.

Miller. By 1969, the play had gained a reputation as the ‘most crucial’ Shakespearean tragedy ‘for our time’.¹⁰³ In the post-Second World War world, it seemed to speak

with special power to the contemporary psyche. In a violent age where atrocities, murders, poverty and acts of self-destruction are commonly seen on television, the violence in the play, and its concerns about human rights, seem particularly apposite.¹⁰⁴

The RSC had helped to establish *Lear*’s iconic status with Peter Brook’s landmark 1962 production. Starring Paul Scofield as the King and bearing the influence of both Kott’s *Shakespeare our Contemporary* and Brecht’s alienation theory, Brook’s stripped-back version was set on a bare stage, with bright lighting and no music: he ‘wanted to create a totally believable society, both barbaric and sophisticated’.¹⁰⁵ Burge was surely aware that by placing *Lear* in the Playhouse repertoire he was inviting comparisons with the RSC, but while this had inherent risks, it could also enhance the Playhouse’s reputation if its production was considered of equal merit. Casting Michael Hordern – formerly of the RSC and Old Vic – as Lear was, perhaps, another way of asserting the Playhouse’s standing alongside those national theatres; certainly, it generated a great deal of interest in the press, and extended analytical reviews appeared in all of the national papers. Most had little to say about Miller’s bare stage or his seventeenth-century dress and instead focused almost exclusively on Hordern’s

¹⁰³ Frank Marcus, ‘Some domestic tragedies’, *Sunday Telegraph*, 09 November 1969, NSA DD/NP/2/4/1/21.

¹⁰⁴ ‘*King Lear* in performance: The RSC and Beyond’, in *King Lear* by William Shakespeare, ed. by Jonathan Bate and Eric Rasmussen (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 165.

¹⁰⁵ ‘*King Lear* in performance’, *King Lear*, p. 166.

performance. The *Guardian*, like many others, felt that the only ‘innovation’ lay in characterisation, indicating how acclimatised reviewers had become to austere settings that were unfamiliar a decade earlier:

Michael Hordern’s *Lear* developed with hone-edged subtlety from a dyspeptic, ageing schoolmaster into a shattered wreck of a psyche, still disbelieving that all this could happen. [...] Otherwise the grief and gore all happened in the usual Shakespearean ever-ever-land, the Lords and Ladies poncing and plotting in their vaguely Stuart finery against a virtually bare set of black translucent flats – the courtly puppet show manipulated by a sadistic horror in a void of unrelieved ill-will.¹⁰⁶

The *Sunday* and *Daily Telegraphs* went further and explicitly contrasted Miller’s production with Brook’s. Each noted the differences rather than similarities: Frank Marcus praised Miller’s apparent decision to resist the influence of contemporary scholars and to instead ‘cut his cloth to suit his leading actor’, while Eric Shorter was ‘baffled’ by an

evening which seems to want to have the play in two traditional ways at once: in the despairing and bleak Samuel Beckett manner made memorable by Peter Brook, and in the more obviously humanistic style for which the greatest *Lears* are remembered.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶ Robin Thornber, ‘Miller’s “Lear”’, *Guardian*, 30 October 1969, NSA DD/NP/2/4/1/21.

¹⁰⁷ Marcus, ‘Some domestic tragedies’, *Sunday Telegraph*; Eric Shorter, ‘“Lear” played in two ways at once’, *Daily Telegraph*, 31 October 1969, NSA DD/NP/2/4/1/21.

While betraying a preference for the traditional portrayal of the King, Shorter's review is also demonstrative of the status attained by Brook's *Lear* which, like his *Dream*, would cast a shadow over future productions for decades to come.

The success of the Nottingham Playhouse and its fellow regional repertories in the 1960s has led John Bull to declare that, by the end of the decade, 'the monopoly of the London West End theatres was to some extent undermined'.¹⁰⁸ However, while the likes of the Playhouse and Bristol Old Vic had won national and international recognition for the quality of their work, imprinting themselves on the cultural landscape, London remained firmly at the top of the theatrical hierarchy, and a West End transfer remained the ultimate mark of approval for any provincial production. Subsidy was still relatively new, and the merits of the system remained much-debated in the press; many of the more conservative journalists questioned the true extent of the regional reps' achievements. In October 1969, John Barber dedicated his regular 'About the Theatre' column in the *Daily Telegraph* to the question 'How creative up North?'.¹⁰⁹ In this, Barber queried the quality of theatre outside London, and concluded that although exciting new work was created there, this was not evidence that provincial theatre was blossoming. Most of his article reads as fairly even-handed: Barber surveyed the forthcoming programmes of forty provincial theatres to 'give an idea of how dependant the provinces are on London, how many plays are new, and how far a local creative policy is emerging'.¹¹⁰ In his concluding sentences, however, Barber revealed his

¹⁰⁸ John Bull, 'Mainstream Theatre, 1946-1979', in *History of British Theatre* vol. 3, p. 337.

¹⁰⁹ John Barber, 'How Creative up North?', *Daily Telegraph*, 06 October 1969, NSA DD/NP/2/4/1/21.

¹¹⁰ Barber, 'How creative up North?' *Daily Telegraph*.

metropolitan prejudice with a distasteful comparison between the fashion tastes of provincial girls and the outputs of their local theatres:

Nothing could be healthier than that the provinces should sponsor new plays and help to set fledgling authors on their feet. It remains to be proved that great drama has ever been, or ever will be, nourished outside the great capitals. [...] In my view, there is little hope that the provincial theatres, for all their new-found, expensively nurtured health and energy, will revitalise British drama. Like the Saturday-night girls with bare midriffs in every English market town, they follow the West End fashions: they cannot create them. Nothing would delight me more than to be proved wrong.¹¹¹

Evidently, Barber either did not consider the RSC to be a provincial theatre or else had cast Stratford as one of the 'great capitals', a classification that could only apply in reference to Shakespeare. Regardless of his thinking, the company's achievements had clearly done little to change entrenched views about the inferiority of provincial drama, and London's place at the centre of theatre remained unchallenged in the eyes of Barber and his contemporaries.

1980s: 'A Wide Variety of Entertainments'

Throughout the 1970s the Playhouse cycled through artistic directors Richard Eyre (1973-1978) and Geoffrey Reeves (1978-1980). The theatre thrived under Eyre's 'lively, bright' approach, which was centred around new writing but still maintained revivals of Shakespeare and the classics. Consequently, audience

¹¹¹ Barber, 'How creative up North?' *Daily Telegraph*.

figures rose by ten per cent.¹¹² During the directorships of Reeves and his successor, Richard Digby-Day (1980-1984), however, the financial crisis in the arts world finally reached the Playhouse, with visible repercussions for its Shakespeare productions. Economic recession had cut funding available from the ACGB, and Reeves responded with 'initial uncertainty', phasing out true repertory in 1979 and seeing attendance fall in response.¹¹³ When Digby-Day took over, his stated aim was to win back his audience by offering 'a wide variety of entertainments' that would appeal to 'the widest possible range' of theatre-goers: new plays were removed from the agenda.¹¹⁴ Accordingly, Crispin Thomas' 1981 production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* seems to have been calculated for impact rather than insight. John Curry, the former world champion ice skater, made his British acting debut as Puck, and this novelty celebrity casting was widely reported in the national and local press. The *Derby Evening Telegraph* commented that with Curry in the cast, 'this production could not fail to attract attention'.¹¹⁵ Set and costume were deliberately provocative: suspended above the stage was a glowing ring that the *Stage* felt was reminiscent of a 'flying saucer', and the mortals and fairies alike were dressed in contemporary fashions, with Helena and Hermia (Jennifer Hall and Janet Spencer-Turner) cast as New Romantics.¹¹⁶ The *Nottingham Post* reported enthusiastically on the production's 'Flair for Fashions', writing that,

¹¹² Rowell and Jackson, *Repertory*, p. 136.

¹¹³ Rowell and Jackson, *Repertory*, p. 137.

¹¹⁴ Digby-Day, in interview with the *Nottingham Evening Post*, 05 September 1980; Digby-Day, in interview with Frank Eggins, *Plays and Players*, August 1982; both quoted in Rowell and Jackson, *Repertory*, p. 137.

¹¹⁵ L. H. M., 'Ingenious, inventive "midsummer's" evening', *Derby Evening Telegraph*, 17 October 1981, NSA DD/NP/2/4/1/29.

¹¹⁶ Marian Bryson, 'Giving Shakespeare the disco treatment', *Stage*, 05 November 1981, NSA DD/NP/2/4/1/29.

Top fashion designers have been responsible for all the costumes, with Paul Dart involved in most of them. His work is sold through the exciting London store “Bastet.” Paul Smith of Nottingham and Top Shop will also be displaying their sartorial wares, the latter actually exhibiting its new range before general release.¹¹⁷

The *Post*’s anticipation for the production itself was more muted, as indicated by the note that ‘unorthodox productions of Shakespeare are anything but new and it will be interesting to see what Crispin Thomas actually conveys [...] besides fashionable elegance and novel sets’.¹¹⁸

Mediocre reviews suggest that the *Post*’s reservations were justified; most critics (and there were few from the national press) found fault with the lack of substance in a *Dream* that, as the *Stage* and *Nottingham Evening Post* both found, played relentlessly for laughs.¹¹⁹ The point of criticism from Simon Shepherd was, however, far more informed than others, local or national. Shepherd, a leading academic writing for the *Nottingham News*, picked up on an element that other reviewers overlooked: that the fairies’ leather-and-chains look was drawn ‘from the gay male disco-club culture of London and New York’, rather than generic ‘disco’ or ‘heavy metal’, as had been stated elsewhere.¹²⁰ Production photos show Oberon (Malcolm Sinclair) in a heavily studded leather jumpsuit, one fairy in tight leather shorts and vest and another in nothing more

¹¹⁷ ‘Shakespeare with a difference – and a surprising flair for fashions!’, *Nottingham News*, 16 October 1981, NSA DD/NP/2/4/1/29.

¹¹⁸ ‘Shakespeare with a difference’, *Nottingham News*.

¹¹⁹ Bryson, ‘Giving Shakespeare the disco treatment’, *Stage*; Emrys Bryson, ‘Not so much a dream... More of a real knees-up’, *Nottingham Evening Post*, 17 October 1981: both NSA DD/NP/2/4/1/29.

¹²⁰ Simon Shepherd, ‘Midsummer Night’s Dream at the Playhouse’, *Nottingham News*, 23 October 1981, p. 11.

than a leather harness. Shepherd's objection was not to the kinky costumes – he noted that 'personally' he 'prefer[ed] leather and studs to gossamer and gauze' – but to the fact that the values of the scene had been transposed upon the play: the 'expensive, big city, conservatively middle-class' and anti-woman sentiments of the gay club coterie were, argued Shepherd, evident in a show that 'titters at the working class, simpers about provincialism and sniggers at women'.¹²¹ In his final paragraphs, Shepherd seemed to rail as much against the populist ethos of Digby-Day's Playhouse as this particular production:

The play here just isn't alive: there's plenty of drama in the *Dream* that needs no glitter, only intelligence and purpose; it's so cool it's gone cold. Cosmetic tinkering doesn't make radical, important or dramatic theatre. The people who ask you to be thrilled at a studded leather jacket differ little from those who refuse a biker service in a pub. This sort of expensive glamour can't conceal the anti-social ideas; the shop-window fashions sit on inanimate dummies. This production has less to do with a magic spell than a magic sell.

In all, this *Dream* embodied the Playhouse's sad artistic decline, which continued throughout the 1980s. In 1984, when Rowell and Jackson wrote their history of repertory theatre, it seemed that 'the role of the Playhouse, from the Neville era onwards, as a powerhouse of new ideas and new plays – a regional theatre with a national reputation – has fallen into the shadows'.¹²²

¹²¹ Shepherd, 'Midsummer Night's Dream at the Playhouse', *Nottingham News*.

¹²² Rowell and Jackson, *Repertory*, p. 139.

The decline of the artistic in favour of the commercial at the Nottingham Playhouse was replicated in many repertory theatres during the Conservative governments of 1979 to 1990 and 1990 to 1997. Baz Kershaw has suggested that the 'conventional view in most theatrical quarters [...] that Thatcherism was the worst news ever for the arts' is not entirely supported by the hard facts: statistics show that grants to English subsidised theatres grew by forty per cent, business sponsorship tripled, box office income for all theatres almost doubled, and the number of seats sold in regional repertory theatres remained steady.¹²³ Regional theatre's costs, however, 'continued to outstrip the hard-won rise in earnings', and the ACGB's 1986 Cork Report found 'an impoverished repertoire, dilapidated buildings, disgracefully low wages, proportionately more money to the nationals, [and] a rising threat to diversity'.¹²⁴ Digby-Day's successor, Kenneth Alan Taylor (1984-1989), consequently took an equally populist line in a bid to stem the mounting losses the theatre was sustaining: 'I gave myself my own brief – to fill the theatre, especially with a new and young audience, to entertain first but to educate and improve as well if I could.'¹²⁵ His approach was contentious, and in the first year of his tenure the *Stage* printed letters from Nottingham residents expressing their support or frustration. Much of this conversation was concerned with the issue of elitism. While one resident pointed out that the 1983 productions of Shakespeare, Brecht, Wilder and Shaw were sparsely attended and that 'no artistic director in this day and age can afford to be accused of running an elitist theatre', another wrote that she

¹²³ Baz Kershaw, 'British theatre, 1940-2002: an introduction', in *Cambridge History of British Theatre vol. 3*, pp. 291-325 (pp. 310-311).

¹²⁴ Kershaw, '1940-2002', p. 312.

¹²⁵ "Self indulgent policy" splits Notts Playhouse', *Stage*, 19 July 1990, p. 2.

‘prefer[ed] Chekov to Mike Harding and Kenneth Alan Taylor has some duty to cater to my tastes, for I am also a tax and rate payer’.¹²⁶ Some of the complaints touched on questions of Nottingham’s status as a provincial city as much as the theatre’s status as a former leading repertory. One letter-writer suggested that Taylor’s former post at Oldham Coliseum was to blame, writing that, ‘without wishing to disparage Oldham, may I suggest that Nottingham is a larger and very much more sophisticated city and that artistic policies correct for a small Lancashire town are not so suitable here’.¹²⁷ Another questioned whether ‘we necessarily want a director who is “in touch with the local community”’, stating that she ‘would prefer my theatre to be universal rather than parochial’.¹²⁸ The concern with Nottingham’s status as expressed in this debate affirms that the intra-provincial hierarchy outlined in previous chapters remained in place in the twentieth century. It is clear, however, that this was interpreted in different ways by those in the periphery: while one letter looks inward, focusing on Nottingham’s supposed cultural superiority to the more-provincial Oldham, the other looks outward in their implied wish to transcend the regional altogether and become ‘universal’, by which I would interpret to mean the centre.

Despite, or perhaps as a result of, these complaints, Taylor did stage Shakespeare, producing the Playhouse’s second *King Lear* in 1986 and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* in 1987. This was in line with national trends: while classical plays had been in decline throughout the 1980s, rates of Shakespeare

¹²⁶ G. Godfrey, ‘Nottingham director is keeping his promises’, *Stage*, 29 August 1985, p. 9; Naomi Pinfold, ‘Diet of trivia’, *Stage*, 12 September 1985, p. 7.

¹²⁷ Pinfold, ‘Diet of trivia’, *Stage*, 12 September 1985, p. 7.

