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NTQ

NEW THEATRE QUARTERLY

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ERIC BENTLEY IN INTERVIEW

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THE BROADWAY SEASON

THE CRAFT OF THE DRAMATURG

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GEORGE AND IRA GERSHWIN IN TWENTIES LONDON

PRODUCTION CASEBOOK ON SOYINKA AT THE RET

ELIZABETHAN AND WEST END AUDIENCES COMPARED

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Eric Bentley
interviewed by Charles Marowitz

From Half-Century to Millennium: the Theatre and the Electric Spectator

Well into his eighth decade, Eric Bentley now regards himself as primarily a playwright, having redefined the agenda of serious criticism during the early post-war years, pioneered the understanding, translation, and production of Brecht in the West, and for long combined academic work at Columbia with producing the best kind of regular theatre reviews. Apart from several collections of that 'occasional' writing, and anthologies of plays in translation which have helped to extend the range of the English-language repertoire, he has produced several full-length studies of seminal importance – from his early re-evaluation of Shaw and, in *The Playwright as Thinker*, of other major modern dramatists, to the more theoretical but invariably stimulating 'rethink' of dramatic genres in *The Life of the Drama*. More recently, he has devoted his time to active playwriting, and it was during a production of his *Lord Alfred's Lover* in Miami that the director and self-proclaimed 'counterfeit critic' Charles Marowitz persuaded him to discuss the present state of both the active theatre in the West – and of the condition of the critical trade he had once pursued.

IN THE EARLY 'FIFTIES, *when I was stationed in France doing my bit for Uncle Sam, the only thing that kept me sane was my subscription to the* New Republic *and the reviews of Eric Bentley which they contained. In those frosty 'fifties, when the watchword was conformity and the Broadway stage was tamer than the Court Circular in* The Times, *the ring in Bentley's voice made me aware that the theatre could be something more than a combination of warmed-over William Inge and mildly-spiced Robert Anderson – that, as Coriolanus pointed out, 'there is a world elsewhere' and that it contained Expressionism, Russian classics, an English 'new wave', French acting ensembles, and Bertolt Brecht. That was a salvationary insight between 1952 and 1956, and it did a great deal to dignify and aggrandize a theatre that, in the opinion of many of us, was tame, tepid, dreary, and domesticized.*

Since I recently found myself in Miami at the same time as Eric Bentley (he with Lord Alfred's Lover, *I with* Measure for Measure*), I took advantage of the opportunity to pick his brains on a number of subjects of mutual concern. Like all edited transcripts, this is a distillation of a long and woolly conversation.*

Bentley had earlier written in a note to me that writing for the theatre made some kind of sense, but writing about *it no longer did. I began by asking him whether he still held that view.*

It was an impulsive remark inspired to some extent by the hopelessness of the present situation, plus the fact that most of the writing about the theatre isn't very good and might as well be forgotten – and in fact, *is* forgotten about two days after it's been written.

People are always asking: what is the function of theatre criticism? Well, besides providing consumer tips and that sort of thing, I think ideally it should be a discourse, an ongoing discussion of theatrical things, not confined to any one particular review – more a give and take from the entire cultural milieu in which the play is taking place.

Often, it's particularly important in the case of a new author. If you're Ibsen, for instance, coming forward in 1890, someone's bound to say: that's terrible – that's filth, we must stop it. But someone else is going to

rise up and mount a heroic defence, and that will be important.

What is the main difference between criticism today and what it was like in the 'fifties when you were reviewing for the New Republic*?*

I think it's very much the same – certainly in the United States. There are fewer newspapers in New York, of course, but I don't think that makes a very great difference. I saw Brustein argue somewhere that that was a tremendous change, but it wasn't at all – not in the final result. He was arguing, I think, that the *New York Times* now has all the power but, you know, the *New York Times* always had all the power – in fact more, in the days of Brooks Atkinson, because he was looked up to so much more than anybody else.

You don't think it was a corrective, or neutralizing element, that there were six or seven newspapers at that time?

No, because their critics were no good and nobody paid any attention to them.

So even in the 'fifties the Times *was the determining factor?*

Yes, and sometimes if the kind of critic the *Times* liked popped up on another paper, as Walter Kerr did on the *Herald Tribune*, they would simply acquire him.

Tynan talked somewhere about the critic – meaning himself I believe – recording the event for posterity: giving the reader of a future generation some idea of what it was like to be in that particular theatre on that particular night. What do you *think ought to be the working premise of the drama critic?*

I think that a question like that can only be answered by asking which particular publication a critic is writing for and therefore which public one is addressing.

Why should that make such a difference?

Because you're not performing for *any* audience – you're performing for *this* audience. For instance, if I was writing for the *New Republic*, as I once did, on subjects like Arthur Miller or Lillian Hellman, I would enjoy teasing my readers, who tended to adore or idolize those writers, by being a little mean about them, and thus creating a discourse between us which often resulted in a lot of indignant letters. I knew who I was talking to – I knew what they would consider 'mean'.

