

The Construction and Representation of National and Racial

Identities in London West End Revue 1910-1930

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Declaration

I declare that the work presented in this thesis is entirely my own work and has not been submitted for a degree at another university.

David Linton London, March, 2016.

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This thesis is dedicated to Edna, Esme and Handel Linton.

Abstract

This thesis is primarily concerned with how London West End revue engaged in the construction and representation of national and racial identities. The central research question is: what do these representations of national and racial identities in West End revue tell us about wider British culture and society in this period? In answering this question, I explore and develop a number of understandings of how national and racial identity operated in mainstream popular culture. How important was the influence of national and racial politics to revue's success? Why was identity so compelling a theme in these shows? How did other dimensions of difference, such as gender, sexuality and class, interact within these representations of race and nation? What does revue tell us about the changing state and status of Britain under the influence of new technologies, migration and early globalisation? How does this particular focus on national and racial identities change or challenge our wider understanding of revue and its significance in British culture across this period?

My thesis proposes that London West End revue was a topical, satirical popular theatre that engaged in national identity discourse and reconstituted identity formations through music, dance and wordplay. Through contextual and textual analysis, I highlight the attitudes, assumptions and beliefs that informed revue performance and narratives and reflected provocative new lifestyles, values and politics. Often politically conservative, protective of the status quo and concerned with appealing to a mainstream audience, revue was highly sensitive to the status and position of both Britain and London and cultivated a sense of itself as the defender of a colonial empire and, at the same time, the centre of a cosmopolitan culture that competed with other metropolitan centres such as Paris, Berlin and New York.

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Introduction

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the most successful form of theatrical entertainment in London was musical comedy. A plethora of popular shows such as *The Geisha* (1896), *Floradora* (1900), *A Country Girl* (1904), *The Merry Widow* (1907), *The Arcadians* (1909) and *Our Miss Gibbs* (1910) placed musical comedy at the forefront of a vibrant and fashionable popular culture, and established the ‘West End’ of London as ‘a modern retail and pleasure Mecca’.¹ Musical comedy emerged at the height of Britain’s imperial supremacy, with the country benefiting from the peace, prosperity and wealth brought about by its unrivalled Empire and by the industrial revolution. Musical comedies articulated an idealised sense of society,² creating a world that was supremely confident in itself and in which conflicts or challenges to the status quo could be safely negotiated and assimilated, and order maintained. A key theme often cultivated in musical comedy narratives was the smooth integration of old conservative aristocratic sensibilities and the new liberal modernity of the metropolis, as illustrated by George Edwardes’ production of *A Gaiety Girl* (1909).

The plot of *A Gaiety Girl* concerns a group of aristocratic ladies whose ambitions of capturing the interest of military gentlemen are threatened by the entrance of a rival group of young actresses from the Gaiety Theatre. As the story progresses, these vivacious, assertive West End chorus girls become emblematic of a modern world that threatens to encroach on the established order of things. However,

¹ Len Platt, *Musical Comedy on the West End Stage, 1890-1939* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 26.

² See David Walsh and Len Platt, *Musical Theater and American Culture* (Westport, Connecticut and London: Praeger, 2003) and John Bush Jones, *Our Musicals, Ourselves: A Social History of the American Musical Theatre* (Waltham, Brandeis University Press, 2003).

in the end, true to the narrative form of musical comedy, this modernity is made safe: the 'chorus girls' and their perceived challenge are assimilated by marriage.

During the Edwardian period, London West End revue began to supplant musical comedy as the most popular theatrical entertainment. Although revue had much in common with musical comedy, it began to reconstitute a different world on its stages, one that at many levels rejected the world constructed by musical comedy and poked fun at its whimsical plots. Indeed, revue's popularity stemmed in part from the fact that it situated itself in direct opposition to musical comedy and its mainstream status. Where musical comedy had sought union and harmony through linear storylines, revue consciously disrupted the narrative framework and associated itself with the new popular social dances and the syncopated music that accompanied them. In contrast to musical comedy's romanticism, revue's critical, satirical commentary highlighted a world of difference and discord, focusing on contemporary issues such as divorce, drug culture, immigration, sexual infidelity and political dissent. A crucial aspect of revue's exploration of this contemporary world was the representation of national and racial identities, which provided an accessible, taxonomic shorthand for identifying characters and situations. Revue highlighted behaviours and actions that expanded traditional narratives of nation by constructing a distinctive British/English identity alongside the London West End identity that was to become synonymous with the form.

National narratives in popular theatre have often been used to explore the nation in socio-historical terms, drawing on events, myths and folklore and focusing on famous or notorious figures – Shakespeare's plays epitomise the tradition. West End revue narratives followed this pattern, but constructed a range of national and racial representations from a cosmopolitan mass culture that mixed the aspirational

London suburban middle-class with the English aristocrat, the burly, lovable Cockney with the feckless Irishman, the barbarous “German Hun” with the “shifty American Jew” and the “primitive black African American from dear old Dixie” with the “yellow opium peddling” Chinaman of Limehouse, East London.

This thesis is primarily concerned with how London West End revue engaged in the construction and representation of national and racial identities. The central research question is: What do these representations of national and racial identities in West End revue tell us about wider British culture and society in this period? In answering this question, I will explore and develop a number of understandings of how national and racial identity operated in mainstream popular culture. How important was the influence of national and racial politics in the success of the revue? Why was identity so compelling a theme in these shows? How did other dimensions of difference, such as gender, sexuality and class, interact within these representations of race and nation? What does revue tell us about the changing state and status of Britain under the influence of new technologies, migration and early globalisation? How does this particular focus on national and racial identities change or challenge our wider understanding of revue and its significance in British culture across this period?

In addressing such issues, my thesis will address the current failure to recognise the significance and influence of revue as a performance practice in interpreting and reflecting British social, political and cultural life. It will thus have important implications for future work on London West End revue practice and will challenge previous understandings of British theatre and popular culture. I have sought to support my argument through the critical analysis of a wide range of source material and extensive archival work focused in part on the reading and analysis of

revue play-scripts, and correspondence files at the British Library, part of the Lord Chamberlain's play collections. I have also accessed other primary and secondary sources at the Mander and Mitchenson collection, the Theatre Archives at the Victoria and Albert Museum, Westminster Library Archives, University of Bristol, Theatre Collection, the Bunnett-Muir Archive as well as working through secondary bibliographical material. I have attended a number of seminars and workshops at The Society for Theatre Research, Westminster Reference Library and National Theatre of Great Britain. Through literature searches, bibliographies and attendance at conferences I have made myself familiar with the terrain within the subject area, systematically surveying theatrical magazines and journals of the period including *The Era*, *The Stage*, *Theatre World*, *Dancing Times*, *Play Pictorial*, *J P Wearing's The London Stage*, *Whitaker's Almanacs*, *Who's Who in Theatre*. This research in the archive has been supported and reinforced by extensive practical observation of multidisciplinary performance and workshops by contemporary theatre companies³ and indeed my own practice as a black British performer working for over twenty years in multidisciplinary arts practice.⁴

This thesis comprises a series of case studies of revue shows produced between 1910 and 1930, in part to distinguish between what I see as three relatively discrete or characteristic periods of West End revue: 1910-1914, the period of the War, and the 1920s. I will draw on a number of specific contexts that thread their way through each of these periods and shape my focus on national and racial identities in

³ This has involved exploratory investigation into acting and performing styles and delivery looking at improvisational methods, storytelling, non-linear narrative, mask work, movement, singing and design. I have worked with a number of theatrical forms including cabaret, burlesque/neo-burlesque, variety, pantomime, circus, music hall, musical comedy and multimedia, as well as studying the work of contemporary performers with such companies as Robert Lepage, Builders Association. I have also attended workshops with Shared Experience, the David Glass Ensemble, Improbable Theatre and Complicite.

⁴ Working primarily with Prussia Lane Productions, a co-operative multidisciplinary performance company engaging in practice exploring political and social engagement.

fundamental ways. Firstly this was the age of nationalism, the ‘uncritically, passionate, patriotic love of country’,⁵ which fostered notions of both superiority and insecurity. Most importantly for this study, nationalist discourses became framed in particular by Anglo-German rivalry before the onset of the First World War and by what was perceived as British musical theatre’s diminishing power against an “onslaught” of American authority over popular culture. Secondly, representation of racial and national identities was crucially shaped by the cultural project of modernism, which involved ‘strategies that respond[ed] to and engage[ed] with the experience of modernity’.⁶ Thirdly, the accelerating class conflict in Britain and across wider Europe before and after the First World War not only polarised the theatre world but also had a fundamental impact on how revue staged race and nation,⁷ shaped by the growing commoditisation of the female body. Finally, the representation of race and the staging of spectacle, especially in post-War revues, was centrally shaped by a fashionable infatuation with primitivism. Broadly, these thematic dimensions provide a significant part of the conceptual basis for this investigation of how national and racial identities were represented in West End revue across the four periods under discussion.

‘Theatre is intrinsically connected to the nation. Not only does it enhance, “national” life by providing a space for shared civil discourse, entertainment, creativity’, it is also ‘deeply implicated in constructing the nation through the

⁵ Charles W. Kegley Jr and Eugene R. Wittkopf (eds), *World Politics: Trends and Transformation* (New York: Bedford/St.Martins, 2001), 92.

⁶ Rebecca Walkowitz, *Cosmopolitan Style: Modernism beyond the Nation* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2006), 6. See also Pericles Lewis’s *Modernism, Nationalism and the Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) and Len Platt, *Modernism and Race* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

⁷ See John Pick, *The West End, Mismanagement and Snobbery* (Eastbourne: John Offord Publications Ltd., 1983), Raphael Samuel, Ewan MacColl and Stuart Cosgrove (eds), *Theatres of the Left 1880-1935: Workers Theatre Movements in Britain and America* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), Clive Barker and Maggie B. Gale (eds), *British Theatre Between the Wars, 1918-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), Michael Sidnell, *Dances of Death: The Group Theatre of London in the Thirties* (London: Faber and Faber, 1984) and Brian Clark, *Group Theatre* (London: Pitman, 1971).

imaginative realm’.⁸ My thesis proposes that London West End revue was a topical satirical popular theatre that engaged with national identity discourse and reconstituted identity formations through music, dance and wordplay. I hope to highlight through contextual and textual analysis the attitudes, assumptions and beliefs that informed revue performances and narratives that reflected provocative new lifestyle values and politics. Often politically conservative, protective of the status quo and concerned with appealing to a mainstream audience, revue was highly sensitive to the status and position of Britain and London and cultivated a sense of itself as the defender of a colonial empire and, at the same time, the centre of a cosmopolitan culture competing with other metropolitan centres such as Paris, Berlin and New York.

The first chapter, ‘Histories, Practices and Methodologies: Contexts for reading London West End revue’, will present the rationale for this thesis and the aims of the study, providing an explanation of its geographical, social, cultural and historical contexts and the key themes that will be explored. I will outline and consider the significance of the thesis within the subject area and provide reviews of the relevant literature. I will then situate revue performance in the social, economic and cultural contexts of the period and summarise its development clearly. This chapter will also discuss the methodological approach of the thesis, which draws on current theoretical debates across performance and theatre history, performance theory and analysis, cultural theory and intercultural developments in British performance research. I will use my textual analysis to situate revue in the context of the historical circumstances of its production as an entertainment and as a centre for the dissemination of national ideology. I will also highlight my lines of analysis and

⁸ Nadine Holdsworth, *Theatre and Nation* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 6.

contextualise those choices using previous research in this area in order to outline the unique contribution of this work.

The second chapter 'Revue in the Modern World: Possibilities and Perils - West End Identities', will begin to highlight the contradictions and significance of a London identification in revue, especially in its dramatic and cultural form, where revue consciously played with linear narrative and performance frameworks, challenged musical comedy's utopian vision by offering critiques of social and cultural change. Here revue presents the London West End as a space of negotiation that contains conflicting critiques; a space which celebrates all things new and actively seeks to rescue and celebrate past forms of living and performance. In delineating a space for these old and new ways of living in London, revue articulated a fading British/English hegemonic sensibility, a cultural expression of a fragile social and political order. For all its conservatism, London West End revue was also in many ways a critical exploration of modernity. It imagines London as the centre of its world, an urban metropolis that is integral to developing the imagined community of 'the West End'. London was a 'City in the Jazz Age [...] a syncopated civilisation [...] where no notion was too cranky to voice, no experiment too eccentric to try.'⁹ In revue, London and the West End become interchangeable. Like Britain and England, the metropolis identity was constructed as one and singular in ambiguous narratives that captured a city 'shot with diversity [...but] criss-crossed with nervous energy as it stared at an uncertain future.'¹⁰ This dual personality was reflected in revue's depiction of the London West End as a space, eschewing the extremism of social reform (socialism) and embracing moderation (conservatism), but at the same time

⁹ Cathy Ross, *Twenties London: A City in the Jazz Age* (London: Philip Wilson Publishers Ltd, 2003), 11.

¹⁰ Ross, *Twenties London*, 11.

perpetuating a ‘diffusion of acquiescent attitudes towards authority’ in the guise of ‘allowed disruption’.¹¹

In chapter three, ‘New Insecurities, New Form, New Identity – National Identity and Raciologies in *Eightpence a Mile* (1913)’, I will focus on the revue *Eightpence a Mile* (1913) and use it to illustrate how revue constituted a particular response to mounting social, political and cultural insecurities over Britain’s status and position at the beginning of the twentieth century. Just as musical comedy had in many ways reflected Britain at its zenith, revue by comparison captured a sense of decline. Insecurities regarding Britain’s colonial rule, as exemplified in Ireland and elsewhere, were compounded by growing demands for social reform across the country – the call for women’s emancipation, the growth of the labour and trade union movements and the death of King Edward VII all created a climate of mounting disillusion. Revue reflected the immediacy of this uncertain world through a fragmented vocabulary of performance inscribed with a bewildering variety of national and racial characteristics. It mixed dances such as ‘Russian ballet’ with Latin tango or Afro-American ‘cakewalk’ with Viennese waltz. Musically, it utilised German or Viennese operetta, American ragtime and English musical comedy. This national and racial range was a kind of labelling in some ways indicative of a Western European culture that considered race classification a matter of scientific fact.¹² But it also signified a genuine ‘melting pot’ quality which underwrote revue’s status as part of a cosmopolitan culture. Indeed, for all the nationalistic and local elements in *Eightpence a Mile*, such shows also represented a concerted attempt to support

¹¹ Eric A. Nordlinger, *The Working Class Tories: Authority, Deference and Stable Democracy*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 210.

¹² See Leon Poliakov, *The Aryan Myth: A History of Racist and Nationalist Ideas in Europe*, trans. Edmund Howard (London: Sussex University Press in association with Heinemann, 1974). See also Kenan Malik, *The Meaning of Race: Race, History and Culture in Western Society* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996) and Michael Banton, *Racial Theories* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

London's position at the forefront of a contemporary cosmopolitan culture, counteracting challenges from Paris, Berlin and New York to its status as the world's cultural hub. In revue's shapeless and haphazard version of modernity, then, ideas of race and nation became deeply problematised, exposing contradictions in national and racial discourse. One result was the emergence of a London/national identity that displaced the romanticism of English musical comedy by combining a satirical listless detachment with a defiant sophistication that articulated a fading British hegemonic sensibility, a cultural expression of a fragile and changing social and political order.

In chapter four, 'Degeneration/Regeneration – The Remaking of Nation in Wartime West End Spectacular Revue', I highlight how a renegotiation of gender roles occurred during the First World War as women took up the tools of industry in war-related production. This gave them opportunities to break free from the domestic sphere and was pivotal in negotiating patriarchal power structures and contributing to the women's suffrage movement. However, in West End revue this renegotiation had a slightly different register: rather than a breaking down of traditional gender roles and identities, as indeed there was in other spheres, I argue that wartime revue performance displayed a regenerative nationalism that sought a remasculinisation of British culture. In often contradictory and complex representations, revue performances perpetuated images of British manliness and womanhood that reasserted patriarchal values and constructed a version of female virtue that sexually objectified women through the development of the chorus girl persona. This was pivotal in constructing a shared rhetoric of entertainment and patriotism. Focusing on the shows *Business As Usual* (1914), *By Jingo If We Do!* (1914), *Push and Go* (1915) and *The Bing Boys are Here!* (1916), I will highlight how revues of this period

engaged in pertinent national identity and gender formations as the political establishment called for propaganda as well as distraction and escapism.

In chapter five, ‘American Ascendancy and Black Cultural Transfer in *Dover Street to Dixie*’, I examine how cross-cultural exchange coexisted with appropriation on the stages of popular performance, as well as between artists and audience, as travelling African American revue shows and their stars became mediators of a global repertoire of popular culture in the metropolis. By the 1920s, West End musical theatre already had a large and extended repertoire of representations of black and oriental identities for the consumption of Western audiences,¹³ as exemplified by the biggest theatrical success of the War, the musical comedy *Chu Chin Chow*, an oriental fantasy. However the particular entry of the plantation revues *Dover Street to Dixie* (1923) and *The Rainbow* (1923) into the West End at this time signalled a different kind of crossover and a new contradictory investment in the black persona through primitivism and negrophilia. In ‘*Dover Street to Dixie*’ we find a British national ideology re-asserting a “particular order” through a revisionist, romanticised fantasy of black culture expressed as primitivism. In these revues, Britain’s national and racial supremacy was generally maintained through a broad continuum of stereotypical representations of black people. European ideas of primitivism at this time, however, had often opposing connotations. Primitivism embodied an appreciation of art forms from other cultures such as those of Africa that were taken to signify a pure spiritual wholeness thought to have been lost in an increasingly

¹³ For an overview of black representations, see Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (New York: Continuum, 2003). Although writing about American films, Bogle’s identification of stereotypes is just as valid for constructions of black identities for the West End musical theatre. Clarkson Rose, in *Beside the Seaside* (London: Museum Press Ltd, 1960), highlights the importance of black face performance as family entertainment in British theatre (see chapters 1-3). See also Brian Singleton, *Oscar Asche, Orientalism, and British Musical Comedy* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2004), Platt, *Musical Comedy*, chapter 3 and Petrine Archer-Straw, *Negrophilia: Avant-garde Paris and Black Culture in the 1920s* (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd, 2000), Introduction and chapter 1.

materialistic, mechanised and decadent society. However, the ‘primitive’ was also ‘the bottom line in a hierarchy of categories that placed European civilization at its pinnacle’.¹⁴ Following nineteenth-century racial theory, primitivism, while investing blacks with enhanced passion and sexuality, also made familiar identifications with savagery and deviance – a ‘process through which Europeans suggested their own superiority by placing inferior status on others.’¹⁵

The 1920s saw the emergence of the fashion for negrophilia, the “love of black culture” that allowed white people the space to act out myths and fantasies: to try on the accents of blackness, demonstrating the permeability of the colour line, yet always re-asserting the power structures of white supremacy. However, it also allowed black performers access to white privilege and lifestyles. This chapter will describe the role of revue in international transfer and exchange: it provided marginalised black artists with entry into mainstream entertainment and represented a network of black people ‘in residence and in motion,’¹⁶ who had a significant influence across British culture.

Chapter six, ‘Class Distinction and National Identity in 1920s West End intimate revue’, charts two styles of intimate revue that emerged on the West End stage in the 1920s, one represented by *The Co-optimists*, which ran throughout the 1920s and the other by Noël Coward’s revues *On with the Dance* (1925) and *This Year of Grace* (1928). Although markedly similar in some respects, these intimate revues reflected differing cultural and class perspectives and charted complex shifts in national identity that had particular resonance during this period. In the Edwardian period, musical comedy had sought to emphasise the commonality of a British

¹⁴ Archer-Straw, *Negrophilia*, 11.

¹⁵ Archer-Straw, *Negrophilia*, 12.

¹⁶ Gretchen Holbrook Gerzina (ed.), *Black Victorians, Black Victoriana* (London: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 3.

national identity, erasing growing class dissent through spectacular national narratives of assimilation that celebrated a united empire for King and country. However, in the aftermath of the First World War, widespread dissatisfaction with the old social order could no longer be controlled, resulting in large-scale labour unrest, a wave of strikes and increasing animosity between the workers and the bosses, the poor and the rich. After the snap 'Khaki general election' of 1918, a national landscape with a new national and political identity had emerged. The people were 'beginning to discover themselves, and this was a disruptive feature of the national life, full of both promise and of menace. The workers were becoming organized'.¹⁷ The menace, as perceived by the bosses and the government, was the fear of social revolution: the growth of the newly organised left and the threat of Bolshevism taking control of the trade unions caused real concern to the political establishment. These developments meant that the social order and the differences between the classes came to dominate not only the political process but also the arts and the theatre.

¹⁷ Harold Hobson, *Theatre in Britain* (Oxford: Phaidon Press Ltd, 1984), 17.

Chapter 1

Histories, Practices and Methodologies: Contexts for Reading London West End Revue.

My research draws on the approaches of both cultural studies and theatre history to explore London West End revue's engagement with identity construction, using the theatre history research methods of collection, organisation, description and reading of manuscripts, alongside critical theory and cultural studies analysis and understandings of identity, nation and power. In particular I have drawn on Michel Foucault's understandings of 'the production of knowledge and meaning through discourse'¹⁸ with power circulating never monopolized by one centre, but rather being 'deployed and exercised through a net-like organization'.¹⁹ This implies, as Stuart Hall has highlighted, 'that we are all, to some degree, caught up in its circulation – oppressors and oppressed'.²⁰ This understanding is critical to any analysis of the complex dynamics at work in revue identity construction in the early twentieth century because it challenges hierarchical, top to bottom power structures and highlights the possibilities of resistance and agency.

Seeking to critically engage with London West End revue of the early twentieth century brings to the fore the dilemma that faces all theatre researchers and historians interrogating performance in a historic context. Allardyce Nicoll articulates the problem very clearly:

In seeking to grasp the nature of any single revue we can do no more than tantalisingly grope our way through contemporary critiques, realising

¹⁸ Stuart Hall, 'The Work of Representation', in Stuart Hall (ed.), *Representation, Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage Publications, 1997), 51.

¹⁹ Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* translation by Colin Gordon, Leo Marshall, John Mepham, Kate Soper (Brighton: Harvester, 1980), 98.

²⁰ Hall, 'The Work of Representation', 50.

constantly that even the most brilliantly penned critical notice, whether or not assisted by printed texts of selected lyrics and sketches, must inevitably fail to bring any of these pieces to life for us.²¹

It is from this position that all questions about the performances of the past must begin, as Michael Huxley and Noel Witts restate:

If we cannot see Meyerhold's trailblazing production of Gogol's *The Government Inspector* [1926], how can we hope to place it historically in the pre-Stalinist period of Russian history? All we have left is the documents, the accounts, some photographs, not the work itself.²²

Max Herrmann's *Theaterwissenschaftliches Institut* argues that history lies in these documented facts and that nothing can be known without sufficient factual documentation. However, Herrmann's mode of theatre historicism sets up restrictions which in some instances limit research to the 'cataloguing' of data, which, although it has a significant place and value, has restricted the role of critical interpretation and led to the omission of contextual explorations, resulting in stagnation, as Jacky Bratton explains.

The historian is expressly debarred from considering the plays that were put on by people she or he studies except in clearly limited and defined factual ways [...] No knowledge need be dull; but exemption from the obligation to be critical, imaginative, alert to implication and synthetic to ideas in one's research has led too many scholars to an intellectual inertia, and the antiquarian pursuit of relics for their own sake.²³

²¹ Allardyce Nicoll, *English Drama, 1900-1930: The Beginnings of the Modern Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 175.

²² Michael Huxley and Noel Witts (eds), *The Twentieth-Century Performance Reader* (London: Routledge, 1996), 6.

²³ Jacky Bratton, *New Readings in Theatre History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 6.

It is by acknowledging these limitations that interdisciplinary methodologies have re-animated and re-purposed performance and historiographic research. The fact that the event is past demands a focus in application on the need to look beyond the literary text and to emphasise the myriad interrelations of performance. It is precisely the quality of how live theatre performance ‘disappears’ that begins interdisciplinary engagements with, for example, audience perception, interaction, cultural value and the construction of theatre discourses. ‘New readings’²⁴ across performance and theatre history have led to a reappraisal of the engagements of popular cultural entertainments of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. These methodologies challenge the dependence on the playscript both as a ‘standard of excellence and as a foremost implement of theatre research’, exposing a hierarchy that bestowed the ‘paramount test of dramatic excellence’ on the literary text, causing certain elements of drama to take aesthetic precedence over others and leading to the exclusion of ‘a vast range of theatrical forms which express the taste and interest of their period’.^{25 26} In my account of revue I draw on Thomas Postlewait’s ‘disciplinary mandate’ to acknowledge the impact of social and cultural forms on performance and argue that it is necessary ‘to draw upon a very wide spectrum of cultural and social approaches, including not only various theories of performance but also the defining concepts of gender, race, class and ethnicity’.²⁷

I have also drawn on past and current cultural performance analysis methodologies such as those articulated in Erika Fischer-Lichte’s *The Transformative Power of Performance: a New Aesthetic*, Maria Shevtsova and Dan Urian’s ‘Sociology of the

²⁴ Bratton, *New Readings*. See also Peter Holland and W.B. Worthen (eds), *Theorizing Practice, Redefining Theatre Practice* (New York: Palgrave, Macmillan, 2003) and Len Platt, *Musical Comedy on the West End Stage, 1890-1939* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

²⁵ Kenneth Richards and David Mayer, *Western Popular Theatre* (London: Methuen & Co, 1977), 257.

²⁶ Richards and Mayer, *Western Popular Theatre*, 259.

²⁷ Thomas Postlewait, ‘Theatre History and Historiography: A Disciplinary Mandate’, *Theatre Survey* 45:2 (November 2004), 183.

Theatre’ and Millie Taylor and Dominic Symonds’s *Studying Musical Theatre, Theory and Practice*.²⁸ Taylor and Symonds’s exploration of musical theatre offers a series of provocations that begins to highlight how ‘musical theatre *means* – through its narratives, its sign systems, its interaction with audiences and its cultural contexts’.²⁹ They highlight performed identities (a major theme of this thesis because these performances are subjected to the views of the dominant hegemony) and uncover Orientalism, patriarchy and heteronormative perspectives and representations in popular theatre. Similarly Fischer-Lichte and Shevtsova and Urian advocate an understanding of theatre as a social and cultural practice. Incorporating Lucien Goldmann’s approach to theatre history, they highlight the ‘vision du monde of the group or class consciousness [...] expressed in and through dramatic texts’ and advocate a historical sociology ‘taking into account the past, present and future as well as breadth and context’.³⁰ Theatre historians are ‘honing in on societal contextual research and not on theatre history as such [...] They are using the “facts” of history as something that is part of say, a performance in order to learn how performance is a reaction vis-à-vis society as well as an intervention in society’.³¹

This perspective in theatre criticism critically recognises the importance of the interrelations between speech, movement, design, sound and the constant variations of engagement with an audience as fundamentally attached to the particular social and cultural context. My primary interest therefore is in how London West End revue says something about national identity: how it constructed particular representations of identity and wove them into the unconscious and conscious memory of the everyday.

²⁸ Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetic* (Oxford: Routledge, 2008), Maria Shevtsova and Dan Urian (eds), ‘The Sociology of the Theatre’, *Contemporary Theatre Review* 12 (2002), 1-8 and Millie Taylor and Dominic Symonds, *Studying Musical Theatre: Theory and Practice* (London: Palgrave, 2014).

²⁹ Taylor and Symonds, *Studying Musical Theatre*, 79.

³⁰ Shevtsova and Urian (eds), ‘The Sociology of the Theatre’, 4.

³¹ Shevtsova and Urian (eds), ‘The Sociology of the Theatre’, 3.

In this introductory chapter, I seek to provide an intersectional context for reading London West End revue through its ‘relationships among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formations’³² in order to highlight its intersectionality with identity categorisations, theatre histories, performance practices and the social, cultural and political world of the early twentieth century. This ‘polycentric multicultural approach [...] sees issues of race and national representation within a complex and multivalent relationality’,³³ that provides insight and dimension to often derided and dismissed performances. As Paul Gilroy stresses:

There are many histories still to be told and written about the undervalued and underanalysed experiences of cultural and aesthetic fusion and mutation that began the transformation of that discrepant modernity into marginal modernisms. They have often been wrongly excluded from critical discussions about modernity, its uneven consolidation or possible eclipse, let alone its aesthetic character and creative opportunities. Performance was central to the process of cultural intermixture.³⁴

That understanding requires the researcher to draw on the broader histories of urban popular entertainments and their role in generating emerging constructions of local, global and national identities influenced by modernity. In doing so I seek to re-interrogate this popular form and its contents and highlight its important engagement with national and racial identity constructions.

³² Leslie McCall, ‘The Complexity of Intersectionality’ *Signs: Journal of Women, Culture and Society*, 30/3 (2005), 1771-1800.

³³ Ella Shohat and Robert Stam (eds), *Unthinking Eurocentricism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (London: Routledge, 1994), 220.

³⁴ Paul Gilroy, ‘To be Real’: The dissident forms of black expressive culture’, in Catherine Ugwu (ed.), *Let's Get it On: The Politics of Black Performance* (London: ICA Publications, 1995), 15.

Cultural readings have split between two perspectives. The first identifies revue as popular culture linked to the processes of standardisation and mass culture and therefore portraying it as a reactionary, one-dimensional ‘entertainment’.³⁵ More contemporary cultural approaches, however, have looked at popular entertainment in terms of popular modernist aesthetics, where the form ‘reflects’ the modern, urban world in various ways. Also integral to my approach is Roland Barthes’s understanding of the production of myths for consumption in popular culture; bell hook’s work on systems of domination such as racism, sexism and class elitism;³⁶ Stuart Hall’s research into representation and signifying practices; Edward Said’s influential account of Orientalism; and Paul Gilroy’s formulation of the Black Atlantic. All of these expand the cultural horizons of modern history and popular cultural performance in ways that provide points of departure for the investigation of national and racial representations in revue.³⁷ However, that investigation, just like the revue form itself, defies conventional linear story-telling narratives and reflects an unorthodox tracing of marginalised and disregarded performances.

Raymond Williams’s reading of performance understands that it is positioned at the intersection of several fields of inquiry: theatre historians, sociologists, anthropologists and feminist scholars, to name a few, are all concerned with the interplay between the social and aesthetic context of performance. Williams’s formulation acknowledges that performance embodies ‘in itself those emphases, omissions, valuations, interests, indifferences which compose a way of seeing life,

³⁵ See Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, translated by John Cumming (London: Verso, 1989) and F.R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1948).

³⁶ See Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, translated by Annette Lavers (London: Vintage Books, 2000) and bell hooks, *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations* (London: Routledge, 1994).