¹²⁸ Linda Steele, ‘Gone but Notts forgotten’, *Stage*, 12 September 1985, p. 7.

production had remained consistent.¹²⁹ However, neither production was especially well-received by critics. *Lear* appears to have been overlooked by the nationals altogether but received a full write-up in the *Nottingham Post*, where Emrys Bryson explicitly connected Taylor's populist ethos to Andrew Hay and Martin Lewton's self-proclaimed 'accessible and enjoyable' production:

The Kenneth Alan Taylor regime at the Playhouse has built up big audiences, not all familiar with theatregoing, and doesn't want to frighten them away. This *King Lear* therefore is sprinkled with laughs (there is one misplaced even at the poignant ending when, as the villainous Edmund is reported dead, Albany surveys the carnage and comments: "That's but a trifle here!").¹³⁰

While Bryson expressed doubts about the 'anachronistic' approach to costume and characterisation – 'the nasty Goneril and Regan (Romy Baskerville, Eileen Pollock) have a touch of the Ugly Sisters' – he found Ruari Murchison's gold and green-marble set 'magnificent' and Russell Dixon's *Lear* to be an effective 'lynchpin' of the production. Andrew Hay's *Dream* was reviewed in a wider range of publications, many of which praised Robert Jones' set, in which a large moon moved across the back of the stage. Less popular was the use of modern dress and the 'prosaic' verse speaking; Bryson had similarly accused *Lear* of 'abandoning' that play's 'poetry' in 'an attempt to be colloquial', and it seems

¹²⁹ Graham Saunders, 'Historical and Cultural Background', in *BTC 1980-1994*, pp. 1-48 (p. 41).

¹³⁰ Emrys Bryson, 'Lear: It's hard Bard, but worth a tilt...', *Nottingham Evening Post*, 04 April 1986, p. 5.

likely that this approach to Shakespeare's verse was indeed taken with Taylor's target audience in mind.¹³¹

Connected to the criticism of *Dream's* verse speaking was a controversy over casting which erupted in the pages of the *Guardian*. Four black actors appeared in the show, playing Oberon/Theseus (Allister Bain), Hermia (Diane-Louise Jordan), Lysander (Winston Crooke) and Egeus/Snug (Alex Tetteh-Lartey). Reviewer Pat Ashworth interpreted this as a commentary on the parallels between 'the Elizabethan power of the father' and 'the hard-line taken today by West Indian fathers towards their children', and reported that,

the idea works well, but the voices are uncomfortably wrong for Shakespearean verse. The pace of Theseus/Oberon and Egeus sometimes led to crucial loss of meaning, you did [sic] not know the text well.¹³²

Taylor responded in a letter that accused Ashworth of racism. This in turn was countered by a reader who agreed that 'a substantial number of Theseus/Oberon's words were inaudible', but failed to address Taylor's point that Ashworth had found 'it necessary to find a reason for having black actors in the production' and made the 'racist assumption that all black performers must be West Indian', when in fact Tetteh-Lartey was Ghanaian.¹³³ The inclusion of black performers had been noted in passing by Bryson in the *Nottingham Post*, who wrote that he 'only mention[ed]' it because he had not 'seen any in the

¹³¹ See reviews in 'Newscuttings and Press Notices *A Midsummer Night's Dream* 1987', NSA DD/NP/2/4/2/22.

¹³² Pat Ashworth, 'Midsummer Night's Dream', *Guardian*, 06 June 1987, NSA DD/NP/2/4/2/22.

¹³³ Kenneth Alan Taylor, 'Making a drama of a different colour', *Guardian*, 22 June 1987; Vivienne Apple, 'Looks fine but sounds difficult', *Guardian*, 30 June 1987. Both NSA DD/NP/2/4/2/22.

Dream before'.¹³⁴ For three black actors to play leading Shakespearean roles was indeed highly unusual for the period: according to the British Black and Asian Shakespeare Database, Crooke was the first ever black actor to play Lysander on the British stage, and Bain only the second to play Oberon/Theseus (following Don Warrington's performance at the Leicester Haymarket in 1984).¹³⁵ Not until the 2008 revival of Doran's 2005 *Dream* did the RSC stage a production of this play which offered so many roles of comparable size to black and Asian actors. Shakespeare at the Nottingham Playhouse under Taylor may have been catered for mass appeal but, in *Dream* at least, this did not exclude innovative practice at the cutting edge of the industry.

2000s: A Return to Prestige

Under the leadership of artistic directors Pip Broughton (1990-1994) and Martin Duncan (1994-1999), the Playhouse slowly recovered from the 'lean artistic times of the Eighties'.¹³⁶ When Duncan announced his resignation in 1998, the *Stage* praised his term as a 'golden era' in which the theatre had 'risen to international prominence' through its collaborations with leading British and European artistic companies.¹³⁷ His success resulted in a seven per cent increase in funding, attributed by the *Stage* to the Playhouse's 'rise to national stature'.¹³⁸ That same article reported rises in subsidy for a number of other East Midlands organisations, including the Derby Playhouse, Royal Theatre Northampton, the

¹³⁴ Emrys Bryson, 'Dancing Zorba... it's all a Dream', *Nottingham Post*, 05 June 1987, NSA DD/NP/2/4/2/22.

¹³⁵ See entries for individual characters and productions at 'A Midsummer Night's Dream', *British Black and Asian Shakespeare Database* <<https://bbashakespeare.warwick.ac.uk/plays/midsummer-nights-dream>>.

¹³⁶ '... for a taste of Nottingham nouveau', *The Observer*, 14 November 1993, p. 3.

¹³⁷ Phil Gibby, 'Duncan to leave Nottingham', *Stage*, 02 April 1998, p. 4.

¹³⁸ 'It's simply magic to be tied in Notts', *Stage*, 07 January 1999, p. 4.

Phoenix Arts Centre in Leicester, and touring company New Perspectives. The influx of arts funding was the product of Tony Blair's New Labour government, which prioritised cultural development and 'virtually double[d] the grant-in-aid available for arts funding' towards the end of its first term.¹³⁹ Giles Croft, artistic director from 1999 to 2017, maintained the Playhouse's reputation even after the Conservative-led coalition government imposed deep cuts to public spending from 2010 onwards, which resulted in the Playhouse losing its Nottinghamshire county funding and seeing reductions from the city council.¹⁴⁰ Development of new writing was the mark by which all three directors' achievements were judged, as had become typical for regional producing theatres, and as a consequence Shakespeare's place in the repertoire became diminished.

There were no productions of *King Lear* after 1986 and only two of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in a twenty-five-year period, neither of which were representative of the Playhouse's more celebrated output. I would argue that this indicates that artistic efforts may have been channelled towards work that was more likely to transfer to the West End, or at the very least to a national tour: Shakespeare productions were extremely unlikely to do either, due to the presence of the RSC (and, to a lesser extent, the NT) in London and the existence of Shakespeare-specific touring companies in the regions. The first *Dream* since 1987 was directed in 2000 by Richard Baron and performed in repertory with J. M. Barrie's *Dear Brutus*, a rarely-revived play that echoed elements of *Dream*.

¹³⁹ Liz Tomlin, 'Historical and Cultural Background', in *BCTC 1995-2014*, pp. 1-26 (pp. 3-7).

¹⁴⁰ Mark Shenton, 'Giles Croft: "Running a theatre is much more complex than it used to be"', *Stage*, 12 January 2017 <<https://www.thestage.co.uk/features/interviews/2017/giles-croft-running-a-theatre-is-much-more-complex-than-it-used-to-be/>>.

Critics tended to review the Barrie and overlook the Shakespeare, possibly on account of the latter's populist approach which once again relied on celebrity for its appeal. Baron cast television actors Gareth Thomas as Oberon/Theseus and Angus Lenny as Bottom, and dressed the fairies in green onesies and 'head appendages' in the style of children's TV characters The Teletubbies.¹⁴¹ This particular creative choice, and the fact that educational work had remained a priority at the Playhouse under all its artistic directors, suggests that the production was aimed at families with children. The 2013 *Dream* was not the work of the Playhouse, but a co-production between a London company, Custom/Practice, and a London theatre, the Almeida: Nottingham was just one stop on a tour that also covered Edinburgh, Malvern, Guilford and Newbury.¹⁴² As in 2000, this production was created for children and 'opened with a framing device that left no doubt as to the production's intended audience', being that of a school detention room with pupils forced to read the play by 'their velvet-jacketed teacher "Mr Goodfellow"'.¹⁴³ Peter Kirwan questioned the relevance of this device to the 'very traditional' interpretation of *Dream* that followed, and found that the 'school-friendly' running time of two hours led to the company treating the text 'as something to be got out of the way'.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴¹ Julie Warburton, 'A Midsummer Night's Dream – Review', *BBC Nottingham – Theatre*, 13 September 2000 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/nottingham/entertainment/theatre/092000/midsummer_review.shtml>.

¹⁴² 'A Midsummer Night's Dream', *Custom/Practice* <<http://www.custompractice.co.uk/projects/2013-season-opens-a-midsummer-nights-dream-national-tour/>> [accessed 13 October 2017].

¹⁴³ Peter Kirwan, 'A Midsummer Night's Dream (Custom/Practice) @ Nottingham Playhouse', *The Bardathon* <<http://blogs.nottingham.ac.uk/bardathon/2013/03/01/a-midsummer-nights-dream-custompractice-nottingham-playhouse/>>.

¹⁴⁴ Kirwan, 'A Midsummer Night's Dream', *The Bardathon*.

The fact that the Playhouse received a touring production was illustrative of how it – and other regional repertory theatres – had expanded their original remit by the twenty-first century. Hosting the work of others, collaborating with commercial and subsidised theatres, and transferring their own productions to London have all become crucial to the survival of the modern civic theatre. Whilst, as I have argued, Shakespeare was not typically considered for transfers, the Playhouse did co-produce his plays, most recently staging *Richard III* with the Theatre Royal York in 2013. I would suggest, however, that this account of the Playhouse's history of performance points to a difficulty that successive generations of artistic directors have struggled with: balancing Shakespeare with potentially-prestigious new writing and an obligation to serve all strata of the local community. It seems that often, in the case of *Dream* in particular, directors have favoured mass appeal over the creation of challenging or even exciting interpretations: a dilemma that the introduction of subsidy was intended to eliminate, but one that even the RSC grapples with, as I discuss in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5

2016: Provincial Shakespeare Performance in the Quatercentenary Year

2016 was a remarkable year for Shakespeare and for the United Kingdom. The four hundredth anniversary of the playwright's death was commemorated in all corners of the UK with events that celebrated the national landscape and heritage as much as Shakespeare's life and works: from a Shakespeare Tree Planting in Northampton, to a Shakespeare Feast in Stathern; a Shakespeare Slam in Morecombe and a Shakesbeer Promenade in Clifton, which combined 'a tour of beautiful Clifton Village', and 'supping on fine ales' with 'enjoying the Bard's plays [...] in the open air'.¹ From their base in Stratford-upon-Avon, the RSC marked the quatercentenary with a ground-breaking production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that toured to thirteen British venues between February and July: in each town, local schoolchildren played Titania's fairy train and local amateurs took on the role of the mechanicals. Subtitled 'a Play for the Nation', *Dream 16* (as it was also known) was, as director Erica Whyman wrote,

¹ 'Shakespeare tree planting', *What's On Summer 2016, Royal & Derngate Northampton*, p. 54 <<https://issuu.com/royalderngatestaff/docs/rsummer2016>>; 'Introducing the Stathern Shakespeare Season', *Stathern Star March/April 2016*, p. 13 <<http://www.stathernparish.co.uk/Stathern%20Star/March-April%202016%20Final.pdf>> [accessed 01 August 2017]; 'Shakespeare Slam', *Bard by the Beach: Morecombe Shakespeare Festival Brochure 2016*, p. 6 <https://issuu.com/afterdarkmurder/docs/bard_by_the_beach_brochure_2016>; 'Shakesbeer Promenade: Clifton Village', *EventBrite* <<https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/shakesbeer-promenade-clifton-village-tickets-23906452844#>>. N.B. Unless stated otherwise, all other websites referenced in this chapter were accessed and live as of 01 December 2017. Thanks to Fiona Ritchie for sharing her database of Shakespeare 400 celebrations.

born of the desire to celebrate three key pledges which the RSC holds dear: to ensure that Shakespeare is seen live all over the country; to ensure that all children and young people have an inspiring and enjoyable experience of Shakespeare's plays; and to encourage adults to take part in creating their own theatre.²

In early June, at the end of many months on tour, associate director Sophie Ivatts felt 'euphoric' at the level of engagement the company had achieved with local audiences, and claimed that their production had led 'people of all walks of life' to come together 'in communities to talk about Shakespeare':³

Dream 16 has been about getting new people through the door; redefining who Shakespeare is for; that it's a 400 year legacy that belongs to us all, regardless of age or education; that it holds meaning and value for us all.⁴

Any sense of national accord achieved by the production was, however, swiftly overshadowed by the referendum on the UK's membership of the European Union on 23 June and the subsequent victory of the Leave campaign with fifty-two per cent of the vote. While the political and economic ramifications of Brexit lie largely outside the remit of this thesis, the referendum results appeared to reveal stark, long-standing cultural differences both between and within the member nations of the UK. These divisions – of age, income, geography and educational attainment – have considerable implications for a study which

² Erica Whyman, 'A National Passion', *A Midsummer Night's Dream* commemorative programme, Royal Shakespeare Theatre, 15 June-16 July 2016.

³ Interview with Sophie Ivatts, 10 October 2016.

⁴ Sophie Ivatts, 'From Coast to Coast', *Dream 2016* <<http://www.dream2016.org.uk/company-news/from-coast-to-coast/>>.

considers the relationship between centre and periphery with regard to Shakespeare performance.⁵ In the immediate post-Brexit era, national icons such as Shakespeare have been cast in a new light as commentators search for evidence of a truly United Kingdom, and popular and scholarly attention alike is attuned as never before to the significance of place and, in particular, the cultural gulf between a few select urban environs and the rest of the country.

Here, I turn from the macro approach of previous chapters to the micro, with an in-depth study of the RSC's 'Play for the Nation'. I analyse this production as an example of interaction between cultural authority and periphery in the twenty-first century, and consider how this might speak to concerns that have been raised in the build-up to, and wake of, the referendum. I argue that audience reception was informed by the political and cultural contexts and that these produced a reading of the performance that the creative team could not have anticipated.

5.1 *Dream 16*

Between February and July 2016, the RSC's *Dream 16* was performed in twelve different venues, with fourteen amateur companies and fifty-eight groups of schoolchildren.⁶ Variouslly billed by the RSC as 'ground-breaking', 'unique' and 'madly ambitious' – claims that the press repeated in their coverage and reviews – the production toured more widely than any of the company's other

⁵ Tom Clark, 'EU voting map lays bare depth of division across Britain', *Guardian*, 24 June 2016 <<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/jun/24/eu-voting-map-lays-bare-depth-of-division-across-britain>>.

⁶ '583 School Children Take Part in The RSC's A Midsummer Night's Dream', *RSC* <<https://www.rsc.org.uk/press/releases/583-school-children-take-part-in-the-rscs-a-midsummer-nights-dream>>.

Shakespearean pieces had for over twenty years.⁷ It opened and closed in Stratford, but in between visited Newcastle-upon-Tyne (Northern Stage); Glasgow (Citizens Theatre); Blackpool (Grand Theatre Blackpool); Bradford (Alhambra Theatre); Canterbury (Marlow Theatre); Norwich (Theatre Royal Norwich); Nottingham (Theatre Royal Nottingham); Truro (Hall for Cornwall); London (Barbican); Cardiff (New Theatre); and Belfast (Lyric Theatre and Grand Opera House). Most theatres received the tour for one week of six performances with local schoolchildren and amateurs from Tuesday to Saturday, before the professional cast and crew moved onto the next location. Then, to complete the run, the production returned to the RST for one month, during which the company was 'constantly in a state of tech' as each group of mechanicals performed in two evening shows and one matinee.⁸

Originally conceived by Gregory Doran, artistic director of the RSC, as a 'major marker for what the RSC means, locally, nationally, [and] internationally', *Dream 16* brought together strands of the organisation's pre-existing work with schools (their Learning and Performance Network) and amateurs (Open Stages).⁹ BBC film crews followed the amateurs' rehearsal process for a series of

⁷ Gregory Doran, 'February-August 2016', *A Midsummer Night's Dream* commemorative programme, RST, 15 June-16 July 2016; Summer Season 2015 Announced', RSC <<https://www.rsc.org.uk/press/releases/summer-season-2015-announced>>; Whyman, 'A National Passion'.