The Critic, the Journal, and the Reader

That would seem to suggest that there is such a thing as a definable character to the readership of something like the New York Times *or the* New York Post. *But can such a diffuse metropolitan readership actually be defined ?*

Yes, I hope so. For example, if you're writing for *The Nation*, you're not writing for a New York public, but for a national readership – therefore you're not necessarily writing for people who are going to see the play. That's very different from writing for, let's say, the *Daily News*, where someone is going to pick up that paper in the morning to see if their critic liked the play that opened last night.

The other thing is that although journalists always deny that they are writing down to their public, I think they do. Because they tend to believe that they are superior to their readership, and so there's often a certain dictatorial relationship there. Good criticism can only happen when you're writing for people whom you regard as your peers. You mustn't write down to anyone – or, as for instance Shaw used to do, pretend that his readers were just as witty and refined as himself. God knows they were not!

So sometimes, the critic has to delude himself that he is writing to a more sophisticated public than is actually out there?

If it *is* a delusion. When I was writing for the *New Republic*, my assumption was that my

readers were just as sophisticated as I was, although I knew more about theatre specifically because most of them were not theatre people, so I could give information without in any way patronizing them.

Of course your companions on that publication actually set the tone for your reviews: they were themselves astute and sophisticated writers. But, by the same token, a writer for, say, the New York Post *is often surrounded by shlock journalists dealing with popular subjects in a tabloid manner. Do you think that conditions the way a critic's mind works in regard to his readership?*

Pretty much. Once I had a friend, Louis Kronenberger, who was the *Time* magazine critic for several decades. At that time, there was a *Time*-style, more or less dictated by Henry Luce – I think it's largely gone now. Louis resisted that – tried not to write *Time*-style, and told me that he *didn't* write *Time*-style, but in the end, he *did*, and you can see it if, for instance, you compare his reviews with his books, where he was writing freely. You know Shakespeare says the dyer's hand takes on the colour of the dye – that's not a direct quote, just the gist of it. That's very true: that if you work within the framework of a given institution you do become part of it – however independent you may strive to be.

Back to the Realistic Mould?

In the 'sixties there was a strong desire to transcend realism – to get away from the influence of writers such as Miller, Odets, Inge and Williams. There was also a lot of experimentation in non-naturalistic writing – the theatre of the absurd, a lot of talk about 'the death of the word', and so forth. Today, the leading American playwrights are people such as Mamet, Wilson, Shepard, Guare, Baitz, Korder, Henley, Wasserstein. Does that mean that we are back in an unbudgeable realistic mould and can never escape?

Everybody is always rebelling against realism, but it always seems to reassert itself. And what could be more naturalistic than *Glengarry Glen Ross*, with every third word being 'fuck'? And yet Mamet himself has consciously tried to depart from realism.

There is a kind of belief, isn't there, that by taking naturalistic speech and sculpting it in a kind of Pinteresque way you are somehow transcending realism. Can that really be done?

If you have enough skill. I think certain Irish playwrights, O'Casey in particular, started with Dublin speech and then began playing around with it. He played around with it so much that it became somewhat oratorical and fell into a kind of phoney Irish. It's a difficult proposition because I think the realistic and 'the other' merge or leastways interact a lot.

Does it mean that no matter what we do, we can never really transcend the patterns of psychological realism because they are so much the patterns of the life we know and lead and which the theatre is obliged to reflect – that to try to escape such realism is just so much wasted effort?

I think the the weight of the realistic novel is felt by all of us – Balzac, Tolstoy, these giants who portrayed the world as it is. Playwrights imitated that, and did so rather well – in Ibsen's realistic plays for instance, although he fought against it at the end. Then Brecht arrives, and he doesn't think the theatre is realistic enough. He's going to be *super*-realistic, and other people tend to say those are his departures from realism, that his epic style, his tendency towards 'alienation' are moves away from realism. But since he lived within the aegus of Communism, where social realism was a holy concept, he was obliged to argue: no, no, this is the *real* realism. So ultimately you get lost in a maze of semantics.

Obviously, he had political pressures that he felt he had to accommodate, but he was the only thinker who actually mounted a theory counter to Stanislavsky's.

Against *pyschological* realism but in favour of sociological realism.

Does the fact that it was *sociological realism and opposed to facile naturalistic devices make for a fundamental difference?*

He thought it was fundamental, but I'm not sure he was right. He liked to say that he didn't merely offer opinions, he offered *truth* – and I think that is what the realists always believed.

The Brechtian Legacy

In the 'sixties and 'seventies Brecht's influence was virtually inescapable, especially in Europe. But now with the dismantling of the Soviet Union and the consequent general disenchantment with both Communism and Marxism, do you think that influence is necessarily going to have to wane?

I think it probably is waning, but I think it could very easily come back. Some of it has to do with just the natural ups and downs of an author's reputation.