³⁷ See Hall, *Representation*, Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993).

and drama as part of life',³⁸ thereby creating a particular reality. Crucial to that perception for Williams and to the formation of that 'reality' is 'that selection of interests and values that we call a particular culture'.³⁹ The terrain of culture, Stuart Hall warns, is a 'battlefield'.⁴⁰ This is manifested through a perpetual struggle in which the dominant hegemony seeks to categorise and define not only the field of play but also the players within an essentialised hierarchy. By tracing the development of the meanings of culture, Hall argues, we expose 'where hegemony arises and where it is secured'.⁴¹ Those developments of the definitions of culture, Morag Shiach argues, highlight how we have inherited 'not just the cultural hierarchies of the nineteenth century but distinctive ways of theorising them, which select cultural forms that exclude or marginalise'.⁴²

In the nineteenth century, Matthew Arnold⁴³ inaugurated a particular way of mapping the field of culture, which was furthered by F.R. Leavis⁴⁴ in the twentieth century. Both critics were responding to what they viewed as the degenerating onslaught caused by the development of large-scale industrial production, urbanisation and the rise of the working and middle classes. They placed 'culture' in a binary relationship where 'anarchy' and mass civilisation operated 'as a synonym for popular culture, defined as working-class culture', maintaining that culture had

³⁸ Raymond Williams, *Argument; Text and Performance: Drama in Performance* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), 170-188. .

³⁹ Williams, *Argument; Text and Performance*, 170-188..

⁴⁰ Stuart Hall, 'Notes on Deconstructing 'the Popular'', in John Storey (ed.), *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader* (Pearson: London, 1994), 451.

⁴¹ Hall, 'Notes on Deconstructing 'the Popular'', 453.

⁴² Morag Shiach, 'Feminism and Popular Culture', in John Storey (ed.), *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture, A Reader* (Pearson: London, 1994), 337.

⁴³ Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1932).

⁴⁴ F. R. Leavis, *Mass Civilisation and Minority Culture*, (Cambridge: Minority Press, 1930).

become fractured into two: 'high' and 'low' culture, or a 'minority culture' against a 'mass culture'⁴⁵.

Minority culture is the embodiment of the values and standards of the best that has been thought and said [now more or less reduced by the Leavisites to a literary tradition]. In contrast [...] mass culture of mass civilisation: [was defined by] commercial culture consumed unthinkingly by the 'uneducated' majority.⁴⁶

Both Arnold and Leavis stressed the unprecedented character of the mechanical 'modern age' and were critical of what they saw as its levelling-down effects in areas such as the theatre, the press, film and literature. They argued that the majority was susceptible to such standardising trends.

Theodor Adorno maintained that popular culture pedalled the ideology of the dominant hegemony through an exploitative capitalist industry, creating uniform and predictable consumer products. Adorno and Max Horkheimer⁴⁷ coined the phrase the 'culture industry' to describe the politics of the creative processes of 'mass' culture. Adorno highlighted popular music in his critique, particularly jazz music, and argued that popular music, like the other products of the culture industry, was consumed unthinkingly by the masses. Adorno argued that the music of the culture industry deceived the consumer by bestowing mass-produced products with the impression of individual choice through pseudo individualisation leading to standardisation. Adorno focused not only on the music but also on its reproduction, promotion and the distribution, which he stressed was highly centralised in its economic organisation, robbing popular music of any authenticity and reducing it to the status of a

⁴⁵ John Storey (ed.), *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader* (London: Pearson Education Ltd, 1998), 3.

⁴⁶ Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*, 5.

⁴⁷ See Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

commodity. For Adorno, capitalist modernism adapted and used consumerism and consumption as a way of maintaining power by manufacturing false consciousness, which ideologically supported class inequality and removed any chance of challenging class hierarchy. In other words popular culture was merely capitalism renewing itself through consumerism, homogenising culture and pacifying the masses. Key works by Raphael Samuel and Norman Marshall⁴⁸ view London West End theatre and by association revue from Adorno's theoretical perspective, labelling West End revue derisively and placing it firmly within the context of an ideological struggle as a manifestation of mass culture.

Adorno's fellow Frankfurt School critical theorist Walter Benjamin differed from Adorno, instead seeing in popular culture emancipatory possibilities that challenged the old repressive cultural hierarchies, which Benjamin argued denied the majority of people the opportunity to partake in and appreciate culture. In his essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction',⁴⁹ Benjamin argued that the mechanical reproduction of art had changed the reaction of the masses towards art by allowing them to participate in its reception and appreciation, highlighting what he saw as the democratic participatory nature of popular culture and the 'shattering of tradition'.⁵⁰ Benjamin's theoretical reasoning interrogated the binary of 'high' and 'low' popular culture and questioned the relation between aesthetics and politics at a time when, in his view, technological progress was bringing about a radical change in the production and reception of culture. Benjamin argued that art could not be viewed in isolation, but had to be critically analysed within a wider historical context, which

⁴⁸ Raphael Samuel, Ewan MacColl and Stuart Cosgrove, *Theatres of the Left 1880-1935: Workers Theatre Movements in Britain and America* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985).

Norman Marshall, *The Other Theatre* (London: John Lehmann Ltd, 1947).

⁴⁹ Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt and translated by Harry Zohn (1969), in William and Karen S. Feldman (eds), *Continental Philosophy: An Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 244-252.

⁵⁰ Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', 245.

inevitably questioned past and present understandings of culture, theory, practice, aims and reception. Benjamin sought to ‘explain the literary work more fully [...] [through] a sensitive attention to its forms, styles and meanings [...] grasping these forms, styles and meanings as the products of a particular history.’⁵¹ That history consisted of a Marxist understanding of art as part of the superstructure of society and part of society’s ideology:

A dominant power may legitimate itself by promoting beliefs and values congenial to it; naturalizing and universalising such beliefs so as to render them self-evident and apparently inevitable; denigrating ideas which might challenge it; excluding rival forms of thought, perhaps by some unspoken but systematic logic; and obscuring social reality in ways convenient to itself. Such ‘mystification’, as it is commonly known, frequently takes the form of masking or suppressing social conflicts, from which arises the conception of ideology as an imaginary resolution of real contradictions.⁵²

Thus, for Benjamin, to understand popular culture, was

first to understand the complex, indirect relations between those works and ideological worlds they inhabit, relations which emerge not just in ‘themes’ and ‘preoccupations’, but in style, rhythm, image, quality and form.⁵³

Critical cultural conceptual frameworks have expanded on Benjamin’s initial understandings,⁵⁴ formulating critical perspectives that highlight the complexity of popular culture and provide insightful theoretical structures with which to examine

⁵¹ Terry Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (London: Methuen & Co, 1976), 3.

⁵² Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction* (London: Verso, 1991), 5.

⁵³ Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, 6.

⁵⁴ See, Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgressions* (London: Routledge, 1996), Ernst Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000) and Richard Dyer, *Only Entertainment* (London: Routledge, 1992).

aspects of West End revue of the 1920s. It is these ‘insistently interdisciplinary’⁵⁵ approaches that have informed my investigation of the West End revue of the 1920s, which seeks to interrogate ‘the narratives of the past in the constructions of the present’.⁵⁶

Stuart Hall highlights the error of ‘self-enclosed approaches to popular culture, which [...] analyse popular cultural forms as if they contained within themselves, from their moment of origin, some fixed and unchanging meaning or value.’⁵⁷ This perspective has also been prevalent in postcolonial theoretical positions, which broadened the study of empire, nation and identity by addressing a wide range of texts to highlight systems of domination and power. As Wright contends, ‘the national past is capable of finding splendour in old styles of political domination and of making an alluring romance out of atrocious colonial exploitation’.⁵⁸ Frantz Fanon’s work⁵⁹ began to highlight the effects of empire and colonisation, and later theorists have developed it to highlight the hybridity of the colonial encounter, which destabilises the notion of pure, timeless identities. This is a theme which is explored throughout this thesis but in particular in the analysis of the revue *Dover Street to Dixie* (1923) as a critical engagement that spotlights the complex meanings attributed to the transculturated or hybrid narratives and asks what relations of power might be articulated there.

Richard Dyer’s work on musical entertainment draws on aspects of Stuart Hall’s notion of popular culture, or, as Dyer prefers to call it, ‘entertainment’. For Dyer, ‘entertainment’ is often assumed to be ‘already unproblematically known,

⁵⁵ Postlewait, ‘Theatre History and Historiography’, 183.

⁵⁶ Holland and Worthen (eds.), *Theorizing Practice*, 7.

⁵⁷ Stuart Hall, ‘Notes on Deconstructing “the Popular”’, 451.

⁵⁸ Patrick Wright, *Living in an Old Country: The National Past in Contemporary Britain* (London: Verso, 1985), 254.

⁵⁹ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, translated by Constance Farrington (London: Penguin, [1961], 2001).

neutral and given, is only entertainment'.⁶⁰ Dyer defines popular culture singularly, confining 'its application to cultural products, the arts and the media'.⁶¹ He wants to emphasise 'entertainment as entertainment':⁶² entertainment for its own sake. He argues that 'we have to understand it itself neither take it as given nor assume that behind it lies something more important'.⁶³ Entertainment, argues Dyer, 'Offers certain pleasures not others, proposes that we find such and such delightful, teaches us enjoyment – including the enjoyment of unruly delight'.⁶⁴ In the 'twenties, revue represented 'unruly delight' propelled by a vibrant dance and music culture, which was seen to disrupt and challenge social modes of conduct, representing 'a sly nose-thumbing at the establishment [...] an expression of daring, urbanity and sophistication'.⁶⁵

Drawing on feminist critiques of popular culture, we can see the value of an interdisciplinary approach, as exemplified by Morag Shiach, who inverts and challenges patriarchal notions of culture. Shiach maintains that the development of a feminist critique of popular culture has 'driven women increasingly towards questions of pleasure and consumption and away from those of history and production'.⁶⁶ This perspective is crucial in highlighting the challenges to patriarchal structures in revue, which manifested themselves in complex and contradictory resistances. As in the New York revues of Florence Ziegfeld and his 'glorification of the American girl', women in West End revues had their bodies similarly appropriated and their images similarly exploited in Albert de Courville's 'beauty chorus' and Charles Cochran's 'Ladies'. Yet, in an interplay between consumption and pleasure, a transgressive

⁶⁰ Dyer, *Only Entertainment*, 7.

⁶¹ Dyer, *Only Entertainment*, 2.

⁶² Dyer, *Only Entertainment*, 19.

⁶³ Dyer, *Only Entertainment*, 7.

⁶⁴ Dyer, *Only Entertainment*, 7.

⁶⁵ Robert Baral, *Revue: The Great Broadway Period* (New York: Fleet Press, 1962), 232.

⁶⁶ Shiach, 'Feminism and Popular Culture', 339.

dynamic developed, personified through the sexuality and energy of the ‘flapper’ and the chorus girls, with women often functioning as ‘a site where cultural values are displayed, contested, negotiated and ultimately transformed.’⁶⁷ This is exemplified in the ‘Grandfather Clock’ scene from the revue *Splinters*.⁶⁸

A man and woman from the nineteenth century play out a courtship scene in traditional gender roles: the woman is gentle, passive and deferring and the man strong, protective, all-knowing and the master of all he surveys. All the courtesies and correct etiquette are displayed, conforming to society’s codes of behaviour for the upper classes of the time. The scene culminates with the man dropping to one knee and proposing marriage. As we go into the next scene, the grandfather clock propels us forward, to look at the contrasting courtship interactions of twentieth century man and woman.

Clock: Now the Nineteenth century
Is completed, and you’ll see,
How bashful, modest maid
Having ceased to be afraid
Of convention has developed
To a parasite.⁶⁹

The man and woman enter, and times have now decidedly changed, as is epitomised by the language, dress and behaviour of the woman.

Woman: Hullo, old sport. Got any chocs?

Man: No, old dear, I haven’t.

Woman: Blighter [...] What are you yawning for?

⁶⁷ Angela J. Latham, *Posing a Threat: Flappers, Chorus Girls, and other Brazen Performers of the American 1920s* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2000), 11.

⁶⁸ *Splinters* (London: British Library, Lord Chamberlain’s Play, 1919), np.

⁶⁹ *Splinters*, np.

Man: Up all last night, dancing.

Girl: Well, so was I. Didn't get to bed till seven o'clock. Haven't been in bed till daylight for a month. Doing anything tonight?

Man: No, except going to bed early.

Girl: Rot – You've got to take me to see the 'Tooth Powder Girl' [...] You can phone through for a couple of stalls.

Man: Stalls!!⁷⁰

The scene continues as the woman proceeds to ask the man to 'engage a table at the Savoy for dinner [...] with champagne [...] iced of course'⁷¹. The man, completely dumbfounded, counters by saying how he was going to ask her to

fix up things with me [...] you know, marry. But all you think of is rushing about at some poor chap's expense. So I've changed my mind about asking you.⁷²

The girl in no uncertain terms replies, 'Think I'd marry you! No fear. I'm not going to marry any man on less than five thousand a year.'⁷³

The 'Grandfather clock' scene burlesques male and female relations through a 'compare and contrast' method that juxtaposes the twentieth century woman and her nineteenth century predecessor. The interjections provide a guiding commentary that direct the audience and allow fragmentation and quick movement between comparisons. The twentieth century woman is presented as the personification of a changed world: she swears, wants chocolates, goes dancing, stays out late and is highly materialistic. She is not only now the equal of her male counterpart, but his better – able to out-compete and outlast the man, who is tired literally and

⁷⁰ *Splinters*, np.

⁷¹ *Splinters*, np.

⁷² *Splinters*, np.

⁷³ *Splinters*, np

metaphorically and is disorientated by the changing social relations. On the surface this seems like a damning attack on this ‘parasitic girl’, but a closer reading reveals an ambiguity. Although lambasted and derided, there is something in her rebellious attitude, her fashions and her snappy wit that endears her to us. The audience is at once repelled and attracted to the twentieth century woman because her pursuits of dancing, music and fashion are their pursuits and interests. Her desire to see the show ‘Tooth Powder Girl’ associates her with the audience: she is one of them.⁷⁴ The sketch is not an attack but a ‘tender mockery’, and the audience share in the esoteric joke, poking fun at aspects of their own lives and those of the people they know. Sketches like this cultivated an ‘in crowd’ knowingness and encouraged the audience to understand themselves and their lives as important enough to be ‘talked about’ and to become sophisticated enough to laugh at themselves. The scene also emphasises revue’s ‘liveness’ – that revue is a live event, before an audience, linking itself directly to the audience and the moment, connected to and celebrating the now. Revue was the manifestation of a particular conception of modernity: of ‘modernity not as an ideal, but as the practical negotiation of ones life and one’s identity within a complex and fast changing world’.⁷⁵ This was captured in revue’s fragmented, multidisciplinary form, which reflected the ‘messy and uneven nature of socio-historical change [and] [t]he understanding that change operates at different levels and there are discontinuities as well as continuities’.⁷⁶

Christine Gledhill’s analysis of popular culture advocates a theory of culture as negotiation and seeks to avoid a deterministic view of cultural production.

⁷⁴ A sense of identification between the audience and the characters/performers was actively encouraged, with the distinction between audience and performer, the real and the unreal, becoming ‘unfixed’, with old music hall interplay and asides to the audience that emphasised the actor-spectator relationship and audience interaction.

⁷⁵ Mica Nava and Alan O’Shea (eds), *Modern Times: Reflections on a Century of English Modernity* (London: Routledge, 1996), 11.

⁷⁶ Nava and O’Shea (eds.), *Modern Times*, 12.

Gledhill's theory of negotiations like the carnivalesque 'implies the holding together of opposite sides in an ongoing process of give-and-take'.⁷⁷ Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony underpins Gledhill's view of 'culture as negotiation': she describes the 'ever shifting, ever negotiating play of ideological, social and political forces through which power is maintained and contested'.⁷⁸ The value of negotiation is that it allows space to the subjectivities, identities and pleasures of the audience. 'Meaning is neither imposed nor passively imbibed but arises out of a struggle or negotiation between competing frames of reference, motivation and experience'.⁷⁹ Yet, I contend, revue enacted ideological contestation as much as it reflected or reproduced the dominant ideology: the possibilities for contestation and transgression lie in the process of telling stories. Revue's form disrupted the dominant linear narrative and in doing so highlighted the instability of modern national identities and also the possibility of and agency for changing the social order.

Literature review

Andrew Davies, in his book *Other Theatres: The Development of Alternative and Experimental Theatre in Britain*, constructs a history of British commercial theatre of the 1920s as a theatrical landscape that is sterile and stagnating, devoid of aesthetic experimentation or social relevance. Davies depicts West End theatres as decorative, alienating, class ridden and out of touch with the contemporary world:

In such circumstances it was hardly surprising that naturalism – stage action that sought to represent the 'real', i.e. middle-class life – should dominate the

⁷⁷ Christine Gledhill, 'Pleasurable Negotiations', in John Storey (ed.), *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader* (London: Pearson, 1994), 239.

⁷⁸ Christine Gledhill, 'Pleasurable Negotiations', 239.

⁷⁹ Christine Gledhill, 'Pleasurable Negotiations', 239.

West End or that the experiments and innovations current elsewhere in mainstream European theatre should pass the British commercial theatre by [...] most popular was the endless diet of musicals or historical period pieces.⁸⁰

Davies's perspective on West End theatre and, in particular, the 'endless diet of musicals', uses a discourse of cultural value that denies agency and significance to 'certain kinds of dramatic action'.⁸¹ Davies, as the title of his book suggests, seeks to construct an alternative theatre history, arguing that progressive, challenging theatre of this time was found at the periphery with the Workers Theatre Movement, the Group Theatre and Unity Theatre. However if we take another look at popular commercial performance, especially the 'endless diet of musicals' and, more specifically, West End revue, the most popular and successful theatrical entertainment being produced in the West End of London of the 1920s, what we see does not support Davies's reading, and in fact renders his interpretation simplistic and reductive.

The 1919 revue *Eastward Ho!* was written by Oscar Asche in collaboration with Dornford Yates and opened at the Alhambra theatre. The show was a follow up to Asche's landmark musical comedy *Chu Chin Chow*, a musical version of Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves, which had played at His Majesty's theatre for 2,235 performances. It was a 'cunning mixture of music, stage realism and art pantomime with Folies-Bergerian mannequin parade in frocks remarkable for their bizarre and gorgeous colour schemes'.⁸² In keeping with Asche's trademark lavish, oriental style, *Eastward Ho!* sees the protagonists sail to Egypt in search of hidden treasure in a

⁸⁰ Andrew Davies, *Other Theatres: The Development of Alternative and Experimental Theatre in Britain* (London: Macmillan Education Ltd 1987), 80.

⁸¹ Raymond Williams, *Argument*, 170-188.

⁸² Lynton Hudson, *The English Stage, 1850-1950* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press Publishers, 1951), 164.

ruined temple in the Desert of Sin. The reviewer for *The Stage* had trouble placing *Eastward Ho!* in terms of genre, but settled on ‘roughly revue’. Meanwhile Asche and his collaborator Yates had already situated the show as a revue. The lyrics of the song ‘I don’t know why, do you?’ confront us with a challenging social landscape that is deeply political and at odds with Davies’s version of an inconsequential music theatre.

I don’t know why do you?

If we need coal to rule the waves

That Britons never shall be slaves

Why we don’t hang our Bolshie Knaves

I don’t know why do you?

I don’t know why do you?

Why dresses now are cut so low

Why women want their backs to show

All bare from here to

(cough) – half a mo-

I don’t know why do you?

I don’t know why do you?

Why British workmen heed such rot

From Ramsay Mac and Snowdon lot

Why not as France does have ‘em shot

I don’t know why do you?

I don’t know why do you?

If justice deals impartially

Why Sein Feiners went scot free

I don't know do you?⁸³

Here the performers seek to engage the audience directly in a topical debate about contemporary issues. Far from being frivolous or neutral, we find West End revue articulating and commenting on the issues and concerns of its time and taking sides. This song actively questions the growing challenges to the old order and pointedly sets about mocking and criticising individuals or groups and symbols that embody or support change. The Russian revolution of 1917 was still fresh and fear of revolution in Britain was real: industrial action and union agitation threatened to challenge the government and the social order, as did the rise of alternative political parties such as the Labour party, which sought to challenge class prejudice, and Sinn Fein, which called for the dismantling of the British Empire in Ireland. The song constructs a world that is complex and unrelentingly miserable and through its direct address places the audience at the centre through recurring questions, as illustrated again by a later song, 'The Burning Question'.

Now everything's a question

For that's the term we use;

It's a question whether Palestine

Be given to the Original Inhabitants

And drinks and strikes and honours lists

Are questions to be faced,

I've even heard that Jazzing is

In questionable taste.

⁸³ Oscar Asche and Dornford Yates, *Eastward Ho!* (London: British Library, Lord Chamberlain's Plays, 1919) np.

About the Coal we need so much
There's been a great to do,
The owner wants the profits, and
The miner wants them too;
And neither's satisfied with part
But each demands the whole
In fact they want the blinking earth
But the public wants the Coal!⁸⁴

Research by scholars on revue often influenced by cultural studies has begun to develop new understandings of the form and its registrations.⁸⁵ As Sophie Nield has highlighted, British popular performance of the early twentieth century maintained an 'ideological slipperiness [...] as it engaged the cultures of its times'.⁸⁶ However, I contend that revue popular performance was an active and important signifying practice that employed diverse representational strategies to construct common-sense views of national belonging and identity.

Past readings of London West End revue have understood it as a sub-genre of musical theatre, a staging post in the 'evolution' of musical theatre towards an integration of music, song and dramatic narrative culminating in the 'book musical'.⁸⁷ Within macro-narratives of theatre history, revue, if discussed at all,⁸⁸ is given little

⁸⁴ *Eastward Ho!*np..

⁸⁵ See Jonas Westover, (ed), 'The Glamour, the Gags and the Girls: The Musical Revue in Europe and America, 1907-1957', *Studies in Musical Theatre* 7:1 (2013), Len Platt, *Musical Comedy* and Gordon Williams, *British Theatre in the Great War: A Re-evaluation* (London: Continuum, 2003).

⁸⁶ Sophie Nield, 'Popular Theatre 1895-1940', in Baz Kershaw (ed) *The Cambridge History of British Theatre*: Volume 3 2004, 96.

⁸⁷ See Len Platt and David Walsh, *Musical Theater and American Culture* (Westport: Connecticut: Praeger, 2003) and Gerald Bordman, *American Musical Revue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

⁸⁸ See, Phillip B. Zarrilli, Bruce McConachie, Gary Jay Williams and Carol Fisher Sorgenfrei, *Theatre Histories: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2006).

critical analysis, or considered in terms of social and cultural meanings. From this perspective, revue is still overlooked even by those, such as Kurt Ganzl, who seek to formulate an alternative theatrical ‘canon’ that highlights the significance of musical theatre.⁸⁹ Ganzl provides an extensive and detailed historical record of West End musical theatre shows and marks revue’s presence, but grants it limited space in his final detailed chronology. Similarly, Andrew Lamb’s *150 Years of Popular Musical Theatre*⁹⁰ examines the French and Viennese traditions of operetta, the Spanish zarzuela, the English language comic operas of Gilbert and Sullivan, American vaudeville and West End and Broadway musical comedies, but, again, revue is mentioned only in passing but never situated or given any real value or significance.

Ganzl’s and Lamb’s approaches are located within a progressivist theatre history discourse in which theatre ‘begins as a simple popular form and becomes increasingly complex [...] [one] that [...] grows progressing from rudimentary and naïve to the fully mature, articulated and sophisticated drama’.⁹¹ Their exclusion of revue from their version of music theatre history is understandable, because revue is a composite form that straddles the boundaries of many different theatre styles. As a hybrid, it does not fit in with the progressivist view of music theatre history. Whereas that history looks for the integration of words, music and dance and a whole and complete narrative, revue performance works through montage and fragmentation.

There are a few accounts that focus specifically on London West End revue, of which Raymond Mander and Joe Mitchenson’s, *Revue: A Story in Pictures*⁹² is the exception, although it is essentially an unproblematic chronology of the longest running shows that offers a concise theatre history that is largely non-analytic. Its key

⁸⁹ Kurt Ganzl, *The British Musical Theatre Volume II: 1915-1984* (London: Macmillan, 1986).

⁹⁰ Andrew Lamb, *150 Years of Popular Musical Theatre* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000).

⁹¹ David Mayer and Kenneth Richards, *Western Popular Theatre* (London: Methuen & Co, 1977), 269.

⁹² Raymond Mander and Joe Mitchenson, *Revue: A Story In Pictures* (London: Peter Davies, 1971).

feature is the amount of photographic material it reproduces, which presents an invaluable visual record, especially of the importance of spectacle and the contributions of designers like Oliver Messel, Leon Bakst, Paul Poiret and Rex Whistler to revue's aesthetic.

Challenges to both the progressivist view and the self-contained versions of theatre history have emerged in the work of the new theatre historians exemplified by Tracy Davis, Jim Davis, Peter Bailey, J. S. Bratton, Thomas Postlewait and Len Platt. These cultural and social re-readings of popular theatre have highlighted how previous theatre historiographies maintained a bias toward the literary text at the expense of performance and implied a hierarchical version of theatre history in which certain types of performance were excluded from what was considered the theatre 'canon'. Scholars have challenged the dominance of progressive narratives through an investigation of theatre's wider cultural contexts, relating theatre practice to social, political and aesthetic movements and shifting the emphasis away from traditional sites of agency and influence.

Past historiography of the West End theatre at the turn of the twentieth century constructs a picture of a divided theatrical landscape driven by commercial expansion rather than aesthetic imperatives in 'the hands of men of money'.⁹³ The West End, a 'ramshackle edifice',⁹⁴ was split between a formal, serious form of drama and popular entertainments, both portrayed as sterile and stagnating forms.⁹⁵ Popular entertainment, as a result of the consequences of the growth of liberal capitalism, saw

⁹³ Marshall, *The Other Theatre*, 14.

⁹⁴ Marshall, *The Other Theatre*, 11.

⁹⁵ Davies, *Other Theatres*, 5.

the development of culture industries and the creation of West End theatres that catered to the growing population of the inner cities.⁹⁶

Music halls had begun to lose favour in terms of both reputation and economic viability,⁹⁷ so the changes in theatrical legislation in the late nineteenth century with the 1893 Theatre Act had presented an opportunity for the literal legitimisation of these old entertainment centres. The refurbishments and sanitising of the old entertainment halls had of course been preceded by the remodelling of large areas of the district of Westminster. These changes were pivotal⁹⁸ in that they necessitated a reassessment of the material presented by producers and managers to attract audiences. They also, inadvertently, meant that these spaces engaged in a wider cultural debate about the application and significance of culture and the arts that reflected wider changes and differences across political and social ideologies. Music halls, after lavish refurbishments, became theatres as producers sought to re-position them as ‘high-brow’ and attract middle class audiences into these old spaces. The ‘entertainment’ landscape saw various theatrical forms as a result of social and economic expediency, experimentation and re-structuring. An evening’s entertainment now saw the rearranging of the one to three acts, which were previously split between burlesque, comedy or drama and dancing; these forms were now all brought together. It was the blend of these diverse yet kindred popular entertainments at the closing stages of the nineteenth century, along with pierrots or concert parties and minstrel shows, which provided the nucleus for West End revue, which coincided

⁹⁶ See Jacky Bratton, *The Making of the West End Stage: Marriage, Management and the Mapping of Gender in London, 1830-1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), Maggie B. Gale, *West End Women; Women and the London Stage 1918-1962* (London: Routledge, 1996) and Claire Cochrane, *Twentieth-Century British Theatre: Industry, Art and Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

⁹⁷ John Pick, *The West End, Mismanagement and Snobbery* (Eastbourne: John Offord Publications Ltd, 1983).

⁹⁸ James Ross Moore, *An Intimate Understanding: The Rise of British Musical Revue, 1890-1920* (Unpublished PhD, thesis, University of Warwick, 2000).

with the economic, political and cultural conditions to provoke aesthetic adaptation and experimentation.

My work on London West End revue seeks to develop these earlier theories in significant ways. Firstly, the idea of the musical that presented itself as a democratic melting pot is both acknowledged and challenged. Although various performers were undoubtedly brought together on the musical stage, this was never a multicultural celebration, but rather a commoditised presentation controlled by and supporting a white patriarchal capitalist supremacy. Len Platt⁹⁹ interprets the musicals of this period as an illusion of a totalising national identity. In reality the musical was a complex exclusionary form, fragmented and located in different historical periods during which it became more English or more concerned with race, a problematic product of the musical form and much less certain of itself. The fact that West End revue was so formulated actually highlighted deep insecurities rather than confidence and reflected precise historical moments and political, economic and social issues. Secondly, my focus acknowledges the influence and representation of nation and location as specific identities that were crucial in influencing the construction of West End revue. Revue as a performance is more dependent than other forms on its locale. Different traditions of revue have existed across Britain, Europe, America and the Far East as topical and contemporary critical commentaries. Drawing on the local and current concerns of its location was a key element in diverse revue styles and success. I contend that revue in the West End of London cultivated a specific local and global identity that sought a national profile by placing itself as representative of nation and Empire. The term 'London West End' focuses my research on a specific location as a geographical marker, but it is also an introduction to the wider social and cultural

⁹⁹ See Len Platt, *Musical Comedy*.

identity dynamics that are the focus of my thesis: revue staged in this location was immediately engaged in a complex process of identity construction.

London as a city at this time was representative of England, Britain and Empire, having a particular plurality of identities with subdivisions of metonymy that identified it ‘as a city of global reach’ and ‘a transnational place’.¹⁰⁰ ‘The Thames made Londinium and Londinium made England and England made Parliament and Parliament made Britain and Britain made the world’.¹⁰¹ As John Clement Ball argues, ‘in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, London [...] projected itself to the inhabitants of its pink-stained territories as the centre of the world, the fountainhead of culture, the zero-point of global time and space’.¹⁰² The ‘West End’ on the other hand, as a phrase and as a space, has different meanings in different contexts, equally describing a shopping area or the theatre district that was constructed in the minds of the public through a mixture of unabashed self-promotion, advertising and myth. The West End contained the main concentrations of London’s metropolitan services such as places of entertainment, theatres, cinemas, nightclubs, restaurants, art galleries and museums. It has been given appellations such as ‘theatreland’ and ‘entertainment capital’, but geographically, the West End is in reality a borderless entity stretching across the borough of Westminster, its location fluctuating and its area indefinite.

I have chosen to explore and focus on a particular historical period and geographical location to provide an understanding of the importance of locale to revue content and to highlight significant works, developments and styles. This demonstrates revue’s involvement in marking the declining identities and power

¹⁰⁰ John Clement Ball, *Imagining London: Postcolonial Fiction and the Transnational Metropolis* (London: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 4.

¹⁰¹ Ball, *Imagining London*, 4.

¹⁰² Ball, *Imagining London*, 4.

structures that once controlled the world and in giving rise to new identities, ‘fragmenting the modern individual as a unified subject’.¹⁰³

West End revue sought to be considered a British, English national product and desired a clear demarcation between it and Parisian, Berlin and New York revue. The presentation of popular performances within a national context often had racial connotations, as highlighted by David Calvert¹⁰⁴ in his research into pierrot shows. Calvert highlights how pierrots’ emergence in the late nineteenth century in British seaside towns signified a racial and nationalistic response to the popularity of blackface minstrelsy. This is an understanding that I draw on in my reading of the re-emergence of the pierrot image in *The Co-Optimists*, a popular revue series of the 1920s, in which a perceived growing Americanisation is countered by a registration of the pierrot as symbolic of pre-war Edwardian England.