For press coverage see: 'Exclusive Video: the RSC's ground-breaking A Midsummer Night's Dream, *Telegraph*, 21 June 2016 <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/theatre/what-to-see/exclusive-video-the-rscs-ground-breaking-a-midsummer-nights-drea/>>; 'Theatre Review - A Midsummer Night's Dream: A Play For The Nation', *Living North*, March 2016 <<https://www.livingnorth.com/northeast/arts-whats/theatre-review-midsummer-night%E2%80%99s-dream-play-nation>>; Abbie Wightwick, 'RSC: A Midsummer Night's Dream is a truly magical experience that will leave you spellbound', *Wales Online*, 26 May 2016 <<http://www.walesonline.co.uk/whats-on/theatre-news/rsc-midsummer-nights-dream-truly-11383494>>.

⁸ Interview with Ivatts.

⁹ Interview with Erica Whyman, 02 March 2017.

documentaries, titled ‘The Best Bottoms in the Land’, that were broadcast regionally in May 2016. With press attention at both a local and national level, *Dream 16* was a high-profile production that the RSC successfully presented as the centrepiece of their quatercentenary celebrations. However, it is my argument that there were inherent conflicts between the production’s setting and its intended message, as well as issues with the execution and share of creative control. Together, these created a power dynamic that replicated, rather than countered, the hierarchical order of cultural and theatrical authority that I have sought to unveil in previous chapters. In the following section, I concentrate on the RSC’s positioning of the production as a ‘Play for the Nation’, looking in particular at Whyman’s decision to set the action in a bombed-out theatre in post-Second World War Britain, using an ethnically diverse professional cast. I argue that in doing so, she attempted to bring past and present together by reflecting – and indeed celebrating – multicultural contemporary society, whilst simultaneously evoking a somewhat problematic sense of nostalgic national unity located in an era that held very different values to those of the twenty-first century. In the second section, I examine issues of creative control and the centre/periphery relationship. I look at the perspectives of both the RSC itself and its regional partner theatres and amateurs, using the Nottinghamshire-based Lovelace Theatre Group as a case study for the latter. Throughout, I draw on my own experiences as an audience member at six different performances on tour, as well as interviews conducted with those

involved in *Dream 16*, in order to explore the structural barriers to parity for the provincial theatres and performers in this production.¹⁰

5.1.1 'A Play for the Nation'? Place and the Concept of National Unity

The national nature of the RSC's production was placed front and centre of its marketing campaign from the moment the project was first announced. Doran declared in an early press release that their *Midsummer Night's Dream* would be a play 'with and for the nation' – although what precisely was meant by 'nation' was left undefined – and on programmes and posters the tagline 'A Play for the Nation' was featured in a larger and thus more visible font than the names of the amateur companies partnering with the RSC (Fig. 26).¹¹ The minimising of regional difference on publicity materials and the lack of clarity surrounding the RSC's vision of 'nation' were demonstrative of broader tensions within a project that struggled to reconcile regional difference with national unity, an issue that became more conspicuous in light of the Brexit referendum and which I explore in detail below.

Participation

The RSC's scope was undoubtedly wide-ranging and inclusive in both geographic and demographic terms: few large-scale productions of classical drama take on touring dates in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Even so, as Figure 27 illustrates, only specific sections of the nation were chosen

¹⁰ The performances I attended were: Northern Stage, Newcastle-upon-Tyne feat. The People's Theatre – Saturday 26 March 1.15pm; Grand Theatre, Blackpool feat. Poulton Drama – Thursday 7 April 1.15pm; TR Norwich feat. The Common Lot – Saturday 30 April 7.30pm; TR Nottingham feat. The Lovelace Theatre Group – Thursday 5 May, 1.15pm; Barbican, London feat. The Tower Theatre Company – Thursday 19 May, 7.30pm; Royal Shakespeare Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon feat. The Lovelace Theatre Group – Thursday 7 July, 1.15pm.

¹¹ 'Summer Season 2015 Announced', RSC <<https://www.rsc.org.uk/press/releases/summer-season-2015-announced>>.

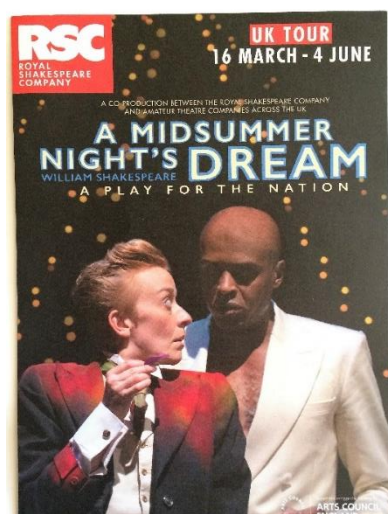
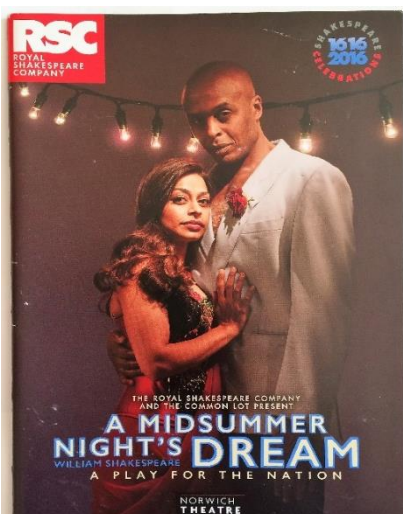
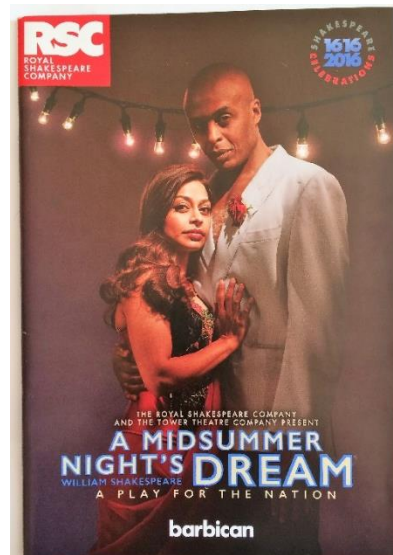
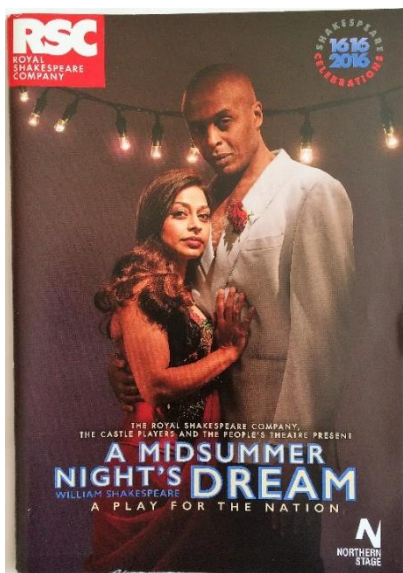
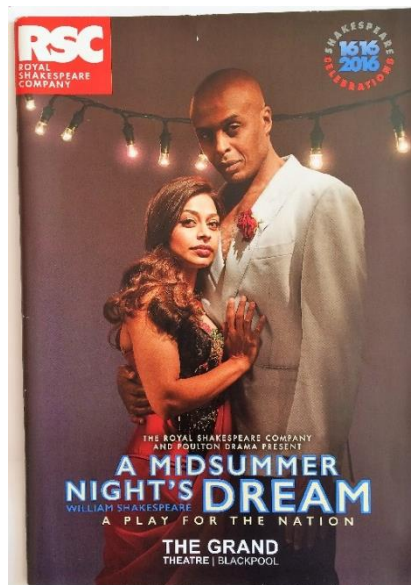
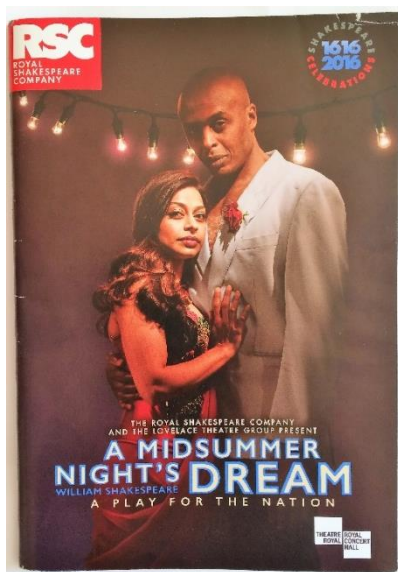


Figure 26 - Dream 16 programmes from (clockwise from top left): Theatre Royal Nottingham; The Grand Theatre Blackpool; Barbican; RST; Theatre Royal Norwich; Northern Stage



Figure 27- Map of Dream 16 tour venues

to participate, and the process that determined their selection is worthy of closer consideration. The English theatres were drawn in part from the RSC's existing partners in their Learning Performance Network, a scheme that ran from 2006 to 2016 and brought schools together with local theatres in communities where 'young people [...] have least access to Shakespeare, cultural provision and the RSC'.¹² Four of the eight English touring venues, in Bradford, Blackpool, Canterbury and Truro, were selected from this pool. Each of these were identified by producer Claire Birch as amongst the RSC's key partners; Arts Council England had classified them as areas of low engagement that should be

¹² 'Partnerships', RSC <<https://www.rsc.org.uk/education/how-your-school-can-work-with-us/partnerships>>.

prioritised for projects intended to build drama audiences.¹³ The remaining five locations were chosen to achieve Doran's aim of visiting every English region, and the theatres themselves were selected on the basis of their capacity and the strength of pre-existing relationships with the RSC through past touring engagements. Thus the number one venue in Norwich represented East Anglia, and that of Nottingham the East Midlands, with the RST in Stratford covering the West Midlands. Newcastle was the obvious choice for the North East, given the city's past status as the third home of the RSC, and Northern Stage was presumably chosen over the Theatre Royal due to Whyman's previous position as Chief Executive at the former from 2005 to 2012. To fund the Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish legs of the tour, the RSC had to apply for special funding from the Arts Council, which in turn necessitated partnering with number one venues in Cardiff and Belfast for the first time in decades. Glasgow's Citizen Theatre was chosen, despite its middling size, because of its community ethos and, once again, a pre-existing relationship with the RSC. In keeping with the scope of this thesis, this chapter will focus primarily on the English theatres.

With the partner venues in place by September 2014, the search began for amateur companies. This was managed by the regional venues, who were tasked with attracting applications and determining a shortlist of up to twenty companies for a one-day workshop audition attended by RSC directors. At the Theatre Royal Nottingham the process was overseen by creative learning manager David Longford. He made the decision to restrict the call to local, rather than regional, amateur groups on the grounds that,

¹³ Interview with Claire Birch, 25 November 2016.

the play in each venue need[ed] to encompass the regional identity [...] although we consider ourselves a venue for the East Midlands and beyond, we were not going to consider companies in Derbyshire, Leicestershire, Lincolnshire and so on. It was purely going to be Nottingham and Nottinghamshire that we would look at in terms of the pull of companies.¹⁴

Indeed, across the project as a whole, twelve of the fourteen amateur companies were based in the town or city of their partner theatre, perhaps indicating that, as in Nottingham, local identity was felt to hold a greater opportunity for specificity than the regional.¹⁵ Of course, it is also possible that the partner theatres selected a local company for logistical reasons, or that they had in fact opened auditions up regionally and happened to select a local company. Longford's commitment to a Nottingham-focused production led him to determine that the thirty schoolchildren needed for Titania's fairy train would be drawn from six city schools within Nottingham itself, schools that typically 'just would not have that kind of experience' and which were located in areas of very low engagement with the theatre. In comparison, most of the other touring venues worked with just one or two schools.

The distinction between immediate, local and regional was clearly of great importance to the Theatre Royal Nottingham and indeed all the partner venues. On tour the programmes reflected this, featuring a biographical page on 'The Amateurs' which specified their location and often gave examples of their

¹⁴ Interview with David Longford, 17 October 2016.

¹⁵ The exceptions were the Leeds Art Centre company who performed at the Alhambra Theatre, Bradford; and The Castle Players from Barnard Castle, County Durham, who performed at Northern Stage, Newcastle.

local work. In Nottingham, the Lovelace Theatre Group from Hucknall – a small, former mining town seven miles from the city – wrote of their forty-eight year history, and explained that their name was taken from Ada Lovelace, whose father Lord Byron ‘is buried 10 metres away from our venue’.¹⁶ However, when the production transferred back to Stratford, a commemorative programme was issued which allocated each amateur group a half-page Q&A in which they responded to a set selection of questions prepared by the RSC (Fig. 28). Formulaic and rather bland (‘What makes Shakespeare relevant today?’ ‘What does amateur theatre mean to you?’), the questions focused on what the amateurs had learnt from the process, and generated repetitive answers that referred to the universality of Shakespeare’s work and the feeling of community within amateur theatre. One company’s profile was indistinguishable from another in both presentation and content, effectively erasing any regional differences in favour of the appearance of uniformity. This was exacerbated further by the reduction of the amateurs’ bio to just one line and, in the case of Lovelace and several other companies, the generalisation of their location to either that of their partner venue or else the region more generally.

‘The Nation’

To some extent, this prioritisation of commonalities over differences may be attributed to Whyman’s desire to create a production that presented an image of national unity. As I argue here, this objective raised some problematic issues surrounding contemporary concepts of nationhood and the status of regional

¹⁶ ‘The Amateurs’, programme, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, TR Nottingham, 03-07 May 2016.