But Brecht predicated much of his work on Marxist ideology, and now that Marxism and Communism, its great outgrowth, is falling by the wayside, doesn't it necessarily *mean that Brecht has got to fall by the wayside as well?*

Only if his practice was consistent with that theory. This is certainly the way he thought and he wanted other people to think in his later decades: but I always assumed he was wrong, and this assumption now works in his favour. The imaginative artist in him was there long before all these theories and was not always consistent with them.

So accidentally he may escape oblivion?

By talent – not by ideology. His notion that it's all part of Marxism and that his work will only succeed as the Soviet Union succeeds is so much political oratory. It never really had any truth, and the Soviet Union never really embraced his work. We can now say that definitively, since there is no longer a Soviet Union.

When his plays were so popular, in the 'sixties and 'seventies, it was a period of great political ferment and Brecht seemed both fashionable and inevitable. But now that we, both in Europe and America, are living in an age of rampaging conservatism, does that not also tend to pull the carpet out from under his plays?

Although I agree with the thrust of what you're saying, I think it's the Other Brecht, not Brecht the social propogandist, who will survive – the Brecht who was there before the Marxist ever arrived. And by that I don't mean to say that nothing will survive but his early works, but that this Other Brecht continued to exist even when he was also spouting Soviet propaganda. It may be that his reputation will now flower more as a lyric poet, since there is a very solid body of poetry there.

I think the plays that simply preach Soviet Communism are his weaker plays. *St. Joan of the Stockyards*, for instance, is philosophically speaking a pathetically inadequate play because it is really saying that if only the Salvation Army would become atheist and join the Communist Party, everything would be fine. But one of the biggest ideological failures of the Soviet Union was atheism – it was regarded as very liberating at one time, but atheism never came to anything. It was as negative as the word sounds. And yet that is a big play which Yale Rep now intends to revive. They would never have done it when the Soviet Union existed because they'd have been too scared, but now they will do it, and I guarantee it will be a dead duck.

Do you think Good Woman of Setzuan, Chalk Circle, *and* Mother Courage *still retain their fundamental validity no matter what changes may take place in the political climate?*

They may have been plotted only as a critique of capitalism but that's not all they are. I think they're a critique of a certain mode of thinking and living and, as such,

are still relevant. And by the way, the fact that the Soviet Union is over and that Marxism-Leninism is *perhaps* over – I'm prepared to believe it *is* over – doesn't mean that all the writers will now be saying capitalism is a good thing, the way Mr. Bush and others of his ilk might wish. I think they won't. Capitalism has not shown itself a success because socialism has shown itself a failure. Therefore, a critique of capitalism is still valid.

Postmodernists and Auteurs

How do you explain the phenomenon of performance art – the rise of these many monologists and visually-oriented solo performers? Is this a hangover from the 'sixties Happeners or, even earlier, the Dadaists of the 'twenties, or is it a genuinely new development in theatre?

I see it somewhat negatively. For example, producers love it because they don't have to hire actors – not more than one, anyway. That's a practical point. Not too far from it, there is this tendency among contemporary playwrights to have their plays, all too often, dwindle into monologue. I see it largely as a weakness, although it may have some positive aspects. Of course, there have always been soloists – whether Ruth Draper or Maurice Chevalier or great solo comedians, or even before them the traditional vaudeville monologists. And then, you mustn't forget, there were people like Judy Garland who virtually did her autobiography on stage, pouring out her heartbreak to her fans. No one thought of that as being particularly avant-garde.

If you take into account performers such as Will Rogers, Lenny Bruce, or, as you say, Garland at the Palladium, is it that performance art is only a slight variation on a very old art form, and therefore perhaps a somewhat pretentious label?

That's what I feel about most of this stuff that's considered to be a product of the second part of the twentieth century – including all that's called postmodernism. Postmodernism is an evasive word, you know, because it doesn't tell you what it *is*, only what it's *post*. And it isn't one style, as far as I can make out, or one attitude.

But it's supposed *to be eclectic, isn't it?*

Then it has to be always eclectic, doesn't it, to be consistent.

The changes which have taken place in the theatre in the past fifty or so years have also affected the classics. Almost every Shakespearean revival nowadays is some kind of auteur-production – conceptualized down to its boots. But is classical work today reflecting the changes that are taking place around us?

It reflects the fact that the serious theatre has become what I call 'universitarian' or overeducated, so that the people in charge feel obliged to contribute their education to whatever they are doing – which wasn't the case in the past when many of them didn't have an education. As late as the Lunts, American actors had no kind of collegiate or university background. Productions didn't have to have what they now call 'concepts': the actors just had to go on and do it.

For instance, in the 'twenties, when I first saw Gielgud's *Hamlet*, people called it 'a very Freudian *Hamlet*'. It was and it wasn't. In the sense that he knew about Freud, well, he didn't – not at that time, he may know something about him now. It was only Freudian if the whole world we lived in was Freudian, if that was the air we breathed. But Gielgud didn't have 'ideas', nor did he expect his director to have any. That was how the theatre was then.

But later on, when you began to get phenomena like the Yale Drama School and the 'profession of the director', which was a relatively new development, and the director had to offer something, which again was new, things began to change. When Salvini did Othello, for instance, he just walked on and did it. There was no theory about blacks or chastity or anything else.