Revue has recently begun to be given the extended analysis given to other genres of theatre performance; Gordon Williams,¹⁰⁵ for example, highlights revue’s influence on the avant-garde. Indeed Platt, Becker and Linton’s recent comparative study of London and Berlin musical theatre begins to acknowledge revue as more than a marginal period form in its historiography. Yet previous ignorance of revue has meant that its importance, influence and profound engagement as a performance practice has remained overlooked. The *Studies in Musical Theatre* (2013) special issue on revue reflects an emerging acknowledgement by the academy of the form’s long-standing importance within musical performance and popular culture. However, it also highlights what is in many ways a traditional and limited western historiography of musical theatre, with the perpetuation of the idea of revue as a form

¹⁰³ Stuart Hall, David Held and Tony McGrew, (eds) *Modernity and its Futures* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1992), 274.

¹⁰⁴ Dave Calvert, ‘‘Royal Pierrots’ and ‘White Coons’: The British Pierrot Troupe in the Racial and National Imaginary’, in *New Theatre Quarterly* 29:2 (May 2013), p 107-120.

¹⁰⁵ Williams, *British Theatre in the Great War*.

that only found its full expression in America. Of the various essays in the journal, only one was concerned with a form of revue outside of the United States of America, yet, as a topical and contemporary practice, different traditions of revue existed beyond America and Europe.

For all the general neglect of revue as a modern form, then, there are signs in some academic quarters that it is beginning to be taken more seriously. James Ross Moore's unpublished thesis¹⁰⁶ and his chapter 'Girl crazy: Musicals and revue between the wars',¹⁰⁷ along with his work on Andre Charlot,¹⁰⁸ provide a fairly sustained critical overview of the development of West End revue. Charting its early origins from 1890-1920, Moore begins to situate revue in a social and cultural context, but never quite manages to move beyond cataloguing textual allusions to historical events. His work is a valuable introduction, but remains confined within a linear progressive narrative and understands revue as an essentially European and Eurocentric musical theatre genre, thereby failing to fully recognise the specifics of revue performance and its significance as social practice.

Moore does, however, give a good indication of some of the contexts that produced revue. He highlights several key influences, which, he argues, all coincided in the development of revue at the start of the twentieth century. He outlines the changes in entertainment jurisdiction that allowed the form to escape variety and move into the legitimate theatres. The West End had seen the introduction of small and medium sized theatres as a result of the austerities of the war. Moore emphasises that these were critical to revue's widespread popularity, because it became the choice of theatre managers and producers who were looking for an adaptable and affordable

¹⁰⁶ Moore, *An Intimate Understanding*.

¹⁰⁷ In Clive Barker and Maggie Gale (eds) *British Theatre between the Wars, 1918-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

¹⁰⁸ James Ross Moore, *Andre Charlot: The Genius of Intimate Musical Revue* (London: McFarland & Company, Inc. Publishers, 2005).

product that could accommodate diverse acts. Moore also uses the idea of genealogy to understand the nature of revue. In his genealogy, Moore argues that the elements of revue were not imported from overseas, but rather ‘scattered among the era’s stages’ with a ‘shifting and unreliable’ taxonomy.¹⁰⁹ He provides an interesting outline of pre-existing forms of musical theatre which impacted on revue in various ways – burlesque, for example, which included the political and social topicality so important to later revue and musical comedy, was the precursor of revue in terms of plotting and its obsession with fashion. Moore refers, too, to the significance of *burletta* – derived from the word *burla*, a shorter form of musical farce or mockery and by the end of the century ‘a drama in rhyme, which is entirely musical; a short comic piece, consisting of recitative and singing, wholly accompanied, more or less, by the orchestra’¹¹⁰ – to variety and music hall with their programmes of ‘turns’. The concert party – which for Moore formed a link between variety and revue by way of the bon vivant Harry Pelissier and the Co-Optimists – seaside entertainment, minstrels and pierrots likewise converge in revue. A British ballet tradition – the Alhambra’s ballet-pageants ‘ow[ed] less to the Russian tradition of stylised dramatic dance’ – was one of the elements that transformed variety bills, and it was also important in the development of revue, providing a link to Florence Ziegfeld’s spectacular revues ‘adapted from Paris for New York in 1907 and which Albert de Courville brought back from Ziegfeld’s Broadway five years after that.’¹¹¹ Moore also discusses French revue and French variety, which had emerged from the Cafés Chantant, and, of course, the role of Andre Charlot, veteran of the Folies Bergères and the Théâtre du Chatelet.

Revue for Moore, then, had complex origins, although even this full account is incomplete and problematic, with Moore failing to acknowledge Afro-American

¹⁰⁹ Moore, *An Intimate Understanding*, 5.

¹¹⁰ Nicholson Watson, *The Struggle For a Free Stage in London* [1906] (London: Blom, 1966), 281.

¹¹¹ Moore, *An Intimate Understanding*, 20.

influences and the impact of Orientalism. The West End is recognised as crucial to the development of revue, yet revue in the West End is not seen to be different from that of the regions. Moore's study also gives pre-eminence to the text over the visual and aural elements and omits any discussion of dance, music and design.

Despite the earlier refusal to treat revue seriously, some important perspectives preceded Moore. James Agate, an influential drama critic writing in the 1940s, for example, presented an ambiguous chapter on the most high-profile revue shows of the period in his *Survey of Light Entertainment on the London Stage 1920-1943- Immoment Toys*,¹¹² with his readings illustrating an indeterminate theatrical landscape. In some respects a forerunner of Richard Dyer, Agate celebrates light entertainment as 'entertainment', while still reaffirming the art versus entertainment distinction, and finally concluding that revue is no more than familiar, neutral and light. However, he does appreciate the form in performance terms and recognises that it has particular possibilities as entertainment.

Earlier still was Huntly Carter's *The New Spirit in the European Theatre, 1914-1924*, published in 1925.¹¹³ Carter's illuminating overview highlights critical aspects of commercial West End theatre practice and the contribution and influence of revue across genres in terms of performance. Carter describes a commercial West End theatre, well organised and shaped by the economic realities of the period's marketplace and wider social and cultural contexts. He shows how in West End revue aesthetic experimentation and challenge, often deriving from so-called 'high' art forms, can be found. For Carter, revue becomes a conduit for burgeoning art movements. He rightly recognises that the innovative experimentation in design,

¹¹² James Agate, *Immoment Toys: Survey of Light Entertainment on the London Stage 1920-1943* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1945). Agate was also drama critic for both *The Sunday Times* (1923-47) and the *BBC* (1925-32).

¹¹³ Huntly Carter, *The New Spirit in the European Theatre, 1914-1924* (London: Ernest Benn Ltd, 1925).

dance, movement, non-verbal expression and montage happening across the continent was being adapted by revue. Carter sees revue as a multidisciplinary performance, linking it not only to the Wagnerian concept of ‘total theatre’¹¹⁴ but directly to a British model encapsulated by Sir Henry Irving and John Ruskin’s ‘three fold method of play production – sound, colour and movement’.¹¹⁵ Carter acknowledges the innovative cross-cultural influences on revue performance but, at the same time, sees revue as a commercial form with limited artistic value and, in this respect, despite the interesting cross references with innovation and ‘serious’ culture, typical of the West End.¹¹⁶

Taxonomy of form

Allardyce Nicoll’s history of English theatre¹¹⁷ recognises revue’s popularity but struggles to acknowledge its singularity, its theatrical and social frameworks and its application as a multidisciplinary performance model engaged across the political, economic and cultural spheres. Nicoll offers a contradictory, conflicted commentary that at times disparages revue aesthetically but also recognises that, because it was socially reflective, it was significant. However, importantly for the purposes of this study, Nicoll’s summary brings attention to the difficulties of defining revue within a conventional theatre history. Revue, in Nicholl’s brief definition, is ‘an evening’s entertainment made up of numerous ‘turns’, generally short, some pointedly topical and some spectacular, presented in swift, kaleidoscopic rotation’.¹¹⁸ Early British revues, for Nicoll, were by and large musical extravaganzas, which ‘hardly went

¹¹⁴ Patrick. Carnegy, *Wagner and the Art of the Theatre* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2006).

¹¹⁵ Huntly Carter, *The New Spirit*, 10. See also Jeffrey Richards, *Sir Henry Irving: A Victorian Actor and His World* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2006), 9.

¹¹⁶ Carter, *The New Spirit*, 110. See Part 1 Theatre and War and Part 3 Theatre and Peace.

¹¹⁷ Allardyce Nicoll, *English Drama, 1900-1930: The Beginnings of the Modern Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973).

¹¹⁸ Nicoll, *English Drama*, 169.

beyond the theatrical burlesque'.¹¹⁹ He observes that there was a 'certain vagueness and uncertainty concerning revue',¹²⁰ and emphasises that, although revue shows had been presented in the nineteenth century, the word 'revue' was not introduced until 1905 when 'J.B. Fagan's *Shakespeare v. Shaw* appeared at the Haymarket and George Grossmith Jnr's show, *Rogues and Vagabonds* at the Empire music-hall and Venus also the following year'.¹²¹ Yet Nicoll does understand that revue was intrinsically connected to changes that were happening across British theatre and, like Moore, draws attention to performance practices that had been appropriated by the form: 'the influence of the contemporary French type, the adaptation of native music-hall practice and the utilisation of the material culled from the musicals'.¹²²

revue may have come from Paris and the concept of the 'revue' may have been an importation [...] [but] its appeal would not have been so great had it not been intimately related to what was happening within the English Theatre itself [...] and that many influences besides the French played a part in their composition.¹²³

Revue's popularity with a mass audience, Nicoll argues, was as much of a deciding factor in its definition and categorisation as the work itself; he concludes with an astute observation about the social and cultural significance of revue:

The revue had clearly caught the imagination and interest of the time, and there might be justification for regarding it as one of the most characteristic theatrical developments in England between its introductions in 1905 to the close of this period [1930].¹²⁴

¹¹⁹ Nicoll, *English Drama*, 168.

¹²⁰ Nicoll, *English Drama*, 169.

¹²¹ Nicoll, *English Drama*, 169.

¹²² Nicoll, *English Drama*, 170.

¹²³ Nicoll, *English Drama*, 169.

¹²⁴ Nicoll, *English Drama*, 169.

It is clear from Nicoll that the question of definition has always been problematic for revue, because revue has always incorporated many performance forms, styles and diverse expressive elements. The word 'revue' has its origins in France, coming from the French word *revoir*: to see again. At one time revue was typically a retrospective, established as a literal end of the year 'review' of the social and cultural calendar in the form of a theatrical production, which, through a succession of scenes in dialogue and song, represented incidents and individuals that had 'preoccupied the public to a greater or lesser extent during the course of the year'.¹²⁵ But in its later West End incarnations, revue arose against a backdrop of enormous social change, with a wide array of criss-crossing influences and huge variations that develop revue's core element of critical commentary. It is in the burlesque and pantomime conventions and styles of the eighteenth and nineteenth century that the origins of revue's critical commentary can be found; as David Mayer has argued, they

reflected and recorded the social, economic, political and aesthetic issues of the time and in the face of vigilant and tenacious censorship and chaotic licensing laws, was the only dramatic form to oppose the reigning follies and to serve as a vehicle for social comment and satire.¹²⁶

Burlesque satire, including social, topical or political satire, has long been established in British theatre as a means of providing the humour that allowed transgressive tendencies to be voiced. It was Henry Fielding's political satire in his plays and ballad operas at the Little Theatre in the Haymarket, which continually attacked the government in general and Walpole in particular, that eventually led to

¹²⁵ Mander and Mitchenson, *Revue*, 1.

¹²⁶ David Mayer, *Harlequin in His Element: The English Pantomime, 1806-1836* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1969), 2.

the introduction of censorship on the British stage in 1737.¹²⁷ The emergence of this satirical character can be seen earlier still in John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* (1728), for example, with its particular combination of music, drama, satirical spoof, episodic family and marriage scenarios and everyday social commentary, which makes it a clear forerunner of revue. Indeed, a revival of *The Beggar's Opera* at the Lyric Hammersmith in 1920, with new settings by Frederic Austin and directed by Nigel Playfair, was seen by Tyrone Guthrie,¹²⁸ who hailed it as the starting point of the integration of music and drama. Six years later, Playfair was responsible for the seminal revue *Riverside Nights* (1926), which greatly influenced the work of both the Group Theatre and Workers' Theatre Movement of the 1930s. In the nineteenth century, William Moncrieff's production of *Tom and Jerry; or, Life in London* (1821), adapted from a novel by Pierce Egan, could similarly be seen as embryonic revue: it comprised a series of individual scenes, comic and serious, with songs and dances, linked together by a theme or idea, in this case an expedition to the city of London. It included various styles of performance and visual spectacle, had a predilection for the illicit and titillation and offered contemporaneous commentary on everyday life, all of which epitomised the core ingredients of 1920s West End revue. Less than a hundred years later, we have the twentieth century equivalent of *Tom and Jerry* in the form of the revue *The Bing Boys are Here: A Picture of London Life in a Prologue and Six Panels*, adapted from a French piece by the writer famous as 'Rip'.

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¹²⁷ V. C. Clinton Baddeley, *The Burlesque Tradition in the English Theatre after 1660* (London: Methuen & Co Ltd, 1952), 2.

¹²⁸ Michael Sidnell, *Dances of Death: The Group Theatre of London in the Thirties*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), 33.

¹²⁹ Two brothers come up from Binghampton and visit London eager for adventure, accompanied by a lady's maid, for whom Lucifer Bing, played by George Robey, has a passion. Equipped with grotesque suits respectively too large and too small for them, they undergo adventures in night-clubs, grand hotels, theatres and the zoo, observing and commenting on metropolitan living.

Revue's elusive multiple nature highlights the characteristics that locate revue within what David Mayer calls the common ground of popular theatre. Mayer identifies problems of definition of popular drama as a defining trait, which is self-evident:

popular drama/theatre resists definition, definition must aim at limiting, at fixing boundaries, at excluding apparent irrelevancies, whereas [...] popular theatre emphasizes the contrary.¹³⁰

Popular theatre has always been a problematic and contested term and practice, often used to describe 'popular' entertainment 'that reaches a broader audience [...] appealing to cross-class audiences in complex societies through commercial means'.¹³¹ However, it is also defined as a people's or community theatre attributed to marginalised communities, utilising folk traditions such as those highlighted by the work of theatre practitioners Augusto Boal, Bertolt Brecht and Joan Littlewood¹³² and associated with a democratic proletarian and politically progressive theatre.¹³³ This latter definition of popular theatre is often used as a critique against the former, which it primarily sees as a standardising mass culture, 'a commercial culture consumed unthinkingly by the uneducated majority'¹³⁴ generated for profit alone rather than any aesthetic emphasis and viewed as parasitic, feeding on high culture. 1920s West End revue, as a form of popular theatre, reflected these critiques and for a time sought to straddle the commercial and the progressive aspects of theatre arts culture. This

¹³⁰ Mayer and Richards (eds.), *Western Popular Theatre*, 257.

¹³¹ Phillip B. Zarrilli, Bruce McConachie, Gary Jay Williams and Carol Fisher Sorgenfrei, *Theatre Histories: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2006), 311.

¹³² Augusto Boal (1931-2009), a Brazilian theatre director, writer and politician, and a major influential figure in the development of community theatre. See *Theatre of the Oppressed* (1971). Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956), a German poet, playwright and theatre director who challenged traditional dramaturgy and theatrical production. Joan Littlewood (1914-2002), a British theatre director and practitioner, and a founder of Theatre Workshop, a community-focused ensemble that put working class stories on the stage in the post war period.

¹³³ Joel Schechter, *Popular Theatre: A Sourcebook*, (London: Routledge, 2003).

¹³⁴ Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*, 5.

situated revue at a fascinating social and cultural intersection of a number of opposing ideologies that linked in quite organic ways to important traditions in English theatre and across British culture. It is within this intersection that revue's engagement with identity formation was directly and obliquely responding to moments of change and transformation across British society and corresponding to national, social, political and cultural concerns. As Nadine Holdsworth asserts,

The vast majority of theatre practices that engage with the nation, directly or obliquely, do so to respond to moments of rupture, crisis or conflict [...] theatre often deploys its content, formal properties and aesthetic pleasures to generate a creative dialogue with tensions in the national fabric.¹³⁵

I contend that West End revue was 'materially constitutive of the world it imagine[d]'.¹³⁶ As Margaret Werry argues, popular theatre does not merely represent but also generates and perpetuates 'social imaginaries'.¹³⁷ These social imaginaries consist of a feedback system between the general public and, in this instance, the revue shows, creating a relationship of 'reflexive circulation and exchange'.¹³⁸ It is a relationship between theatre and society that the British theatre practitioner Joan Littlewood, heavily influenced by popular theatre, likened to a figure of '8': what happens outside the theatre becomes reflected inside it, and vice versa, with the performances being influenced by and influencing society in a continual loop. Richard Schechner emphasises that this circulation and exchange moves between 'real life, pretending, acting on stage, simulating,[and] real life'.¹³⁹ The progression seems to move from left to right but actually the system loops back into itself. In this

¹³⁵ Nadine Holdsworth, *Theatre & Nation* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 7.

¹³⁶ Margaret Werry, "'The Greatest Show on Earth': Political Spectacle, Spectacular Politics, and the American Pacific', *Theatre Journal* 57 (2005), 356.

¹³⁷ Werry, 'The Greatest Show on Earth', 356.

¹³⁸ Werry, 'The Greatest Show on Earth', 356.

¹³⁹ Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2002), 119.

theoretical reading, popular entertainment begins to engage in the construction of social reality as Richard Dyer asserts:

It works with the desires that circulate in a given society at a given time, neither wholly constructing those desires nor merely reflecting desires produced elsewhere.¹⁴⁰

Popular entertainment West End revue provided audiences with ‘something better to escape into’,¹⁴¹ with images not of themselves as they really were, but, drawing on Benedict Anderson’s understanding, of an ‘imagined community’.¹⁴² In doing so, revue became a potent symbol of the popular imagination, providing new formulations of national identity and the potentiality to move from representation into areas of performativity through distinctive dancing and musical forms which would define a generation, offering new expressions of self and nation.

Narratives of nation

The ideas of nation, nationalism and national identities run through the thesis, because theatre is deeply implicated in the construction of the nation through the imaginative realm. As Patrick Wright emphasises, ‘stories play a prominent part in the everyday activity of making sense. They help to bring things into the order of our world’.¹⁴³

Nadine Holdsworth stresses that ‘there simply is no consensus on what nations are, what drives nationalism or how we should define national identity.’¹⁴⁴ Yet Holdsworth nonetheless argues that the idea of a national theatre signals ‘cultural

¹⁴⁰ Dyer, *Only Entertainment*, 7.

¹⁴¹ Dyer, *Only Entertainment*, 20.

¹⁴² Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso Books, 1991).

¹⁴³ Wright, *On Living in an Old Country*, 15.

¹⁴⁴ Holdsworth, *Theatre & Nation*, 9.

autonomy, distinctiveness and legitimacy'.¹⁴⁵ Indeed, in Britain and across Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century, there were calls for 'the emergence of state sanctioned national theatres as sites for asserting political power and/or national cultural autonomy as a [...] re-imaging of nation'.¹⁴⁶ A civic or political nationalism sees nations as a territorial entity: 'at its most basic level [...] nation refers to a territorial community [...] the borders [...] define the nation'¹⁴⁷ and places an emphasis on how people are united by common laws and institutions. However, the growing international landscape, transnational cultural exchanges and a global diaspora saw a crossing of borders of which revue, as an integral form of the culture of popular musical performance of this period, was at the forefront.

This highlights the ethnic definition of nationalism: consciousness of a national identity may be 'activated through ethnic elements such as common values, traditions and culture in the form of stories, myths, memories and histories'.¹⁴⁸ This form of identity construction highlights the convergence of a number of factors such as 'history, territory, heredity, language and culture – to constructions of national identity and begin[s] to identify challenges to fixed ideas of nation and national identities posed by migration, multicultural communities and globalisation'.¹⁴⁹ Michael Billig's¹⁵⁰ theory of banal nationalism produces another understanding of nationalism that is particularly pertinent to this study: nationalism or a sense of national identity that is linked to social living or day to day encounters and to the performative nature of everyday life. Billig's understanding of nations and nationalisms is important for this examination of the construction and representation

¹⁴⁵ Holdsworth, *Theatre & Nation*, 38.

¹⁴⁶ Holdsworth, *Theatre & Nation*, 7.

¹⁴⁷ Holdsworth, *Theatre & Nation*, 10.

¹⁴⁸ Holdsworth, *Theatre & Nation*, 10.

¹⁴⁹ Holdsworth, *Theatre & Nation*, 10.

¹⁵⁰ Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London: Sage, 1995).

of national and racial identities in revue performance, in which ‘national identities are neither biologically nor territorially given: rather they are creatively produced or staged’.¹⁵¹

The new drama of the early twentieth century saw the re-emergence of state-of-the-nation plays, in which the plays’ scenarios became ‘a microcosm of the nation-state to comment directly or indirectly on the ills befalling society, on key narratives of nationhood or on the state of the nation as it wrestles with changing circumstances’.¹⁵² Indeed, director William Poel, the founder of the Elizabethan Stage Society, was at the forefront of a type of national ‘theatrical archaeology’¹⁵³ that sought to rescue and perform British Elizabethan performance in a spirit of heritage reclamation. Poel influenced the leading directors of the day by advocating for the importance of a British tradition of theatre which found expression in Harley Granville-Barker’s production of William Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer’s Night Dream* (1914) and in Nigel Playfair’s revivals of other English playwrights at the Lyric Hammersmith. Granville-Barker had co-authored a book calling for a national institution to ‘define and bear (the drama of) the national culture and to be the core from which what is of value should be disseminated to the rest of the country’.¹⁵⁴ These theatre practitioners encouraged the assumption that British theatre shared a coherent identity and constructed a sense of nationhood by drawing on already existing traditions, myths and signifiers. In this way the theatre transformed the singular experience into a national one, marking boundaries and differences and engaging in the maintenance and regulation of identity. The imagining or construction of national identity in performance becomes a ‘meeting point between the individual

¹⁵¹ Jen Harvie, *Staging the UK* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 2.

¹⁵² Holdsworth, *Theatre & Nation*, 39.

¹⁵³ Richard Eyre and Nicholas Wright, *Changing Stages: A View of British and American Theatre in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2001), 33.

¹⁵⁴ Geoffrey Whitworth, *The Making of the National Theatre* (London: Faber & Faber, 1951), 20.

and the collective conception of the nation, but crucially both are variable. An individual changes and alters [...] and the nation is similarly an ongoing process'.¹⁵⁵ The fragmented form of revue, with its focus on contrasting the old with the new, seemed to capture the national journey.

A key concept in the theme of national identity is the understanding that people are constantly engaged in the act of creating their identities. The idea of nation as a given monolithic structure is therefore challenged and the nation becomes 'instead a contested site, one open to constant change and re-invention'.¹⁵⁶ West End revues begin to expose these shifting political and geographical contexts through their engagement with and utilisation of contemporary and historical popular culture. The inflated patriotic extravaganza was well established in popular entertainment, but revues began to provide an alternative version of the state-of-the-nation play through the inclusion of many styles of performance, 'from psychologically rich social realism, through magic realism, to multimedia productions'.¹⁵⁷ Early twentieth century revue drew from a wide performance heritage to produce commentaries on aspects of social and political life at the same time as the 'West End' sought to become synonymous not only with British theatrical and musical entertainment but also representative of the British nation as a whole. Revues, with their large casts, public settings, epic timescales and national venues, captured rupture, crisis and conflict in its diverse forms. They were, however, still often weighted in favour of the interests and traditions of the dominant social group.

This thesis on London West End Revue is fundamentally concerned with the narratives of nation that revue engaged in telling, including the what and the how of telling at specific periods and moments. In many ways these revues were harbingers

¹⁵⁵ Holdsworth, *Theatre & Nation*, 21.

¹⁵⁶ Steve Blandford (ed.), *Theatre and Performances in Small Nations* (Bristol: Intellect, 2013), 5.

¹⁵⁷ Holdsworth, *Theatre & Nation*, 39.

of a type of ‘heritage tourism’ as it is understood by theories of cultural memory, nostalgia and heritage.¹⁵⁸ As Sara McDowell observes, heritage in this context ‘is a highly politicized process that is subject to contestation and bound up with construction, reconstruction and the deconstruction of memory and identity’.¹⁵⁹ By using the theatrical framework of the travelogue narrative that takes the audience on a celebratory journey, revues utilised characters, architectural locations and landscapes to define, contrast and represent England and Englishness. The process involved giving meanings and endowing them with a national value. A key element of “heritage tourism” is a certain artistic license, ‘disregarding “historical accuracy”, [...] [because] it is not factual but felt history that is the most important in this context’.¹⁶⁰ Here, ‘heritage tourism is experienced primarily from within the confines of the imagination [...] [reducing] the complexities of history to a kind of easily digestible shorthand associated with specific and often singular locations’.¹⁶¹ As Patrick Wright argues, heritage involves ‘the extraction and its re-staging or display’¹⁶² of nation and in the early twentieth century London West End revue began to map and construct a particular British and English identity.

The emergence of London West End revue

West End revue was staged in the first decades of the twentieth century by a number of prominent producers. Harry Gabriel Pellissier’s *Follies* (1908), (1911), along with George Grossmith’s *Hullo...London* (1910), *By George!* (1911) and *Kill That Fly*

¹⁵⁸ See Brian Graham and Peter Howard (eds.), *The Ashgate Research Companion to Heritage and Identity* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2008).

¹⁵⁹ Sara McDowell, ‘Heritage, Memory and Identity’, in Brian Graham and Peter Howard (eds), *The Ashgate Research Companion to Heritage and Identity* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2008), 37-53.

¹⁶⁰ Ruth Adams, ‘The V&A, the Destruction of the Country House, and the Creation of ‘English Heritage’’, in *Museum and Society* 11:1 (March 2013), 10.

¹⁶¹ Catherine Palmer, ‘An Ethnography of Englishness: Experiencing Identity through Tourism’, *Annals of Tourism Research*, 32:1 (2005), 7–27.

¹⁶² Wright, *On Living in an Old Country*, 69.

(1912) started to expand and experiment with form and narrative story-telling. These revues began to promote contemporaneity and a critical commentary on modern society as West End revue's defining elements, but it was Charles Cochran, Albert de Courville and Andre Charlot in particular who established and defined London West End revue style. Cochran and de Courville would establish revue as a popular entertainment foregrounding contemporary dance, music, sexual titillation and spectacle. Albert de Courville was integral to the formulation of the 'spectacular revue' style heavily influenced by Florence Ziegfeld's New York revues, which had in turn been inspired by the Paris and Berlin spectacular revues that employed hundreds of performers and stagehands and used 'ultramodern technical equipment'.¹⁶³ Spectacular revue was built around singers and songs (often transatlantic), and 'opulent adornment' with spectacular designs and a large chorus of dancing girls.¹⁶⁴ Big budget productions like *Everybody's Doing It* (1912), *Hullo Ragtime!* (1912) and *Hullo Tango* (1913) cultivated visual spectacle and began to situate revue in the public consciousness, firmly connecting it to a burgeoning dance and music culture. Revue's musical heritage enabled it to connect into extensive and well-established structures of marketing and self-promotion through a range of different media, exploiting revue's visual and aural appeal through dance, music, fashion and design.¹⁶⁵ Albert de Courville placed revue at the forefront of the Jazz dance and music era with the importation of two seminal American Jazz bands. Nick La Rocca's Original Dixieland Jazz band in *Joybells* (1919) and Paul Whiteman's Orchestra in *Brighter London* (1923). This association with the new dances and music allowed revue a special registration with the public as they marked clear generational

¹⁶³ Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *In 1926: Living at the Edge of Time* (London: Harvard University Press, 1997).

¹⁶⁴ Mander and Mitchenson, *Revue*, 26.

¹⁶⁵ See Carter, *The New Spirit*.

differences and seemed to capture alternative political and social attitudes and expressions.¹⁶⁶

Peep Show (1921) and *Round in 50* (1922) incorporated the new media of film into revue, establishing its multi-media credentials, while designers such as Leon Bakst, Paul Poiret and Doris Zinkeisen employed a range of innovative costume designs and lighting and staging techniques to maintain revue's link to fashionable consumables. *By Jingo If We Do* (1914), *Odds and Ends* (1914), *More (Odds and Ends)* (1915) and *The Bing Boys are Here* (1916) exemplified revue's position and popularity during the First World War. Conservative and jingoistic, revue engaged in First World War propaganda, but as an entertainment it provided popular and diverse content. Through association, the West End, London's entertainment capital, defined itself as a space for adventure, excitement and 'safe pleasure' through revues like *Business As Usual* (1914), *Joyland* (1915), *Pick-A-Dilly* (1916) and *Hullo America* (1918). André Charlot, along with Cochran, ushered in the smaller 'intimate' revue style, which promoted sophisticated satirical word play: Charlot's earlier revues, with the writer Ronald Jeans, *Tabs* (1918) and *Buzz, Buzz* (1918), saw a move away from spectacular revue towards smaller sets and cast. The revues of Noël Coward and Ronald Jeans reflected the post-war neuroses of a decadent Mayfair society as well as the ambitions of the aspirational middle classes. Jeans and Coward were arguably the most successful West End revue writers of the 1920s and established revue's modern credentials with satirical and discerning social commentary within a multidisciplinary form. Jeans, the son of the founder and managing editor of the Liverpool *Post* and *Mercury* newspapers, was instrumental in the formation of the Liverpool Repertory

¹⁶⁶ This view of a changing order was further advanced by the *Representation of the People Act of 1918* which, transformed the British political system, nearly tripling the electorate from 7.5 million to over 20 million. Cathy Ross, *Twenties London: A City in the Jazz Age* (London, Philip Wilson Publishers Ltd, 2003), 18.

Theatre in 1910, and campaigned for an experimental repertory season in Liverpool dedicated to classic and contemporary works. He wrote several revues for the Liverpool Repertory Theatre before being hired by André Charlot to write the second edition of *Tabs* (1918). A ‘sharp observer of modern manners, he was an expert chronicler of what he later called ‘the state of mind of the public today’.¹⁶⁷ Coward, as an actor, playwright, lyricist, composer and satirical wit, seemed to epitomise a growing generational divide both on and off stage. His satirical work in revue seemed to capture the theme ‘that one now knew a little too much for happiness’¹⁶⁸ and began to be critical of the very dance craze and syncopated music culture that revue had spawned.¹⁶⁹ Charlot brought them together for *London Calling* (1923) and they worked for both Charlot and Cochran, cementing revue’s popularity with *Charlot’s Revue* (1923), and Coward’s *On With the Dance* (1925), *This Year of Grace* (1928) and *Words and Music* (1932). These revues engaged in a cultural reflexivity that expressed social and cultural changes through an expansive performance vocabulary of theatrical spectacle, colour, vibrancy, music, movement and verbal pyrotechnics. Both Cochran and Charlot sought to attract a ‘sophisticated theatre-going public as opposed to the popular variety-music hall audience’,¹⁷⁰ and it was through female performers such as Gertrude Lawrence, Beatrice Lillie, Binnie Hale and Florence Mills that they were able to cultivate and situate revue at the forefront of contemporary British culture.