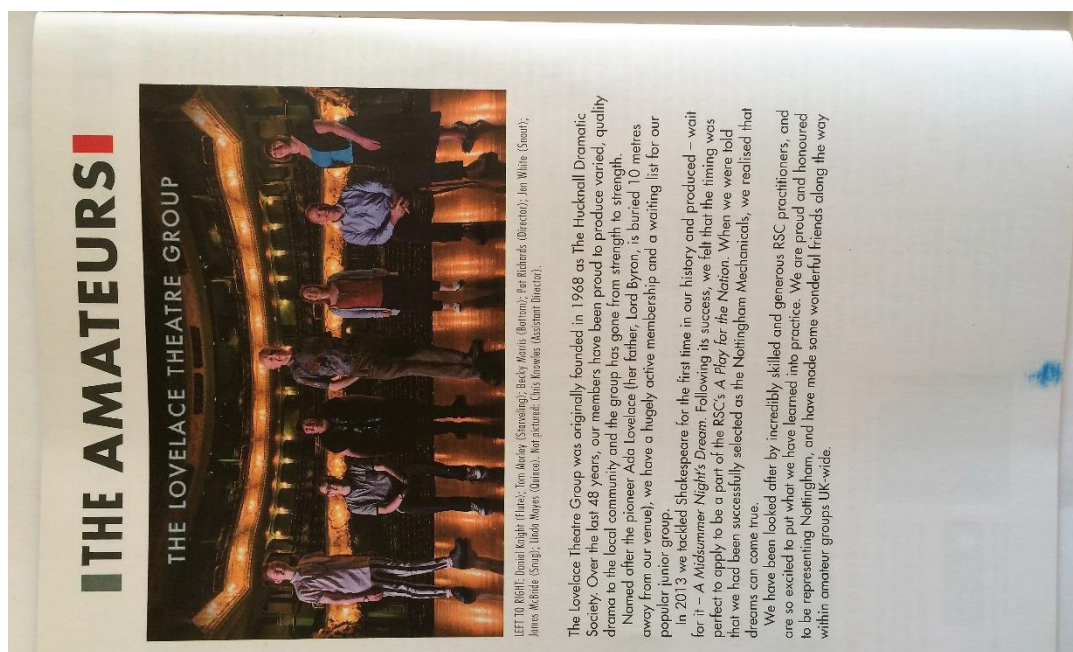
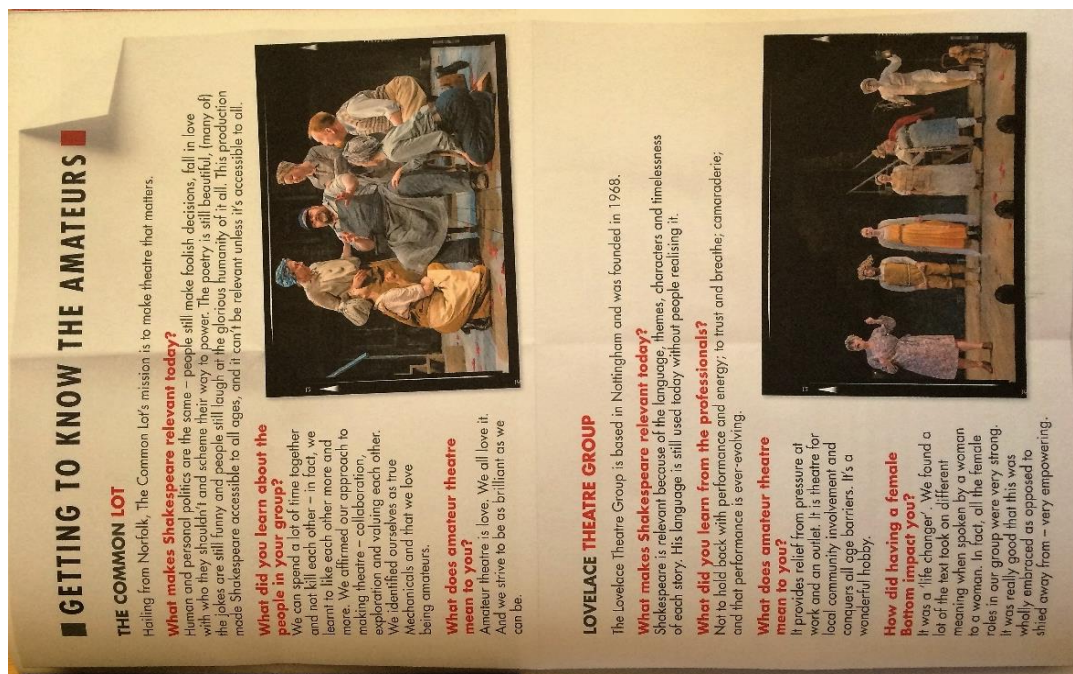


Figure 28 - Left: Lovelace's biography in the Theatre Royal Nottingham programme. Right: Their Q&A in the RST Commemorative programme



performance. In a programme essay, Whyman explained her post-war setting, writing that 1940s Britain,

like Shakespeare's imagined Athens, [...] was a place and time of great change. The country was in recovery from the ravages of war but, in spite of deep and painful austerity, it was also a time of hope, ambition and a powerful shared purpose.¹⁷

Austerity is, of course, a term that resonates in the 2010s just as it did in the years following the Second World War. So too is the idea that adversity creates a 'powerful shared purpose': in the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis, when David Cameron's successive governments (2010-2016) imposed harsh public spending cuts, his party adopted a slogan intended to foster a sense of unity in economic hardship, promising the electorate that 'we're all in this together'.¹⁸ The RSC's production was first conceived in 2013, and at that point the company's optimism about creating a genuine sense of national unity may have still seemed feasible, despite cynicism about the government's oft-repeated slogan from several quarters. However, by 2016, when the Leave and Remain campaigns had brought deep political divisions to the surface of everyday life, sentiments of national accord surely rang false to a large proportion of the audience, whatever side of the debate they were on.

Like many in the arts industry, the professionals I interviewed identified themselves as staunch Remainers, while most of the towns on tour (but not

¹⁷ Whyman, 'A National Passion'.

¹⁸ 'In full: Cameron's speech', *BBC News*, 08 October 2009

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/in_depth/uk_politics/2009/party_conferences_2009/8297618.stm>.

necessarily the amateurs themselves) voted in the majority to Leave.¹⁹ Across England there was a clear tendency for areas outside the larger urban cities to vote Leave, a fact which has been interpreted by many as the product of feelings of exclusion generated by a dominant metropolitan narrative in politics and the media (Fig. 29).²⁰ All three professional directors associated this division with what Whyman termed 'a scandalous poverty of confidence' in the amateurs they worked with:

the sense that they were not taken seriously by the world they live in. [...] There's something about how too many people, and people who don't make it into the bracket of sufferers, or people who are failing to make ends meet, lots of them still feel ignored and disrespected by the structures around them. And it was shocking, just how much [this sense] was repeated.²¹

In wider society, this feeling of being disrespected manifested itself amongst a vocal minority as right-wing, nationalist rhetoric which inadvertently chimed uncomfortably closely with the post-war framework of national identity utilised in this production. That same rhetoric bore tragic consequences in the

¹⁹ 'EU referendum: full results and analysis', 23 June 2016

<<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/ng-interactive/2016/jun/23/eu-referendum-live-results-and-analysis>>; of the English towns that participated in the production, only London, Newcastle and Norwich returned a majority for Remain.

²⁰ For examples of this argument from both sides of the political divide, see Andy Beckett, 'From Trump to Brexit, power has leaked from cities to the countryside', *Guardian*, 12 December 2016 <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/dec/12/trump-brexit-cities-countryside-rural-voters>>; and James Kirkup, 'The new political divide which drove both Brexit and Donald Trump: town versus country', *Telegraph*, 11 November 2016 <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/11/11/both-donald-trump-and-brexit-were-driven-by-the-gap-between-town/>>.

²¹ Interview with Whyman.



Figure 29 - Map of the UK showing the results of the 2016 EU referendum by local authority. Areas marked in blue show a majority of Leave votes, while areas marked in yellow show a majority of Remain votes ('EU Referendum: full results and analysis', Guardian)

quatercentenary year, with an attendant rise in hate crimes against minorities and the murder of Labour MP Jo Cox.²²

Under these circumstances it is possible, and perhaps even likely, that the vision of national identity put forward by Whyman's production may have been misconstrued. In an interview six months after the show closed, Whyman discussed her intentions for *Dream 16*, explaining that,

I wanted something that felt truly British – [that] just becomes an even weirder thing to say in 2017 doesn't it, but it felt possible to say in 2015 – that allowed the very sharp class distinctions of the play. So setting it now didn't serve me well. I wanted a modernity, I wanted us to recognise ourselves in it, and for that to be true in Glasgow and Truro and Nottingham [...] But I didn't want to set it now because that felt like then the gender politics of the play and the class politics of the play would feel out of kilter. [...] Mostly people missed the fact that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* happens immediately after a war, and I thought the Second World War in itself was compelling. It rings quite loud in my family and I think it does in lots of British families, that it defines the generation before us.²³

Whyman intended to evoke the hopefulness of the post-war spirit – the 'coming together after the war, and hosting the Olympics, the Festival of Britain, the sense of pageant and collective celebration as one nation having survived

²² "Record hate crimes" after EU referendum', *BBC News*, 05 February 2017 <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-38976087>>; 'Jo Cox: Man jailed for 'terrorist' murder of MP', *BBC News*, 23 November 2016 <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-38079594>>.

²³ Interview with Whyman.

something' – but, throughout the production's run, a more jingoistic image of the Second World War was referenced by politicians and the media.²⁴ In an article dedicated to 'Britain's World War Two fixation', published in June, Reuters reported that 'talking about the war is a reliable way to tug at patriotic heartstrings, and both sides in the EU debate have been doing it'.²⁵ They noted that the music 'blaring from the loudspeakers' on Nigel Farage's Leave.EU campaign bus was 'from the classic World War Two movie "The Great Escape"', a gimmick that went down well with his supporters: one twitter user expressed that this was 'a brilliant choice' that 'makes you proud to be British!'.²⁶ Winston Churchill's posthumous support was another matter of contention, as 'Churchill's grandson Nicholas Soames, a member of parliament, has said Churchill would have voted "Remain"', while 'the "Leave" camp argues that he did not want his country to be fully involved in European integration and would therefore have backed a British exit'.²⁷ In the *Sun*, veterans were featured pleading with readers not to 'give away what we fought for' and 'urging voters to back Brexit'; in the *Guardian*, a different group of veterans 'warned that Britain should stay in the EU or otherwise risk the stability in Europe that they fought to ensure'.²⁸ Marvin Carlson has argued that theatrical analysis should pay more attention to the 'larger social milieu' of any given production as this 'may be as

²⁴ Interview with Whyman.

²⁵ Estelle Shirbon, 'Brexit debate brings out Britain's World War Two fixation', *Reuters*, 04 June 2016 <<http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-britain-eu-worldwartwo-idUKKCN0YP1XO>>.

²⁶ Shirbon, 'Brexit debate'.

²⁷ Shirbon, 'Brexit debate'.

²⁸ Harry Cole, 'Battle of Britain: WWII vets plead with Brits "don't give away what we fought for" urging voters to back Brexit', *Sun*, 20 June 2016

<<https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/politics/1313861/wwii-vets-plead-with-brits-dont-give-away-what-we-fought-for-urging-voters-to-back-brexit/>>; Chris Johnston, 'Second world war veterans say Brexit risks stability they fought for', *Guardian*, 09 May 2016 <<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/may/09/war-veterans-brexit-risk-stability>>.

important to the formation of the reading of the experience as anything actually presented on the stage'.²⁹ I would argue that, in this case, the context of highly-politicised wartime nostalgia may well have affected the audience reception of *Dream 16*, particularly because the setting was, as Whyman herself acknowledged, intentionally ambiguous:

What I didn't want was people going 'oh, that's a clever idea' or, 'oh I see what I'm meant to think about that'. I just wanted them to feel it, that they knew who the King was, and they knew that there'd been a war, and they knew that coming together for a party was really necessary.³⁰

While this approach would have provoked a variety of responses from spectators even without the extraordinary political climate of 2016, I would suggest that the presence of the referendum made it more likely that audiences would interpret the post-war setting as either hopeful or hopeless, depending on their opinion of the EU.

Design

In performance, the historical period was immediately and obviously signalled by the production's design. All the action took place within the remains of a bombed-out theatre, which was the only element of the production to suggest the violence of war. Red velvet columns descended in 2.1 to mark the forest, and mobile doors and an iron staircase were used to indicate space, be that

²⁹ Marvin Carlson, 'Theatre Audiences and the Reading of Performance', in *Interpreting the Theatrical Past: Essays in the Historiography of Performance*, ed. by Thomas Postlewait and Bruce A. McConachie (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 1989), pp. 82-98 (p. 90).

³⁰ Interview with Whyman.

facilitating the coordinated red-carpet entrances of Hippolyta and Theseus (Laura Harding and Sam Redford) at the outset of the play, or evoking the confusion of the lovers as they chased one another through the forest in 3.2. The most dramatic visual display came in 5.1, when strings of fairy lights were draped across the stage for the weddings; in several of the performances that I attended this evoked sighs of pleasure from the audience as we witnessed the most obvious visual symbol of a hopeful post-war spirit. Costume indicated not only the era but also the class of the characters, an element that was, as previously stated, central to Whyman's interpretation of the text. She referenced photos found by designer Tom Piper of the royal family 'touring bombsites' after the war and explained that;

Suddenly we sort of understood how to do the show. That's where it came from. That they were in their finery, going to visit completely destroyed places to show their respect [...] You could see the class distinction, and they believed that the most respectful thing to do was to demonstrate the class distinction, not what we would do now, which is to put on a hard hat and an anorak. But actually, to put the pearls and the high heels on and step through the rubble was to grace it with their presence. And that felt like the play [...] If those two people [Theseus and Hippolyta] could come together against all their differences, in order to make peace, and invite people to perform for them, they could heal the nation.³¹

³¹ Interview with Whyman.

Accordingly, the lovers were dressed in middle class floral tea dresses (Mercy Ojelade and Laura Riseborough) or trouser braces and ties (Jack Holden and Chris Nayak), with Egeus (Peter Hamilton Dyer) in the uniform of an RAF officer, and Theseus and Hippolyta in aristocratic finery. The mechanicals, in contrast, wore working-class attire that, although practical in form – overalls, pullovers and aprons in denim, cotton and wool – was cast in a relatively cheery palate of blues and yellows. This reflected the production's overall upbeat tone: there was no sign of injury or hardship, no drawn faces, torn cloth or bandaged limbs. The characters of the fairy realm were set apart from the mortals by less period-specific costume; instead, their clothing emphasised the warring factions between King and Queen. Oberon (Chu Omambala) was distinctive in a wide-lapelled white suit, and Puck (Lucy Ellison) reminiscent of a cabaret MC in a theatrical dark suit and top hat. Titania (Ayesha Dharker) wore a scarlet, Indian-inspired ensemble, and her young fairy train bore signs of their loyalty to her via the colourful Holi powders that appeared to have been thrown over their school uniforms.

As an audience member I first thought that the schoolchildren were dressed in their own uniforms, but close inspection of the RSC's production photos reveals that that they were in fact in period costume. The boys wore white shirts and grey shorts, sometimes with a grey or red blazer; the girls a mix of gingham or floral dresses, grey pinafores, white shirts, pleated skirts, red blazers and cardigans. What complicated my reading of this was the fact that primary school uniforms have changed so little in the past seventy years: had the children walked the streets of Nottingham in their costumes, they would have been taken for a class trip. In this way, and in many others, the era of the

Second World War feels present in contemporary British society, and remains a touchstone of our culture. Bridget Escolme has argued that in using period dress, actors are draped 'in layer upon layer of constructed past-ness, recalling other versions of the ancient past'.³² While the war is not the 'ancient past', it is beyond living memory for the vast majority of the population, who must build their 'versions' of the war from school, the recollections of older family members and, perhaps most influentially, the media. The popular image of this period is of a pre-mass-immigration Britain valiantly fighting the Germans, rather than the era of the advent of the welfare state which Whyman sought to evoke, and I would question whether the production worked hard enough to overcome those preconceptions to succeed in bringing home its intended message. Many national critics failed to find any deeper meaning in the setting, and Ian Shuttleworth's review in the *Financial Times* appeared to misunderstand it on exactly the grounds outlined above, writing that the 1940s was 'the last era in which the nation came conspicuously together'.³³ One directorial choice that may, however, have reinforced a more progressive message was the diversity of the professional cast, which featured black, Asian and disabled actors. In Peter Kirwan's review, he noted that,

Chu Omambala's Oberon leapt to his feet in rage when Jack Holden's Lysander referred to Hermia (Mercy Ojelade) as a tawny Tartar; and when Lysander called Hermia a dwarf, the actor of short stature

³² Bridget Escolme, 'Costume', in *Shakespeare and the Making of Theatre*, ed. by Stuart Hampton-Reeves and Bridget Escolme (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 128-145 (p. 130).