You don't think you could infer a conception that the artist himself had not formulated?

Yes, but I think it would have been a traditional one, handed down intuitively, without going through a conscious, cerebral process. Oh yes, if we survey performances of *Hamlet* from the past, someone like Garrick would now be said to have had an interpretation – even though *he* never thought that he did or consciously formulated one. I guess I'm expressing a prejudice. In this area, I favour the intuitive and the traditional over the collegiate or book-nurtured.

But to go back to my last point: can you really make that kind of distinction? I mean Olivier was a rather non-intellectual actor and yet . . . .

Yes, but occasionally he would read a book, or Tynan would provide him with a theory of some sort.

Desecrating the Classics?

But even before Tynan came on the scene, he was doing some pretty interesting conceptual productions of Shakespeare, which I think you're right, he had never mapped out intellectually. But it was there in the work – *the instinctive notions produced a conception in the work. I just wonder whether it is ever possible to avoid a 'conception' of a play or a character, even though the act of conception has not consciously been undertaken.*

A Victorian actor doing a Shakespearean role was dealing with a great number of inherited ideas. Of course, if they were *all* inherited there would be nothing fresh and people wouldn't say he was marvellous. But why did they think Irving, for example, *was* marvellous? Not because he was the same, but because he was different. Why was he different? Because his vocal characterization was different, he had a different physique, the way he expressed his emotions was different – but not his ideology, because he didn't have one.

Wouldn't his attitude to the role and the time in which he was living have influenced his performance?

But that came about organically – not by conscious design.

Then would you agree that it is unavoidable that every actor is, organically, going to produce a conception of his own?

You can call it that in hindsight but it *wasn't.* It was just a feeling the actor had about what he was doing. I think we ought to let the Shakespeare production develop slowly and organically from within and not, for instance, have a director say: 'I've read Dover Wilson's *What Happens in Hamlet,* and by God, that's the way we're going to do it.' Or worse still, to have someone who is simply in love with his own ingenuity – or worse still again (and this is a prominent trend in modern directing), somebody who wishes to bring a classic down to the people, which usually means bringing it down into the mud, desecrating it, following the modernistic nihilistic tendency to make it filthy or nauseating. That may be putting it too strongly, but when you take an aristocratic form like Mozartian opera, for instance, and set it at a lunch-counter – that is desecration as I see it.

But it's unavoidable, isn't it, that every generation is going to express what's going on in its head through the classics? You bring to my mind the production of Midsummer Night's Dream *which recently played in London where the characters were, in fact, knee-deep in mud a good deal of the time. That caused quite a stir in that it was a visual expression of the play that had not been seen before – at least, not to such an extreme degree. Doesn't something like that justify itself in that the director is clearly refusing merely to repeat the play in a predictable and conventional manner?*

But in the second half of the twentieth century, we haven't had the conventional repetition of the classic. We've had a constant straining for an originality that isn't really there.

Right, point taken. Now can I ask you a much more general question: must there always be a

theatre? Can you conceive of a situation in which the theatre might simply disappear – be superceded by the electronic media?

I think the theatre will persist because all through my lifetime people have been saying that the movies or television would remove it and it hasn't happened – not even approximately. In many areas there is more live theatre now, both in the US and in Britain, than when I was growing up.

The Necessary Theatre

Is there something that the theatre can do which is so unique that it can't be done in films or television?

The contact between the live actor and the live spectator.

You don't think that when the electronic media produce first-rate art, as they occasionally do, a contact of that sort is established?

No. Because the spectator can't answer back. He's just glued to the screen.

The theatre spectator doesn't very often answer back either. I mean, in films and television, on an imaginative level, there is the same kind of collaboration, isn't there?

It's a question of interaction. If you substitute a tape for the accompaniment of a song, there's no interaction between you and the orchestra. But when the orchestra is actually out there, reacting to the vicissitudes of each performance, there's a live current out there. Once you've put it on tape, you've killed it.

Could it not be that once you put it on tape you've refined it to its nth degree?

Perhaps, but that would be an alternative, not a replacement. Like Glenn Gould's way of recording piano music – assiduously splicing one version together with another. You know, he's given us compact discs of performances that never really happened but that were carefully scissored together, and there are musicians with more refined tastes than my own who think the results are fantastic. Let's not forbid that. Let's not say an artist mustn't do it. But I don't think that will ever replace a pianist giving a live rendition before a live public.

But if an artist produces the finest definition of his art by working in such a manner, electronically, doesn't that suggest that he can possibly transcend the live experience? Why couldn't what happens in a play be reproduced in a screenplay so well that – I haven't seen Glengarry Glen Ross, *for instance , but everyone tells me that the essence of the play is captured on film.*

That may be the best way of realizing *that* play. I don't think it would be best for every play. And I think, similarly, an actor like Al Pacino is, from what I know of him, much more effective on screen than he is on stage, so perhaps he should stick to the screen. But there are other actors, of whom Gielgud is perhaps the prime example, who are much weaker on the screen than they are on stage. In a theatre, he has a way of relating to audiences which is clearly not possible in a cinema.