¹⁶⁷ Review of *Streamline*, 31 Aug 1934, file of Ronald Jeans, Theatre Museum, London.

¹⁶⁸ Robert Graves and Alan Hodge, *The Long Weekend, A Social History of Great Britain 1918-1939* (London: Cardinal, 1940).

¹⁶⁹ ‘Though you’re only seventeen/ Far too much of life you’ve seen/, Syncopated child./ Maybe if you only knew/ Where your path was leading to/ You’d become less wild./ But I know it’s vain/ Trying to explain/ While there’s this insane/ Music in your brain.’

‘Dance Little Lady’ from Noel Coward, *This Year of Grace* (London: British Library, Lord Chamberlain’s Plays, 1928).

¹⁷⁰ Mander and Mitchenson, *Revue*, 27.

The importance of black expressive cultures in revue had already been established through blackface minstrelsy and Afro-American and Oriental music and dance. However this was to be further emphasised by the revues featuring Afro-American performers such as *Dover Street to Dixie* (1923) and the popular series of all black revues known as *Blackbirds* (1926). Both starred the legendary performer Florence Mills, a leading figure of the Harlem renaissance.

Riverside Nights (1926), a mixture of song, dance, drama, opera, ballet and satire, saw the form finding recognition from the intelligentsia. Directed by Nigel Playfair a principal figure in the evolution of the repertory theatre movement in Britain, it was to have a great influence on the Group Theatre's satirical *Dance Of Death* (1934), written by W.H. Auden, and on The Workers Theatre Movement of the 1930s.

Revue as a form and framework provided a vehicle for mixing the old with the new, offering a space for old music hall acts, dances and comedians as the form allowed different styles to be presented in an economical and diverse programme for these new West End theatres. With the closing down of music halls and their conversion into theatres during this period, some theatre managers, seeking to make the change from variety entertainment to legitimate theatre, exploited the revue format for their convenience and for economic reasons. They would simply provide a variety programme and call it a revue. The revue framework was a perfect remedy, for theatre managers trying to provide a replacement show. As a 1925 article in *The Stage* entitled 'Growth of Revue' observed, there developed a trend for revue 'which approximates [...] an ordinary variety entertainment set off with embellishments of scene and ensemble'.¹⁷¹

¹⁷¹ 'Growth of Revue', *The Stage* 24 (September 1925).

For the moment revue [...] is marked by two leading tendencies. One is to provide showy, colourful scenes especially by way of chorus workers and dancers. The other is to incorporate variety turns. By these means the transition from the music-hall programme of individual items may be in the making; and it will be well if revue can in the process give – as it is at the present doing – opportunity to a large proportion of the variety artists whom it has deprived of their regular work.¹⁷²

The reality was that some revues were a hotchpotch amalgamation, and revue gained a derisory reputation for being all things to all people or a catch-all term that could be used to define anything.¹⁷³ The multidisciplinary quality of revue was seriously damaged and was viewed as a sign of revue's lack of worth or aesthetic engagement. Yet those involved in revue, like Albert de Courville and Charles Cochran, sought to make revue understood.

Interviewed in *The Stage*, Cochran mapped the three main forms of revue, explaining that

It occupies an intermediate place between variety art and the art of the fully organised play; and in that place it has many and diverse expressions, from the revue 'intime' to the spectacular revue, with in between, the revue that is little more than a succession of variety turns, of which the connecting link sometimes does not go beyond or even as far as the title.¹⁷⁴

However the literary text was seen as the undisputed 'paramount test of dramatic excellence [...] arbiter of "true theatre"', while inevitably other theatrical forms were excluded from the canon and devalued by the 'scholarly culture'.¹⁷⁵ The theatre of

¹⁷² 'Growth of Revue', *The Stage* 24 (September 1925).

¹⁷³ Nicoll, *English Drama*, 169.

¹⁷⁴ 'Growth of Revue', *The Stage* 24 (September 1925).

¹⁷⁵ Mayer and Richards, *Western Popular Theatre*, 259.

drama had to be protected from the theatre of melodrama and the theatre of musical comedy and revue: 'They don't mix.'¹⁷⁶

The sum is that the ear beats the eye in the theatre proper; in the other theatre, [which shall not be called improper], in the theatre of light entertainment, the eye beats the ear. The advance of the serious theatre is due, first of all, to recognition of the importance of words.¹⁷⁷

The theatre, it was argued, was restricted by the censorship of the Lord Chamberlain's office¹⁷⁸ on the one hand and by the new owners, the business magnates who regarded the theatres as 'just another asset',¹⁷⁹ intent on squeezing as much profit by producing repetitive fare and oblivious to the debates raging within the theatre movement, on the other. London West End Revue, as popular theatre, reflected these critiques and for a time it sought to straddle the commercial and the progressive. This situated revue at a fascinating social, economic and cultural intersection, focused on debates about the content, form, application and execution of theatre which would directly and indirectly impact on its engagement with national and racial identities during this period.

¹⁷⁶ Frank Vernon, *The Twentieth-Century Theatre* (London: George G. Harrap & Company Ltd, 1924), 7.

¹⁷⁷ Vernon, *The Twentieth-Century Theatre*, 17.

¹⁷⁸ Andrew Davies, *Other Theatres*, 4.

¹⁷⁹ Marshall, *The Other Theatre*, 15.

Chapter 2

Revue in the Modern World: Possibilities and Perils -West End Identities

During the First World War, the West End became known as the British theatrical and musical entertainment district and synonymous with a plethora of social and moral ambiguities. Questions about sexuality and immorality still pervaded the Edwardian consciousness, which was tinged with memories of the sensational trial of the playwright Oscar Wilde for acts of gross indecency.¹⁸⁰ Popular theatre in the early twentieth century was still viewed as suspect because the arts and theatre environment was one of the main areas where an excessively advantaged aristocracy mixed with an unfit and degenerate working class, contributing to the moral pollution of the national stocks.¹⁸¹ Within these popular entertainment spaces, social distinctions became loose and the boundaries between classes were challenged by the ‘new urban crowd’.¹⁸² The West End epitomised a vigorous new leisure world of urban amusements, which came to be seen as a threat to the moral and social order because of ‘the advent of modern leisure and its availability to the multitudes’¹⁸³ was seen as providing opportunities for delinquency. Yet these ambiguities attracted the new middle classes to the West End in pursuit of modern amusements, as Bailey highlights: ‘given the fragmented nature of the social landscape in modern city life, one could move outside the vision

¹⁸⁰ See Michael S. Foldy, *The Trials of Oscar Wilde: Deviance, Morality and Late-Victorian Society* (London: Yale University Press, 1997), Peter Bailey, *Popular Culture and Performance in the Victorian City* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), chapters 1, 6, 7 and 8, and also Clive Barker and Maggie Gale, *British Theatre between the Wars, 1918-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). See also later chapter ‘Degeneration/Regeneration – The Remaking of Nation in Wartime West End Spectacular Revue.’

¹⁸¹ Jeffrey Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society, The Regulation of Sexuality since 1800* (London: Longman Ltd, 1981).

¹⁸² Bailey, *Popular Culture*, 18.

¹⁸³ Bailey, *Popular Culture*, 13.

of society's moral vigilantes'.¹⁸⁴ However the metropolis in revue, especially in the revues of Noël Coward, regularly fails to deliver 'the freedom and personal renewal and worldly access that in time-honoured big-city fashion it is seen to promise'.¹⁸⁵

Popular performance in the West End of London, particularly in the form of revue at the beginning of the twentieth century, was the beginning of what has been coined 'middlebrow theatre': the

Anxious relationship between the commercial and the artistic, [...] the promiscuous mixture of commerce and art, entertainment and politics, the banal and the auratic, profane and the sacred, spectacular and personal, erotic and intellectual.¹⁸⁶

West End revue championed a commodity culture of 'entertainment', through theatrical spectacle, colour, vibrancy, dance, movement and language. Revue's early commercial success provided a mutually beneficial model for both the commercial and artistic theatres because it was regenerative (reviving old forms) and also embodied the 'new spirit', through [new] popular culture forms. In doing so, revue became an ideological expression of the up-to-date that was packaged and sold for consumption. As Peter Bailey asserts, the 'urban' entertainments and the 'New leisure world offered a repertoire of roles that enabled the audiences to negotiate the unsettling encounters of urban life'¹⁸⁷. Vital in that negotiation were the identity associations linked to the West End and perpetuated in revue, which began to frame consumerism and the good time. However, the growing consumerism and commercialism meant that in some quarters West End revue was seen to exemplify the degeneration of serious drama.

¹⁸⁴ Bailey, *Popular Culture*, 21.

¹⁸⁵ John Clement Ball, *Imagining London* (London: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 7.

¹⁸⁶ David Savran, *A Queer Sort of Materialism: Recontextualising American Theater* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2003) 15.

¹⁸⁷ Bailey, *Popular Culture*, 21.

Between the first and second World Wars, the symptoms of decay in the theatre were obvious and many remedies were prescribed: new plays, new dramatic forms, new audiences, new methods of acting and training of actors, fundamental change in theatre architecture and scenic design. The prescriptions were legion but there was a strong consensus about the diagnosis: commercialism was the cancer at the root of the theatre's ills [...] As the supreme obstacle to the recovery of the seriousness and art in the theatre, commercialism had somehow to be circumvented or destroyed.¹⁸⁸

Revue producer Albert de Courville, writing in the programme of his 1919 revue *Joy-Bells!*, challenges the accusations that revue was the embodiment of all that was rotten with theatre because it was the popular choice of a so-called 'degenerate public'. Responding to claims in the 'daily press' that revue was a 'low class entertainment', De Courville declares defiantly that 'I produce revues and glory in the practice', arguing that 'the slur upon revue had to countered',¹⁸⁹ and revealing in the process that the 'West End' was a space of cultural contestation.

West End revue began to enact ambiguous ideological contestations through the cultural production and construction of fictive and reconstructed worlds. In its (re-)creation of these fragmentary new scenarios, it played with linear bourgeois cultural frameworks, challenged the idea of correspondence in performance and life and offered social and political critiques of new lived experiences. However, revue's depictions of the dangers of modern living were always contradicted by its celebration and outright glorification of the West End as the centre of a revitalising entertainment district, as in 'The Curate's Song' from the revue *Splinters* (1919).

¹⁸⁸ Michael Sidnell, *Dances of Death: The group Theatre of London in the Thirties* (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), 33.

¹⁸⁹ Albert de Courville, *Joy-Bells*, London Hippodrome programme, No.102, May 1919.

A friend of mine once took me to the theatre
I think the piece we saw was called hot stuff
Then we went to supper with some chorus ladies.
Which my friend described as little bits of fluff.
I must confess the supper was delightful
With such a lot of fizzy stuff to drink
But I really can't remember all we did there
And to tell the truth
I hardly like to think
Chorus:
But it's not the sort of thing I've been used to
We didn't leave the place till after two
And no doubt it may be silly but we jazzed down Piccadilly
Well it's not what I have been accustomed to.¹⁹⁰

In this scene we have a simple country Curate who illuminates the instabilities of modernity as he finds himself not only in London, the urban metropolis and a beacon of modernity, but in the theatre and entertainment district known as the West End. He catches a show, 'hot stuff', and mixes with chorus girls and drinks 'fizzy stuff' before 'jazz[ing] down Piccadilly'. It presents an assortment of encounters that display the contradictory modern experience: the 'West End' is constructed as a space for permitted over-indulgence and unruly delight, illustrating Bailey's notion of 'consumerism and the good time'. The sketch exemplifies a number of recurring strands of revue's social and cultural registration and exploration of modernity such as degeneration and regeneration, the individual and the crowd, the city (the West

¹⁹⁰ *Splinters* (London: British Library, Lord's Chamberlain's Plays, 1919), np.

End) and the country, generational differences and theatre and entertainment. This list of themes and issues is by no mean exhaustive or exclusive; indeed, analysis of revue's exploration of modernity is problematic in that it exposes the difficulties of assembling a single narrative from the multiplicity of events and identities that revue drew on and associated itself with within British culture. However, revue's fragmented form does provide a series of narratives that allow critical debate. As Mica Nava and Alan O'Shea argue, mass media narratives are

a crucial resource in the formation of identities for the popular classes in Britain. This is not because these narratives stultify people into 'masses' but because they mull over the difficulties and contradictions of living in the modern world: they address the instabilities of modernity [...] and also offer utopian glimpses of transcendence over often harsh and hierarchical bureaucratic rationalism which has dominated the twentieth century.¹⁹¹

These media narratives all converge in revue's critical exploration of the contemporary modern world, which had at its centre London, a 'City in the Jazz Age [...] a syncopated civilisation [...] where no notion was too cranky to voice, no experiment too eccentric to try', but also a city 'shot with diversity and criss-crossed with nervous energy as it stared at an uncertain future'.¹⁹² This idea of London was integral to the development of the imagined community of the 'West End' as part of the urban metropolis. West End revue captured that dual personality and energy, eschewing the extremism of social reform (socialism) and embracing moderation (conservatism) by perpetuating a 'diffusion of acquiescent attitudes towards

¹⁹¹ Mica Nava, Alan O'Shea, (eds), *Modern Times: Reflections on a Century of English Modernity* (Abington: Routledge, 1996), 4.

¹⁹² Cathy Ross, *Twenties London: A City in the Jazz Age* (London: Philip Wilson Publishers Ltd, 2003), 11.

authority'¹⁹³ in the guise of 'allowed disruption'. This is well illustrated by 'The Curate's Song'.

The scene 'My Old Pal Mr Brown' from *Jumble Sale* (1920) also illustrates this theme. A Doctor declares he has invented an imaginary friend called Mr Brown for the sole purpose of using him as an excuse to come to London. He pretends that Mr Brown has sent for him to come to London, a place of girls, drink and fun but also a place to lose oneself and become someone else in the 'Town'.

I've come up here
From Gloucestershire
To see Mr Brown
T' was he who brought me to town
My wife was in the dairy
I said, 'Don't argue Mary
If Mr B
Has sent for me
I must go up to Town.'

I've just toddled up to London
To call on my Old pal Brown
E's round the corner – in another street
But we shall never meet
I don't know a soul in London
But when I come to Town
I meet lots of girls I ought to know

¹⁹³ Eric A. Nordlinger, *The Working Class Tories: Authority, Deference and Stable Democracy* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1967), 210.

Tall girls, short girls, everywhere I go

Now let it rip girls One Two Three

God bless my old pal Brown.

I've got a decent [practise]

But all the lot

Can go to pot

When I come up to town.¹⁹⁴

Confusion prevails for both characters: the modern world leaves the Curate and the Doctor (both representatives of an older generation) bewildered and disorientated in different ways; they are unable to fully deal with these new encounters. A sense of utopian optimism is played out in a space where fantasies can be experienced in a contained, safe environment, before returning back home. However, both 'The Curate's Song' and 'My Old Pal Mr Brown' also present what we might term a parable, a warning or a picture of moral degeneration: the Doctor declares that his practice 'can go to pot', while the Curate, a man of God, also loses himself in the modern world as his new experiences leave him thrilled but conflicted and confused. This is modernity as described by Georg Simmel:¹⁹⁵ new experiences replace the Curate's faith or inner security with a 'secret restlessness' a 'helpless urgency' (as highlighted in the song 'It May Be Life' with its seemingly unyielding series of transformations), exemplified through a consumer culture that was becoming both a source of transcendence and one of social and psychological anxiety. This is illustrated by a subsequent song from *Jumble Sale* (1920), which exposes the

¹⁹⁴ John Hastings Turner, *Jumble Sale* (London: British Library, Lord Chamberlain's Plays, 1920).

¹⁹⁵ Georg Simmel, 'The Metropolis and Mental Life', in *On Individuality and Social Forms* (Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 1971), 24.

pressures of this consumer lifestyle in a manic, stream of consciousness song as a man explains to his wife the reasons behind his incessant talking and walking.

I have to talk
When we are
Out for a walk
Nearly all the way
I have to steer you away from the shops
Out of the danger zones,
If I relent
I'm not left with a cent
That I'm able to call my own.

That's why I'm talking all the time you are walking
Walking along with me
That is why your steps I steer
Tactfully away from all the windows;
I dare not stop, dear,
Outside a shop dear
Such pretty things you see.¹⁹⁶

Revue continually depicts modern living as being empowering yet somehow degenerative: as something that must be reconfigured. In Charles Cochran's revue *As You Were* (1918), this reconfiguration was replicated both on and off the stage. An adaptation written by Arthur Wimperis, from the original French production, it was

¹⁹⁶*Jumble Sale*, np. See also *Pot Luck* (1921) an 'advertisement drama' that satirically comments on the consumerism of the modern products made available through the practice of easy payment methods. The pitfalls of consumerism are also depicted in a comedy sketch 'Bluffers' in *You'd Be Surprised* (1923), a scene that revolves around a bailiff coming to take back all the items bought on credit.

the first show to be performed at the newly modernised London Pavilion, an old established music hall that had been the subject of an extensive refurbishment that changed it into a theatre. Cochran re-opened the theatre with an appendage on the outside, which announced the old music hall's passing and the arrival of the new one with the title, 'The London Pavilion. The Centre of the World'.

Cochran sought to resituate the 'Pav' and revue in general not only within the constructed imagined traditions and myths of West End entertainment folklore, but as a metaphor for a particular way of life, a new attitude that marked itself as sophisticated, fashionable and the place to be. Cochran's boast that the Pavilion was 'The centre of the world' draws on wider colonial notions of London and England and Great Britain and Empire, and in doing so seeks to reassert a global primacy in the face of a growing American dominance of popular culture. In *As You Were* the hero, Sir Bilyon Boost, lives in the year 2018 but travels back in time with the help of 'transit pills'. He seeks a world where 'women are faithful and the nations are peaceful'.¹⁹⁷ Ironically, in the September issue of *The Tatler* magazine, over the page from an advertisement for the new revue was a story that serves to illustrate the political and social reality of the modern world that Sir Boost is trying to run away from. Entitled 'Pictorial Politics' it describes the women bus conductors who were employed to drive and collect fares in the absence of the men during the War, who were on strike and seeking equal pay.¹⁹⁸ In *As You Were* we find revue engaged at both the centre and the edges of fixed ideologies of gender and class identity, simultaneously embracing and disparaging the changing social and political realities by arguing for the loss of qualitative distinctions and for the suppression of the individual by the collective. *As You Were* exemplifies Margaret Werry's model of

¹⁹⁷ Arthur Wimperis, *As You Were* (London: British Library, Lord Chamberlain's Plays, 1918), np.

¹⁹⁸ 'Pictorial Politics', *The Tatler* 897 (4 September 1918), 259.

‘reflexive circulation and exchange’¹⁹⁹ and Richard Schechner’s²⁰⁰ model of how performance is constructed out of everyday life. The story captures a changed world in which women have filled old male roles following the War, which accelerated change and challenged notions about gender roles, behaviour and equality both socially and politically. Although revue reflected the new lived experiences through its form and construction and the advanced utopian possibilities in its scenarios, this was a contradictory space in which the hierarchy of social and cultural stratification operated widely so that the challenges to the old orthodoxies were controlled, contained and redirected. This can be seen in *As You Were*: the hero Sir Bilyon Boost is eventually restored to patriarchal supremacy and his wife once again restrained.

West End revue constituted a type of performance that sought to characterise metropolitan living but also to reconstruct that reality through an exploration of arts practice, form, content, value and aesthetics. In this sense, revue became a space of possibilities that negotiated and offered alternative narratives, however fleeting, before returning to more accustomed ways. What had in France been the review, which was a retrospective, became in the West End the revue, which dealt with the present. However, this was a present born of the contradictory compulsions to capture and mark it and to stop or regress it in order to re-assert a particular order.

The modern scenographic aesthetic of revue – Fragmentation as modernity

Persons interested in the advance of stagecraft went to revue for inspiration and watched for things to flash out. The subject, the scene-painter, the costumier, the electrician, and the variety of talented artistes, some of them

¹⁹⁹ Margaret Werry, ‘“The Greatest Show on Earth”: Political Spectacle, Spectacular Politics, and the American Pacific’, *Theatre Journal* 57 (2005), 356.

²⁰⁰ Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2002), 119.

from the music hall, combined to produce unexpected effects, aesthetic and other, seldom to be found in the production of the drama.²⁰¹

The truth was the straight theatre had become a revue theatre.²⁰²

The *League of Notions*, which was first performed at the New Oxford Theatre in 1921, opens with a theatre manager lost in the fog of London. Unable to find his way, he stumbles around until he meets a group of pantomime players: a harlequin, a pierrot and a columbine. The desperate manager begs them to show him the way and promises the trio that he will dress them in ‘modern things’ and put them in his show. The pierrot retorts ‘We have very little use for any modern show’²⁰³ and tells the manager that they still haunt the theatres where they used to hold sway. They find that modern shows have ‘not advanced a bit, and we can truly say. There’s nothing new’. The manager asks ‘What would you do to set the pace of modern shows?’ and the pantomime players take him to a tailor ‘who has been sewing shows together for years’. The tailor presents a crazy patchwork quilt as an example of the necessary qualities of a modern show, advocating for the importance of form and content. The tailor stresses that a combination of forms and styles is what is needed and that music, song, dance and topicality should be at a show’s heart: ‘Taking a patch from here and there [...] some modern tunes, some old plaintive air, a pretty face, a dance, a merry jest [...] they have for all mankind some interest’.²⁰⁴

Although questions of definition and taxonomy abound, we do know that revue sought to position itself as ‘modern’ performance in form and content. In *League of Notions*, we see revue arguing that it is the manifestation of the modern play, setting the pace of ‘modern shows’ through its fragmented, multi-disciplined

²⁰¹ Huntly Carter, *The New Spirit in the European Theatre 1914-1924* (London: Ernest Benn Ltd, 1925), 82.

²⁰² Carter, *The New Spirit*, 81.

²⁰³ *League of Notions* (London: British Library, Lord Chamberlain’s Plays, 1921), np.

²⁰⁴ *League of Notions*, np.

form, with ‘a patch from here and there’. Revue’s fragmented structure was vital in marking its modernism and its difference because it contrasted strongly with ordinary theatre’s linear narratives but was also reflective of life. As the programme notes for the revue *The Peep Show* (1921) explain,

Why do we go to the Theatre? To be amused, thrilled, or roused, according to our taste; but most of us will agree that the ideal show would be one in which we experienced all these feelings – for that is life. What better entertainment could one choose than a Revue? The ordinary theatre show gives us only one side of life, but a Revue gives us comedy, and tragedy, farce – the sunshine and the shadow.²⁰⁵

The producers of *The Peep Show* promoted the revue aesthetic as opening up experiential possibilities on stage and pointedly associated it with a modern vitality: ‘that is life’. *The Peep Show* revue itself showcased technical innovation in the form of a transforming lighting device that was described as having ‘revolutionary possibilities in the theatre’.²⁰⁶ The device enabled sets, costumes and characters to be changed through special effects, moving from ‘a snow-clad mountain gorge [...] into the interior of an ancient palace of India’.²⁰⁷ Revue’s non-linear narratives and deliberately eclectic performance style singled something fresh and exhilarating and, as Len Platt highlights, this was a key marker of the distinction between revue and musical comedy.

Far from creating a consistent fabric, whether in terms of narrative or style, the up-and-coming form [revue] aimed for bizarre shifts and dramatic transformations at every level. Melodrama could snap into showtime glitz at

²⁰⁵ *The Peep Show* (1921) programme, The Mander and Mitchenson Archives, Trinity University, London.

²⁰⁶ *The Peep Show* File, The Mander and Mitchenson Archives, Trinity University, London.

²⁰⁷ *The Peep Show* File.

any minute, film was often interpolated into performance implying not a reproduction of the modern, as in the old tradition, but a multi-media practice that emphasized difference rather than assimilation [...] the fresh quick pace and tempo of revue whose fragmented form, eschewed what it saw as the narrative simplicity and romanticism of musical comedy.²⁰⁸

Revue's ability to change and adapt gave it an advantage by allowing it to remain current and fresh, with the introduction of alternate performers, acts and new topical scenes. *You'd Be Surprised* (1923) is a series of sketches or 'surprises', such as the 'Fearless Flipper', 'Pajama Blues' and 'Chicken à la King', which are interspersed with speciality acts and the Savoy Jazz band. *The Charlot Revue* (1924) is comprised of such scenes as 'Karma', a ballet by Cyril Scott, and a violent one act drama of low-life multicultural London called 'Me Pink 'At'.

As a form, the revue had flexibility; without being tied to a storyline or book, the producer was free to introduce performers, songs and songwriters according to his taste or judgement and stirred a response in audiences [...] trade[ing] on burlesque, wit and satire [...] [revues] were the medium par excellence of a time when a breakdown in traditional values and established conventions prompted performers and people to poke fun at things.²⁰⁹

In the scene 'Oh the Language', from *The Whirligig* (1919), all the characters except for a police inspector use dialect that is in strong opposition to that that would be expected of the characters they play. This scene plays with ideas of identity: stereotypes of class race, sex and gender are paraded and swapped around. His lordship, who is 'faultlessly dressed', speaks broad cockney ('Lord luv a duck'); the flower girl speaks in American tones ('wise guy'); the chimneysweep uses an upper

²⁰⁸ Len Platt, *Musical Comedy on the West End Stage, 1890-1939* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), Platt, *Musical Comedy, 1890-1939*, 134.

²⁰⁹ Robert Baral, *Revue: The Great Broadway Period* (New York: Fleet Press, 1962), 232.

class English accent ('pardon me – but this sort of thing isn't done you know. There are certain distinctions to be observed'); Mr Abrahams, described as a 'typical Hebrew', speaks with a thick Irish brogue, while a Frenchman speaks with a Welsh accent and an Irish woman speaks in broken Italian. The scene is brought to a climax by the police Inspector, 'who is an everyday sort of quick-speaking Englishman', the untainted presence and voice of reason in this multicultural gathering. Calling on his detective to make an arrest, the detective takes off his hat to reveal a 'Chinese pigtail' and begins to speak in 'pigeon English'. The final line of the scene, known as the blackout line, is given by the 'coon waiter', who speaks in a 'very high effeminate voice'.²¹⁰ This dismantling of stage realism exemplifies revue's negotiation of modernity, charting the erosion of old hierarchies of social distinction and marking the possible new identities that were occurring as one consequence of industrial modernisation.

'Oh the language' plays with this idea of this modern world, but it is not necessarily a celebration of difference: instead, it keys into anxieties about immigration and foreigners that had resulted in race riots in Liverpool, Cardiff and South Shields in the North East of England in the summer of 1919. Fuelled by fears related to rising unemployment, the disruptions resulted in the introduction of the third Aliens Act, the earlier ones having been introduced in 1905 and 1914. This was followed by the Aliens Order of 1920 and the Special Restriction of 1925, which limited work for black sailors.

Although it is presented as a unified text, West End revue's aesthetic stresses juxtaposition and contradiction by juxtaposing the different performance styles of popular theatre and the contributions of numerous writers, choreographers, composers

²¹⁰ Albert de Courville, Wal Pink and Edgar Wallace, *The Whirligig* (London: British Library, Lord Chamberlain's Plays, 1919), np.

and lyricists, who often worked independently on their individual pieces and scenes. Revue provided a syncretic, articulating frame for these separate performance styles, songs, dances and scenes, within which these forms and conventions could be performed. In doing so, revue highlighted and reflected cultural crossings, montages, breaks and interruptions and the instability and flux of the contemporary modern world. Alan O' Shea argues that the rapidity of modern living saw an 'intense time space-compression',²¹¹ with faster transport and communication systems speeding up the experience of life. This meant that 'the process of change itself was fast, demanding rapid accommodation to new conditions',²¹² as modernity bombarded people with information and sensations. This was replicated in revue: audiences were presented with a similar mixture of visual and intellectual spectacle, often out of the fear of failing to retain the audience's attention as modern audiences seemed to suffer from a lack of durational commitment. As revue writer Ronald Jeans explains,

compression became vital [...] It was a question not only of good art to write economically, but of dire necessity. One had to learn to unfold a situation, develop it, and come to the climax in a matter of minutes.²¹³

This structure provided the opportunity for quick, direct stage performance that played with narrative story-telling, magnifying character relationships and plot lines. This is illustrated in the scene 'For Life' in *The Whirligig*, which fuses and juxtaposes a traditional linear narrative story with theatrical experiment. A quarrelling duet is performed by a couple who relate the breakdown of their marriage directly to the audience (the stage directions dictate 'The lines are addressed in all cases to the audience – never to each other'), in rhyme, alternately and at the same time, playing

²¹¹ Nava and O'Shea (eds), *Modern Times*, 15.

²¹² Nava and O'Shea (eds), *Modern Times*, 15.

²¹³ Ronald Jeans, *Writing for the Theatre* (London: Edward Arnold & Co, 1949), 175.

with timing and vocal rhythm. (This piece precedes Samuel Beckett's short piece 'Play', which uses the same experimental format, by some fifty years.)

He: just five short years ago today

It is since we were wed-

She: The word wed is appropriate

Because it rhymes with 'dead'

He (*looking up*): Oh! Plighted Vows.

She (*hanging her head*): Oh! Blighted spouse.

Both: Excited rows we revelled in

Now cupid's fled.²¹⁴

In 'For Life', the performance structure reflects the scientific management techniques of Frederick Taylor, which were used to rationalise the rhythm and form of the working day of industrial workers in factories. Taylorism, applied here to script and character, presents a messy marriage breakdown neatly packaged in a short and concise orchestrated duologue. The emotions and actions are reduced and presented in a staccato, almost machine-like, way to the consumer/audience. In *The Whirligig*, different performance styles are combined and executed to effect a direct and satirically sophisticated commentary on the 'now'. It was this 'newness', this association with the themes and interests of its times, that made revue not just popular, but for a time *à la mode* with an aspirant audience who desired a 'modern' identity.

As a form of entertainment, revue corresponded to its time and began to reflect and express new social experiences. This is illustrated by the song 'It May Be

²¹⁴ *The Whirligig*, np.