³³ Ian Shuttleworth, 'A Midsummer Night's Dream: A Play for the Nation, Royal Shakespeare Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon – "Tentative"', *Financial Times*, 25 February 2016 <<https://www.ft.com/content/ace0eeae-dbb2-11e5-a72f-1e7744c66818?mhq5j=e1>>.

playing Mustardseed (Ben Goffe) ran out and gave him an almighty smack on the back of the leg, to Puck's applause. Moments such as these showed a pleasing commitment to calling out rather than tolerating problematic language in Shakespeare.³⁴

Other critics made the connection between the onstage diversity and the societal changes of the 1940s, writing that Oberon and Titania and 'our interracial mortal couples represent the future of modern Britain' and evoke 'a world in transition, its makeup changing'.³⁵ Diversity did not, however, extend to the amateur performers, all of whom appeared to be white and presented as able-bodied. The disconnect between the image of contemporary Britain that the RSC sought to portray, and the reality of the contemporary Britons who were chosen to represent 'the nation', is indicative of a deeper chasm between the production's democratic ideals and the hierarchical ordering of its execution.³⁶

Interpretation

Clearly delineated costumes were matched by a relatively straight-forward, family-friendly interpretation of the play that suited the RSC's intention to attract new audiences. Character relationships were given a wholesome portrayal: although Oberon exuded a quiet power, there was no real sense of the

³⁴ Peter Kirwan, 'A Midsummer Night's Dream: A Play for the Nation (RSC/Lovelace Theatre) @ Theatre Royal, Nottingham', *The Bardathon*, 07 May 2016
<<http://blogs.nottingham.ac.uk/bardathon/2016/05/07/a-midsummer-nights-dream-a-play-for-the-nation-rsclovelace-theatre-theatre-royal-nottingham/>>.

³⁵ Kate Maltby, 'Amateurs enrich Joyous ode to diversity', *Times*, 26 February 2016, p. 22; Natasha Tripney, 'A Midsummer Night's Dream review at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon – "celebratory"', *Stage*, 25 February 2016
<<https://www.thestage.co.uk/reviews/2016/a-midsummer-nights-dream-review-at-the-royal-shakespeare-theatre-stratford-upon-avon-celebratory/>>.

³⁶ There is a growing body of research into amateur theatre, as demonstrated by the recent special edition on 'Theatre, Performance, and the Amateur Turn' in *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 27 (2017).

sinister in his manipulation of Titania. Upon her awakening from the spell cast by the love potion she smiled graciously and embraced him, all of their conflict cast aside and their easy reunion celebrated with music and dance. Although the fairy couple were described in the *Times* as 'bristling with erotic energy', there was a noticeable absence of sexual chemistry onstage between either the lovers or Titania and her various Bottoms.³⁷ This element was generally overlooked by the critics, but two of the nationals commented on the production's chaste sensibility: the *Daily Mail* wrote that 'the show could do with more romanticism', while the *Telegraph's* Dominic Cavendish was more specific in his criticism, deeming the 'austerity-era mise-en-scène' responsible for an atmosphere of 'sexless restraint' and the use of a grand piano for Titania's bower a 'passion-killer'.³⁸

I disagree with Cavendish's identification of the set as the cause – there is surely nothing inherently un-erotic about a grand piano – but feel his use of the word 'restraint' is somewhat apt. At every touring performance I attended there was a noticeably high number of families with children, and at the matinees there were numerous primary school groups in attendance. Many of those who attended their local theatre for the first time were the parents of the children involved, all of whom received complimentary tickets. At the Theatre Royal Nottingham, Longford went so far as to brief front of house staff that they should be 'aware that people may be coming and they won't know how [to proceed]' in

³⁷ Kate Maltby, 'Amateurs enrich Joyous ode to diversity', *Times*, 26 February 2016, p. 22.

³⁸ Quentin Letts, 'This amateur Bottom just can't be beaten!', *Daily Mail*, 26 February 2016 <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-3464912/This-amateur-Bottom-just-t-beaten-QUENTIN-LETTS-reviews-Midsummer-Night-s-Dream.html>>; Dominic Cavendish, 'This Midsummer Night's Dream gives Shakespeare back to the people', *Daily Telegraph*, 25 February 2016 <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/theatre/what-to-see/this-midsummer-nights-dream-gives-shakespeare-back-to-the-people/>>.

order to create a positive first experience for the attendees.³⁹ It seems likely that Whyman and her team created the production with this demographic in mind, and restrained the sexual element accordingly. The young audiences I encountered were extremely excitable at the merest hint of impropriety: gasps and shrieks followed Helena's accusation to Demetrius that 'your wrongs do set a scandal on my *sex*', and a (very tame) kiss between Theseus and Hippolyta on their wedding day in 5.1 was met with shouts of 'ew'. These outcries were endearing indicators of high levels of engagement; had the performance featured more suggestive behaviour and thus more frequent outbursts it seems likely that the effect would have been overly disruptive. What the production lacked in eroticism it made up for in physical comedy, which was executed particularly well by Puck and by the Mechanicals. There were subtle variations in each company's rendition of Pyramus and Thisbe, detailed below, but all featured the central conceit of the Wall's hole appearing between the actor's legs, forcing Flute, as Thisbe, to kiss Snout's bum. At the Thursday matinee performance in Nottingham, when the auditorium was almost exclusively filled with parties from the six primary schools participating in the project, this scene caused a near-riot as hundreds of children literally screamed with laughter and stamped their feet in delight, once again suggesting that they were, at the very least, enjoying a positive experience of Shakespeare in performance.

Ellison's Puck was an androgynous character who was clearly intended to engage the audience and put them at ease in what Douglas Bruster and Robert

³⁹ Interview with Longford.

Weimann have termed Shakespeare's 'liminal spaces'.⁴⁰ As defined by Stephen Purcell, these are a production's 'prologues, epilogues and chorus speeches' in which 'an audience is addressed, outside the fictional world of the play, by a speaker who directly acknowledges their existence as a theatre audience'.⁴¹ Referring to Puck's epilogue in Peter Brook's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for the RSC in 1970 and Edward Hall's for the Propeller theatre company in 2003, Purcell demonstrates that in these liminal spaces 'a production can define the kind of "transaction" [...] that it wishes to make with its audience'.⁴² In the former, for example, 'the entire company depart[ed] through the auditorium, taking's Puck's appeal to "Give me your hands, if we be friends" as a cue for the actors to shake the hands of audience members', and in the latter, 'Simon Scardifield's Puck sat on the edge of the stage and spoke the epilogue very simply and sadly': 'where Brook's production celebrated the unifying power of imaginative collaboration between actors and audience, Hall's seemed to mourn its passing'.⁴³ In Whyman's *Dream*, Puck first appeared in the prologue, when she interrupted a pianist's elegant composition by setting herself down on the stool and hitting the keys before launching into a deliberately clunky rendition of Chopsticks. Once her tune was complete, she looked to the audience for applause and then gestured that they should increase it, all the while grinning enthusiastically. Thus, before a line was spoken, the audience had learned that Puck was a transgressive character who would actively draw them in and breach

⁴⁰ Douglas Bruster and Robert Weimann, *Prologues to Shakespeare's Theatre: Performance and Liminality in Early Modern Drama* (London: Routledge, 2004), cited in Stephen Purcell, *Shakespeare and Audience in Practice* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 74

⁴¹ Purcell, *Shakespeare and Audience in Practice*, p. 74.

⁴² Purcell, *Shakespeare and Audience in Practice*, p. 77.

⁴³ Purcell, *Shakespeare and Audience in Practice*, p. 77.

any perceived barriers between stage and spectator. This setup was further enhanced in 3.1, when Puck entered the forest to encounter the Mechanicals' rehearsal by clambering over audience members in the first few rows of the stalls, stealing crisps or sweets from them as she did so. The rapport between Puck and the house was established so successfully that when, in the epilogue, she asked for their hands, there was a sense that the audience truly wished to reassure her of their appreciation and friendship.

The audience response at each of the six performances I attended was overwhelmingly positive. Ellison's performance in particular was lauded by critics and by respondents to the RSC's post-show survey, nine per cent of whom commented that they 'Enjoyed Puck/Lucy Ellison was outstanding/stole the show'.⁴⁴ The results of the survey also indicated that the company was indeed successful in attracting new audiences: one in ten respondents had never seen Shakespeare on stage before, and one in twenty had never been to the theatre before. The obvious flaw in all post-show surveys of this kind is that respondents are self-selecting, meaning that their answers may not be statistically representative. Nonetheless, they are the most useful tool for assessing how successfully *Dream 16* met its aims of inclusivity and outreach.

Voice

Ideals about inclusivity also informed directorial decisions, most conspicuously in Whyman's request that the amateur groups stressed their local accents so as to ensure, in the words of associate director Sophie Ivatts, 'that those characters

⁴⁴ Claire Esling, 'A Midsummer Night's Dream: A Play for the Nation, Tour Research Highlights', Internal report for the RSC (2016). Shared with kind permission of the RSC.

felt that they were of that place'.⁴⁵ The hope was that audiences would feel a greater connection to the production if they heard their own accents reflected back at them from the stage, but I have doubts about the efficacy of this from a critical and practical standpoint that lead me to question whether the ultimate effect of this was to create a version of locality that was as detached from reality as the vision of national identity put forward in this production.

A primary limitation was that not all those amateurs cast in the production naturally spoke with a local accent. In Norwich's Common Lot, for example, only Bottom (Owen Evans) had a Norfolk burr. In Nottingham, the entire Lovelace Theatre Group felt it was difficult to distinguish their accent, although I, as someone from the south-east, found their voices much more similar to one another's than they perhaps realised, and typical of the Nottingham accent.⁴⁶ When watching the Tower Theatre Company perform at the Barbican with Cockney accents, I found myself wondering how far this could be considered genuinely representative of London in 2016. Multicultural London English (MLE), an accent informed by the diversity of ethnic backgrounds in the capital, has overtaken Cockney as the 'vernacular base line' in some parts of the city over the past twenty to thirty years.⁴⁷ It may well be that, as the Barbican is located on the east side of London, the use of Cockney was intended to be highly place-specific. However, I would argue that in the production's broader context this decision to foreground Cockney over MLE, along with the apparent lack of

⁴⁵ Interview with Ivatts.

⁴⁶ Rehearsal observation, 18 February 2016.

⁴⁷ Jenny Cheshire, Paul Kerswill, Sue Fox and Eivind Torgersenc, 'Contact, the feature pool and the speech community: The emergence of Multicultural London English', *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 15.2 (2011), 151-196, (p. 164).

ethnic diversity in the Tower Theatre Company, may have compounded the feeling of nostalgia for a pre-mass immigration Britain that was evoked by the Second World War setting, and is perhaps a further indication of the essentially un-representative makeup of the amateur companies in general.

The instruction given to the amateurs to ‘turn up’ their accents, as reported by Ivatts, can therefore be seen as introducing artificiality into what was intended to be a specifically authentic element of performance.⁴⁸ This seems all the more unnecessary in light of the fact that, in my experience, a significant proportion of the audience were unaware that the mechanicals were being played by local amateurs rather than the regular RSC company. In Newcastle, Norwich, London and Stratford I either overheard or spoke directly to audience members who had no idea that *Dream* was a co-production between, say, the Tower Theatre Company and the RSC. While this may be indicative of the quality of the amateur performances – most of which were indeed indistinguishable from the professionals – it also speaks to the production’s marketing. As Figure 26 demonstrates, *Dream* was given the standard RSC branding, with prominence given to the company’s logo, the 2016 anniversary emblem and the play’s title: only on close inspection are the names of the amateur companies apparent. As with the disappearance of the amateurs’ exact locations in the commemorative programme, this is yet another example of the minimising of regional difference in order to emphasise continuity. Carlson identifies programmes as a key part of the ‘social milieu’ which informs spectators’ reading of performance, and looks specifically at the use of logos as the likely source of an audience member’s ‘first

⁴⁸ Interview with Ivatts.

impression of the production'.⁴⁹ He is referring to logos designed for specific shows, but his argument applies equally well to the logos of iconic companies such as the RSC. In this case, it is the RSC's bold red and white logo which first draws the eye, plainly marking out this production as their work above all else. That it was the RSC, rather than the unique collaborative nature of the piece, that attracted audiences is again indicated in their post-show report, with forty-five per cent of respondents stating that their reason for attending was to see an RSC production.⁵⁰

The conventions of contemporary Shakespeare performance made the use of regional accents more problematic still. Despite the influence of companies such as Northern Broadsides, who use actors' natural Northern voices in classical drama, it remains common practice within the RSC and the industry as a whole to use accents to indicate the class of Shakespearean characters in performance. In this context, the audience may well have anticipated that the mechanicals would speak with regional accents, and have overlooked the fact that those used were local to the theatre itself. For those who did notice, however, the message that they received was that their accent – or at least the accent of their local community – belonged to the working-class characters of the play who form much of the light relief. The directors I spoke to stressed that the mechanicals in this production were not the butt of the joke and were instead sympathetic characters, but Shakespeare's lines undeniably cast Bottom and co. as hapless and fundamentally unpolished performers. Katherine Steele Brokaw aptly summarised the difficulties in reconciling the project's aims and

⁴⁹ Carlson, 'Reading of Performance', pp. 90-91.

⁵⁰ Esling, 'Tour Research Highlights'.

its outcomes, noting that ‘watching the professional actors of Britain’s best-bankrolled company play Athenians who mock provincial actors (played by provincial actors) because they don’t toil enough in their heads was, in the immediate aftermath of Brexit, an unintentionally disquieting reminder that there is much that separates Britons’.⁵¹

The issues surrounding class and accent divided the members of the Cardiff-based Everyman Theatre Company, with Steven Smith (Bottom) putting up resistance, ‘because he didn’t have a very strong Welsh accent, and [...] I think he found the idea a bit problematic [...] [asking] what’s inherently low-status about a Welsh accent anyway?’.⁵² Fluent Welsh speaker Cari Barley (Quince), however, was happy to emphasise her accent:

It did wonders for her character. She was this very impassioned Quince who was desperate to get the show on. And we even in Cardiff translated the last few lines of her prologue in *Pyramus and Thisbe* [...] into Welsh, and played it as if Quince was just doing this of her own volition and none of the other mechanicals knew it was going to happen. And they were allowed to play totally their own reactions to it. And so one of them was like hand on chest, yes really proud, and the others were like ‘what is she saying?’ because some people in Wales don’t speak Welsh, and the audience just loved it.⁵³

⁵¹ K. S Brokaw, ‘A Midsummer Night’s Dream by The Royal Shakespeare Company with Poulton Drama at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, and: A Midsummer Night’s Dream by Shakespeare’s Globe at Shakespeare’s Globe, and: A Midsummer Night’s Dream by Pendley Shakespeare Festival at Pendley Manor (review)’, *Shakespeare Bulletin*, 35:1 (2017), 148-156 (p. 156).

⁵² Interview with Ivatts.

⁵³ Interview with Ivatts.

When the Everyman amateurs performed in Stratford at the end of the run, however, this set-piece was received very differently: Ivatts felt that ‘nobody got it’.⁵⁴ Each group had three performances at the RST, and although friends and family from their hometowns did visit, the bulk of the audiences were the traditional Stratford crowd. At the Thursday matinee I attended, I was surrounded by tourists and white, middle-class retirees who had, not unlike their provincial counterparts, bought tickets to the production simply because it was the RST. Here, the regional accents were stripped of any relevance and became, once again, comical purely on the grounds of their provincialism. This was evident in the responses of many of the national critics who reviewed the press night at the RST in which ‘local’ group the Nonentities (based in Kidderminster, around thirty miles from Stratford) played the mechanicals. Sue Downing, who played Quince for the Nonentities, felt that the opening night audience may have been ‘in shock’ when they first heard their Black Country accents,

but then their ears adjusted and they warmed to this band of Brummies [...] we didn't care what anyone said about our accents, we felt we were an authentic group of Mechanicals, and mostly the press agreed. I was so pleased we'd had the courage to go for it.⁵⁵

The press response to the ‘band of Brummies’ was, however, somewhat mixed. Comments ranged from the *Financial Times*’ observation that the Nonentities ‘deployed broad West Midlands accents’ to the *Daily Mail* and *Evening*

⁵⁴ Interview with Ivatts.

⁵⁵ Interview with Sue Downing, 03 February 2019.