Certainly there are endentured stage actors, and we respond to their work on stage in a way that we do not in any other medium, but I guess what I was really thinking of was the work that is done in the theatre by playwrights, by actors, by directors – the work itself, the artistic composite. What is to prevent that from being so perfectly well translated into another medium that it makes its performance on a stage unnecessary?

I think that may be true for many plays – including some that I've written. There are certain of my plays where all I really need are the actors' heads – not their bodies at all, not their torsos or their legs, let alone their genital organs. Nevertheless I'm not sure that the old plays which were expressly written for the stage are better on the new media. I don't like Shakespeare so well on TV – because they whisper it. Which may be

appropriate for television, but that kind of language wasn't written to be whispered.

Don't Olivier's Hamlet *or* Richard III *or even Kenneth Branagh's* Henry V *convey the essence of Shakespeare's plays in an equivalent way – providing at least as much as you usually get in a stage production, and in terms of strong casting a good deal more?*

They may be valid as an alternative, but not as a replacement. I think there's something unique about being in the theatre as the performance is actually unfolding. In the electronic media, there's a layer missing –

What is that?

The electricity passing between the spectator and the actor.

But there is still some *degree of electricty, isn't there?*

There's no uncertainty. You know that the rest of the film or the tape is there in the can. But on stage, there's always this sense of anticipation – of what will happen next. A 'sense of immediacy' is also part of it – the fact that it's happening now and that the result is uncertain, that there is a palpable transaction taking place right there, at tonight's performance. All of that is psychologically quite important, and seeing a film of it doesn't quite produce the same effect. For instance, it's the actual vibrations between you and me right now which, if we were being filmed, would vanish.

All right, let's take us as a case in point. I'm asking you questions. We're sitting in a room: two real people in a three-dimensional situation. But when this is finished, I will sit down and I will refine and edit this tape in order to make it as coherent as possible. Are you suggesting that the final, coherent, compressed version is going to be less good than the actual experience we are having at the moment?

No, it should be better – but we're not so much interested in the performance aspect of what we're doing as we are in getting a good organization of verbal material.

So our 'theatrical performance' is going to be subordinated to the edited final result. Well, obviously I can't sway you on this point. The theatre is going to live on then, is it?

I'm afraid so.

Leigh Woods

Two-a-Day Redemptions and Truncated Camilles: the Vaudeville Repertoire of Sarah Bernhardt

American vaudeville welcomed a host of important stage actors into its midst during the generation between the mid-1890s and the end of the First World War, and in 1912, following appearances in British music halls, Sarah Bernhardt became vaudeville's centrepiece in its own war with the legitimate theatre for audience and status. By way of exchange, she received the highest salary ever paid to a 'headlined' vaudeville act, while performing a repertoire from which she was able to exclude the sort of light entertainment which had previously typified the medium. Both vaudeville and Bernhardt profited, in very different ways, from this wedding of high culture to low – and in the process a cultural standing seems to have attached itself to exhibitions of pain which legitimised the lot of the morally deviant women she both portrayed and exemplified. Leigh Woods, Head of Theatre Studies at the University of Michigan, explores the ways in which the great actress thus maintained a demand for her services well after the eclipse of her legendary beauty and matchless movement.

SARAH BERNHARDT'S FORAYS into American vaudeville came in lengthy tours while the form was at its height, in 1912-13 and 1917-18, essentially at the same time as the heyday of the British music hall – in which Bernhardt also toured half a dozen times between 1910 and 1920. For her, these tours involved escapes, of a sort, from a legitimate theatre that could no longer easily accommodate her advancing age and worsening health.

Bernhardt's repertoire in vaudeville, although borrowed in part from her legitimate career, is striking for its departure from the generally light tone which the producers and audiences of vaudeville typically favoured. In aggregate, her vaudeville productions offered a grim view of female experience in reiterated and, as time went on, increasingly ritual-like images of masochism and self-destruction.

In what follows, I shall first examine several contexts around Bernhardt's appearances in vaudeville. I shall try to suggest the nature of her appeal in vaudeville, and the appeal of the actress's unconventional repertoire, by vaudeville's standards, to an audience used to making merry. What I hope to unfold here are some of the exactions made on famous actresses in the nineteenth century which were carried over and in some ways intensified in vaudeville until the final years of the First World War.

To some degree, Bernhardt can be seen to have colluded in the processes by which her fame and her notoriety were penalized. She seems to have done so because she knew it was good business, because her options were narrowing, and because marketing bits of her stageworn suffering struck her as the logical and perhaps inevitable extension of her previous career.

The Bill and Its Format

Vaudeville was willing to compromise its roots in popular culture to accommodate the glittering if generally rather coy luminaries it drew away from the legitimate stage. It paid large amounts of money to stage stars, often in excess of what they could have made in 'legit' – and more, too, than all but a handful of the most versatile entertainers trained up in vaudeville could expect to

earn. In its taste for stage stars, vaudeville traded something of its reputation as an egalitarian form for the more distinguished profile it displayed while gripping noted actors in its embrace. It also sacrificed something of its trademark in brisk pacing to a group of actors accustomed to more leisurely appearances in generally more gracious and 'respectable' circumstances.