Life' from *Riverside Nights* (1926). This tender ballad is a commentary by a maid, who critiques her own existence by comparing it to what she sees in the new medium, the cinema:

I wish there weren't no washing up,
And Life was like the movies are
I wish I wore a wicked hat,
I've got the face for it, I know.
I'm tired of scrubbing floors and that
It may be life but ain't it slow?
For I don't have no adventures in the street,
Men don't register e-motion when we meet.
Jack don't register Love's Sweet Bliss,
Jack just registers an ordinary kiss and I says
'Evenin' and Jack says 'Eve-nin',
And we both stand there
At the corner of the square,
Me like a Statue and him like a bear.
He don't make faces like the movie men,
He just holds me tight till the clock strikes ten.
Then I say 'Friday?' And Jack says 'Right',
Jack says 'The same time? And I says 'Right'
Jack just whispers and I can hardly speak.
And that's the most exciting thing that happens in the week.²¹⁵

²¹⁵ Nigel Playfair and A.P. Herbert, *Riverside Nights* (London: British Library, Lord Chamberlain's Plays, 1926), np.

The piece plays on the understanding that new mass cultural activities such as shopping and the cinema were, as Mica Nava argues, the ‘main contexts in which women developed a new consciousness of the possibilities and entitlements that modern life was able to offer’.²¹⁶ Here we find revue, as popular culture, engaging in an ambivalent social and political deliberation: the maid is offered ‘the temptations of the metropolitan world of consumption and spectacle [of the movies] – the urban phantasmagoria – which both dazzles and deceives the crowd’.²¹⁷ Ironically, the movies do not provide her with an ‘escape’ from her existence, but instead magnify the reality of what she does not have or has not experienced. The song negotiates class, economic and gender aspirations and highlights the development of a new consciousness. The maid’s life does not live up to the images or stories shown on the big screen, and this in turn connects with a sense of wanting to change the order of things. Here popular entertainment signals possible emancipation, resulting in what Walter Benjamin called the ‘shattering of tradition’²¹⁸ as the monotony of the linear and the familiarity of the old order of things are exposed and challenged, inspiring a new defiant attitude to experiment and experience.

Adore us, deplore us or scatter before us

We’re set upon singing our opening chorus

Our singing is not operatic

Our acting is scarcely dramatic

Our dancing as well is a bit of a sell and our memory may be erratic

So jeer us or cheer us or simply ignore us

We’ve set our hearts on an opening chorus.

²¹⁶ Nava and O’Shea (eds.), *Modern Times*, 53.

²¹⁷ Nava and O’Shea (eds.), *Modern Times*, 64.

²¹⁸ Walter Benjamin, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’ (1936), in William McNeil and Karen S. Feldman (eds.), *Continental Philosophy: An Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 245.

With a lavish hand we scatter all the very oldest patter
Mouldy jokes and ancient wheezes, painted noses, comic sneezes
People falling on their faces in the most unlikely places
With fancy foible we'll struggle to please you
And show you yourselves as the other man sees you
But since you may shortly be tempted to floor us,
We'd better get on with the opening chorus.²¹⁹

The 'Opening Chorus' of *The Follies* (1919) sets out to introduce revue, and in doing so situates it as a critical performance practice. It displays singing, dancing, acting and a breadth of styles and forms, drawing on the familiar and traditional popular theatre techniques of direct address, self-reference, self-parody and burlesque. It is a brisk and defiant opening chorus, emphasised by its burlesquing of the coming entertainment's themes, styles and approach. The performers challenge the audience's expectations by revealing a performance practice immersed in the routine commercial enterprise of selling entertainment. They lay bare the formulaic and repetitive nature of the entertainment that they are producing, and in doing so they begin to test the notion of the passive consumer. The routine of trying to fulfil the expectations of the audience is burlesqued in an ironic display of candor and apology as they take the show apart and expose what is an integral element of all popular theatre: the tacit understanding between the audience and performer of the reality of this unreality. Here the actuality of entertainment is laid bare as a 'struggle to please'. However, the deconstruction does not stop at practice and form alone, but moves towards a potentially more provocative agenda, critiquing the audience and society itself. It is

²¹⁹ *The Follies* (London: British Library, Lord Chamberlain's Plays, 1919), np.

this central element – revue’s critical commentary – that begins to differentiate it and reveals its potential as a transgressive form.

The next scene of *The Follies* takes up that theme directly. Seventeen years before *Modern Times* (1936), Charlie Chaplin’s film satire of the dehumanising effects of the labour methods of the industrial age, *The Follies* comments on the contradictions of both performance and modern life through a satire of a Russian ballet. Here the aesthetic production of a dance is shown to be just as regimented as a factory assembly line: a series of ‘Heath Robinson’ contraptions are shown, and the actors are attached to a succession of complicated and exaggerated ropes and pulleys in order to perform the most mundane of tasks. The sketch provides an illustration of the often complex, subtle, provocative social commentaries of revue, as mass industrial labour techniques are playfully critiqued alongside the acknowledgement that art too is just as much of a produced commodity.

A gallery of modern fashions, music and dance

The *League of Notions* was produced and directed by Charles Cochran and John Murray Anderson, two individuals who were at the centre of a vibrant and challenging trans-continental theatre industry. Cochran, who had a wide knowledge of European and American theatre and performance, had hired Anderson from New York to bring his artistic flair to the project. Anderson was seen at the time as ‘the equal of Edward Gordon Craig and Max Reinhardt’²²⁰ and was beginning to build his reputation in revue, which he eventually did with his annual New York revues, *The Greenwich Follies*. Both Cochran and Anderson were fully aware of intellectual theatrical debates about social realism and plays that were experimenting with artistic

²²⁰ *Encore*, 18 November 1920, Charles Cochran Scrapbooks, (London: Theatre Museum), np.

styles, and this contributed to the success of *League of Notions*, which demonstrated Cochran's astute amalgamation of popular and avant-garde theatrical forms. Cochran employed top designer Paul Poiret, who produced what Huntly Carter called 'A Gallery of Fashion',²²¹ for *League of Notions*, and the French couture fashion designer mixed modern aesthetic designs and costumes to give revue contemporary commercial appeal. Although Carter dismisses *League of Notions* as a 'hash of pre-war aesthetic influences', his critique and summary actually serve to highlight the artistic depth and breadth of the revue's aesthetic and pedigree:

There was a 'Hell's Kitchen' belonging to the Moscow Art Theatre; a 'fete des Mannequins' staged by M. Paul Poiret; 'An Episode with Benda Masks' that recalled the modern mask school; and a 'Persian Dance' that had stepped out of 'The Russian Ballet'; and there were bits of scenery by Marc Henri of the Belgian New Art School.²²²

Carter highlights the parallels between the innovative experimentation in design, dance, movement, non-verbal expression and montage happening across the continent and within the content of West End revue. As early as 1915, revue had developed an aesthetic connected to wider social and artistic movements, with Charles Cochran's *More* (1915) signalling 'a fresh note which, together with the innovations seemed to say that a new and satisfactory expression had come and stagecraft was putting on a new art form'.²²³

Popular theatre was seen as possessing the ingredients necessary to become a 'modern theatre': a people's theatre, a theatre for the people at large. Huntly Carter,

²²¹ Huntly Carter, 'Stage Influence on Dress and Fashion. The Theatre as a Driving Force', in *The Drapers Organiser* (1919), 131, Charles Cochran Scrapbooks, Theatre Museum, London.

²²² Carter, *The New Spirit*, 85.

²²³ Carter, *The New Spirit*, 84.

an art critic and an ‘ideologue [...] in its earlier phase’²²⁴ of The Worker’s Theatre Movement,²²⁵ was a staunch advocate of such a possibility, although he was critical of aspects of West End theatre practice, which he argued was a commercially organised industry dictated by the economic objectives of free market capitalism, thereby effecting the production and consumption of theatre not as art but as a commodity. Yet it was the West End’s need for profit that had spurred the initial innovation and recognition of the importance of other forms over words, creating visual and sensory spectacles. In spectacular revue this resulted in investment in a vast array of people on stage and in extravagant visual and aural displays that integrated the latest design, fashion, dance and music into the scenes. Indeed, this was not new, as Carter admits: Sir Henry Irving had a similar device, known as the Drury Lane method, which incorporated ‘colossal machinery’²²⁶ and large crowds of ‘supernumeraries’. West End theatres were ideally placed financially to exploit the creative possibilities and practices that became possible with new technological advances, and revue surpassed its rival, musical comedy, as the latest fashion.

Integral to this fashion for the modern were African-American dances and music, which became popular markers of fashionable kudos and daring and clear signifiers of generational difference in the 1920s. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White’s work on the cultural categories of high and low as mechanisms for class ordering and sense making by the most powerful socio-economic groups sheds light on the use of black cultural expressions of dance and music and the ambiguous creations of the class, gender and racial ‘types’ in relation to West End revue. What Stallybrass and

²²⁴Raphael Samuel, Ewan MacColl and Stuart Cosgrove (eds.), *Theatres of the Left 1880-1935: Workers’ Theatre Movements in Britain and America* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Plc, 1985), 33.

²²⁵The Workers’ Theatre Movement (1926-35) belonged to the Communist rather than the Labour wing of the Socialist movement. It was concerned with agitation rather than moral uplift or entertainment. It saw itself as a theatre of action, dealing with immediate issues. See Samuel, MacColl and Cosgrove (eds.), *Theatres of the Left*, 3.

²²⁶Carter, *The New Spirit*, 85.

White refer to as a primary site of contradiction stresses that ‘what is socially peripheral is so frequently symbolically central’.²²⁷

The primary site of contradiction, the site of conflicting desires and mutually incompatible representation [...] repugnance and fascination are the twin poles of the process, in which a political imperative to reject and eliminate the debasing ‘low’ conflicts powerfully with a desire for the ‘other’.²²⁸

Stallybrass and White argue that a recurrent pattern emerges as the top attempts to reject and eliminate the bottom for reasons of prestige and status, only to discover ‘not only that it is some way dependent upon the low-other but also the top includes that low symbolically as a primary constituent of its own fantasy life’.²²⁹ This element of ‘contradiction’ is exemplified through ‘black face’ performance, with its affiliation with the minstrel shows and the creation of black stereotypes.

The stereotype, which is a major discursive strategy is a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is known and something that must be anxiously repeated.²³⁰

James C. Scott’s theoretical framework of the ‘public and hidden transcript’²³¹ argues that, to comprehend the range of power dynamics within a culture, one must look at the discourse of the dominant as performed by both the empowered and by the subaltern. By focusing on the tensions and contradictions of this interplay, it is possible to uncover how this discourse of the socially dominant is a key means of signalling power relations within society.

²²⁷ Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Methuen: London, 1986), 5.

²²⁸ Stallybrass and White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, 5.

²²⁹ Stallybrass and White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, 5.

²³⁰ Homi K. Bhaba, *The Location of Culture* (London, Routledge, 1994), 66.

²³¹ James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (London, Yale University Press, 1990).

Public transcript is close to conformity with how the dominant group would wish to have things appear [...] [Yet] The dominant group never control the stage absolutely, but their wishes normally prevail [...] In ideological terms the public transcript will by its accommodationist tone, provide convincing evidence for the hegemony of dominant values, for the hegemonic dominant discourse. It is in precisely this domain where the effects of power relations are most manifest and any analysis based exclusively on the public transcript is likely to conclude that subordinate groups endorse the terms of their subordination and are willing, even enthusiastic, partners in that subordination.²³²

West End revue, as the initial carrier of these forms into the mainstream, found itself at the forefront of new musical trends. English popular music had always been strongly influenced by different cultures, but in the First World War and the years immediately after, American musical influences changed the way the English thought of music and dance and modified popular musical culture in the West End. The role of revue was crucial: it was a form in which dance and music were fused and disseminated.

The relationship between imported American music and English popular musical culture is complicated by the fact that 'English music was very adept at assimilating and modifying American popular music.'²³³ The music in West End shows had been primarily what Ross McKibbin calls 'middlebrow', 'drawn largely from European influences'²³⁴ following on from musical comedy and operetta. However, the expulsion of German and Austrian bands from the West End at the outset of the First World War created a vacuum that was slowly filled by American

²³² Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 4.

²³³ Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England 1918-1951* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 413.

²³⁴ McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures*, 386.

music. The new American syncopated music became associated in the popular mind with the immense material success of American democracy. What had been ‘fashions’, McKibbin argues, now became full blown Americanisation with the popularity of such tunes as Irving Berlin’s ‘Alexander’s Rag-time Band’ (1911) and ‘Everybody’s Doing It Now’ (1912). Revue’s association with the new dance music was cemented in the public’s mind by Nick La Rocca’s ‘Original Dixieland Jazz Band’ in *Joybells* (1919) and by the arrival of the orchestras of Paul Whiteman in *Brighter London* (1923) and the Afro-American Will Vodrey in *Dover Street to Dixie* (1923), which confirmed revue as a hip and contemporary space.

The definition and classification of the music in these revues is difficult because music historiography is generally complex and widely contested. The music associated with the popular dances was the syncopated musical style which today we might call jazz, but Howard Rye and Jeffrey Green rightly highlight that

the misunderstandings of self-appointed authorities whose rules of Jazz criticism and Jazz history have failed to grasp that the essence of the music was public entertainment and dance. Out of that social function came an art form.²³⁵

For present purposes, then, it makes sense to imagine jazz in the comprehensive sense it took on in twenties discourse: as a mixture of blues, ragtime or any sufficiently syncopated music of the period.

Opposition to this music and dance was strongly expressed for the same reasons that it was popular in some quarters. The music and dancing’s association with African American culture saw openly racist opposition that derided it as primitive “nigger music”, perceived and regarded as part of an American invasion of

²³⁵ Howard Rye and Jeffrey Green, ‘Black Musical Internationalism in England in the 1920s’, *Black Music Research Journal* 15, (1995), 94.

British culture. This was strongly voiced in particular by theatre critic Hannen Swaffer in his columns in the *Daily Graphic*, in the *Sunday Times* and in the right wing publication *John Bull*. Paradoxically, this was reflected and expressed not only outside of revue but also within the very shows that celebrated and propagated these new forms in scenes like ‘Nigger Heaven’ in *Riverside Nights* (1926) and in a plethora of comments such as those of the house party scene in *SNAP!* (1922): ‘House parties are not what they once were. One used to get sport and port, now one only gets Jews and Jazz’.²³⁶

However, the imagined influx of foreigners and their music was exaggerated, as the majority of the songs in West End revue were in the tradition of indigenous ballads and local novelty songs, which as McKibbin, points out

the public for which was almost certainly larger than that for Jazz or Jazz inspired music. Aside from being vaguely syncopated, most of the popular ballads of the period owed little to Jazz and more to musical comedy, operetta or popular religious music.²³⁷

West End revue positioned itself as part of dance culture and as at the centre of the dance crazes that swept the country. This association was driven in part by Charles Cochran’s passion for dance, which was always integral to his revues. As James Nott has argued, it is important to understand the role that dance played in people’s lives and how popular music (meaning commercial music) was connected to social dancing and entertainment.²³⁸ Although the tango had arrived in 1912, featuring in the revue *Hullo Tango*, it was the last popular dance to come from Paris; thereafter, dances mostly came from New York. Even Latin American dances, which, had

²³⁶ Dion Titheradge, Kenneth Duffield, Ronald Jeans, Nat, D. Ayer, *Snap* (London: British Library, Lord Chamberlain’s Plays, 1922), np.

²³⁷ *Classes and Cultures: England 1918-1951*, 415.

²³⁸ See James J. Nott, *Music for the People, Popular Music and Dance in Interwar Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University press, 2002).

hitherto, like the tango, come to England via Paris or the Riviera, were, like the popular Cuban dances of the interwar years (the rumba, the pasa doble and the conga) filtered through New York.

Dance was, of course, to become less central to revue's form and definition, but, during the 1920s, it was the dances and the dance music that helped to popularise revue and mark its place as modern popular culture. Ramsay Burt highlights the 'complex' inter-relationships between dance as popular entertainment and dance as a serious art form, noting the 'coexistence and interdependence of many different forms of theatre dance during the interwar years, and of connections and cross-overs between them'.²³⁹ He emphasises the contribution of West End revue popular entertainment, arguing for its central role in the incubation and development of modern dance and highlighting in particular the work of Leonide Massine.

Massine started his career with Diaghilev's Ballets Russes, alongside the likes of artist Pablo Picasso and composer Eric Satie before working with Anton Dolin (the first artistic director of the English National Ballet) and Ninette de Valois (the founder of the Royal Ballet) in revues such as *You'd Be Surprised*, *On with the Dance*, and *Whitebirds*.

The interwar period saw the greater commercialisation of music following the emergence of 'dynamic and self-sustaining'²⁴⁰ technologies that enabled the rapid diffusion of music, 'helping to bring about a 'mass audience''²⁴¹ for dance music. This was illustrated by Charles Cochran's *Charleston Ball and Dance Competition*, at the Royal Albert Hall in December 1926, which included among the judges Fred

²³⁹ Ramsay Burt, *Alien Bodies: Representations of Modernity, Race' and Nation in Early Modern Dance* (London: Routledge, 1989), 5.

²⁴⁰ Nott, *Music for the People*, 3.

²⁴¹ Nott, *Music for the People*, 3.

Astaire, the American dancer and later Hollywood film star, and Florence Mills, the star of the all-black American revue of 1926 *Blackbirds*.

London West End revue's association with the new dances and music gave revue a special recognition with the public, marked clear generational differences and seemed to capture alternative political and social attitudes and expressions. This was crucial to revue performance's popularity and success during the World War One, because it combined patriotic entertainment with the maintenance of national morale. With its fragmentation, experimentation with form and use of different practices past and new, West End revue of the 1920s reflected the social and cultural anxieties of a modern world that Marshall Berman described as

An environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and our world – and at the same time threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are.²⁴²

Revue invested in all things modern and placed itself as the vanguard of the new media and fashions of a consumer society, observing the way people thought and felt about everyday life, presenting a 'vernacular modernism or modernism in the streets, or the popular experience of modernity'²⁴³ and portraying 'the dialectic of modernity, its possibilities and perils'.²⁴⁴

²⁴² Marshall Berman, *All that is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (London: Verso, 1983), 15.

²⁴³ Nava and O'Shea (eds.), *Modern Times*, 189.

²⁴⁴ Nava and O'Shea (eds.), *Modern Times*, 10.

Chapter 3

New Insecurities, New Form, New identity- National Identity and Raciologies in *Eightpence a Mile* (1913)

During the Edwardian period, West End revue began to develop a different voice from British musical comedy, the dominant popular musical entertainment of the time. Musical comedy at the turn of the century had by and large established its formula for success: catchy songs, an abundance of nubile chorus girls, extravagant costumes and sets, linear formulaic romantic plots and a regular injection of patriotism, 'escapism, exoticism and ironic comedies of manners'.²⁴⁵ Numerous shows like the *Geisha* (1896), *Morocco Bound* (1893) and *Go Bang* (1894) followed the template of the operettas of Gilbert and Sullivan by mixing patriotism with racial representations and nationalistic displays.²⁴⁶ Patriotic songs, such as 'We've Faith in Our Old Flag Yet', sung in *King Kodak* (1894); 'Private Tommy Atkins' in *A Gaiety Girl* (1893) and re-used in *San Toy* (1899); and 'Hands off' in *An Artist's Model* (1895), provided the soundtrack to these narratives. Although musical comedies at times attacked aristocratic pomposity and the idiotic foibles of the establishment, they predominantly depicted an Empire that prized British rule, and encouraged a patriotism that upheld the British national character against an oriental other as the benchmark of all that was good, reconciling differences and tensions in the narrative. However, as Brian Singleton emphasises, although 'Rule Britannia' continued to be sung with pride and gusto in the early twentieth century, 'behind the façade of nationalist supremacy lay political division and social unease'.²⁴⁷ Colonial unrest in

²⁴⁵ Brian Singleton, *Oscar Asche: Orientalism and British Musical Comedy* (London: Praeger Publishers, 2004), 1.

²⁴⁶ See Derek B. Scott, 'English National Identity and the Comic Operas of Gilbert and Sullivan', in *Musical Style and Social Meaning: Selected Essays* (Farnham: Ashgate), 219.

²⁴⁷ Singleton, *Oscar Asche*, 1.

India and Ireland; the shame of the atrocities committed during the Boer War; the increasingly antagonistic demands of women's suffrage; growing agitation for better pay and working conditions from a newly unionised work force; and the threat of military conflict in Europe provided the backdrop to an anxious Britain and these concerns began to shape revue in the pre-War period. Focusing on the revue *Eightpence a Mile* (1913), this chapter looks at how London West End revue constituted a particular response to mounting social, political and cultural insecurities over Britain's status and position at the beginning of the twentieth century. Just as musical comedy had in many ways reflected Britain at its zenith, revue by comparison captured a feeling of decline. This chapter highlights revue's topical observation and satirical commentary and the development of a new fragmented performance style characterised by satirical critical reflection and intellectual questioning. In revue's shapeless and haphazard version of modernity, anxieties about degeneration and the condition and identity of modern England became deeply problematised, providing a cultural expression of a fragile and changing social and political order.

Eightpence a Mile, a revue in two acts and twenty-five tableaux in a non-linear structure, was written by Fred Thompson and George Grossmith Jr and produced by André Charlot and Montague Leveaux at the Alhambra theatre in Leicester Square in May 1913. A visually stunning and multi-disciplinary production, it contained ballets choreographed by Theodore Kosloff and designed by Eugene Ronsin, costumes by couturier Paul Poiret, music composed and arranged by Willy Redstone, lyrics by Hugh E Wright and other dances and ensembles by Julian Alfred. It was an eclectic mix of discursive yet patriotic representations of Edwardian Britain and its Empire with which Alhambra audiences would have been familiar. In the late nineteenth century the Alhambra Theatre, under the auspices of the manager A.

Dundas Slater and the musical director George W. Byng, had built a reputation for patriotic ballets with a series of spectacular productions. Byng had taken over from the German-born Georges Jacobi in 1898 and thereafter 'imperial politics began to feature increasingly'.²⁴⁸ 'Patriotism and Empire [...] were] highly marketable products in the world of popular entertainment'²⁴⁹ and shows such as *A Day Off* (1899), *Soldiers of the Queen* (1899) (Revived as *Soldiers of the King* in 1901), *Britannia's Realm* (1902), *Our Flag* (1909) and *Fall in Rookies* (1910) were presented at the Alhambra with a strong sense of national pride. Although music hall was known as the 'fount of patriotism',²⁵⁰ the popular theatres of the West End of London, such as the Alhambra and the Empire, were all potent providers of imperial nationalism. *The Times* review of *Our Flag* at the Alhambra provides a sense of how national patriotism and the celebration of empire were mixed together.

[it] takes the form of a pageant of England's colonial possessions [...] India, South Africa, Canada, Australia, the West Indies, New Zealand and Hong-Kong take part, and combine in a series of Kaleidoscopic dances [...] It is all very pretty and patriotic and the appearance of the various colonies and the presentation of a miniature Dreadnought in front of a well-painted scene representing Windsor Castle stirred the audience to quite a little display of enthusiasm.²⁵¹

As Eric Hobsbawm argues, nationalism worked best when 'combined with some more powerful interest and mobilising force, ancient or modern',²⁵² and empire served

²⁴⁸ Jeffrey Richards, *Imperialism and Music, Britain 1876-1953* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), 253.

²⁴⁹ Penny Summerfield, 'Patriotism and Empire, Music-Hall Entertainment 1870-1914', in John M. Mackenzie (ed.), *Imperialism and Popular Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), 42.

²⁵⁰ Summerfield, 'Patriotism and Empire', 17.

²⁵¹ *The Times*, December 21, 1909; pg10; Issue 39148; col F, *Our Flag*, Alhambra Theatre.

²⁵² Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire, 1875-1914* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson Ltd, 1987), 163.

that purpose. At this time the ‘uncritical support for monarch, the Empire and the government of the day was not, however considered ‘political’.²⁵³ The celebration of the acquisition of far off lands and the sovereign domination over others in the name of King and country was seen as a great national achievement, as C.F.G. Masterman articulated:

For its effort at conquest, however annoying to those who resent its domination, are enterprises of no mean or timid order. No nation need be ashamed of Empire on a large scale or apologise for the overlordship of a Continent.²⁵⁴

Yet this colonial ‘overlordship’ had started to be questioned both on and off stage. Stage plays like *John Bull’s Other Island* (1904) by George Bernard Shaw mocked notions of British rule in Ireland, and the earlier revue *King Kodak* (1894) highlighted British Imperialism in Africa. Off the stage, Britain saw the rise of political opposition exemplified by movements and events such as the Pan-African Conference held in London in 1900, which called for the end of colonial rule and imperialism.²⁵⁵ However, popular musical theatre’s economic success also lay in being part of an extensive transnational commercial industry. Indeed, musical theatre was one of the early popular cultures to be organised on a global scale, importing and exporting shows, music and performers to ‘continental and transcontinental metropolises, including Vienna, Paris, Hamburg, Budapest and New York as well as an empire circuit that featured such sites as Johannesburg, Cape Town, Sydney, Melbourne,

²⁵³ Summerfield, ‘Patriotism and Empire’, 42.

²⁵⁴ C.F.G. Masterman, *The Condition of England* (London: Methuen and Co Ltd, 1909), 51.

²⁵⁵ See Peter Fryer, *Staying Power* (London: Pluto Press, 1984), 237-297, also Jonathan Schneer, ‘Anti-Imperial London: The Pan-African Conference 1900’, in Gretchen Holbrook Gerzina (ed.) *Black Victorians, Black Victoriana* (London: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 175-186.

Adelaide, Dublin, Singapore, Mumbai and Allabad'.²⁵⁶ This process saw great exchange and cultural transfer, allowing the popular theatrical forms and styles of the continent to be appropriated by the London stage and vice-versa, thereby creating a common metropolitan culture.²⁵⁷ As a theatrical form, revue's emergence in the West End was shaped by its popularity abroad, most notably in the Zeigfeld Follies in New York and the Folies Bergère in Paris. George Grossmith Jr, one of the writers of *Eightpence a Mile*, was an established leading man in Edwardian musical comedy and was active on the international theatre circuit, having spent his early professional life working in the revue shows at the Folies Bergère.²⁵⁸ This experience enabled him for a while to become, along with Harry Gabriel Pélissier's Follies,²⁵⁹ the leading exponent of the new form in the West End at the beginning of the century. André Charlot, the French producer of *Eightpence a Mile*, was also a product of this cultural exchange and transfer, having been the business manager at the Folies Bergère in Paris before he relocated to London to take charge of the Alhambra. Over the next two decades, Charlot would become a dominant figure in West End revue.²⁶⁰ However, in 1913 what 'theatre conscious Londoners knew of revue was mainly through Grossmith's experimentations'.²⁶¹ During 1912, Grossmith had written and produced three revues at the Alhambra, *Everybody's Doing It* (1912), *A Guide to Paris* (1912) and *Kill that Fly* (1912), a collaborative work with Charlot. Grossmith's earlier revues *Hullo London* (1910) and *By George* (1911) at the Empire theatre were among the first, and they retained a residual reliance on a diverse variety of elements,

²⁵⁶ Len Platt, Tobias Becker and David Linton, *Popular Musical Theatre in London and Berlin 1890-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 27. This is an area that requires further investigation but has started to be acknowledged.

²⁵⁷ See Platt, Becker and Linton, *Popular Musical Theatre in London and Berlin*.

²⁵⁸ Kurt Gänzl, 'Grossmith, George (1874-1935)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/33591>, accessed 26 April 2012]

²⁵⁹ See Ernest Short, *Fifty Years of Vaudeville* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode), Chapter 10.

²⁶⁰ See James Ross Moore, *André Charlot: The Genius of Intimate Musical Revue* (London: McFarland and Company, Inc. Publishers).

²⁶¹ Moore, *André Charlot*, 34.

mixing music, singing, dance and design with comedy and topicality.²⁶² These early shows relied on a preponderance of travelogues, narratives of national greatness and patriotic celebration. As topical patriotic ‘turns’ on the evening’s bill, these early revues sought the opportunity to associate themselves with celebrations of the nation, but also with a cosmopolitan avant-garde high culture. *By George* at the Empire played alongside a cosmopolitan mix of European performers in a rousing patriotic spectacle, celebrating the coronation of King George V, as the review in *The Era* described:

the coronation tableau sounds a splendid note of imperialism [...] Mr Harry Allister wears the robes of the King in a huge frame with dignity and stateliness and the entourage of peers and peeresses, heralds, and pages in all the pomp and circumstance of a great and unique ceremony forms a coup d’oeil that will make a strong appeal, not only to Londoners but to loyalists from all parts of Britain beyond the seas.²⁶³

As Martin Green has argued, Empire provided ‘a frame for England itself, a way of knowing what it meant to be English.’²⁶⁴ *The Era* review presents a contemporary understanding of the symbolism that the monarchy embodied and recognises the important role of representation in supporting and maintaining Britain’s role as an imperial nation. The need to appeal to ‘loyalists [...] beyond the seas’, was not a throwaway line, but an acknowledgement of the potent challenges to British colonial power. A week after *Eightpence a Mile* had opened, *The Era* reported that

On Saturday afternoon a tin canister containing 42 gun powder cartridges was found in [...] the Empire Palace theatre, Dublin [...] cartridges were padded

²⁶² See Chapter 1, ‘Histories, Practices and methodologies: Contexts for reading London West End Revue’

²⁶³ *The Era*, *By George*, February 8th 1911, 22.

²⁶⁴ Martin Green, *Dreams of Adventure, Deeds of Empire* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), 3.

all around with cotton which had been saturated with oil, and a cotton cord also saturated with oil was attached to the canister. This cord was ignited when the canister was discovered.²⁶⁵

In 1913, the growing challenges to British colonial rule and the old orthodoxies were evident for all to see, and those experiences were to be critically expressed and reflected on in a new form that seemed to mirror the age.²⁶⁶

Eightpence a Mile opens in 1813, a hundred years in the past, with a chorus of 'London cries'. The opening scene envisages the sight and sound of the waking metropolis, London, with industrious tradespeople entering one by one, selling their wares on the capital's streets – an imagining of London, used in countless musicals, that constructs an innocent image of a bygone age in which an artisan working class plies its products, happy in its work.

Men: Water creases.

Men: Salt, three pounds a penny!

Girls: Who'll buy? Won't you buy my sweet lavender?

Girls: Old chars to mend. (rpt)²⁶⁷

Corinthian Tom and Jerry Hawthorne, also known as, 'Tom and Jerry', the heroes of Pierce Egan's famous book *Life in London* (1820), enter this nostalgic idyll. *Life in London* presented the wild 'urban' adventures experienced by Corinthian Tom, a 'man about town', and Jerry Hawthorn, his country cousin and a gullible yokel. In Egan's series of stories, Tom introduces his cousin Jerry to the pleasures and seedier sides of London and comic adventures ensue: the heroes experience regency 'life in London' in full, going gambling, shooting, drinking, cavorting and carousing across

²⁶⁵ *The Era*, May 17th 1913, 19.

²⁶⁶ See Chapter 1, 'Histories, Practices and methodologies: Contexts for reading London West End Revue.'