Standard's connection of the accents with comedy ('comically Brummie-accented'; 'nicely Midlands, funny yet not overdone'), to the overtly patronising response of the *Telegraph's* Cavendish, who wrote that, 'the freshest, most entertaining moments of the night came courtesy of the incomers [...] Having a Midlands accent probably helps. There's something innately amusing about the way Chris Clarke's bully Bottom [...] elongates the name Thisbe into "Thisbay"'.⁵⁶ This is, of course, only 'innately amusing' to Cavendish's ears because of the association between class and strong regional accent, but although his response was presumably distasteful to Whyman and her team, it was also rather predictable, leading one to question once more whether their optimism for the unifying powers of their production took into account the realities of twenty-first century attitudes.

5.1.2 Managing the Centre/Periphery Relationship

Logistics

Despite a focus on inclusivity by the RSC and the regional theatres, there were multiple instances in which the inherent privilege enjoyed by the RSC in Stratford revealed itself, to the detriment of the amateur companies and the provincial towns and cities that the company was 'in partnership' with. Many of these imbalances were a result of the complex logistics involved in developing

⁵⁶ Shuttleworth, 'A Midsummer Night's Dream: A Play for the Nation – "Tentative"', *Financial Times*, 25 February 2016; Letts, 'This amateur Bottom just can't be beaten!', *Daily Mail*, 26 February 2016; Fiona Mountford, 'A Midsummer Night's Dream: A Play for the Nation, theatre review – "The nation is in for a treat"', *Evening Standard*, 25 February 2016; Cavendish, 'This Midsummer Night's Dream gives Shakespeare back to the people', *Daily Telegraph*, 25 February 2016.

and marketing a large-scale theatrical tour, rather than an intentional prioritising of the centre at the expense of the periphery.

One such example is the means by which the amateur companies received direction and integrated rehearsals with the professional cast. To some extent, the RSC anticipated that accommodations were necessary to prevent a divide between the professionals and the amateurs, and so issued an 'open invitation for anyone involved in the project to come and watch any of the rehearsals'.⁵⁷ However, as these were held primarily in London, latterly in Stratford and for one week in Newcastle, visits were not a viable option for most groups, made up as they were of individuals who balanced their participation with working lives and family obligations. A more genuinely accessible option was the live-streaming of all the professional rehearsals, which allowed the amateurs to not only visualise their place in the production as a whole, but also observe the creative process. In addition, each week assistant directors Sophie Ivatts and Kim Sykes spent two or three nights in rehearsal with an amateur company; this in turn was streamed to the other amateur groups, who were able to interact with the live rehearsal, asking questions and offering suggestions. Sykes explained how this was coordinated:

We had the mothership, as we called it, that went with Erica everywhere. Which was most of the time in the rehearsal room in London, or when we'd relocated to Stratford, or we went and rehearsed in Newcastle for a week [...] So that was a big screen [...] with cameras around the room and a Google Drive system whereby

⁵⁷ Interview with Ivatts.

we could stream whatever we were doing in the rehearsal room to all the fourteen other companies around the UK who were all given a laptop, and they had set up on that laptop all the software, so that they could login, and watch, and they could interact. The important thing is that we were able to interact with each other [...] Sophie and I had the sisterships that came round with us in suitcases, which was basically the mothership but slightly smaller, because it had to tour a lot more. And so with the help of our amazing stage managers, who had learnt from scratch how to work this equipment, we would get to a room somewhere in the country, set everything up, check Wi-Fi, soundcheck, and then we would connect the three of us.⁵⁸

This system facilitated a level of cultural exchange that would not have been possible without technology. It allowed the amateurs to develop their scenes individually whilst also drawing inspiration from their equivalents elsewhere in the country. Sykes gave an example of the process in action:

During a week I might go to Belfast, Sophie [Ivatts] might go to Glasgow, and Erica [Whyman] would be in London [...] I would rehearse a bit of a scene, and then Erica would go 'oh that's great, so we'll take that idea and I'm going to take that a step further with the group I've got in London, with Tower Theatre'. So then Erica would rehearse a little bit, and then Erica would tune into Sophie and they would go, 'we've got a question about what you've just rehearsed'. And so sometimes it would be three rehearsal rooms all working

⁵⁸ Interview with Kimberley Sykes, 24 October 2016.

together whilst all the other companies watched. And then at the end of each session we would do a Q&A session, where we would go through each [company] and they'd sometimes be in their living rooms, they'd have watched it, and then they'd be like 'right, we've got a question about this, this and this'. So we were able to essentially rehearse all fourteen companies all together at the same time.⁵⁹

It is important to note here that the professionals' experience did not necessarily match that of the amateurs. Downing reflected that she did not remember 'seeing much at all of the other [companies]'s work', and did not feel that her performance was at all influenced by exposure to the other Quinces, as she 'never saw just what the other Quinces were doing'.⁶⁰

During the run, however, I did notice the results of cultural exchange between the different amateur groups in the repetition of certain pieces of stage business: in several companies, for example, Quince handed out sizeable parts in 1.2 to all but Snug, who received a small scrap of paper for his correspondingly small part; other companies performed this moment differently. Whyman asserted that she believed the digital rehearsals encouraged the amateur companies to challenge themselves to undertake riskier choices as they witnessed each other succeed. The example she provided was a fairly complex interaction between Puck and Snout in 3.1, in which the former repeatedly snatched the almanac from the latter's hands, before throwing it to Quince and exiting through one of the on-stage doors. This was originally conceived by

⁵⁹ Interview with Sykes.

⁶⁰ Interview with Downing.

Poulton Drama, the company paired with the Grand Theatre, Blackpool, and was then developed further during a rehearsal when,

Kim was in Blackpool online, broadcasting to everybody, I [Whyman] was in London, and Cornwall were watching but couldn't talk back because the sound wasn't working [...] and they rang and said, 'Can Quince throw the Almanac back at Starveling?' and I remember going 'no no no, that's much too complicated', and then I went 'no no no you're right!' [...] And trying it, and everyone round the country trying it.⁶¹

However, because none of the amateur groups were able to rehearse this business with the set until a few days before their opening night, 'in conception it was possible to not have Puck throw the almanac with a particular group, and not go through the door, and just leave the stage'. In the event, however, 'they all wanted to, because once one group had done it and pulled it off and caught the almanac then they all wanted to do it'.⁶²

Inevitably, the virtual was not a perfect substitute for in-the-room rehearsals. Downing found that 'being directed over live stream was more of a novelty than really being useful', partly due to the unreliability of the technology but also because this method 'wasn't at all hands on', and lacked the immediacy of the traditional actor/director dynamic: 'the time on air was very short, and rather than watching other groups rehearse, we were directed from a distance. [...] We would listen to directions, but not actually be observed carrying them

⁶¹ Interview with Whyman.

⁶² Interview with Whyman.

out.⁶³ In this respect Downing experienced a resolutely one-way relationship with the RSC, where the authoritative professionals from the centre issued guidance that the amateurs from the periphery were to passively receive and replicate. Although she appreciated that ‘the enormity of the project’ meant that having the undivided attention of the directors was not possible, Downing still mentioned several times in the course of our interview that ‘it would have been much better to have had the director in the room’. This sentiment was shared by Sykes, who commented that she ‘hated directing via livefeed’ because,

You can't see somebody's eyes, and when I'm directing I need to see how someone's responding to what I'm saying [...] And when you're giving somebody feedback, and looking into this void, this technical black hole, thinking 'I hope this is making sense', it's really difficult.⁶⁴

As such, the groups based in London, Stratford and Newcastle who received more in-person direction were given an advantage over those who did not. Ivatts explained how those companies benefited from their proximity to different stages of the rehearsals;

By virtue of [the Tower Theatre Company] being based in London, they had rehearsed more, they had met the professional cast more than the rest of the amateurs round the country. And likewise, when we moved the professional rehearsals up to Newcastle for a week, the Newcastle groups [People's Theatre and the Castle Players] got to rehearse more with the professional cast, and then similarly when we

⁶³ Interview with Downing.

⁶⁴ Interview with Sykes.

went up to Stratford to open the show in Stratford, we were there for quite a long time and then integrating those groups [Nonentities Society and Bear Pit Theatre Company] [...] They had had longer to build up a kind of trust and relaxation around the idea. [...] I think the more time you have in any rehearsal room, the easier it is to build trust. So I think what the groups who had more time with the professional cast, their privilege in a way, what their advantage was [was] that they just had more time to get to know the professional cast, and to feel part of it, really integrated.⁶⁵

The structure of the theatre industry made such inequalities almost inevitable; it would not have been financially or logistically possible for the RSC to have transported the professional cast around the country to ensure equal rehearsal time with each amateur company. Even with the advancements of modern technology, then, the dichotomy between centre and periphery remained firmly intact.

Although the London company spent more time with the professionals than perhaps any other group, in all other regards the fact that they were based in the nation's theatrical centre was not recognised by the production. Of all the touring locations it was Newcastle, rather than London, which received preferential treatment, with the production visiting Northern Stage for two weeks, compared to just one at the Barbican and the ten other regional theatres; accordingly, two amateur companies were partnered with Northern Stage, just as two were partnered with the RST. When the project was announced in 2014,

⁶⁵ Interview with Ivatts.

Whyman framed this decision in terms of the ‘incredibly special’ relationship between Newcastle and the RSC, indicating that this remained a priority for the company despite the cessation of full-season tours to the Theatre Royal in 2011.⁶⁶ As discussed in the previous chapter, the Barbican also shares a close relationship with the RSC, albeit one which has been more tumultuous than that of the city of Newcastle. With this in mind, it may be that *Dream 16* specifically chose to reinforce their affiliation with their regional, rather than central, partner. The Barbican did, however, ultimately enjoy more weeks of RSC Shakespeare than Newcastle, with the company’s productions of *Cymbeline* and *King Lear* visiting for six weeks each in November and December 2016.⁶⁷

Stratford and the RST clearly took precedence over all other companies and locations throughout the run. The show premiered at the RST, and so the performance reviewed on press night featured the Nonentities of the Wyre Forest playing the mechanicals: all other amateurs were reviewed only by their local press. Similarly, the official CD of music and speeches from the production included the Nonentities’ Bottom, Chris Clarke, recording his character’s speech from 4.1.⁶⁸ With their names and images in the national press, and their voices preserved on RSC-branded discs, the Nonentities received a level of recognition that their peers would not. Their other advantage was that, along with the Bear Pit company, the Nonentities rehearsed and performed on the RST’s thrust stage in their initial run. The other companies were paired with regional theatres that

⁶⁶ Sam Wonfor, ‘Royal Shakespeare Company will not bring a major production to Newcastle in 2015’, *Newcastle Journal*, 24 September 2014 <<http://www.thejournal.co.uk/culture/culture-news/royal-shakespeare-company-not-bring-7712476>>.

⁶⁷ ‘RSC at the Barbican’, RSC <<https://www.rsc.org.uk/barbican>> [accessed 19 July 2017].

⁶⁸ ‘*When my cue comes, call me, and I will answer...*’, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* 2016, read by Chris Clarke (RSCE 012, 2016).

had a proscenium arch stage (Fig. 30). During the final month of the run, when each amateur company took three consecutive performances at the RST, tight scheduling meant that rehearsal time was limited and focused on re-blocking the scenes featuring Bottom and the mechanicals. The amateurs from other regions had little time to acclimatise to the new staging, but this did not seem to hinder the quality of their performances. Indeed, when I attended the RST to see *Loveland* at their Thursday matinee, they seemed altogether more assured than at their equivalent performance at the Theatre Royal Nottingham two months earlier. This can be attributed in part to the company's growing confidence, but also to the fact that the production was simply better suited to the thrust stage, a fact which privileged both the companies that performed there and the audiences that saw the production in Stratford.

I watched the production at five different regional theatres before Stratford, and at the RST it was immediately obvious that the production had been designed for the thrust. Scenes merged fluidly as actors entered and exited on diagonal walkways, a dynamic that matched the movements of key pieces of set – the staircase and the doors – which circulated on wheels. The pace felt more stilted on the proscenium stage, as the actors had only half the number of possible exits as on the thrust. The RST staging also drew more attention to Oberon's frequent observance of the mortals, which on the proscenium arch took place upstage, with Omambala seated on the staircase, half in shadow. At the RST he meandered around the edges of the stage, far more central and visible, giving an altogether stronger impression of Oberon's role in manipulating the relationships of mortals and fairies than at the regional performances. Sykes agreed that the thrust staging was superior, stating that,



Figure 30 - Opening scene of Dream 16 on the thrust stage at the RST (top) and on the proscenium arch stage at the Theatre Royal Nottingham (bottom), both viewed from the stalls

It takes you on the journey, and the rhythm of the writing and the rhythm of the piece as a whole just takes you with it, rather than being presented with it [on the proscenium arch]. I also think things like the lovers' quartet was so much better on the thrust stage, because you could have that boxing ring feel to it [...] It was designed for that space. We would adapt it each week to whatever stage we were on, but it was always made for the thrust.⁶⁹

This was echoed by Mercy Ojelade (Hermia) in a blog post for the RSC reflecting on her experience with the company. She wrote that the thrust stage was 'vast and freeing and yet surprisingly intimate [...] The touring nature of the Dream made many of us long for the RST space bringing the show back to its intended shape'.⁷⁰ The idea that the production was at 'home' at the RST is understandable – it was, after all, the theatre that it was created for – but also somewhat at odds with the collaborative nature of the piece.

Creative control

The RSC's authority over its regional partners was exercised more explicitly in the management of the amateurs' creative output. In her role as director, Whyman held ultimate authority over creative decisions, but her jurisdiction was both more necessary and more complex than in a regular RSC production: as amateurs, the participating companies required more guidance than professionals, but they also had their own resident directors who were responsible for running the majority of their rehearsals. Training, for example,

⁶⁹ Interview with Sykes.

⁷⁰ Mercy Ojelade, 'Making my RSC Debut', *RSC Blogs: Black History Month Blog*, October 2016 <<https://www.rsc.org.uk/blogs/black-history-month-blog/mercy-ojelade-debut>>.

was a key element of the rehearsal process, necessary to both build up the amateurs' confidence and to ensure that the quality of their performance would meet audience expectations for an RSC production at a leading regional theatre. Here, I explore specific moments in the creative process, looking at the relationships between amateurs and professionals in each and the extent to which the RSC intervened in the amateurs' practice. *Dream 16* is an atypical example of provincial Shakespeare performance because of its inclusion of amateurs, which means that the RSC's approach to this project cannot be considered representative of their usual methods. It can, however, reveal the nature of the RSC's influence on the ecology of local theatres and performers across the country. Furthermore, it may indicate the potential shape of future interactions between centre and periphery.

In anticipation of the amateurs' different working practices, Whyman devised a set of exercises for each company to work on from September to December 2015. These were partly intended to prevent the amateurs from over-rehearsing their parts, but also to build up what Ivatts termed the 'toolbox for craft' that the non-professionals tended to lack due to restraints of time and resources:

[amateurs have] got the set and the costume and the blocking and script, and they're the main ingredients [...] But most of the professional theatre that I've experienced, there's a lot more craft

around mining the text and understanding the dynamics underneath the text.⁷¹

For the first task, each actor was allocated a speech from another Shakespearean play that had some relevance to their character in *Dream*. The Bottoms were given ‘a bit of King Lear to look at, or a bit of Hamlet, to explore the epic scale that Bottom has in his drama, and to be able to go into his “Olivier” moment’, while the Flutes were given speeches by Juliet or Lady Macbeth, in order to consider how they might play a female role.⁷² Downing reflected that the Nonentities found this ‘quite worrying’ and ‘unnerving’, not only because many of the cast had never delivered a Shakespearean monologue before but also because the speeches were live-streamed to the other amateur companies.⁷³ Although she felt that they ‘struggled through’ their performances, the opportunity to compare their work with others’ was ultimately a positive one; ‘after viewing many, [we felt that] we hadn’t done too badly. There were some stunning examples throughout the country, but we felt we had established ourselves as more than competent, and a bunch of comedians to boot!’.⁷⁴ The second task focused on choreographing a dance to one of four pieces of music so that the professional directors could ‘take the temperature’ of the amateurs’ level of ability for the Bergamasque dance at the end of the play; Ivatts recounted that ‘it was clear that that wasn’t going to be problematic and that everyone could cope with a bit of movement’.⁷⁵

⁷¹ Interview with Ivatts.