Vaudeville bills after the turn of the century generally comprised between seven and nine elements. Opening acts were called 'doormats' and closing acts 'chasers'. These often consisted of dumb or non-speaking performers whose main function was the utilitarian one of easing audiences into and out of the theatre as part of the quick turnaround dictated by multiple shows daily. The performers in doormats and chasers knew that, because of their placement, they could never expect the audience's full attention, or for that matter any attention at all when the hour was late or the preceding entertainments laggard.

Black performers were often stationed next-to-last, though rarely as 'headliners', because many chasers consisted of animal acts and only the animals could be guaranteed not to complain about following African-Americans on the bill. There was a class system in vaudeville, and stage stars stood at the very top of it, at a great remove from performers who inhabited the levels below them. The stars' very appearances in vaudeville elevated the bills they headed well above the range of standard fare.

These stars found themselves sharing bills with a motley assortment of performers. There were street acts that had developed some kind of specialty; ethnic acts featuring dialect humour to capture Jewish, German, Irish, and Italian immigrants; other ethnic acts in blackface, sometimes African-Americans but more often whites; acrobats, jugglers, aerialists, skaters, and animal-trainers with feats of skill or daring; and supporting players and chorus members appearing in larger and showier vaudeville productions, but lacking stars of magnitude. Song-and-dance acts were common, often including a performer of each sex. After 1910 or so, non-dialect comedians became vaudeville staples, too, often in double acts of laugh-getter and straight man (or woman).

All headliners from the stage found themselves either in the spot just before intermission or next-to-last on their vaudeville bills. The next-to-last act fell after the audience returned from the intermission, and had usually seen another filler act to settle them back into their seats. After the traditional headliner's slot, then, the audience was primed to leave the theatre either during the chaser or just after it.

The Role of the Star

Stage stars like Bernhardt with heavy sets always played in the next-to-last slot because the time needed to arrange the stage could only come during the intermission. The slot following just after intermission was a particularly tough one, sandwiched as it was between the two most prestigious acts on the bill. This act fulfilled a function in some ways like the opening and closing acts before an audience that was restless, distracted, and looking forward to the headliner.

All acts were short. Doormats and chasers often ran ten minutes or less. Longer acts lasted between twenty and thirty minutes, and fell in the featured slots – usually four, five, and seven. Occasionally, a stage star's play would last longer than half an hour, but given vaudeville's brisk and insistent rhythms, such a length could carry risks. In fact, the most common criticisms of stage stars in vaudeville damned them for action that took too long in getting under way.

Vaudeville audiences also expected that a star would be on stage when the play began, or enter very soon afterwards. This expectation either accelerated or erased entirely a practice prevalent in the legitimate theatre of the day, that had the star's character discussed at length by the other characters before that star made her triumphal appearance.

Slots in the less prominent parts of the vaudeville bill were often juggled by local managers after the first weekly matinee on Monday. When changes were made in a

stage star's bill, this often took the form of shuffling the acts on either side of the star, so as to manipulate the audience into the proper frame of mind just before or after the headlined act appeared. A performer doing a dumb act to open for Bernhardt might well have been a headliner many times at a smaller theatre, sometimes only the week before.

Nevertheless, the class and salary system in vaudeville related very directly to slots on the bill, and to the prestige of the theatre where the bill was playing. There was truth in Channing Pollock's jest, written in 1911, that when it came to vaudevillians, 'By their numbers ye shall know them.'[1] Performers grew accustomed to thinking of themselves as numbers in their slot on the bill, in the minutes that their acts took up, and in their weekly salaries. Vaudeville showed a passion for quantification that affected all levels of the enterprise.

A kind of mechanized quality that seemed brisk and efficient to vaudeville audiences did not always seem so to stars accustomed to the legitimate theatre. Mrs. Patrick Campbell, famed from legit in A. W. Pinero's *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray*, complained of the trials she suffered during her single short tour of vaudeville in 1910: 'Oh, those two [daily] performances. . . . I had to kill a man twice a day and shriek – and it had to be done from the heart – the Americans see through "bluff" – and I was advertised as a "Great tragic actress"!'[2] Ethel Barrymore found touring difficult at a time when she had young children. But she remembered her tours later for the way that, in vaudeville, 'Things ran as systematically and efficiently as in a large business concern', training up an 'audience . . . so used to perfection that they are tough.'[3]