²⁶⁷ George Grossmith Jr and Fred Thompson, *Eightpence a Mile* (London: British Library, Lord Chamberlain's Plays, 1913),np.

the city in contrasting episodes that explore the city's highs and lows. With illustrations by Robert Cruickshank, the stories and characters became wildly popular and inspired many imitations and numerous theatrical productions, the most famous being William Moncrieff's adaptation, *Tom and Jerry* (1821) at the Adelphi theatre. Indeed, Moncrieff's adaptation was part of an emerging genre of plays during the nineteenth century about urban London that promised 'authentic scenes of London Life'.²⁶⁸ As Heidi Holder argues, these dramas 'offered not only striking images of urban life, but also dramatic representations of the prevailing urban theories of their time [...] influenced by [...] the writings of so-called social explorers such as Henry Mayhew, James Greenwood, Andrew Mearns and George Sims'.²⁶⁹ These proved very popular because their central appeal lay in the fixing of identities and roles, the 'mingling of classes and the crossing of the city's geographical and psychological boundaries', often putting 'forth realistic scenes of poverty in the city and fantastic resolutions of the problems it presented'.²⁷⁰

To Edwardian audiences, 'Tom and Jerry', would have been instant signifiers. As urban adventurers, 'forerunners of the dandies [...] bohemian seekers of knowledge and culture',²⁷¹ they were representative of an affectionately remembered London, full of vigour, humour and adventure, but also slightly indulgent and excessive, marking the extremes of aristocratic wealth and working class poverty. In *Eightpence a Mile*, Tom and Jerry enter 'dancing, singing, full of glee'²⁷², and it seems we are about to experience their raucous exploits in the metropolis again, this

²⁶⁸ Heidi J. Holder, 'Outcast London on the Victorian and Edwardian Stage', *Theatre History Studies* 23 (2003): 49-64.

²⁶⁹ Holder, 'Outcast London', 49.

²⁷⁰ Holder, *Outcast London*, 55.

²⁷¹ Holder, *Outcast London*, 52.

²⁷² *Eightpence a Mile*, np.

time in the company of a compère and several commères.²⁷³ As the revue begins, London is presented as a patriarchal playground for Tom and Jerry to explore, as expressed in the song, ‘What makes the boys like London?’

What makes the boys like London?

What makes the boys like town?

What makes the boys like London

As they go up and down.

Is it the streets? Or perhaps it is the park

Is it the daylight? Is it the dark?

I’ll bet it’s the girls around

Who set their hearts a whirl

*That’s why the boys like London.*²⁷⁴

A spirit of boisterous celebration is advanced by the compère and several commères, who relate how they are to be escorted around London on a drinking spree by Tom and Jerry.

We’ll taste the wines in the wood at the London docks – then on to chaff the flash Mollishers at the Grand Carnival – in fact we’ll indulge once more in a ramble and spree through the metropolis [...] If you want a run around town to

²⁷³ Grossmith had been exposed to the practice of the compère/commère in Paris, but it was common across the continent. The compère/commère was the equivalent of a Greek chorus and narrated and commented on the action. It was a device that was further developed in the traditions and techniques of popular performance in commedia dell’ arte and music hall, in which performers would directly address the audience at times and seek interaction.

²⁷⁴ Grossmith Jr and Thompson, *Eightpence a Mile*, np.

have a bit of fun, Tom and Jerry know the way, they'll tell you how it's done.²⁷⁵

Tom and Jerry exit momentarily, singing of the splendours of London, and as they do we find ourselves returned to the present of 1913. The music still plays, but it has changed, as do the people. As the stage directions indicate, a 'modern crowd'²⁷⁶ enters. Tom and Jerry also re-enter but in a new 1913 manifestation as 'modern nuts'²⁷⁷, markedly different from their regency old selves. No longer merry and eager for adventure, they are now 'bored' and 'more bored'. As a commère runs to greet them they observe,

Jerry: (Bored) Who's the bird, Tom?

Tom: (More bored) Haven't an earthly! (putting up eye glasses and looking over.)²⁷⁸

Shocked by the sharp change in their demeanour, the compère checks to see who they are.

Compère: You're Tom and Jerry aren't you?

Tom: We are. I'm Tom Martini, known at Oddy's and elsewhere as the 'Flapper King'.

Jerry: And I'm Gerald Nutt, nicknamed 'Post-dated Jerry' of the Bank Managers Bogie.²⁷⁹

The 'modern' Tom and Jerry are now firmly situated in a contemporary popular dance culture of cocktails, nightclubs and bad finances. The world of 1913 is contrasted sharply with that of 1813: the modern crowd now seem detached, disinterested and lethargic. However, encouraged by the commère and compère, the duo hail a taxi to

²⁷⁵ Grossmith Jr and Thompson, *Eightpence a Mile*, np.

²⁷⁶ Grossmith Jr and Thompson, *Eightpence a Mile*, np.

²⁷⁷ Grossmith Jr and Thompson, *Eightpence a Mile*, np.

²⁷⁸ Grossmith Jr and Thompson, *Eightpence a Mile*, np.

²⁷⁹ Grossmith Jr and Thompson, *Eightpence a Mile*, np.

take them on their way. ‘How much will all that cost?’ asks the compère, to which the taxi driver replies, ‘Eightpence a mile!’²⁸⁰

So begins our journey, structured using the familiar travelogue or ‘tourist’ motif, an aristocratic Grand Tour in the company of a modern day cicerone, a compère and five commères. The audience are to be taken on an adventure, travelling around the capital, observing, encountering delights and skirmishes, and intermingling the familiar and the exotic ‘other’ to give the sense of experience. However, in *Eightpence a Mile*, the ‘exotic’ is not necessarily distant, but focuses on behaviour and persons felt to be different,²⁸¹ constructing critical responses to those, from suffragettes to futurist painters, who are challenging convention across the metropolis. Theatrical travelogues drew a great deal from the travel literature of the nineteenth century which, as Laurence Kitzan argued, fused two genres of travel writing, ‘one specifically about travel and the other fiction partly inspired by travel [...creating] images of different parts of the world and the people who lived and adventured there’.²⁸² Theatrical travelogue allowed the audience to experience myriad different places and things in a short period of time through the characters, causing them to become involved in the topical grand, national narratives and the momentous currents of the time through the depiction of a more nuanced and everyday record. As Benedict Anderson highlighted,²⁸³ the circulation of narratives of belonging are a means by which a community can be imagined. In popular theatre, travels around the capital, back in time or across the globe helped to forge ideas of nation through

²⁸⁰ Grossmith Jr and Thompson, *Eightpence a Mile*, np.

²⁸¹ See Ralph Locke, ‘Exoticism and Orientalism in Music: Problems for the Worldly Critic’, in Paul A. Boré (ed.), *Edward Said and the Work of the Critic: Speaking Truth to Power* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 257-81, 266.

²⁸² Laurence Kitzan, *Victorian Writers and the ‘Image of Empire’: The Rose Coloured Vision* (Wesport, CN, and London: Greenwood Press, 2001), 15.

²⁸³ See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

commonality and differentiation: cultural traditions took on meaning through a system of differences by which people came to know themselves as a community and to perceive themselves as different to ‘others’ outside of the community. Indeed, the *Flowers of Allah* ballet in *Eightpence a Mile* particularly draws attention to popular musical theatre’s historic engagement with a larger evolving discourse of Orientalism,²⁸⁴ engaging in ‘spectacular representations of otherness for the western spectator’.²⁸⁵ Artist and stage designer Eugène Ronsin was responsible for the exotic ‘Pastel’ and ‘Flowers of Allah’ ballets, while French couture fashion designer Paul Poiret created the Persian costumes and Mr A.E. Craven the scene paintings. The ballets in *Eightpence a Mile* bring together the key elements of power, fantasy and the stereotype in their imagining of nation in revue. Stereotyping, as Stuart Hall argued, ‘has its own poetics – its own ways of working – and its politics – the ways in which it is invested with power.’²⁸⁶ This is hegemonic and discursive, but also circular because ‘it implicates the subjects of power as well as those who are ‘subjected to it’’.²⁸⁷ For as Edward Said highlighted, ‘Orientalism is never far from [...] the idea of Europe, a collective notion identifying “us” Europeans, as against all “those” non-Europeans’.²⁸⁸

In this European racial imagining, oriental aesthetics ‘linked to the primitive [...] become tools for a critique of western civilisation’.²⁸⁹ Here the Orient, as constructed by Europeans, becomes a regenerative force with which Londoners may

²⁸⁴ See Carolyn Williams, *Gilbert and Sullivan: Gender, Genre, Parody* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011) and Carolyn Williams, ‘Utopia, Limited: Nationalism, empire and parody in the comic operas of Gilbert and Sullivan’, in Sally Ledger and Scott McCracken (eds.), *Cultural Politics at the Fin De Siècle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 221-247.

²⁸⁵ Martin Clayton and Bennett Zon (eds), *Music and Orientalism in the British Empire, 1780s-1940s: Portrayal of the East* (Aldersot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2007), 8.

²⁸⁶ Stuart Hall, ‘The Spectacle of the ‘Other’’ in Stuart Hall (ed) *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage Publications, 1997), 263.

²⁸⁷ Hall, *The Spectacle of the ‘Other’*, 263.

²⁸⁸ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978), 7.

²⁸⁹ Derek B. Scott, *Musical Style and Social Meaning: Selected Essays* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2010), 175.

acquaint themselves with what contemporary city living has destroyed. These spectacular scenes used stage, pictorialism, dance, colour and tableaux to suggest, an ‘authentic’ binary of representations of place at home and abroad that contrasted the degenerative urban metropolis with an Oriental idyll untouched by a decaying western modernity – a cautionary warning to the dangers of regression to a privileged, decadent society, exemplified by the characters Tom and Jerry.

In *Eightpence a Mile*, produced on the eve of the First World War, there is a recurring metanarrative concern with the condition of England and issues of attack from outside and within, which affect the British character/identity as exemplified by ‘Tom and Jerry’. Contemporary metropolitan signifiers are tacitly presented by making the audience question what has happened in the intervening hundred years to change the familiar heroes. Tom and Jerry’s differing portrayals present cultural ambivalences and concerns and are indicative of the discursive possibilities of revue about the ideas of ‘progress’, ‘degeneration’ and national identity. The simple dramatic device of ‘compare and contrast’ or ‘before and after’ demands quick, sharp representations. These are then juxtaposed, causing the audiences to literally ‘review’, analyse and critique. A little crass and clunky in some respects, but nevertheless a highly suggestive engagement: the revue author subtly focuses the audience on profound contemporary anxieties and complex issues of individual and national concern. The modern world that revue depicts consists of challenging new politics, new art and a new social order that is intent on dismantling British hegemony and the status quo. Here the new exotic ‘other’ presents a much more complex and ambiguous picture of the modern world: identities are unfixed and the ‘other’ is no longer necessarily foreign, but British, a mixture of home-grown instigators. In *Eightpence a Mile*, these ‘others’ are often portrayed as objects of derision, but their location is no

longer at the margins of Empire. Now, threateningly, they figure at the centre, marking a changing social and political landscape and a modernity that seemed intent on dismantling and challenging the old certainties.

The previous year, 1912, had seen one such challenge in the form of the Futurist art exhibition that had opened at the Sackville Gallery in London. The Italian Filippo Tommaso Marinetti presented his controversial art manifesto of Futurism aesthetics to a less-than-receptive British press. In *The Times*, the manifesto had been largely dismissed as ‘not very clearly reasoned’²⁹⁰ and Marinetti’s lecture on the ‘aims of Futurism’ had been called a ‘morbid form of destructive revolution’.²⁹¹ In *Eightpence a Mile*, the Futurist is satirically ridiculed, removed from the trappings of the art world of high culture and portrayed as a con-artist out to deceive and make money: as the compère asks him to ‘give us a vague impression for say five pounds’, the Futurist replies, ‘It would be vaguer for ten.’²⁹² In West End revue, the passing of realist art in favour of the unorthodox new forms Futurism and Cubism is lamented:

Is there no realism left in Art?

Is there nothing pleasing and beautiful left for us to look at?²⁹³

These new ‘exotic’ forms are appropriated by revue culture not in a celebration but as an example of the issues that are causing a degenerative modernity. This is further illustrated by the scene caricaturing the suffragette activist Mrs Flora Drummond. In this scene, the politics of suffragette activism and militancy are brought to the stage and lampooned. The suffragette Mrs Drummond was at the forefront of an intensification of suffragette militancy the previous year, which destroyed public property and saw suffragettes smashing the windows of West End on The Strand,

²⁹⁰ *The Times*, March 01, 1912, 11.

²⁹¹ *The Times*, March 21, 1912, 2.

²⁹² Grossmith Jr and Thompson, *Eightpence a Mile*, np.

²⁹³ Grossmith Jr and Thompson, *Eightpence a Mile*, np.

Oxford Street and Regent Street.²⁹⁴ Now “the hunger striker” is burlesqued doing her weekly shopping in Selfridges and having food delivered to her home from the very store she attacked, another representation of the new ‘exotic’ not as a threat but as a hypocritical charlatan. The portrayal of contemporary women in revue ‘was a testing proposition, at once predatory and parasitic, demanding and withholding,’ but as Bailey attested, they were also ‘front and centre of the spectacle.’²⁹⁵

These satirical comic scenes offer a particular criticism of the contemporary world of 1913. It is a criticism that is engaged with theories of degeneration in Britain. Degeneration was a recurring theme in an intellectual and literary culture that saw the advance of modernity in its many guises as a force that was corrupting contemporary western culture. Writers such as Max Nordau²⁹⁶ were influenced by eugenics and criminal theories and argued that this was a depraved and degenerate age. The German cultural commentator Friedrich Nietzsche argued that modernity was eroding distinction, producing a homogenous world, resulting in what he saw as ‘the collective degeneration of man [...] to the pygmy animal of equal rights and equal pretensions’.²⁹⁷ In some quarters the diminishing power and demise of the British landed aristocracy²⁹⁸ and the changing nature of male and female roles and identities were perfect illustrations of a nation in decline. In literature the decline of the landed aristocracy was used as a symbol of this degeneration, with a whole genre of books in this period charting aristocratic decline in fictional representations of

²⁹⁴ *The Times*, March 02, 1912, 12. Suffragettes arrested like Mrs Drummond would go on hunger strike. The government determined to prevent these women becoming martyrs, so introduced the Prisoner’s Temporary Discharge of Ill Health Act so as and when the hunger strikers became ill they were released; upon recovery they were re-arrested. This was also known as the Cat and Mouse Act.

²⁹⁵ Peter Bailey, *Popular Culture and Performance in the Victorian City* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 137.

²⁹⁶ See Max Nordau, *Degeneration* (London: William Heinemann, 1895).

²⁹⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* (London: Penguin Books, 1973), 127.

²⁹⁸ See Len Platt, *Aristocracies of Fiction: The Idea of Aristocracy in Late-Nineteenth-Century and Early-Twentieth-Century Literary Culture* (London: Greenwood Press, 2001).

‘collapsing and displaced nobilities’.²⁹⁹ The fragmentation of traditional class identities and the erosion of the ‘sexual borderline’³⁰⁰ between men and women were highlighted as manifestations of the crisis that faced modern cultural society. Nietzsche attacked the ‘modern’ idea that women would be emancipated once they had secured equal rights; rather he argued, women would become as sick as ‘European “manliness” is sick’.³⁰¹ Nietzsche was critical of what he saw as the loss of ‘womanly instincts’.³⁰² Nietzsche’s overall critique of modern western culture considered what others saw as progress a ‘blind confidence in modern ideas’.³⁰³

Eightpence a Mile, then, is a singular reading of social and cultural concerns about Britain at the beginning of the century. At the centre of this exploration was Britain’s character and identity, which became the focus of heated debate. Four years earlier, C.F.G. Masterman’s *The Condition of England* (1909), an acute criticism of Edwardian society, had constructed a vision of a flawed and delusionally indulgent British culture. For Masterman, modern England was carrying ‘within itself the seeds of its own destruction’,³⁰⁴ was negligent to the realities of its fate and was suffering from the success and prosperity of empire.

In all cases prosperity has brought some especial dangers: a weakening of the willingness to work, a rejection of earlier simplicities, a too eager absorption in pleasure.³⁰⁵

Masterman’s examination of the social condition of England was heavily influenced by earlier Victorian precursors such as Matthew Arnold, Thomas Carlyle and John

²⁹⁹ Platt, *Aristocracies of Fiction*, 3.

³⁰⁰ Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle*, (New York, Viking, 1990), 8.

³⁰¹ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 168.

³⁰² Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 167.

³⁰³ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 127.

³⁰⁴ Masterman, *The Condition of England*, 223.

³⁰⁵ Masterman, *The Condition of England*, 214.

Ruskin, and continued a debate about modern Britain that lasted well into the twentieth century. A common theme popular in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was the analogy between the fall of Rome and the demise of the British Empire. Indeed, in Victorian and Edwardian theatre ‘Ancient Rome, Greece, Egypt, Babylon and the Holy Land were popular settings’,³⁰⁶ because the ‘theatrical codification [of the ancient world] became a way to contrast contemporary urbanisation and industrialisation with an imagined golden age, to comment on national identity.’³⁰⁷ It was a tradition perfected by the ‘masters of the pictorial stage’,³⁰⁸ Henry Irving and Herbert Beerbohm-Tree. A number of literary publications such as a spoof futuristic pamphlet by Elliot Mills entitled *The Decline and Fall of the British Empire*³⁰⁹ (written in 1905 but set in 2005) also sought to construct this Roman parallel. The pamphlet outlined Britain’s demise in comparison to that of the Roman Empire through the eyes of a Japanese academic. A speculative fiction, it compiled a list of the symptoms of decay ‘common to the two epochs’³¹⁰ and made criticisms of British social and foreign policy through a xenophobic racist gaze. From Mills’s perspective the decadence of the society, combined with wanton pleasure seeking in general was a major indicator of decline for both the British and the Romans. Similarly, in early 1907 Mr Warde Fowler, speaking to the Classical Association at Cambridge, made the same comparison between modern London and the fall of the Roman Empire, highlighting the growing mass populace who were

³⁰⁶ Rebecca D’Monté, *British Theatre and Performance 1900-1950* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 25.

³⁰⁷ D’Monté, *British Theatre and Performance*, 25.

³⁰⁸ Jeffrey Richards, *The Ancient World on the Victorian and Edwardian Stage* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 152.

³⁰⁹ Elliot Mills, *The Decline and Fall of the British Empire: A brief account of those causes which resulted in the destruction of our late ally, together with a comparison between the British and Roman Empires* (Oxford: Alden and Co Ltd, Bocardo Press, 1905). Mills cited an array of causes for Britain’s decline, the main elements being the decline of British national sea and naval defences, the deterioration of British health, religious life and literary and dramatic tastes and the failure to defend the Empire from attack.

³¹⁰ Mills, *The Decline and Fall of the British Empire*, 4.

intent on ‘the ever growing demands for pleasure and excitement’.³¹¹ Masterman also employed this Roman comparison in *The Condition of England* in his analysis of British national identity, and he was critical of what he perceived as a propensity for profligacy and ostentation in the British character.

Any student who has followed the history of Rome’s destruction - the gradual disintegration of a society exceedingly complex and rational - will never conceal from himself the possibility of similar vast changes in the world of tomorrow.³¹²

For Masterman, these changes were caused by degenerative elements from outside and within which were undermining the British character and its power. ‘Tom and Jerry’, like the suffragette Mrs Drummond, are representative of Masterman’s idea of degeneration from within, of an upper class lacking ‘ideas and creative energy, having been raised on the principle of doing as one likes’.³¹³ The boredom of our ‘modern nuts’ in *Eightpence a Mile* is manifest in the lethargy of the upper classes, which is reflected by Masterman’s general theme ‘that material advance has outstripped moral progress’.³¹⁴ Using Masterman’s taxonomy, the ‘modern nuts’, Tom and Jerry, are representative of Britain’s demise into a ‘dumbing’ mediocrity, but also of the failure to defend the empire.

In his concluding chapter, the ‘The Illusion of Security’, Masterman develops his argument, contending that these degenerative elements had made the country vulnerable to attack and that England was in denial about the threats to its empire.

And of all illusions of the opening twentieth century perhaps the most remarkable is that of security. Already gigantic and novel forces of

³¹¹ *The Times*, October 24, 1907, 17.

³¹² Masterman, *The Condition of England*, 232.

³¹³ Masterman, *The Condition of England*, 28.

³¹⁴ Masterman, *The Condition of England*, xxviii.

mechanical invention, upheavals of people, social discontents, are exhibiting a society in the beginnings of change.

Eightpence a Mile captures a Britain in the early twentieth century that was in many ways more concerned with ‘the defence of an existing empire rather than in its acquisition’.³¹⁵ It is a political satirical critique that presents a ‘Britain [that] had been resting peacefully, unaware of the threats to the Empire coming from jealous foreigners’³¹⁶ encroaching upon British territories, most notably in this period Germany. The growth of Germany as a nation state had been phenomenal. Germany’s economic wealth, coupled with its build-up of armaments and naval force, led to an intense Anglo-German rivalry before the onset of World War One.³¹⁷ Masterman drew parallels between England’s decline and H.G. Wells invasion novel *The War of the Worlds* (1898), and argued that ‘one way [...] in which the end may come’³¹⁸ was through aerial warfare:

it is in the realization of so remarkable a danger that the outbreak of aerial warfare becomes not so much a nightmare vision of the future as a vigorous criticism of the present.³¹⁹

In the next scene of *Eightpence a Mile*, a German airship is spotted flying over the admiralty arch, to the dismay of anxious Londoners below. The particular symbolism of the airship, as a metaphor for Germany’s military power, would not be lost on contemporary audiences: the Zeppelin rigid airship, pioneered by Count Ferdinand von Zeppelin and operated before the First World War by the Deutsche

³¹⁵ John M. Mackenzie (ed.), *Imperialism and Popular Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), 7.

³¹⁶ Summerfield, ‘Patriotism and Empire’, 27.

³¹⁷ See Paul M. Kennedy, *The Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism 1860-1914* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1980) and V.R. Berghahn, *Germany and the Approach of War in 1914* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1973).

³¹⁸ Masterman, *The Condition of England*, 223.

³¹⁹ Masterman, *The Condition of England*, 223.

Luftschiffahrts-AG, had, more than any other airship, come to signify Germany's encroaching presence. The scene reflects a growing wave of invasion concerns, and sightings of German airships were frequently reported in the press at this time. *Six Panics and Other Essays* by F.W. Hirst (1913)³²⁰ offers a contemporary account of the British mystery airship wave of 1913, which saw the last of a series of panics concerning the alleged threat of foreign invasion, and highlights how fears of being attacked by Germany became a political issue, leading to calls for increased military expenditure.

British national discourses became particularly framed by invasion anxiety, which was reflected in popular fiction and focused on Germany invading Britain. Invasion literature included Erskine Childers' *The Riddle of the Sands* (1903) and William le Queux's *The Invasion of England* (1905) and *The Invasion of 1910*, which was published in 1906 and serialised in the popular national newspaper the *Daily Mail*. Yet in literature, as in revue, the whole invasion genre was frequently lambasted, as is exemplified in a satirical short story, by P.G. Wodehouse, 'The SWOOP or How Clarence Saved England A Tale of the Great Invasion' (1909), which tells of the simultaneous invasion of England by nine countries. The countries eventually leave for various reasons (the Swiss have to be home for the winter hotel season), and the German Prince Otto and the Russian Grand Duke Vodkakoff are offered music hall engagements.

The topic of invasion in *Eightpence a Mile* is dealt with in what might be seen as an unpatriotic way: Britain is portrayed as a country unprepared to deal with a military attack. However, the scene engages directly with the politics of British military readiness for war and the call for armaments in the press in response to

³²⁰ F.W. Hirst, *The Six Panics and Other Essays* (London: Methuen and Co, 1913). See particularly the chapters 'The Fifth or Dreadnought Panic', 59 and 'The Sixth or Airship Panic', 103.

Germany's military strength. It does this through a mixture of classic comic misunderstandings and play with class, gender and national identity stereotypes. A British soldier enters in the form of the gullible, hen-picked Private Tommy Atkins.³²¹ 'Tommy Atkins', or more recognisably 'Tommy', is a slang or generic name for a common soldier in the British Army; coined during the nineteenth century, the word 'Tommy' was to become synonymous with British soldiers during World War One. The symbolism of the soldier 'Tommy' was not yet as established in the British psyche as it would later become during the War, but 'Tommy' was still representative of British pluck and endeavour.

Tommy: It's no use you talking like that, Annie. You seem to forget who I am. My name's Private Tommy Atkins known to the British public as the hope of the country.

Annie: Oh, you're the hope of the country, are you?

Tommy: I am that.

Annie: Well God save the King!³²²

Private Tommy Atkins, 'the hope of the country', is shown to be completely ill equipped as he literally bumps into Lord Seely, the Secretary of War, looking at the airship in the sky.

Seely: Ah, British soldier. Now my man, haven't you noticed that speck in the sky? That's a German air-ship!

Tommy: Well, what if it is? Who are you, anyhow?

Seely: Colonel Seely, the Secretary of War.³²³

³²¹ For detailed analysis of the emergence and history of the name see John Laffin, *Tommy Atkins: The Story of the English Soldier* (London: Cassell, 1966).

³²² Grossmith Jr and Thompson, *Eightpence a Mile*, np.

³²³ Grossmith Jr and Thompson, *Eightpence a Mile*, np.

It is Seely who has to instruct the hapless Tommy berating him: ‘Well? What ought you to do? You know the rules prescribed in the Ariel Navigation Act.’ Tommy then proceeds to take a rule book from his pocket and give it to Seely, who finds the article and communicates in detail the rules concerning who is allowed to fly over the country even as the airship hovers directly above the admiralty arch in the heart of London.

Seely: Foreign Naval or Military Aircraft shall not pass over land within any part of United Kingdom within the conditions prescribed by the foregoing order No 4.³²⁴

The message comically relayed is clear and far from politically neutral. While the British fumble with the rulebook, the Germans are already flying overhead. As Steve Nicholson highlighted, West End theatre engaged in sometimes blatant and explicit propaganda when the establishment felt under threat,³²⁵ and popular musical theatre was no different.³²⁶ However, the scene pulls back from the seriousness of the politics of war and diverts the audience with a play on identity and gender stereotypes through a mixture of high comedy slapstick and subtle contemporary social resonance. As the airship is brought to ground, our fears of war are found to be unfounded, and instead we are confronted with two cultural invaders of sorts: out of the airship come a ‘New Woman’ and a German. The ‘new woman’³²⁷ was a subject traditionally identified with social change in the *fin de siècle*, here represented by ‘Miss Trehawke Davis’,³²⁸ in reality a renowned British aristocrat, a flying pioneer of the time, ‘the first lady to

³²⁴ Grossmith Jr and Thompson, *Eightpence a Mile*, np.

³²⁵ Steve Nicholson, *British Theatre and the Red Peril: The Portrayal of Communism 1917-1945* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1999).

³²⁶ See Chapter 4, ‘Degeneration/Regeneration – The Remaking of Nation in Wartime West End Spectacular Revue.’

³²⁷ See Viv Gardner and Susan Rutherford (eds.), *The New Woman and Her Sisters: Feminism and Theatre 1850-1914* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992).

³²⁸ Grossmith Jr and Thompson, *Eightpence a Mile*, np.

loop-the-loop'.³²⁹ Capable, independent and confident, the 'new woman', as epitomised by Miss Davis, was seen to be pushing against the limits which society had imposed on women. Unconstrained by Victorian norms and domesticity, she was emblematic of change and a source of controversy in a world 'transformed by industrialisation and embourgeoisement.'³³⁰ The 'new woman' was seen to be contributing to a crisis of manliness: men, it was argued, 'suffered from a weakened personality'³³¹ as a result of the erosion of traditional ideals of masculinity and the undermining of the institutions of marriage, family and gender roles, destabilising patriarchy. For many, this was a sign of a culture of 'regression and degeneration'.³³²

Men are losing as women are gaining, and [...] the natural balance of the sexes and their biological relationship are being thwarted by the claims of women who are becoming unsexed, anarchical and rebellious against natural laws, while man, weakly acquiescing in his own destruction, is becoming emasculated, decadent and doomed.³³³

The other cultural invader, a "German", is pulled out of the airship and is sharply questioned about his presence in the country. He proudly explains that he is a musical conductor: 'I was de conductor of ze band at the Crystal Palace'.³³⁴ The German military invasion may have been avoided for now, but here the German presence is a potent signifier of national and imperial decline and waning cultural supremacy. In this period Germany, along with the United States of America, was seen to be challenging Britain's position as a world leader economically, militarily and culturally

³²⁹ C. Turner, *The Old Flying Days* (London: Arno Press Inc, 1972), 177.

³³⁰ Herbert Sussman, *Victorian Masculinities: Manhood and Masculine Poetics in Early Victorian Literature and Art* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 2.

³³¹ Frederick Copleston, *Friedrich Nietzsche: Philosopher of Culture* (London: Harper and Row, 1942), 35.

³³² Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy*, 4.

³³³ Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy*, 8.

³³⁴ Grossmith Jr and Thompson, *Eightpence a Mile*, np.

and artistically. The growing influence of German arts, film and theatre could be read about in theatre papers such as *The Era* or seen in dynamic theatre productions such as Max Reinhardt's Orientalist extravaganza *Sumuran* (1913), with music by Fredrich Hollendar and stage designs by Ernst Stern, which opened in the West End. Fears of an impending war and a possible German invasion were further explored and reflected in the 'Topical Quartet'³³⁵ scene. In *Eightpence a Mile*, the external tensions of conflict in Europe and rivalry with Germany are performed in a rousing song through a satirical, tabloid burlesque that mimics the sensationalist 'new journalism'.³³⁶

I take in *The Times* I vow
It only costs two pence now
It says when you're carving Turkey
And everyone wants a wing
That somebody's bound to break the [piece]
There's a peculiar thing.³³⁷

The potentially tricky topic of war in Europe and the details of the dispute are handled with a pun and rhyme: the domestic image of 'carving Turkey' is abruptly turned into a metaphor for the continuing Balkan conflict and the ensuing conflicts over the sharing of the Ottoman territories between the victors. This wordplay continues in the next verses: the lyrics allude again to anxieties over invasion scares and the defence of Britain against Germany's growing industrial and military power, as epitomised by the pioneering German steel foundry of Alfred Krupp and his son Friedrich.

They say the Pall Mall
The truth will always tell

³³⁵ Grossmith Jr and Thompson, *Eightpence a Mile*, np.

³³⁶ Anthony Smith, *The Newspaper: An International History* (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd), 152.

³³⁷ Grossmith Jr and Thompson, *Eightpence a Mile*, np.