⁷² Interview with Ivatts.

⁷³ Interview with Downing.

⁷⁴ Interview with Downing.

⁷⁵ Interview with Ivatts.

In the third and final task, the amateur companies were asked to stage the *Mechanicals*' section of 5.1 as a radio play, 'to get them thinking about the text and not about where you're standing, what you're wearing, and what you're holding'.⁷⁶ According to Lovelace, they found this the most difficult of the three tasks, revealing an issue with what Ivatts termed the 'specificity of language [...] understanding what Shakespeare's saying, and not generalising,' which was a 'universal challenge' for all the amateurs:

Every word in Shakespeare, I believe, we believed, is there for a very specific reason [...] And getting the companies to put the work in to understand and be clear and precise about every single word was a huge challenge for them. And I understand that, because they don't normally have time to do that work. So what freaked them out, was how much time we spent on the text, not up, making random choices. Because that's often what they have to do. Together they do one or two evenings, they've just got to get it up and go with their first choice. And that's great because [...] They are very fast workers and they come with an ability to follow their instincts, but to really put that detailed time and effort and work in the text was a real challenge for them.⁷⁷

Text work was woven into early rehearsals with the professional directors, and this included working on eliminating pauses from delivery, another common practice amongst the amateurs. Sykes explained that they typically 'wanted to do

⁷⁶ Interview with Ivatts.

⁷⁷ Interview with Sykes.

their acting before or after they were speaking the words', rather than working with the 'musical' rhythm in Shakespeare's verse.⁷⁸ Text work thus represents a clear instance of the RSC intervening in a pre-existing practice, albeit one determined by a lack of resources rather than artistic impulse.

How receptive the amateurs were to RSC instruction, and thus to the influence of a central Shakespeare authority, varied from group to group. Sykes identified experience as a determining factor: 'the groups that had done more Shakespeare were often the groups that were the least malleable, because they were quite set in their ways'.⁷⁹ Lovelace had no longstanding tradition of Shakespeare performance; their only previous production was a 2014 *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Their relative inexperience meant that, in Sykes' words, they 'just wanted feeding. So every time I went to see them they were just desperate, like "tell us, give it to us, give it all to us". So they were very flexible'.⁸⁰ The Nonentities were slightly more familiar with Shakespeare, having staged six productions at regular intervals in the twenty years preceding *Dream* 16. Downing was eager to engage in text work – 'as an amateur company with six weeks rehearsals for each production, we don't normally have the luxury of exploring and experimenting with the text' – and in fact expressed that she would have preferred a greater degree of instruction from the RSC on this aspect of the process, reporting that 'we did very little of this [text work] [...] maybe three hours one evening with Erica at the RST. [...] I did think we would do more'.⁸¹

⁷⁸ Interview with Sykes.

⁷⁹ Interview with Sykes.

⁸⁰ Interview with Sykes.

⁸¹ Interview with Downing.

For the 'least malleable' groups, the root of their inflexibility was the fact that 'they [got] the RSC coming in and telling them, offering them a new way of doing it. They sometimes felt that was them being told that they'd been doing it wrong all along. So we had to tread that line very carefully'.⁸² Indeed, all the professionals I interviewed admitted that the manner in which direction was communicated and executed was complicated, involving as it did the most explicit acknowledgement of the power structures at play. Ivatts described the process in terms of 'tiers of directors', with Whyman at the top, then Ivatts and Sykes as 'ambassador[s] for her direction', and finally the amateur directors.⁸³ Many of the latter tier had been with their companies for years and were used to maintaining control, but in this production their roles were, in the words of Longford, more that of 'a coordinator' than an active director.⁸⁴ Pat Richards, the Lovelace director, had been with the company since the 1960s and was also a director with the Nottingham-based Lace Market Theatre company, a large amateur group with their own theatre who produced fifteen shows in the 2015/16 season.⁸⁵ As Sykes described it, this hierarchy was 'sometimes quite uncomfortable' for the amateur directors,

because they didn't always know where [any given] decision had been made, and how. Because the inner sanctum, if you want to call it that, was Erica, Sophie and me [...] We spent a lot of time together and so we got to get all that information from Erica, and then it was

⁸² Interview with Sykes.

⁸³ Interview with Ivatts.

⁸⁴ Interview with Longford.

⁸⁵ '2015/16', *Lacemarket Theatre*

<<http://lacemarkettheatre.co.uk/LaceMarketTheatre.dll/Archive?Season=7>>.

our job to go and share that. But by the time it's got to the company it's come through several different people, I think they would often feel like, 'When did that happen? How did that happen?' And eventually they had to just let go of that, and just go with it. But I don't think it was easy for them.⁸⁶

One of the earliest interventions the RSC made was to re-cast roles within the amateur companies at the audition stage, a move the professional directors considered necessary as they often found that 'for the audition, [the amateur directors] cast what they thought of as their most senior actor as Bottom, and then Quince, rather than necessarily thinking about who was right for it'.⁸⁷ When Lovelace first auditioned, James McBride played Quince and Linda Mayes Snug, as they had in the company's 2014 production, but Ivatts swapped their roles.⁸⁸ She thought the company 'found it hard', as both McBride and Richards individually sought out explanations for the change weeks later.⁸⁹ This disruption of a provincial company's internal hierarchy has echoes of the past: specifically, in the nineteenth century practice of touring stars taking leading roles such as Hamlet or Rosalind from the provincial lead. The circumstances and motivations behind such adjustments may differ significantly – stars seeking to secure their own celebrity versus a genuine desire to improve casting – but both are evidence of a central cultural authority disrupting a peripheral ecology, suggesting that concepts of ownership and expertise in Shakespeare remain

⁸⁶ Interview with Sykes.

⁸⁷ Interview with Ivatts.

⁸⁸ 'A Midsummer Night's Dream, 2014', *The Lovelace Theatre Group* <<http://www.lovelacetheatregroup.co.uk/2014may.htm>>.

⁸⁹ Interview with Ivatts.

powerful forces, a fact that is perhaps reflected in the continuing low status of the provinces in England.

For the professional directors, the early establishment of a clear creative structure reduced the need for substantial adjustments to the amateurs' work in the rehearsal period. Whyman asserted that she 'tried to give quite a lot of creative control' to the amateurs:

It was very important that every group had their own director. So they knew whether it was Sophie or Kim or I, and they could have a dialogue. Weirdly, you need someone really close to it if you're going to give them some creative control. Because if you just walk away, actually they would have been lost or they would have created, I mean that did happen with at least four groups, that they did create quite bonkers business that they didn't need [...] You had to be quite close in order to allow them effective creative control.⁹⁰

As well as the literal structure of regular check-ins with the professional directors, the amateurs were also given a clearly defined creative structure in which to work. Whyman took it upon herself to communicate 'the world' of the production to the amateurs:

I was sure that it was going to help us if I decided what the design was [...] that it was the late 1940s, that they were really doing those jobs. They were carpenters, they were weavers. Because there was a lot of suggestion about 'well maybe if she's not really a weaver and

⁹⁰ Interview with Whyman.

she's a kind of fashion designer' – there was a lot of that. Those were the areas where I had to go, 'actually, that is straying from the play, and I know you've seen it done in wild and fancy productions, probably sometimes by us [the RSC], but in this instance the story that these are working people from their community, trying to impress royalty in Athens, is really important'.⁹¹

Downing was well aware of the boundaries put in place by the RSC's directorial team. Although she felt that she and her fellow amateurs 'had no creative control over our performance', and that 'any budding directors, if they were wise, kept their thoughts to themselves', she agreed with Whyman that ceding to the authority of the RSC was necessary for the project's success: 'a level playing field had to be found where each team [of amateurs] could fit into the main play easily. Not that any ideas were squashed, but they had to fit the mould.'⁹²

Costume was a key element in the creation of that mould. It established the mechanicals' working identity, and also enforced a degree of visual uniformity across all iterations. Where necessary, costumes were adjusted from company to company according to size and sex, but there was no attempt to reflect local industry; no nod, for example, to Nottingham's history of lace manufacture or Bradford's of wool. Characterisation was another element prescribed by Whyman. Ivatts explained that,

From the beginning she [Whyman] was very clear that she wasn't interested in exploring Bottom as an egotist, which can often happen.

⁹¹ Interview with Whyman.

⁹² Interview with Downing.

And she was very emphatic with all the amateur actors that what was really interesting to her about Bottom was his or her Tigger-like quality, a kind of ebullience that didn't really know any boundaries. And she was very keen not to make those early mechanical scenes about fundamental antagonism between Quince and Bottom, it wasn't going to be a power struggle, it was more like 'let me help, let me help, let's brainstorm together'.⁹³

The co-operative dynamic was at least partly dictated by the inclusion of amateurs and an initial uncertainty of their ability. Ivatts thought that Whyman 'felt that [...] in order for it to work, we really need to love them and be rooting for them [...] Exploring a kind of antagonism was not going to be that helpful'.⁹⁴ The RSC's caution was likely a consequence of the innovation of the production and the weight of their reputation, but in the event the audience responded positively to the mechanicals, offering enthusiastic applause at every performance that I attended.

The final factor in the creative framework was blocking which, while allowing for 'some fluidity', was constrained by the set and technical elements of the production. Ivatts gave an example of how this was negotiated in 1.2,

the piano will be there, Quince's stool will be there, so probably this semi-circle formation is going to be good, and we can then use the centre as Bottom's dancefloor if you like [...] It couldn't be radically

⁹³ Interview with Ivatts.

⁹⁴ Interview with Ivatts.

differently staged in every place because we wouldn't be able to light it.⁹⁵

In practice, this meant that the physical movement of the mechanicals and Bottom varied very little between different amateur companies. In every version of 1.2, all the acting mechanicals lined up, facing forward, as Quince handed out the roles, but their exact order differed from group to group. The basic blocking for the performance of Pyramus and Thisbe in 5.1 was similarly consistent: the lovers were seated stage right, Theseus and Hippolyta stage left, with the mechanicals in the middle. All groups used the same exits and entrances and all repeated the same set piece of Snout changing the placement of the chink in the wall from between their fingers to between their legs. Every major aspect of the production was, therefore, dictated by the RSC.

There was still, however, space for individual interpretations within the wider framework, which was evident in performance. Whyman emphasised that 'it was, like any rehearsal process [...] a dialogue' between actor and director, and added that there were practical limitations to the level of conformity that could be achieved: 'we couldn't invent something that every Starveling had to do, because some of our Starvelings were in their eighties and some were nineteen'.⁹⁶ At the first two shows I saw – in Newcastle and Blackpool – it seemed that the amateurs' performances were indistinguishable from each other, but at each subsequent performance I became more aware of the moments that offered the amateurs the greatest possibilities for creative

⁹⁵ Interview with Ivatts.

⁹⁶ Interview with Whyman.

control: Quince struggling to manage the rehearsal in 3.1; Bottom's realisation that he has been abandoned by his company halfway through the same scene; Snout's turn as the Wall in 5.1; Snug, playing the Lion, terrorising Thisbe; Starveling's Moonshine, accompanied by a toy dog on wheels; and Flute's final speech as Thisbe. Bottom has the most lines of any role in the play, and thus arguably a greater opportunity to establish their character. Blackpool's Anthony Henry was a decidedly stropky Bottom, stamping his feet and obstinately picking his nails when told in 1.2 that he could play no part but Pyramus, while Norwich's Owen Evans was quick and light-hearted, and altogether less forceful than the others I witnessed. Each Bottom handled the song in 3.1 differently, and in fact this was one of the character's defining moments in this production: at Northern Stage, Pete McAndrew of The People's Theatre was cocky; Blackpool's Henry became shy and self-conscious; Nottingham's Becky Morris played the grand piano that doubled as Titania's bower, and London's John Chapman played the spoons to accompany his rendition.

Despite Bottom's more substantial stage time, it was often Flute, as Thisbe, whose performance made the biggest emotional impact. Ivatts recounted that Whyman felt the text of Thisbe's final speech 'demanded a certain solemnity' and should be played as 'a moment where Flute actually discovers what it is to be truthful and in the moment as an actor'.⁹⁷ In Blackpool, Garry Houghton's Flute did not alter the pitch of his voice in order to appear more feminine, and the decision to maintain Flute's normal speaking voice brought an earnest honesty to his performance. The most effective performance

⁹⁷ Interview with Ivatts.

I attended was that of Daniel Knight from the Lovelace company. His was a slightly unsure Flute who absolutely committed to the role of Thisbe, tossing his mantle into the Lion's face after it roared at him and then flouncing offstage. Though Thisbe's final speech was still (deliberately) overplayed, Knight brought a sense of vulnerability to the role which was genuinely moving. These performances demonstrated that there was indeed space for the amateurs to create their own performances within the parameters of the production that the RSC had constructed.

There were also instances in which the local environment affected both performance and reception, illustrating limits to the influence of centre upon periphery. The Geordie accent shared by all members of the People's Theatre company at Northern Stage, for example, gave a colloquial twist to Quince's (Jo Kelly) line "'Ninus' tomb", man!' in 3.1, bringing a more authentic sense of collaboration into the production as Shakespeare's writing met local dialect. In Glasgow, the Citizen Dream Players' Bottom, Martin Turner, not only made his own prop sword for Pyramus because, as Whyman explained, 'the three swords we'd offered him were none of them big enough', but was also determined to bring Scottish identity into the production. He requested to wear a kilt in 5.1;

And it was insane. He wore the undergarment and the Roman apron and the hairbrush hat and a massive full-body kilt, and a huge sword.

So I suppose that's a visible example of creative control, it's just

really exactly what Bottom would do. Bottom would go, 'Pyramus is interesting, but a Scottish hero would be more interesting!'.⁹⁸

Furthermore, the material dimensions of the regional theatres themselves inevitably created different audience experiences, most tangibly in the varying set-up on stage. While the set was designed to be adjustable in order to fit the dimensions of the touring venues, 'in some places there were entire bits of set missing, because you couldn't fit it in. In other places, like in Canterbury and the Barbican [...] [they] were so wide we had to add in extra set'.⁹⁹ Space affected the performance not only by offering the actors more or less room in which to work, but by restricting the stage presence of the musicians. Identified as Oberon's Fairies in the programme, the musicians were supposed to sit onstage, at a tattered upright piano stage right and on foldup chairs with various instruments stage left. When they did (at Northern Stage, the Barbican and the RST of the performances I attended), they reacted to events onstage and were obviously performers who played instruments. At theatres with narrower stages (the Grand Theatre Blackpool, the Theatres Royal Nottingham and Norwich), the musicians were pushed to the extreme sides or placed on floor level (Fig. 31). There, they were read as musicians who were visible, rather than in the orchestra pit, for no discernible reason. In this way, the peripheral environment exerted its own influence upon the production, warping it into a different physical shape.

⁹⁸ Interview with Whyman.

⁹⁹ Interview with Birch.



Figure 31 - Musicians onstage at the Barbican (top) and partially obscured by the red curtain at the Theatre Royal Norwich (bottom), both viewed from the circle

Legacy

Throughout this chapter, I have sought to explore the myriad and complex ways in which the centre/periphery dynamic was articulated in *Dream 16*. I have asserted that the RSC's influence and resources granted them a position of power over the regional theatres and amateurs they partnered with, and that their place at the theatrical centre influenced the vision of the 'nation' they put forward. The ongoing national Brexit debate added meaning to the production's subtitle. I would argue that 'A Play for the Nation' emphasises a contradiction at its core: the RSC ultimately conceived of the production as a gift *for* the nation, rather than an endeavour *with* the nation. This signifies the hierarchical issues which continue to shape provincial Shakespeare performance today, but could also, perhaps, indicate the RSC's tacit acknowledgement of that hierarchy.