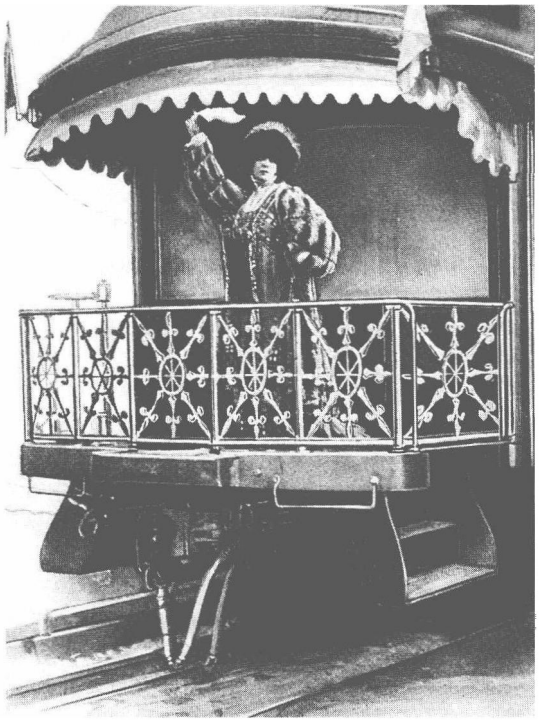
Jessie Millward, a British actress who specialized in melodrama, grew frazzled by the travel and the mechanized vaudeville routine. In her case, though, her first tours were short ones – only the several blocks between F. F. Proctor's Fifth Avenue and his Twenty-Third Street theatres in New York City in 1904. Then again, Millward played two shows in each theatre for a total of four shows daily, racing from one theatre to another for both matinee and evening performances in order to fill spots on the two different bills:

> When the first week of it was over, I caught myself jumping out of bed in the middle of nights and rushing to the door mechanically as if I were going to take another car to somewhere or other. It was an experience that I certainly shall never go through again. Hereafter, I shall be content to appear in one theatre at a time, giving two performances, of course, each day, but not in places several miles apart [*sic*].[4]

Millward's nightmare resembles what performers in small time vaudeville experienced routinely, doing as many as five or six shows per day. On the other hand, Millward became the first actress to make $1000 a week in vaudeville in a development which in some ways presaged Bernhardt's interest and eventual appearance in the form. But Millward's salary and her mode of travel would both find themselves outstripped eight years later, when Bernhardt entered the field.

Bernhardt Enters Vaudeville

Extensive travel was built into vaudeville, with large circuits of its theatres coming under the control of a handful of monopolistic producers during the dozen years that followed the turn of the century. Extensive travel suited Bernhardt, part of whose celebrity derived from popular images of her itinerancy and rootlessness as an artist, and from the grand manner in which she travelled with her entourages. She made several world tours during her legitimate career, and the one that began in 1891 lasted over two years, taking her across the United States and Canada, to Hawaii, Samoa, New Zealand, and Australia, then back to the United States, off to France and London, to Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Switzerland, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Russia, Austria, Italy, Monaco, the French Riviera, on to a jaunt that included Hungary, Romania, Turkey, Greece, and Portugal, and then to a final leg with stops in Brazil, Argentina, and Senegal.[5]



Top: a buoyant Bernhardt at the back of her train (Sanders Collection, University of Michigan).
Bottom: Lillie Langtry with Bernhardt (Players Club).

Lacking the model domestic life that drove and at the same time confined the American star Ethel Barrymore's stints in vaudeville to locations mostly in and around New York City, Bernhardt may even have welcomed the prospect of entering its farthest reaches at such a late stage in her career. She certainly welcomed the $7000 a week she earned during her first tour and (with a war on) the $5500 a week she made during her second vaudeville engagement.

Because vaudeville offered cheap daily matinees and relatively low prices for its evening shows, women were often more heavily represented in its audiences than they were in legitimate theatres of the time. This element of vaudeville seems to have suited it to female performers in general and ageing actresses in particular. The spectacle of the late-sixtyish and then finally seventy-ish Bernhardt on two long marches through vaudeville recalled that offered by the not-quite-so-matronly Lillie Langtry. Langtry was also internationally famous from a long touring career and the days of her earlier attachment – shared later by her friend Bernhardt – to the Prince of Wales, Queen Victoria's son Albert Edward, who later became Edward VII of England.

In the legitimate theatre, Langtry had specialized in worldy-wise, bejewelled characters in comic or satiric pieces. Her vaudeville offerings, however, located themselves much more firmly in a retrograde morality. *Between Nightfall and the Light* and *The Test* were both excerpted from her legitimate success in the 1880s in Victorien Sardou's *A Wife's Peril*, and during her first and second vaudeville tours respectively each play had Langtry's character dying at the hands of her would-be-seducer after having been tempted to infidelity by him with the news of her own husband's philandering. On her third and final vaudeville tour, Langtry alternated in *Ashes* and *The Eleventh Hour*, in both of which she featured as an erring and anxious wife. Here, her characters did not die, but were chastened rather – and determined to expiate their lapses from domestic propriety.

Bernhardt's vaudeville repertoire showed even greater licence – and greater severity.