It says that German war scares
Are invented by Mr Krupp
They'll very soon come a 'kruppex'
If nobody keeps 'em up.³³⁸

Alfred Krupp and his son Friedrich specialised in steel production, but had begun to increasingly focus on the manufacture of ammunition and armaments. The scene draws attention to this issue, portraying the Krupps as perpetuating war scares in order to sell more of their products, as well as to prepare for attack. The Krupps's company's size and growth had been noted, as *The Times* reported the previous year: between 1902 and May 1912, Krupps's workforce had increased by 70 percent to 71,239.³³⁹ This marked not only Germany's military prowess, but also its growing economic and technological supremacy as a modern industrial nation state and Imperial competitor to Britain. For many, the growth of Germany seemed to support the incendiary statement made by Lord Northcliffe, Charles William Harmsworth, four years earlier. Harmsworth, the proprietor of the *Daily Mail* and *The Times*, stated, after visiting German factories in 1909, that 'Every one of those factory chimneys is a gun pointing at England'.³⁴⁰ Northcliffe was to become an ardent supporter of British rearmament as a jingoism, 'whereby the love of one's own country is transformed into the hatred of another nation', quickly developed against Germany.³⁴¹ This saw 'an era of economic-political rivalry between competing national economies, intensified by protectionism'.³⁴²

In *Eightpence a Mile*, sketches and songs grappled with challenging social subjects using comic language and exaggerated performance styles that played

³³⁸ Grossmith Jr and Thompson, *Eightpence a Mile*, np.

³³⁹ 'The Centenary of Krupp's. Origin and Growth of the Firm', *The Times*, August 07, 1912, 17.

³⁴⁰ BL Dept.3890. Northcliffe Papers, vol.49 19 May 1909, in A.N. Wilson, *After the Victorians: The World Our Parents Knew* (London: Arrow Books, 2006), 181.

³⁴¹ Summerfield, 'Patriotism and Empire', 17.

³⁴² Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire*, 76.

directly and indirectly with complex cultural and political themes of the day. The revue explored contemporary concerns such as the fear of degeneration and of being invaded or overrun in terms of losing patriarchal and racial supremacy. This was a theme that had been articulated by Charles Pearson, whose book *National Life and Character: A forecast* (1893), had voiced concern about what he saw as not only the inevitable decline of the British Empire, but also of western civilisation more broadly. Pearson spoke of the impending decline of the 'white race' and the rise of the 'industrial dark races',³⁴³ claiming that the western urge to civilise Africa and Asia would rebound on western imperialist nations and that the 'Chinese and negroes' would overcome the white races. Pearson's book was a heady mixture of pseudo-scientific facts, biological determinism, eugenics, racialisation and imperialist policy, and it captured a growing anxiety and insecurity about Britain's position that was only to increase in the coming decades. To be English was to be white, Anglo-Saxon and male, a master race to a quarter of the world's population. Yet the growing threat of being overtaken, by the Germans, women or especially by natives, was a galling prospect and a constant worry.

The day will come, and perhaps is not far distant, when the European observer will look round to see the globe girdled with a continuous zone of the black and yellow races, no longer too weak for aggression or under tutelage but independent, or practically so, in government, monopolising the trade of their regions, and circumscribing the industry of the European.³⁴⁴

Associated with this was the issue of degeneration through 'contagion' by blood or disease, weakening the purity of blood stocks and national identity. To avoid

³⁴³ Charles H. Pearson, *National Life and Character: A Forecast* (London: Macmillan, 1893), 45.

³⁴⁴ Pearson, *National Life and Character*, 84.

this, many like Masterman sought a sense of ‘identity and permanence.’³⁴⁵ He advocated for strict border controls along the lines of race, class, and nationality, utilising the ‘new sciences’ to prove the ‘mental and physical differences’³⁴⁶ between groups, preaching an ideology of ‘differentiation and hierarchy and [warning of the] degenerations that threatened when these boundaries were transgressed’.³⁴⁷

Arthur Conan Doyle’s novel *The Lost World*, published in 1912, the year before *Eightpence a Mile*, was part of what Daniel Pick describes as ‘fictions of degeneration’:³⁴⁸ a series of novels that debated the idea of the regression of the ‘highest type of man’.

To envisage the loss of ‘our world’ in this period was almost axiomatically to envisage a primitive ‘lost world’ or a degenerate ‘after world’ [...] the vision caught up in the fantasies of evolution, palaeontology and racial anthropology.³⁴⁹

The ‘lost world’ therefore becomes a space of lost ‘fixed hierarchies and places and temporal trajectories’.³⁵⁰ It’s a boys’ own adventure of British exploration and the discovery of a literal ‘lost world’ in which the heroes stumble across a war between natives and a vicious tribe of ape-like creatures. The hero is George Edward Challenger, who displays the same intellectual arrogance as Doyle’s more famous fictional creation, Sherlock Holmes. Challenger is an irascible scientist and adventurer, known for his superhuman intelligence, explosive temper and untamed appearance.

³⁴⁵ Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy*, 4.

³⁴⁶ Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy*, 8.

³⁴⁷ Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy*, 5.

³⁴⁸ Daniel Pick, *Faces of Degeneration: A European Disorder 1848-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 155.

³⁴⁹ Pick, *Faces of Degeneration*, 156.

³⁵⁰ Pick, *Faces of Degeneration*, 156.

The Lost World is a classic of the Imperial or colonial travelogue genre, in which British explorers discover new lands and bring back riches and new species to western civilisation. Like Doyle's *The Lost World*, *Eightpence a Mile* examines the world of evolution and degeneration but, in a scene that highlights an ambiguous relationship to science and progress, through comic pastiche.

The 'Professor Challenger' scene in *Eightpence a Mile* explores these issues and anxieties, taking Pearson's reading to an extreme through comic satire. We are introduced to Professor Challenger and his wife and informed that this is the same professor who discovered 'the lost world along with Arthur Conan Doyle and the proprietors of the Strand Magazine'.³⁵¹ Challenger is the high point of intelligence in Western civilisation, a man of science and reason, an explorer and a gentleman. He embodies a particularly British imperialist spirit of this time, that of the adventurer, explorer, botanist, scientist and colonial pioneer. Yet as the scene slowly unfolds his dominant position is undermined: his intelligence deserts him and he is reduced to a desperate, bumbling, comic figure. Challenger has returned home from his expedition to the colonies and is greeted by his wife, a symbol of upper-middle-class Edwardian respectability, to whom he presents exotic gifts and animals. However, Challenger's taste and intellect begin to be questioned and the plunder that he has brought back from his travels is mocked and seen as meaningless clutter, with the exception of his prize specimen from his adventures, a 'Man-Ape', 'the last word in missing links'³⁵². Mrs Challenger asks, 'Can he speak,' to which the Professor answers, 'He has a language all of his own – which I have managed to master'.³⁵³ As it turns out, this is a false declaration, as is revealed in the scene where the Professor claims to be interpreting what is obvious gibberish.

³⁵¹ Grossmith Jr and Thompson, *Eightpence a Mile*, np.

³⁵² Grossmith Jr and Thompson, *Eightpence a Mile*, np.

³⁵³ Grossmith Jr and Thompson, *Eightpence a Mile*, np.

Mrs Challenger: How do you like London?

Man-Ape: 'MA- Grr-r!'

Professor Challenger: 'He says that he likes London immensely and that he prefers Leicester Square to the Tower of London or the Monument.'³⁵⁴

The compère then asks the Man-Ape if he would like to live in England, to which he replies:

Man-Ape: Gurra-gurra-walla-walla-olla-pololla-macka wacka-dacka-chicka-chicka-goggle-oggel!

Compère: What does that mean?

Professor Challenger: Yes.³⁵⁵

The scene continues in the same vein, with the Professor explaining how he has taught the Man-Ape some phrases to repeat but, alas, that the Man-Ape has not mastered English. He then gets the Man-Ape to perform a series of words.

Man-Ape: I am Challenger

Professor Challenger: There you are.

Man-Ape: My darling.

Mrs Challenger: Where did he hear you say that?

Challenger: In the night watches thinking of you dear.³⁵⁶

At this moment the professor then expresses the progressivist belief that the Man-Ape could almost 'pass for a human. It would be an interesting experiment. I'll try.'³⁵⁷ Here the idea of improvement is twisted on its head and seen as excessive civilisation or, rather, interference in natural selection that leads to chaos and a complete unravelling of the evolutionary dynamic. The professor and the Man-Ape go off into a

³⁵⁴ Grossmith Jr and Thompson, *Eightpence a Mile*, np.

³⁵⁵ Grossmith Jr and Thompson, *Eightpence a Mile*, np.

³⁵⁶ Grossmith Jr and Thompson, *Eightpence a Mile*, np.

³⁵⁷ Grossmith Jr and Thompson, *Eightpence a Mile*, np.

large box hidden from the view of Mrs Challenger. After a short time the Man-Ape enters dressed in Professor Challenger's clothes and speaking learnt phrases in a robotic fashion; Mrs Challenger mistakes him for the professor:

Man-Ape: I am Challenger.

Mrs Challenger: But of course dear. I'm so glad you haven't dressed up that animal in your clothes.³⁵⁸

The Professor then enters wearing the Man-Ape's clothes. Realising the case of mistaken identity, he tries to explain, but the confusion worsens:

Professor Challenger: My darling, I am Challenger.

Mrs Challenger: He talks wonderfully but do take him away.³⁵⁹

The Man-Ape interjects 'My darling', aping the Professor, to which the Professor retorts, 'I am Challenger, my darling'.³⁶⁰ Mrs Challenger demands that her husband, whom she now thinks is the ape, be taken away, to which the professor again declares 'I am Challenger' and attacks the Man-Ape. At which point Mrs Challenger protects the Man-Ape, declaring 'Be careful dear, chain him. I'm sure he's a savage'.³⁶¹ The Man-Ape shackles the Professor in chains, the latter protesting wildly, and the servant becomes the master. The transformation is completed by the Man-Ape turning to Mrs Challenger and whispering the lyric, 'Snooky ookums, snooky ookums'³⁶² from the Irving Berlin song before performing a duet.

Here Conan Doyle's lost world and Pearson's argument of progress as regressive for the white races are represented comically to highlight a number of possible dangers. The colonial mandate that civilised 'British' white men had a racial genius for self-government which necessitated the conquest of more 'primitive',

³⁵⁸ Grossmith Jr and Thompson, *Eightpence a Mile*, np..

³⁵⁹ Grossmith Jr and Thompson, *Eightpence a Mile*, np.

³⁶⁰ Grossmith Jr and Thompson, *Eightpence a Mile*.

³⁶¹ Grossmith Jr and Thompson, *Eightpence a Mile*, np.

³⁶² Grossmith Jr and Thompson, *Eightpence a Mile*, np.

darker races³⁶³ is turned on its head. Professor Challenger, the embodiment of the white, male Anglo-Saxon, is literally replaced by the colonial native singing an American song. This song is another ironic contemporary signifier of England's diminishing supremacy as popular musical theatre began to be replaced by American song and dance. This engagement with the contemporary social and cultural concerns in *Eightpence a Mile* was indicative of West End revue's negotiation of modernity, which charted the erosion of old hierarchies of social distinction and marked the possible new identities that were occurring as one consequence of industrial modernisation.

Growing social change created a new performance landscape that differed from musical comedy in that a combination of representational modes such as gesture, dance, text, colour and form reflected new identities. By presenting topical comic, satirical configurations, revue engaged in a process of re-fashioning of national identity to suit the new conditions and to fit new purposes. Revue allowed audiences to become involved in grand, national narratives of imperialism and end of empire and also in the momentous currents of eugenics, race, class and gender identity politics of the time.

The growing understanding of West End audiences and Britain's position by the writers and producers that allowed them to structure their concerns, adding to revue's growing popularity. However, aesthetic advances to the form and the charting of new identities would take a different turn with the outbreak of the First World War. Revue's mixture of satirical performance and discursive possibilities would be replaced for a time by a return to spectacle and dancing girls in a celebration of a West End consumer culture and as a rousing vehicle for national propaganda.

³⁶³ Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilisation: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (London: University of Chicago Press), 22.

Chapter 4

Degeneration/Regeneration – The Remaking of Nation in Wartime West End Spectacular Revue.

Osborne: This show at the Hippodrome has been running a long time.

Stanhope: What? Zig-zag?

Osborne: Yes. George Robey's in it.

Stanhope: Harper saw it on leave. Says it's damn good. Robey's pricelessly funny.

Osborne: Wish I'd seen a show on leave.

Stanhope: D'you mean to say you didn't go to any shows?

Journey's End (1928)³⁶⁴

Although the two most successful shows of the First World War were the musical comedies *Chu Chin Chow* (1916) and *Maid of the Mountains* (1917), it was revue³⁶⁵ that established itself at the heart of the flourishing popular entertainment zone and arguably surpassed musical comedy as the principal musical form. As is alluded to in R.C. Sherriff's seminal play about the First World War, *Journey's End*,³⁶⁶ the West End became an almost compulsory part of any soldier's leave itinerary, and revues became an integral part of that experience. Why and how did this happen? What was it about revue that saw it transcend the popularity of other musical forms during wartime? In this chapter, I argue that revue's engagement with specific strands of a

³⁶⁴ R.C. Sherriff, *Journey's End* (Oxford: Heinemann Plays, 1993), 44.

³⁶⁵ In particular Albert de Courville at the Hippodrome, with *Business As Usual* (1914), *Push and Go* (1915), *Flying Colours* (1916), *Zig-Zag* (1917) and *Box o' Tricks* (1918), Alfred Butt at the Palace with *The Red Heads* (1914), *Bric à Brac* (1915), *Vanity Fair* (1916), *Airs and Graces* (1917) and *Hullo America* (1918) and André Charlot at the Alhambra with *Not Likely* (1914), *5064 Gervard* (1915) and *The Bing Boys are Here* (1916).

³⁶⁶ Sherriff, *Journey's End*, 44.

wartime identity discourse of national regeneration and renewal, was underpinned by the re-establishment of distinct male and female roles and this was crucial to its popularity and success during the War.

An apparent renegotiation of gender roles seemed to be occurring as women took up the tools of industry in war-related production during wartime, giving them new opportunities to break free from the domestic sphere, supporting demands for equality, challenging patriarchal power structures and contributing to the women's suffrage movement. However, in West End revue that negotiation took on a slightly different register: rather than a breaking-down of traditional gender roles and identities, as indeed occurred in other spheres, wartime revue performance displayed a regenerative nationalism that sought to remasculinise British culture. Focusing on the shows *Business as Usual* (1914) and *By Jingo If We Do!* (1914), I will highlight how revues of this period engaged in pertinent national identity and gender formations as the political establishment called for propaganda as well as for distraction and escapism.

The onset of war saw the country gripped by a fervent, validating call to arms, with different voices detailing the numerous national benefits of impending battle.

With the outbreak of war came chaos [...] there seemed to be no way out except by patriotism. It took everyone like an infection. Strange ideas took the public fancy. Said one patriot, 'War is a virtue'. Said another, 'We are fighting a war for peace.' Strange figures emerged from the grey mist to float into the golden columns of the press in order to tell the public of the marvellous good the war was going to do.³⁶⁷

³⁶⁷ Huntly Carter, *The New Spirit in the European Theatre 1914-1924* (London: Ernest Benn Ltd, 1925), 29.

In the early days of the First World War, West End revue promoted a rhetoric that justified Britain's involvement in the conflict. At its core, this rhetoric was driven by a blood and soil nationalism that engaged in remasculinising British culture. In a world in which 'Germany was challenging British commercial and naval supremacy at every turn',³⁶⁸ the War was presented in revue 'as a necessity [...] [which] might be the prerequisite of the establishment of a happier world order'.³⁶⁹ In Britain this line of reasoning was connected to pre-War cultural fears about national decline, a growing sense of the erosion of British power and the sense that the nation that had forgotten its true history and greatness, as Samuel Hynes recounts:

Englishmen had abandoned the high austere ideals of conduct that had made the Empire great, and had sunk into a too-comfortable, too-prosperous Edwardian decadence.³⁷⁰

A key manifestation of this decaying world, it was argued, were the changes in the roles of men and women following the push for women's emancipation, which was seen by some as a sign of a culture of regression and degeneration. The fragmentation of traditional class identities and the erosion of the 'sexual borderline'³⁷¹ between men and women were highlighted as manifestations of the crisis facing modern society. Friedrich Nietzsche attacked the idea that women would be emancipated once they had secured equal rights; rather, he argued, women would become as sick as 'European "manliness" is sick' and suffer from the erosion of 'womanly instincts'.³⁷² War, it was felt, was the end product of 'the softness into

³⁶⁸ Arthur Marwick, *The Deluge: British Society and the First World War* (London: The Bodley Head, 1965), 27.

³⁶⁹ Marwick, *The Deluge*, 27.

³⁷⁰ Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (The Bodley Head Ltd, 1990), 19.

³⁷¹ Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siecle* (London: Bloomsbury, 1991), 8.

³⁷² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* (London: Penguin, 1973), 167-168.

which England had fallen'.³⁷³ In a world 'transformed by industrialisation and embourgeoisement',³⁷⁴ where nineteenth-century ideals of masculinity had been challenged by the "new woman", questioning the traditional institutions of marriage, work and the family, and undermining patriarchy, this 'softness' was largely attributed to the men of England. A crisis of manliness was perceived to be a result of the rise of women, which meant that men 'suffered from a weakened personality'.³⁷⁵

Fears about the deterioration of the population and of national blood stocks³⁷⁶ were compounded by the high percentage of rejections due to physical causes during recruitment for the Boer War, and led to the creation of the Inter-Departmental Committee on Physical Deterioration (1904). The Royal Commission on Care and Control of the Feeble-Minded (1904-1908), along with the National Social Purity Crusade, was charged with raising the standards of social and personal cleanliness. A quest for national efficiency began informing the social reforms after 1906, which dealt with the working class, children's health and welfare. The deterioration of the nation, in some quarters, was symbolised by class and gender politics expressed in the dramatic plays of the period such as *Fanny's First Play* (1911), *Rutherford and Son* (1912) and *Hindle Wakes* (1912)³⁷⁷, which highlighted growing calls for political and social reforms. These themes were also to be found in West End revue's topical sketches, which dealt with topics including the militancy of the suffragettes, the politicisation of the working class and, most poignantly, the threat of Germany as a military, cultural and economic power. All together these events fed into the belief in

³⁷³ Hynes, *A War Imagined*, 19.

³⁷⁴ Herbert Sussman, *Victorian Masculinities: Manhood and Masculine Poetics in Early Victorian Literature and Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 2.

³⁷⁵ Frederick Copleston, *Friedrich Nietzsche: Philosopher of Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1942), 35.

³⁷⁶ See Jeffrey Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society: The Regulation of Sexuality since 1800* (London: Longman, 1981), Chapters 7 and 9.

³⁷⁷ George Bernard Shaw, *Fanny's First Play* (1911), Githa Sowerby, *Rutherford and Son* (1912) and *Hindle Wakes* (1912) by Stanley Houghton.

the demise of the British “race”: of once-great physical prowess, now contaminated and vulnerable to attack as a result of excess and decadence. It was now argued that Britain’s degeneration and growing effeminacy before the War could be countered, with the War itself becoming an impetus for cleansing and remaking the British nation. These ideas are well represented by Selwyn Image, a Professor of Fine Art, in his lecture *Art, Morals, and The War* in November 1914:

Ah! There is little doubt we need a cleansing purge, a sharp awakening, a recalling to sanity, to a readjustment of our estimates of things. Well, perhaps it was only war, a war such as that upon us, a war, as I have put it to you, for the sake of fundamental ideals that could give us for art and conduct generally the salutary shock.³⁷⁸

‘For from being the end of civilisation, the war would be the end of civilisation’s illnesses’³⁷⁹ by re-establishing patriarchal order, fortifying the old roles and positions of class and gender and reclaiming British supremacy, as was articulated by the writer H.G. Wells:

One talks and reads of the heroic age and how the world has degenerated. But indeed this is the heroic age, suddenly come again. No legendary feats of the past, no battle with dragons or monstrous beasts, no quest or feat that man has hitherto attempted can compare with this adventure, in terror, danger and splendour.³⁸⁰

It is therefore of central concern in this chapter to illustrate how these ideas of regeneration and remasculinisation were utilised and disseminated through the spectacular revue aesthetic at the beginning of the First World War.

³⁷⁸ Selwyn Image, *Art, Morals, and the War* (London: Oxford University Press, 1914), 19.

³⁷⁹ Hynes, *A War Imagined*, 19.

³⁸⁰ H.G. Wells, ‘The Most Splendid Fighting in the World’, *Daily Chronicle*, 9 September 1914, 4.

Revue's overall political and social engagement during wartime saw it balance the need for entertainment with the necessity of maintaining national morale. In this sense, revues were instrumental in constructing a 'shared rhetoric [...] [of] entertainment and patriotism'³⁸¹ through the creation of a populist 'sense of national purpose'³⁸² that allowed wartime propaganda to influence the population directly and effectively. This was done using identity politics overtly and covertly to outline 'what the British were fighting for' and construct a definitive inspirational British persona that was contrasted against an evil, barbarous German enemy. These representations of Germany were directly in line with government wartime policy, as the Lord Chamberlain's report for *By Jingo If We Do!* (1914) illustrates: 'no country can be denied the satisfaction of vilifying its enemies in wartime'.³⁸³ Thus the government sanctioned denigrating portrayals of Germany in revue.

Nationalism in West End revue: 'denigrate the enemy', celebrate the nation

We all live with multiple identities, rarely troubling over the contradictions between them. But in wartime, identities become clearer and more significant.³⁸⁴

This statement by Jay Winter and Jean Louis Roberts about identity in wartime highlights how there were attempts during the War to establish clear demarcations, most notably between the warring countries. Differences in character, behaviour, style, culture, art, theatre and music became intrinsic manifestations that were used to highlight all that was wrong about the German enemy and right about Britain. A popular strand of propaganda was developed, which framed the conflict as a battle of

³⁸¹ Jan Rüger, 'Entertainments', in *Capital Cities at War: Paris London, Berlin 1914-1919*, Vol II, Jay Winter, Jean Louis Robert (eds) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 116.

³⁸² J.M. Bourne, *Britain and the Great War 1914-1918* (London: Edward Arnold, 1989), 203.

³⁸³ Arthur Wimperis, *By Jingo If We Do!*, (London British Library, LCP 1914), n.p.

³⁸⁴ Jay Winter and Jean Louis Robert (eds), *Capital Cities at War, Paris London, Berlin 1914-1919*, Vol II, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 3.

two opposing ideologies, a struggle between two incompatible conceptions of civilization. German music in particular was seen as expressing Germanic evils, and this attitude led to the formation of the National Association for the Protection of British Interests in Music. A campaign against German music, composers and derivatives ensued, exemplified by the stoppage of German operettas on the West End stage. This anti-German attitude also manifested itself in other areas of British life, such as the Lyons restaurant chain who ‘fired all German, Austrian and Hungarian musicians’.³⁸⁵ Before the War, revue had associated itself with the avant-garde theatrical experiments taking place across the continent, and this would continue after the War to some extent.³⁸⁶ However, during the War there was a backlash against art forms with German associations, and ‘the war against Germany rapidly became a war against modernism’.³⁸⁷ For musical theatre and revue this would have far reaching consequences, leading to a concerted repositioning of revue’s image in the public imagination and the beginning of the growing influence of American musical theatre on content and form.

British wartime identity was a product of the cultural meanings of the given historical moment, and in revue these provided the means with which to construct social and political meanings for national solidarity. Wartime theatre and other communicative technologies engaged in creating forms of national consciousness that emphasised the idea of belonging. West End revue productions like *By Jingo If We Do!* (1914) and *Business as Usual* (1914) were indicative of revue shows in the early years of the War. Highlighting the commercial opportunism of the revue producers, both shows took their titles from prominent War catchphrases in order to mark their

³⁸⁵ Hynes, *A War Imagined*, 77.

³⁸⁶ See Gordon Williams, *British Theatre in the Great War: A Re-valuation* (London: Continuum, 2005), chapter 2 ‘Musical comedy and musical anarchy’, 18.

³⁸⁷ Hynes, *A War Imagined*, 64.

association with the ensuing national war effort. *By Jingo If We Do!* was produced by Charles Cochran and opened at the Empire theatre in October 1914, two months after the start of the First World War. The title was drawn from the chorus of the famous Macdermott's War Song (1877) by G.W. Hunt. *Business As Usual*, produced by Albert De Courville, derived its title from H.E. Morgan of W.H. Smith and Son, who, in August 1914, wrote 'a letter to the *Daily Chronicle* [that] suggested that the country would do well to follow a policy of "Business as Usual"'.³⁸⁸ The phrase, was taken up by the government, which believed that it was necessary to continue in the same manner as before the War in order to maintain a stable, functioning country. The implication was that any change in behaviour could be equated to victory for the enemy, so 'Business as Usual' became shorthand for Britain's resolve not to give in. Both productions were rousing patriotic recruitment shows that mixed jingoistic bravado with musical razzmatazz as a means of disseminating wartime propaganda. Revue was perfectly placed to straddle a mix of the serious and comedic, and it was this quality that enabled it to fulfil a crucial wartime role as an entertaining distraction that also provided a vehicle for supporting the war effort and bashing the enemy.

On the revue stage German soldiers were represented as either incompetent figures of comedy or devious evil aggressors. As Cate Haste argues, propaganda in its essence deals with 'simplification [...] [and] eternal repetition',³⁸⁹ and in both these shows this can be seen in simple sketches that 'persuade men to fight [...] keep up morale [...] inspire patriotism and continually denigrate the enemy'.³⁹⁰ In these revues, the enemy is denigrated through a crude representational combination of atrocity propaganda, military romanticism, patriarchal symbolism and identity

³⁸⁸ Marwick, *The Deluge*, 39.

³⁸⁹ Cate Haste, *Keep the Home Fires Burning: Propaganda in the First World War* (London: Allen Lane, 1977), 3.

³⁹⁰ Haste, *Keep the Home Fires Burning*, 2.

stereotyping, which as much sought to define British manliness as it did to denounce the German enemy. This was achieved in *By Jingo If We Do!* through a constant steady stream of ‘digs at the Kaiser’³⁹¹ and depictions of the German soldiers that marked them as villainous and cowardly aggressors, in particular through ‘references to German atrocities’³⁹² and a ‘brutal scene’³⁹³ that depicted German officers performing acts of violence against defenceless women. The German bombardment of the Belgian town of Louvain in August 1914 was regarded in Britain as cowardly and instigated the legend of unprovoked German barbarity on civilians. For many the attacks against these Belgian towns proved that the Germans were descendants of “Attila the Hun”. The beginning of the War saw a plethora of stories of rape, murder, mutilation and other German atrocities in the press.³⁹⁴ Women in particular were the victims of these stories, and their accounts of ‘wanton, phallogentric, German barbarism’ were used as a catalyst for male action.³⁹⁵ Men like the writer Robert Graves were ‘outraged to read of the cynical violation of Belgian neutrality [...] [and promised] vengeance for Louvain’.³⁹⁶ A widespread ‘campaign of hate was waged against Germany’,³⁹⁷ which sought to justify the war by reconstructing Germany’s aggression, as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle later expressed:

If our workers could actually see the vile things, which have been perpetuated upon our people [...] they would work with redoubled heart and vigour. Since

³⁹¹ Wimperis, *By Jingo If We Do!*, n.p.

³⁹² Wimperis, *By Jingo If We Do!*, n.p.

³⁹³ Wimperis, *By Jingo If We Do!*, n.p.

³⁹⁴ See ‘Atrocities In Belgium. Accounts By Refugees. The Opening Of The Great Battle’, *The Times*, 28 August 1914, 7 and ‘German Barbarity In Belgium. The Sack Of Aerschot. Fourth Official Report’, *The Times*, 5 October 1914, 6.

³⁹⁵ Nicoletta F. Gullace, *The Blood of Our Sons: Men, Women, and the Renegotiation of British Citizenship During the Great War* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 46.

³⁹⁶ Robert Graves, *Goodbye to All That* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1929), 99.

³⁹⁷ Haste, *Keep the Home Fires Burning*, 79.

they cannot see them, they should be brought home to them in every way, verbal or pictorial, that is possible.³⁹⁸

The opening scenes of *Business as Usual* constructs a response to war along a number of lines that were prevalent in the early stages of the War. They exemplify Conan Doyle's desire to reconstruct the savagery of German warfare for the British public; revue became part of the 'filtering of fact and opinion which eventually deposited a unified image [of] a monster, even a devil',³⁹⁹ as a representation of Germany. The "harvest scene" illustrates the simple yet effective style of revue narrative story-telling by constructing both the enemy and the nation so as to provide a clear justification for the war. The scene presents a small, idyllic village in France or Belgium at harvest time, with people working in a 'field of glorious golden corn'. This is a romanticised picture of country life, as the stage directions indicate: 'the picture should be very tranquil, peaceful and animated by the youthful exuberance of the people at work'. To add to this sense of utopia, the people sing 'Harvest Time', a celebratory song of 'old Mother Earth [...] gather[ing] the fruits that the world may be fed'.⁴⁰⁰ An English tourist enters and comments on the sense of patriotism amongst the villagers.

English Tourist: It's so lovely to be in France. Everyone is so national. Do you know, all the way along here the [peasants] were singing the mayonnaise.

Father Leon: You mean the Marseillaise.

English Tourist: Is it? Very Likely.⁴⁰¹

The villagers break into song again, this time singing 'All the World Is Full of Happy Peace Time'⁴⁰² as the church bell rings to celebrate the harvest.

³⁹⁸ Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Times*, 16 January 1918, 9.

³⁹⁹ Haste, *Keep the Home Fires Burning*, 81.

⁴⁰⁰ Albert de Courville and F.W. Mark, *Business as Usual* (London: British Library, LCP, 1914), n.p.

⁴⁰¹ De Courville and Mark, *Business as Usual* n.p.

However the peace is broken suddenly and theatrically by the sound of canon fire. Panic ensues as among the sheaves come barbaric German soldiers dragging their guns over the harvest and destroying the peace. The villagers are flung aside, creating a final haunting tableau of the ‘advancing German hordes’.⁴⁰³ The harvest scene reconstructs the German invasion of Belgium so that it provides a simple and easily understood rationale for war, which is depicted as a natural moral necessity. Such representations of unprovoked German attacks on women provided moral justification for the war, and duty and honour became watchwords in the quest to avenge this atrocity. German atrocity stories, recounting horrific acts by German soldiers, who were accused of raping and mutilating women and children, were perpetuated prominently and had a marked effect on British views. The German army were not real men, like the British soldiers, but cowards and the killers of the innocent. The harvest scene in *Business as Usual* plays with a simple binary of identities that tacitly present Britain as a global democratic force not only defending its possessions but acting as an honourable “world policeman”. The image of Britain protecting the interests of its partners and military allies from a rampaging and dishonourable war mongering German nation became a rallying call, reaffirming Britain’s political supremacy. These propaganda shows were exported far outside the West End of London through a vast communications network that communicated songs, music and images across the Empire.⁴⁰⁴ The commercial growth of the media, newspapers and literature, combined with the sophistication of commercial advertising with its simple but effecting messaging, provided rich and vibrant images of German aggression. These had fed on and exploited German invasion scares and anti-German feeling, and

⁴⁰² De Courville and Mark, *Business as Usual*, n.p.

⁴⁰³ De Courville and Mark, *Business as Usual*, n.p.