However, the legacy of *Dream 16* stretched beyond the final performance and continues to impact its partner theatres and their communities. In conversation, Longford was optimistic about the benefits to the Theatre Royal Nottingham and the city itself. At the most immediate level, he anticipated that a closer relationship with the company would ensure a Nottingham engagement for the RSC's future touring productions. Following the demise of Propeller in 2014, the RSC was 'the only company' providing 'large-scale touring Shakespeare', 'and so having the RSC is really, really important to us'.¹⁰⁰ Beyond facilitating access to Shakespeare's plays in performance, Longford also hoped that a connection to the RSC would bring greater opportunities to local schools.

¹⁰⁰ Interview with Longford.

Prior to the production, Longford had noticed a decline in schools' engagement with the theatre:

I know from talking to teachers directly that Heads are refusing them [permission] to leave school because [...] there's a lot more pressure on schools just to stick with your curriculum texts, and of course we know how the arts and drama is suffering.¹⁰¹

The RSC's Associate Schools Programme (the replacement for the Learning and Performance Network, which ended in 2016) therefore offered a chance for the theatre to revive their education outreach work. The ASP aims 'to bring about a significant change in the way young people experience, engage with, and take ownership of the work of Shakespeare'.¹⁰² At the time of interview, Longford had begun the process of establishing the Theatre Royal Nottingham as a theatre hub and engaging the participation of city schools which, he stated, was 'a direct response from *Dream*'.¹⁰³ The process is now complete, and Nottingham is one of ten Associate Theatre Partners. So too are four other venues from the *Dream 16* tour, which further suggests that the experience has delivered tangible benefits to the regional partner theatres.

Longford also ensured that the production provided opportunities to engage with the RSC beyond those afforded to participating amateurs. He worked with Ian Wainwright, producer of the Open Stages project, to run a workshop with RSC staff practitioners for thirty amateur actors 'using some of

¹⁰¹ Interview with Longford.

¹⁰² 'Associate Schools Programme', RSC <<https://www.rsc.org.uk/education/associate-schools-programme>>.

¹⁰³ Interview with Longford.

the techniques' learned from *Dream*.¹⁰⁴ The benefits of participation were thus disseminated among the community. He also organised a day for local professional actors to meet with members of the RSC casting department along with representatives from New Perspectives, an East Midlands-based rural touring company; Pintsize Theatre, a theatre-in-education company based in Nottingham; and Derby Theatre.

Actors then submitted their details to the RSC, and the RSC shortlisted it to about thirty [...] and it was really an opportunity just to come along, do an audition piece, and have a chat, and to get on people's radar really. [...] The number of times they said to the RSC 'thank you for coming here, we don't normally have this opportunity'.¹⁰⁵

Longford was confident that the RSC would change the nature of their touring practice as a result of *Dream 16*:

They will have to continue, I think, that level of regional [...] involvement whether that is having another day of those professional auditions, whether it is having some kind of community project that doesn't necessarily mean having local actors onstage but could be some alternative performance, I don't know, but it can't just go back to the old-style touring model of just coming into, doing a show, and then going away again. I think they've set a very successful high

¹⁰⁴ Interview with Longford.

¹⁰⁵ Interview with Longford.

benchmark for themselves. And I think the theatres will be expectant as well.¹⁰⁶

The legacy of *Dream 16* may yet produce changes in the working practices between Stratford and the provinces, but whether it will see improvements to the organisation's touring practices in terms of more frequent tours to a greater number of theatres is still unknown.

¹⁰⁶ Interview with Longford.

Conclusion

This thesis has followed two interconnected threads: one concerned with the nature of Shakespeare performance in the provinces, the other with what those performances reveal about the wider ecology of relations between centre and periphery. My research has brought to light the recurring prominence of celebrity and novelty in provincial productions, as well as the central role that touring has played and the trend towards Shakespeare specialisation over a two-hundred-and-fifty-year period. I have traced the roots of cultural inequality back to structural forces within society and have demonstrated that legislation, government policy and Shakespeare's status as a national icon all contributed to a culture in which provincial theatre was disparaged and disadvantaged. I have explored how influence flowed from theatres and companies at the apex of the theatrical hierarchy to those with lesser standing, and argued that this flow also acted in reverse and brought innovation from the provinces to the capital. Finally, I have demonstrated that Shakespeare on the periphery was subject to a set of factors independent of those in play at the centre. Above all, I have argued that provincial Shakespeare performance should be neither conflated with nor considered inferior to that which took place in London or Stratford.

The previous neglect of this rich and wide-ranging history can, as I suggested in the Introduction to this thesis, be explained in large part by a deep-seated yet often unaddressed cultural disregard for provincial theatre. This disregard has not only led generations of scholars to concentrate their energies on the London stage, but has also provided little incentive for the conservation of relevant historical documentation. As a consequence, there are many

difficulties in locating archival materials; this has, in turn, encouraged micro-studies of individual theatres and towns rather than broader histories, and has doubtless further contributed to the subject's marginalisation. In undertaking my research, I found that playbills have often been scattered across multiple locations, uncatalogued and unsorted. Nineteenth-century playbills for the Theatre Royal Brighton, for example, are held in four separate archives: the British Library, The Keep, the London Metropolitan Archives and the Templeman Library at the University of Kent. Those which have been preserved in archives are often the product of eclectic private contributions and thus rarely provide full runs of consecutive seasons. Compiling a performance record large enough to draw reasonable conclusions from was highly time-consuming, and the spreadsheet that I did produce was by no means comprehensive or even substantial enough to support the data analysis that I originally intended to run. Furthermore, the quality of conservation varies considerably from one archive to another, and in some cases my requests to view materials were denied due to their poor condition. It seems unlikely that these will receive the conservation necessary to ensure their long-term survival: cuts to local government budgets since 2010 have had a detrimental impact upon local archives and as a consequence many are struggling to simply stay afloat and lack the resources to preserve playbills.¹

Longstanding attitudes to provincial theatre have impacted the preservation of regional voices as well as regional materials. National

¹ Adam Chapman, 'Access to Archives: plans to introduce charges threaten serious research', *The IHR Blog* < <https://blog.history.ac.uk/2017/07/access-to-archives/> > [accessed 01 December 2017]. N.B. Unless stated otherwise, all other websites referenced in this chapter were accessed and live as of 01 December 2017.

newspapers inconsistently and idiosyncratically review provincial productions, denying historians of provincial theatre the more systemic and comprehensive resources afforded to historians of the London or Stratford stage. Local papers can usually be relied upon to write up performances, but this can lead to self-reinforcing bubbles of descriptive praise, often by single dominant voices. This leaves the researcher with (often) only a single perspective of a performance. Even this is under threat in the digital age: as print media declines, many local newspapers are reducing their staff or closing altogether, which risks diminishing the record of provincial performance yet further.² The online world does, however, present new opportunities for capturing a more localised response to theatre. Blogging in particular allows anyone with access to the internet to express their views, and the rise of volunteer-run online reviewing (such as *A Younger Theatre* or *Exeunt*) has diversified critical voices around the regions, but these lack the exposure or consistency of professional reviewing platforms.³ While the pool of theatregoers wishing to share their experiences online may be small, it is inevitably larger than the number of reviews recorded in print.

In addition, the ongoing digitisation of archival materials widens access to collections and opens up new methodologies. In September 2017 the British Library launched 'In the Spotlight', a crowdsourcing project which asks members of the public to transcribe details from digitised playbills in order to

² Dominic Ponsford, 'The decline of local journalism is a far greater threat to media plurality than Rupert Murdoch', *Press Gazette*, 31 March 2017 <<http://www.pressgazette.co.uk/the-decline-of-local-journalism-is-a-far-greater-threat-to-media-plurality-than-rupert-murdoch/>>.

³ *A Younger Theatre* <<https://www.ayoungentheatre.com/>>; *Exeunt Magazine* <<http://exeuntmagazine.com/>>.

make these more searchable.⁴ At present only a third of the total collection has been digitised, and a mere fraction of that uploaded to the crowdsourcing platform, but should the project succeed the data generated will create exciting possibilities for future researchers. The manual compilation of performances that took me several months to complete could be executed in minutes. It will be possible to study discrete variations in theatrical presentations of Shakespeare productions, and to follow the career of individual performers as they move from one company to another through the years, thus granting a whole new perspective on cultural exchange.

Significantly, the first two theatres' playbills selected by the British Library for 'In the Spotlight' were provincial: the Theatres Royal Plymouth and Margate. This is representative of what I perceive to be an increasing commitment from major institutions towards the regions. Indeed, whilst I have resisted constructing a teleological narrative charting the provinces' rise from eighteenth-century subordination to twenty-first century equality, it is clear that the status attributed to theatre outside London has in fact risen in the past seventy years, largely as a result of changing social attitudes after the Second World War and a subsequent shift in government policy towards decentralisation. The impact that this has had on Shakespeare performance is mixed: the Arts Council facilitates large-scale touring companies, but its funding is not always consistent; it is often new writing, rather than Shakespearean revivals, which attract prestige to repertory theatres; and, as my discussion of

⁴ Mia Ridge, Alex Mendes and Christian Algar, 'Introducing... Playbills In the Spotlight', *Digital Scholarship Blog*, 07 September 2017 <<http://blogs.bl.uk/digital-scholarship/2017/09/introducing-playbills-in-the-spotlight.html#>>.

Dream 16 shows, centre and periphery may interact in high-profile and innovative ways but the essential imbalance between the two remains.

Increased dialogue surrounding provincial theatre is important, however, because it is only with greater visibility that this aspect of English culture will receive recognition. The BBC is playing a key role in this regard; their current 'definition of purpose remit' outlines six 'purpose priorities', three of which directly reference decentralisation: representing and catering to 'the different nations, regions and communities to the rest of the UK', and encouraging 'interest in and conversation about local communities'.⁵ With this in mind, the BBC's 2016 Shakespeare Festival included a project titled 'Shakespeare on Tour', which used the tagline 'raising the curtain on performances of The Bard's plays countrywide from the 16th Century to the present day'.⁶ Based on research by Siobhan Keenan and myself, 'Shakespeare on Tour' presented a variety of public interest stories about Shakespeare performance in the regions, the majority of which originated from the Records of Early English Drama and the British Library playbill collection. The stories ranged from individual performances of Shakespeare's own company in seventeenth-century Nottingham to those of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century child actors, stars, and innovators such as Ira Aldridge and Charlotte Cushman. In total, around two hundred stories covering the thirty-nine BBC English regions were posted online on a page headed 'Much ado near me', which invited readers to 'find stories from across the country about people, places and performances of the Bard's work, maybe

⁵ 'Public purposes: Reflecting UK audiences', *Inside the BBC* <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/corporate2/insidethebbc/whoweare/publicpurposes/communities.html>>.

⁶ 'Shakespeare on Tour 2016', *BBC* <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p03fcz11>>.

even featuring the great man himself'.⁷ Some of these were then picked up by local BBC radio and television stations and broadcast as features during the April quatercentenary celebrations; those radio stations that did not develop stories further still publicised the online resource. Altogether, the project ensured that the Shakespeare commemorated in 2016 was not only the Shakespeare of Stratford-upon-Avon and the Globe Theatre, but of Dover, Dunstable, Devon and beyond.

The quatercentenary year also brought opportunities for the academic community to explore provincial Shakespeare. At the 2016 World Shakespeare Congress, held in Stratford and London, Peter Kirwan and Monika Smialkowska led a seminar on 'Decentralised Shakespeare: Provincial and Marginal Shakespearean Performance' which asked participants to 'engage with Shakespearean performance that is considered, or considers itself, to be provincial and/or marginal, whether in social, geographic, or political terms'.⁸ An international array of scholars produced papers that addressed the idea of the Shakespearean periphery in a variety of contexts, from nineteenth-century Tasmania to 2015 Ireland. A common theme amongst all was the use of Shakespeare performance as a form of communication between centre and periphery that existed on a spectrum of reciprocity, an argument that I have put forward and developed throughout this thesis. The power dynamic between centre and periphery that has characterised this thesis has applications beyond

⁷ 'Shakespeare on Tour 2016: Much ado near me', *BBC*
<<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/nLWW73TlZh4W6bNN502JXr/much-ado-near-me>>.

⁸ Peter Kirwan and Monika Smialkowska, Call for Papers, 'Decentralised Shakespeare: Provincial and Marginal Shakespearean Performance', 2015.

those on the margins of English professional theatre, such as prisons and community projects, both of which were the subject of seminar papers. However, the specific geographical and structural considerations I have outlined in this thesis give a distinct character to the provincial within the English context. Amateur and outdoor performances are both highly relevant to my research interests; outdoor Shakespeare in particular seems to share many of the characteristics of late twentieth-century touring productions. This is the primary way in which many contemporary audiences encounter Shakespeare and its provincial identity is even stronger as performances are literally sited on, and indeed incorporated into, the local environment. The nature of the dialogue between centre and periphery in this type of Shakespeare performance would be a fascinating subject for future research.

Looking forward, it is difficult to predict how the centre/periphery relationship will continue to develop. Will the RSC continue the legacy from *Dream 16* through regional casting and more comprehensive national tours? At present only one Shakespearean tour has been announced for 2018, which does not represent any expansion of the company's previous touring activity. A revival of the RSC's 2016 production of *Hamlet*, starring Paapa Essiedu, will visit Salford, Plymouth, Hull, Newcastle upon Tyne and Northampton for a week each before moving to London for a month-long engagement and then the USA.⁹ It is perhaps too early for the impact of *Dream 16* to have been felt; in five years' time it will be possible to assess more accurately what, if anything, the company has learnt from their collaborative project. By that point, political factors may well

⁹ 'Hamlet Tour Dates and Venues', RSC <<https://www.rsc.org.uk/hamlet/tour-dates-and-venues>>.

have intervened. At the time of writing there has been no clarification as to what shape the UK's exit from the EU will take, but despite reassurance from government ministers that the 'Arts industry will play key role in promoting post Brexit Britain', many in the sector are concerned about its future once EU funding and the collaborations facilitated by free movement disappear.¹⁰ Patrick Brill's May 2017 article for the *Guardian* captured the extreme end of such concerns, prophesying a 'Henry VIII-style cultural assault' that will see the destruction of creative institutions and the works they develop.¹¹ His conclusion, however, articulated the fears of many:

In our arts organisations, theatres, museums, galleries and universities there is deep sense of foreboding. If Brexit is delivered it will undoubtedly shift the nature of our culture in a way that is deeply worrying. Brexit will mean the end of a period of British culture born out of the ashes of the second world war that was open, intellectually curious and essentially generous. The arts currently suffer disdain and removal of patronage. Many who are vocal in defending the welfare state and NHS fail to recognise or do not take seriously that our museums and galleries are similarly threatened.¹²

It is too soon to tell how well-founded those fears are, but the cultural shift that Brill predicts could have consequences that he has not considered. It is surely

¹⁰ "‘Arts industry will play key role in promoting post Brexit Britain’, say Ministers", *Government News*, 11 January 2017 <<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/arts-industry-will-play-key-role-in-promoting-post-brexit-britain-say-ministers>>.

¹¹ Bob and Roberta Smith [pseudonym of Patrick Brill], 'Brexit will spell the end of British art as we know it', *Guardian*, 12 May 2017 <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/may/12/brexit-british-art-artists-museums-galleries>>.

¹² Smith, 'Brexit will spell the end of British art as we know it', *Guardian*.

possible that the force of Brexit will also disrupt national priorities and redress the balance between London and the regions, or at the very least act as a call to action to confront this. Brexit, like the Theatres Act of 1843, the development of the railways and the introduction of public subsidy for the arts before it, may well act as a pivotal moment for provincial Shakespeare performance. Future productions could very well take place within a radically altered framework that places greater value on the way those in previously marginalised communities connect with the national playwright.

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