She had first played Marguerite Gautier, the Camille in *La Dame aux Camélias* by Alexandre Dumas *fils*, in the United States during her first tour there in 1880.[6] When originally in America, Bernhardt had been amused to learn that schoolchildren were forbidden to see her as Camille; in France, though she had still not played the role there, she knew that children attended matinees of Dumas' play as a rite of passage in their educations.[7] In any case, her characterization of Camille made a sensation in the United States, only later becoming one in Europe. Over time, it came to stand as the prototype of an undomesticated and therefore rootless woman falling victim to the tortures of love.

Vaudeville thus afforded Bernhardt and Langtry outlets for their notoriety in ways the legitimate stage did not. And in its hypocritical and self-serving attempts to serve up 'family' entertainment, vaudeville offered an arena where a sort of confused and titillating Victorianism prevailed. Such values permitted sexual reference and erotic innuendo – never more so than when these could be instantly juxtaposed, in plays lasting only about half an hour, with suffering and very often death.

Top: Bernhardt in *Une Nuit de Noël sous la terreur.*
Bottom: Bernhardt as Camille. (Sanders Collection.)

Bernhardt's First Repertoire

More than thirty years after she first played the role, Bernhardt made Camille, the only part she played on both her tours, her most durable attraction in vaudeville. Furthermore, during her first tour no fewer than four of the other five pieces she played portrayed women victimized by the strength or expression of their love. The fifth role was from her own son's play, *Une Nuit de Noël sous la terreur*, in which romantic love did not figure prominently. On the other hand, Maurice, as Bernhardt's illegitimate son, was the living emblem of the actress's much-publicized erotic history.

Besides *Camille* and Maurice's, her other plays included Jean Racine's seventeenth-century classic *Phèdre*, Victor Hugo's *Lucrèce Borgia*, and Sardou's *La Tosca* and *Théodora*. Bernhardt had played all of these at full

length in the legitimate theatre: indeed, the roles in Sardou's plays had been written for her in the first place. In choosing portions of the full-length pieces for her brief appearances in vaudeville, Bernhardt fixed on the climactic episodes of plays which – like *Camille* but excluding *Phèdre*, where she played the first two acts only – included her characters' deaths. Even her extract from *Phèdre*, though, included her spurned character's invitation to her beloved stepson to kill her with his sword.

Such plays and such outcomes stood squarely in line with notions of gender in the late nineteenth century. Here, Bronson Howard describes a scenario common on legitimate stages during the last two decades of the century, and his sense of poetic justice would extend itself in vaudeville in the hands of Bernhardt and some of the other female stage stars who entered it. According to Howard, himself a playwright of note:

> In England and America, the death of a pure woman on the stage is not 'satisfactory', except when the play rises to the dignity of tragedy. The death, in an ordinary play, of a woman who is not pure, as in the case of *Frou-Frou* [*by Meilhac and Halévy, in which Bernhardt had also created the title role*], is perfectly satisfactory, for the reason that it is inevitable. . . . The wife who has once taken the step from purity to impurity can never reinstate herself in the world of art on this side of the grave; and so an audience looks with complacent tears on the death of an erring woman.[8]

Bernhardt chose a sequence of roles for herself in vaudeville modelled on a formula rooted thirty years earlier, when she had first played Camille, having also taken many similar roles in her earlier and later legitimate career. In vaudeville, however, the permutations these parts found in bills through the course of several weeks, and the compression in suffering they assumed by being cut to conform to vaudeville's exacting time limit, rendered their cautionary qualities the more conspicuous.

Bernhardt was unique among the serious actors who entered vaudeville in alternating several different pieces there. Other stars lacked her repertoire of short pieces and her skill in playing them, perfected over the previous thirty years of her career from the continental practice of touring in several pieces rather than in one. Other actresses of note also lacked her skill in putting over (and varying) outcomes involving loving too much or 'wrongly', and the consequent suffering and death.

Alternating in a number of pieces gave Bernhardt and the vaudeville producers a strategy for drawing more spectators to see her – one night as Camille, the next as Phèdre, and so on; but this cycle was transformed through the course of vaudeville's fourteen weekly shows into a litany of womanly love's most dire consequences.

The Repertoire for the Second Tour

This same pattern fell out during her subsequent tours in vaudeville, even when her repertoire changed. In 1917-18 Bernhardt often doubled Camille with Alexandre Bisson's *Madame X* within single weeks and, sometimes, even on single bills during the legitimate engagements she sometines interspersed with her appearances in vaudeville. *Madame X* treated a wife who had deserted her husband and young son only to be reunited years later with that son, who comes by chance to defend her against a murder charge. Madame X, like Camille, dies morally absolved and quite ecstatic at the end of her play.

In 1915 – the year after the First World War began and two years after her first tour of vaudeville ended – Bernhardt's right leg was amputated. Not only did this confine her to the brief *tours de force* she had been refining as her staple for English music halls since 1910, but it forced her to change an acting style which had been marked for many years by a quality of movement some had called feline, some serpentlike, and which all agreed was heavily charged with erotic associations.

Having to perform under this limitation seems only to have enlarged her taste for the heroic and the sacrificial. On her final tour, with the First World War raging, she paired 'a French Countess who refused to leave her