⁴⁰⁴ An advertisement for two songs from *Business as Usual*, ‘We Shall All Do the Goose Step’ and ‘When we’ve Wound Up the Watch on the Rhine’, can be found in the *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 20 July 1915, 2.

the debate often appropriated the pseudo-eugenic principles by then firmly rooted in the consciousness of most European nations. The publications that, in documentary form, recorded the alleged atrocities committed by the German army in the invasions of Belgium and Northern France had most impact on the minds of the British public. One account from refugees spoke of how ‘German soldiery chopped off the arms of a baby which clung to its mother’s skirts’.⁴⁰⁵ In an article about the ‘Sack of Aerschot’,⁴⁰⁶ the killing of the ‘burgomaster Tielemans and his son, brother and a whole group of their fellow citizens’ was reported, as were ‘many assaults on women and girls’, corroborating the brutality of Germany’s troops. In this official report German barbarity was confirmed, charting ‘the total ruin which had overtaken this laborious and peaceful population’, pillaged by the German army ‘to satisfy their greed’.⁴⁰⁷ A pamphlet issued by William Le Queux in September 1914, *German Atrocities: A Record of Shameless Deeds*, ‘purported to be based on Belgian government statements, interviews and the reports of war correspondents’.⁴⁰⁸

Germany’s method of warfare, with its use of modern artillery bombardments, was identified as a mark of its difference from the British army. In the press, the use of artillery bombardment was often used to highlight the inadequacy and cowardice of the German soldiers, demonstrated by their refusal to fight “toe to toe”. A Belgian Lieutenant, Deppe, fresh from fighting in Namur, spoke of how the German artillery, ‘and that alone’, had given them the advantage, because ‘the Belgians could do little or nothing against the 12 inch guns’.

The Belgians were far superior with the rifle to the German soldiers, who never attempted to take aim and did not even put their rifles to their shoulders.

⁴⁰⁵ ‘Atrocities in Belgium.’, *The Times*, 7.

⁴⁰⁶ ‘German Barbarity in Belgium.’, *The Times*, 6.

⁴⁰⁷ ‘German Barbarity in Belgium.’, *The Times*, 6.

⁴⁰⁸ Hynes, *A War Imagined*, 52.

The German Army was very well organized but the German soldiers were great cowards [...] When they see a bayonet they turn and run.⁴⁰⁹

The revue stage lampooned German fighting methods and mocked the German troops' masculinity, often through comic references, as the 'Zeppelin Interlude'⁴¹⁰ in *Push and Go* (1915) illustrates. Germany's might and modern military power is ridiculed: German Zeppelin airships are presented on stage as giant sausages on wheels that are kept in sheds like dog kennels. As each farcical Zeppelin sausage is drawn out for inspection, the stereotypical German commanding officer, Admiral Von Tirpitz, is moved to tears, declaring in a cod German accent:

you are like ze shape of ze greatest product of German genius und German kultur, ze pride of Deutschland and the ze terror of all our enemies- The German sausage.⁴¹¹

The scene seeks to undermine Germany's military might by depicting its soldiers as pernickety incompetents who can kill only a hen in their attempts to bomb the British main land. Germany's method of fighting and its treatment of civilians was constantly used to construct an image of the enemy as cowardly and evil aggressors who would be culled by British duty, courage and honour. These qualities were constantly presented as part of the British soldier's innate character through tableaux and visual spectacle in scenes such as the 'Wordless Cavalry Charge' and the 'Heroes of War' in *Business as Usual*, which contained verse spoken by the 'spirit of patriotism'.⁴¹²

The social and political context of wartime revue saw varied displays of the nation, which were often juxtaposed with the German enemy. The importance of these representations was twofold: to attack and to undermine the enemy. However,

⁴⁰⁹ 'Atrocities in Belgium.', *The Times*, 7.

⁴¹⁰ Albert de Courville and Wal Pink, *Push and Go* (London: British Library, Lord Chamberlain's Plays, 1915), n.p.

⁴¹¹ De Courville and Pink, *Push and Go*, n.p.

⁴¹² De Courville and Mark, *Business as Usual*, n.p.

highlighting innate national qualities invariably led to questioning the British soldier fighting at the front. A secondary form of propaganda was needed to counteract pre-War concerns surrounding the British male.

Revue was most effective in stressing the social and collective identity of a patriotic nation by depicting the mobilisation of British men, often in spectacular formats. This is illustrated by the ‘Whitehall’ scene in *Business as Usual*, which shows the crowded streets of London ‘immediately after the declaration of war’, on August 4 1914. On stage, ‘Bands of young men, hatless and otherwise [...] [are] parading the streets waving flags and cheering, singing snatches of the Marseillaise, etc’.⁴¹³ Identities here are performative: the social bonds of nation are performed, defining the British people against the enemy. The scene portrays patriots who rush to enlist as men move from an individual to a social identity reflecting the moment in which ‘many [men] joined up in groups, with their pals’.⁴¹⁴ Certain distinctions are created through tacit categorisation and shaming rituals that are used to mark the crowd on stage: the civilians who become soldiers and ready-made heroes are contrasted with those who oppose the war, who are marked as ‘shirkers’. Politicians who had spoken out against war are named on the placards of newspaper boys who walk the stage with various denouncements, such as ‘Keir Hardie Practices the Goose Step’, ‘Ramsay Macdonald Joins Crown Prince’s Army’⁴¹⁵. In revue, those who had opposed the war like Hardie and Macdonald were branded ‘anti-patriots’ and mocked and derided. In *By Jingo If We Do!*, Hardie is portrayed as being in constant communication with the Kaiser through telegrams. Even the playwright George

⁴¹³ De Courville and Mark, *Business as Usual*, n.p.

⁴¹⁴ Winter and Robert (eds), *Capital Cities at War*, 2.

⁴¹⁵ De Courville and Mark, *Business as Usual*, n.p.

Bernard Shaw is named and attacked in a sketch in *Push and Go* that denounces him as having ‘German measles’.⁴¹⁶

Recent studies, however, have questioned the narrative of widespread and unquestioning enthusiasm at the declaration of war that is reflected here. As Adrian Gregory argues, ‘the evidence for mass enthusiasm at the time is surprisingly weak’.⁴¹⁷

The decision for war in 1914 was taken by a very small number of men, but the idea that it was resoundingly endorsed by the population as a whole became a useful fiction in spreading blame and avoiding awkward questions of personal culpability.⁴¹⁸

Gregory looks specifically at the reaction of the crowds to the declaration of war and provides a picture of the people on the streets of London at the time from eye witness accounts as ‘a normal August Bank Holiday crowd [...] interested spectators rather than a jingoistic mob baying for war’.⁴¹⁹ In contrast, the scene in *Business as Usual* perpetuates the view that there was widespread support for the war and an image of the British men as ready warriors. ‘Concern about insufficient nationalism was the basic impulse behind official and unofficial propaganda’⁴²⁰ and the scene is representative of the attempts to foster and arouse patriotism. In the ‘Whitehall’ scene, the notion of public support and approval is maintained, legitimising the British resort to arms, and these themes and images lead up to the major agenda of

⁴¹⁶ De Courville and Pink, *Push and Go*, n.p.

⁴¹⁷ Adrian Gregory, *The Last Great War: British Society and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 11.

⁴¹⁸ Gregory, *The Last Great War*, 10.

⁴¹⁹ Gregory, *The Last Great War*, 13.

⁴²⁰ L.L. Farrar, Jr, ‘Nationalism in Wartime, Critiquing the Conventional Wisdom’ in Frans Coetzee and Marilyn Shevin-Coetzee (eds), *Authority, Identity and the Social History of the Great War*, (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1995), 144

recruitment. A band of recruits marshalled by Violet Lorraine as a recruiting sergeant, and a group of women, enter and urge more men to sign up and fight:

Come, take your heed of England's need of every gallant son
That liberty and right ne'er be trampled by the Hun
So join the colours, boys and help to lay him low at last
Let William feel old London's heel upon him planted fast.

Old London's hard to leave tis true, Old London's dear to all
But what are London's pleasures when we hear our country's call?
So give the games a rest until the greater fight we win
Enlist to-day, my boys, and play your next match in Berlin.⁴²¹

The song 'The Old Boys of London Town', sung by Violet Lorraine in *Business as Usual*, highlights the way in which revue engaged in constructions of national identity for the purposes of wartime. Here England and London become interchangeable with and symbolic of the whole British nation, which is under threat from the 'Hun' who is seeking to destroy 'liberty and right' and needs to be thwarted by 'gallant' British sons. Here metaphor and symbolism are used in a 'trivialisation of war' to construct notions of the British soldier based on sporting prowess, replacing the horrors of the battlefield with the familiarity of the cricket, rugby or football field. An analogy between sport and war was also used in the recruitment song 'Your King and Country Want You' in the revue *Odds and Ends* (1914):

We've watched you playing cricket
And every kind of game.
At football, golf and polo,

⁴²¹ De Courville and Mark, *Business as Usual*, n.p.

You men have made your name.
But now your country needs you
To play your part in war.
And no matter what befalls you
We shall love you all the more.
So come and join the forces
As your fathers did before.⁴²²

Women objectified

West End revue's assembly and disassembly of cultural identities on stage during this period reflected complex and often contradictory beliefs about gender roles in wartime Britain. A crucial element of this was the propagation of a singular conception of British masculinity that was defined in relation to a reconstructed femininity, which led at times to the reassertion of conflicting societal values about expected behaviours. This was especially manifest in the recruitment revues of the early part of the War and in the construction and depiction of women used to encourage men to enlist and to celebrate the British soldier. The status given to soldiers was part of a recruitment drive to get men to enlist (conscription did not become compulsory until 1916). In these recruitment sketches, the formula was to reinforce the similarity between the qualities of a British soldier and the qualities of a man in the minds of the audience. On the revue stage, the admiration and possible sexual favours of women were crucially important to both identities. To be a man was to be a British soldier, and British soldiers and manhood were on the revue stage

⁴²² Harry Grattan, *Odds and Ends*, (London: British Library, Lord Chamberlain's Plays, 1914), n.p.

rewarded with the promise of sexually acquiescent and adoring women, as the song ‘A Man That’s A Man’ from *By Jingo If We Do!* illustrates:

A man need not be clever
To win a women’s heart;
They see their duty clearly
The men whom we adore;
The men who love us dearly
But love their honour more.
How proud and happy I should be
Were such a man to fight for me!⁴²³

The centrality of women to the process of recruitment and also as symbol of the nation was particularly prominent in revue productions. The blatant use of women as sexual rewards was a recurring theme in revue and highlighted the use of women and their bodies in particular contradictory ways. In the song ‘The Military Uniform’ from *By Jingo If We Do!*, a soldier sings of how uniforms attract the girls:

Oh that Military Uniform!
Absolutely takes the girls by storm
Coming down the street
It knocks them off their feet
Its got’em fairly beat,
As soon as ever they catch sight of –Just a little bit of Red or Blue
Just a little dash of pipe-clay too
They’d give all they’re worth
For any man on earth!

⁴²³ Wimperis, *By Jingo If We Do!*, n.p.

As long as he's in uniform⁴²⁴

These songs highlight the important and often contradictory role of women in recruitment at the commencement of war in revue and reflected a wider transition on the part of women, who had been challenging for equality.

From suffrage to public shaming: Are you doing your duty?⁴²⁵

The War was a turning point for the politics of gender equality. Pre-War agitation for women's rights was cowed at first because the women seeking reforms found that the War changed the terrain. Gender equality was not just put on hold, but regressed. West End revue throughout the War offered potent examples of a complex national identity politics at play as the regenerative culture engaged in constructing a new image of British manliness and reverted to a celebration of traditional roles. At the centre of this process was the British woman, with a complex mixture of roles: as a symbol of the nation and the home, as a victim needing protection and also as a recruiting sergeant, 'policing manhood in the west end of London.'⁴²⁶ Women served as one of the major means by which the war was imagined and represented. In revue, women were tacitly considered a sexual reward for 'serving your country', and became justifying factors for the male action because they needed protection.

Suffragettes like Christabel Pankhurst moved 'from waging war against male obstinacy and weakness to waging war against German wickedness and inciting all British men to go out and take part in that fight'.⁴²⁷ In *The Times* suggestions flooded in for patriotic women who were 'anxious to work for their country but who find that their talents do not lie in the direction of needlework or the domestic economy'.

⁴²⁴ Wimperis, *By Jingo If We Do!*, n.p.

⁴²⁵ Carter, *The New Spirit*, 31.

⁴²⁶ Gullace, *The Blood of Our Sons*, 2.

⁴²⁷ Arthur Marwick, *Women at War 1914-1918* (London: Fontana, 1977), 30.

Under the title ‘How to Be Useful in War Time, Further Work for Woman, Many Forms of Activity’,⁴²⁸ suggestions varied from letter writing, cooking and washing to cleaning boots. Mr Ernest H. Sollas from Shanklin wrote ‘could not the women help by asking all the young men of their acquaintance, ““why have you not volunteered?”’⁴²⁹ In a speech given in Plymouth Guildhall on 17 November 1914, Christabel Pankhurst demanded that women accept their duty of urging men to flock to the colours; and a direct appeal to men to uphold the honour of the British nation and let us be proud of you. The role of coercing men into enlisting became a widespread tool in the recruitment drive at the start of the war, and revue used this to its advantage, placing the women in the revues at the forefront of recruitment sketches. In revue war recruitment, aspects of class and gender identity discourse were combined to exploit women’s symbolic position in order to get men to fight. In this respect, however, some middle-class women paradoxically found themselves empowered over men during wartime, as is illustrated by a letter to *The Times* by A.M. Woodward that expresses zeal for her newfound calling:

There is a wider duty than the making of garments. Young men (she writes) must be persuaded to think what this war really means and what the terrible consequences may be if we fail to appreciate its magnitude and its meaning. So I am commencing a little missionary work. To-morrow I mean to give a leaflet to every man who is apparently a possible recruit. I shall watch for them on the train, in the street, at the cricket and tennis grounds, at the theatre, at the restaurant, and I hope that the little single appeal ‘from the women of England’ will at least rouse their thought and will possibly help them act.⁴³⁰

⁴²⁸ Anon, ‘How to Be Useful in War Time, Further Work for Woman, Many Forms of Activity’, *The Times*, 28 August 1914, 11.

⁴²⁹ Anon, ‘How to be Useful in War Time’, 11.

⁴³⁰ Anon, ‘How to be Useful in War Time’, 11.

In often contradictory and complex representations, revue performances perpetuated images of manliness and womanhood that reinforced patriarchal structures and traditional gender roles and asserted women's symbolic value as the moral standard bearers of the nation and the home. Gender roles and depictions were juxtaposed with one another, highlighting the complex dynamics of gender discourse, power and regulation at work in British identity construction at this time.

Death rather than dishonour

In revue the definition of British manhood relied on a re-feminised representation of women. The militant independent women of the suffrage movement was replaced by vulnerability, passivity, dependency and maternal feeling through the 'reassertion of separate spheres with its implied dichotomies of private and public, of different natures of women and men of home and the front'.⁴³¹ The 'Coffee Stall' scene in *By Jingo If We Do!* highlights the resurgence of a dominant masculinity in both private and public worlds. The scene opens on a London night with Wally, the proprietor of the coffee stall, reading a paper and talking to a tramp about German atrocities, once again repeating ideas of German barbarity and implicating the Kaiser.

Tramp: Any noos?

Wally: Kaiser's sent a telegram thanking 'is troops for them women and children wot they killed.'⁴³²

The emphasis shifts when Nellie enters, 'shabby and ill-clad but showing a tawdry effort at smartness'. Wally knows Nellie and ask why she is out so late, to which she snaps, defiantly, 'P'raps I am' in reply. Nellie asks for a cup of tea and places a sovereign on the stall counter. Suddenly suspicions about Nellie's night time activities

⁴³¹ Jessica Meyer, *Men of War: Masculinity and the First World War* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 156.

⁴³² Wimperis, *By Jingo If We Do!*, n.p.

are raised and Wally lets out a long whistle and looks at her for a long time before saying, 'So that's the game is it? Well it's no business o' mind'. Nellie is one of a growing number of women during the First World War who became what was known as an "amateur prostitute", selling her body for sex.

As the scene progresses, it is explained that Nellie's husband had 'bin out o' work since the war began', and he hadn't been seen for three days. As a mother with two children to feed, she has been forced to look out for herself and children. The scene here presents a snapshot of a taboo social reality during the War as women in hardship turned to prostitution.

However, the scene is not concerned with trying to excuse or defend such behaviour; rather, it is engaged in highlighting the reason behind such actions: namely, that the absence of male power has led to sexual degeneration. The 'Coffee Stall' scene presents a stark picture of the effects of men failing to fulfil their role as heads of the family. In this scene women are presented as weak and gullible, unable to look after themselves and prone to lapse if men are not in control. The consequences of such a fall are starkly shown when Nellie's husband Bill enters. Bill has not abandoned his family, but has been looking for work and has secured employment in Catford, starting the next day. As he excitedly relates his good news, he too becomes suspicious of Nellie being out so late and notices her 'rouged face'. The scene quickly escalates as Bill realises that Nellie has been selling herself for money, and concludes with Nellie's brutal murder: 'Wot's that stuff on your face? Wot's this in your hand? (*Sees the money.*) Where d'jyer get it? (*Realization.*) You!'. The stage directions then indicate that Bill seizes Nellie by the throat, pins her up against the coffee stall and stabs her; the blackout line – 'You've done 'er in!' – is spoken by Wally.⁴³³

⁴³³ Wimperis, *By Jingo If We Do!*, n.p.

This scene would seem startlingly out of place in the traditional genres of musical comedy and operetta, as Len Platt notes.⁴³⁴ The revue form mixed comedy with realism, and Platt recognises the experimental nature of *By Jingo If We Do!*. However, he misreads the scene by underestimating the precise historical conditions that underlie the revue. In the context of a regenerating national rhetoric of remasculinisation, the scene is not an oddity but a reaffirmation of British male power; it is a brutal depiction of the male psyche under the conditions of wartime, when death rather than dishonour is the favoured option. In this scene the dishonour that Nellie has brought to Bill results in a violent crime, which is framed as a crime of passion but is really about the social control and regulation of women and the reassertion of male authority, because the male violence is condoned and tacitly justified. The implication is that only through the ‘righting of gender roles at home can men hope to be effective in remedying a travesty against the family abroad’.⁴³⁵

The first phase of the War, August into 1915, saw ‘a remasculinization of English culture perceived to have become effeminate in the years before August of 1914’.⁴³⁶

The war produced significant changes in ideas about gender and sexual identity, [as it] re-elevated a conception of gender roles—the martial, protective male and the domestic, vulnerable female—whose legitimacy had come under increasing challenge before 1914.⁴³⁷

⁴³⁴ Len Platt, *Musical Comedy on the West End Stage, 1890-1939* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 134.

⁴³⁵ Gullace, *The Blood of Our Sons*, 45.

⁴³⁶ Susan Kingsley Kent, ‘Love and Death, War and Gender in Britain, 1914-1918’, in Frans Coetzee and Marilyn Shevin-Coetzee (eds), *Authority, Identity and the Social History of the Great War*, (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1995), 156.

⁴³⁷ Frans Coetzee and Marilyn Shevin-Coetzee (eds), *Authority, Identity and the Social History of the Great War* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1995), xiv.

The re-establishment of distinct gender roles was reflected in wartime revues through rhetoric and imagery that represented men and women specifically. These portrayals did not only dictate a set of expected behaviours but indicated levels of manliness or womanhood which one could seek to attain or fail to live up to. Constructed in this way, revue encouraged gender regulation and used signifiers to mark traditional and distinguishable gender roles, reinforcing identity constructions that sought to inform the moral economy and code. Women were often placed on an identity continuum that moved from the ideal of a supportive, dutiful wife and mother to demonisation as a plaything, harlot, temptress and harbinger of sexual disease. Men were under pressure to live up to the wartime ideal of true masculinity, that of soldier. This dynamic led to complex shifts in class, gender power and privilege, and women were asked to perpetuate feminine disdain to play on male anxieties about their masculinity:

the failure of a man to act like a man might result in a women threatening to fill his role cast doubt upon the virility of the civilian and implied that manliness lay in the will to act rather than in a particular sexed body.⁴³⁸

One consequence of the pressure placed on men was the celebration of phallogentric masculinity on the West End stages. Here to be a man requires only a penis: the ‘ability to use it in the arena of sexual conquest [...] bring[s] him as much status as a wage earner and provider’.⁴³⁹ This power was accessible to all men in an era in which advanced capitalism challenged traditional patriarchal roles and the capacity to assert power over others was, for most men, diminishing. In *Shell Out* (1915) the song ‘If the Girlies Could Be Soldiers’ covertly mixes the motivating role of women and the fear and shame associated with women taking male roles in its

⁴³⁸ Gullace, *The Blood of Our Sons*: 46.

⁴³⁹ bell hooks, *Black Looks, Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 94.

refrain: 'If girlies could be soldiers [...] Men would want to go to war / To adore / Girls galore'.⁴⁴⁰ The 'war was as much a fight for the reclamation of manhood at home as a battle for the defense of womanhood abroad'.⁴⁴¹ *By Jingo If We Do!* (1914) features virulent displays of jingoistic nationalism, patriarchy and overt misogyny in equal measure. Songs like 'Every Body's Got to Do His Bit' capture a heady, enthusiastic celebration of the British soldier and of manhood.

On the musical stage, female representation had established a long tradition of mixing respectability and the erotic in 'very careful ways'⁴⁴² in plots that centred on female figures in shows like *A Gaiety Girl* (1893), *The Shop Girl* (1894) and *Our Miss Gibbs* (1909). Wartime revue followed in this tradition, with women serving as one of the major means by which the War was imagined and represented. Women had a complex mixture of roles, tacitly implicated as a sexual reward for "serving your country", but also seen as symbols of the nation and home; the justifying factors for male action, as they needed protection. The promotion of women in West End revue mirrored Florenz Ziegfeld's New York revues, which mixed patriotism and sexuality, 'increasing [the] iconicity of the female body',⁴⁴³ and constructing the myth of the chorus girl. This myth perpetuated the idea of an overtly sexualised woman in the male imagination through a sanctioned display of voyeurism, reflecting 'a culture that packaged women and sold sexuality'.⁴⁴⁴

As Catherine Hindson contends, in her work on female performance⁴⁴⁵ the nineteenth century traditionally used visual systems and codes to explore, explain and

⁴⁴⁰ Albert de Courville and Wal Pink, *Shell Out* (London: British Library, Lord Chamberlain's Plays, 1915) np.

⁴⁴¹ Gullace, *The Blood of Our Sons*: 46.

⁴⁴² Platt, *Musical Comedy*, 105.

⁴⁴³ Angela J. Latham, *Posing a Threat: Flappers, Chorus Girls, and Other Brazen Performers of the American 1920s* (London: Wesleyan University Press, 2000), 10.

⁴⁴⁴ Platt, *Musical Comedy*, 7.

⁴⁴⁵ Catherine Hindson, *Female Performance Practice on the Fin-de-Siècle Popular Stages of London and Paris: Experiment and Advertisement* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007).

define. Men's and women's bodies increasingly came to dominate medical and scientific theories as well as entertainments, exhibitions and theatrical entertainments.

Musical comedy staged femininity by constructing a 'customised notion of female beauty and glamour'.⁴⁴⁶ Revue followed in that tradition with the creation of female types. West End revues managed the paradoxes of moral virtue and sexual display by patriotically framing the shows as celebrations of Britain in which women were central to the success of revue.

The film *The Battle of the Somme* (1916) marked a departure from sanitised versions of the war as the scale of violence and destruction shown and the tremendous loss of life already experienced across the country began to take effect. Revue adapted to this changing spirit as audiences sought entertainments that allowed for a temporary escape from the War. Revue pioneer George Grossmith, Jr provided the perfect antidote by rehashing the travelogue formula to produce one of the most successful shows of the war, *The Bing Boys are Here!* The Bing Boys are loutish but socially ambitious sons of a business magnate who sends them to town so that they may learn to cut a dash from their native Binghampton. Their adventures take them to London hotels, the zoo, a star's dressing room and a new gallery cinema, and along the way there are songs, dancing and lots of topical allusions. The first scene establishes a rural, pastoral nation but Lucifer Bing soon announces:

You can have your circus – I want Piccadilly circus, Oxford circus, Trafalgar square, theatres, restaurants, music halls and night clubs. I want to go round the town like 'quex', 'rambler' and 'Mr Gossip'.⁴⁴⁷

Bing Boys provided its audiences in many respects with 'a link with the gaieties and the comparatively carefree existence they knew before the war'.⁴⁴⁸ A

⁴⁴⁶ Platt, *Musical Comedy*, 104.

⁴⁴⁷ *The Bing Boys are Here!* (London: British Library, Lord Chamberlain's Plays), np.

comic adventure around London, it reframed the capital and its inhabitants, keying into the audience's desire for fun and sexual adventure. Huntly Carter argued that 'an unparalleled wave of sexuality became the predominating theatrical feature towards the end of 1916'.⁴⁴⁹ The West End was a space 'full of erotic and aesthetic symbols capable of rousing sexual emotion'.⁴⁵⁰ It was women and their bodies who were seen as the main 'feature of the pornographic theatre period', as Carter explained

Gradually the individual is being quashed out, and the stage is loaded with crowds of child-aping women, called by courtesy, a beauty chorus [...] they dazzle the eye and blast the ear.⁴⁵¹

For some, like Frank Vernon, the war saw a 'the steady deterioration of public entertainments'⁴⁵² it was 'the theatre of the "night out"' with a vengeance',⁴⁵³ a theatre 'butchered for the War-time flapper'⁴⁵⁴ as soldiers sought distraction. It was woman, or the flapper, who, Vernon argued, created a 'colonial holiday' because 'the men on leave came and went, but she remained, helping one soldier after another spend his money on the entertainments she chose'.⁴⁵⁵ One of the shows Vernon most associated with the flapper was The Bing Boys series: 'The flapper loved The Bing Boys'.⁴⁵⁶ It was argued that these popular entertainments promoted physical and moral degeneration, encouraging sexual immorality. The source of this problem lay with women. 'Khaki fever' became a term used to describe the sexual frisson and sexual attraction of women to men in uniform. During the War 'sexual morality was

⁴⁴⁸ Winter and Robert (eds), *Capital Cities at War*, 125.

⁴⁴⁹ Carter, *The New Spirit*, 33.

⁴⁵⁰ Carter, *The New Spirit*, 40.

⁴⁵¹ Carter, *The New Spirit*, 48.

⁴⁵² Frank Vernon, *The Twentieth-Century Theatre* (London: George G. Harrap & Company Ltd, 1924), 119.

⁴⁵³ Vernon, *The Twentieth-Century Theatre*, 118.

⁴⁵⁴ Vernon, *The Twentieth-Century Theatre*, 119.

⁴⁵⁵ Vernon, *The Twentieth-Century Theatre*, 119.

⁴⁵⁶ Vernon, *The Twentieth-Century Theatre*, 123.

often treated as pertaining to women alone':⁴⁵⁷ Edwardian double standards placed severe constraints on women and accused women of leading young men astray. Yet, as Huntly Carter highlighted, sexuality on the stage was generally presented through a focus on parts of the body, inanimate objects and acts and attitudes such as a 'vision of chorus girls climbing ladders as in Hippodrome revues'.⁴⁵⁸ In a letter to Carter, George Bernard Shaw was particularly disturbed by revue's growing sexualisation and its effect on men.

The dialogues and gestures are lewd and silly. The dress and decorations are sexual and suggestive. The whole thing is capable of driving men to the drinking bar at each interval, and to a brothel at the end of the play [...] Someone might say, what do we expect? Ought revues to drive men to prayer?⁴⁵⁹

Revue reflected and constituted the emerging identities at the beginning of the War. Combining atrocity propaganda with entertainment, revue consciously engaged in War recruitment and the maintenance of national moral, justifying the War through the construction of binary oppositions between the German enemy and British men and women. In one sense, wartime became 'a passport to inclusion'⁴⁶⁰ because revue stressed a social and collective national identity that was 'defined in large part by its portrayal of the "other" [...] the enemy'.⁴⁶¹ *Business As Usual* placed itself directly within the context of total war. The depiction of the German army as the aggressor, attacking civilians, followed by the presentation of British men enlisting, responding to the call to defend the innocent, fed into a binary stereotype of the good British and the evil Germans and defined the terms on which British men were going to war.

⁴⁵⁷ Marwick, *Women at War 1914-1918*, 115.

⁴⁵⁸ Carter, *The New Spirit*, 41.

⁴⁵⁹ Carter, *The New Spirit*, 46.

⁴⁶⁰ Winter and Robert (eds), *Capital Cities at War*, 2.

⁴⁶¹ Winter and Robert (eds), *Capital Cities at War*, 2.

The reaction of the Lord Chamberlain's office to such biased and partisan portrayals was not censorship but rather an emphasis on revue's transition into its new social and cultural role as a means of perpetuating propaganda. A wartime British persona of cheery optimism and national camaraderie was repeated and extended to counteract divisive individualism and construct a stereotype of the British citizen. In this construct pre-War political disaffection and social unrest were curtailed and redirected to support the national war effort. This is illustrated in the song 'Are We Dahn-Hearted?' from *Business As Usual*.

The Briton keeps 'is pecker up
Wotever 'ardship comes,
'Is fythe is in termorrer and
'E merely snaps his thumbs.
'This 'ere is bad,' says 'e, 'my lad,
But' ('ere he shakes his fist)
'A change we'll see, and so I'll be
A bloomin' Hoptomist!'⁴⁶²

Reporting back on *By Jingo If We Do!*, the Lord Chamberlain's office maintained that the scenes were 'useful as keeping before the public what we are escaping in England',⁴⁶³ recognising the importance of revue to Government policy in terms of helping to direct opinion and create meaning for its audiences. This support for musical theatre had not always been there. London West End revue, by the start of the First World War, provided a range of entertainment and experiential sensations, meaning that 'popular entertainment was already at the heart of the urban experience'

⁴⁶² De Courville and Mark, *Business as Usual*, 1914, n.p.

⁴⁶³ Wimperis, *By Jingo If We Do!*, 1914, n.p.

by this time.⁴⁶⁴ Spectacle, combined with avant-garde art, music, dancing girls, film and a range of performers, reflecting topical themes, made some suspicious of revue and musical entertainments that commented on urban life as much as they constituted it. The entertainment centre of London, the 'West End', was itself questioned at the outset of the War, and its relevance and appropriateness during wartime were also not taken for granted. The manufacture of national morale was a major consideration during the War, and there were concerns about maintaining it because political and social disaffection was high across Britain. Moral debates focused on the 'legitimacy of entertainment':⁴⁶⁵ it was thought that it was wrong to be frivolous while the War was happening. Intellectual contemporary responses to musical theatre at this time saw it as symptomatic of a degenerative mass culture. Theatre intellectuals derided a popular theatre given over to financiers, speculators and profiteers, the sole guardians of theatrical expression in particular in London. Victorian finance capitalism, it was argued, was forcing standardisation on English theatres. Indeed, West End revue's fragmented form merely served to confirm for some a culture that was emblematic of the nation's moral decay. The modern war was fought on a huge scale that combined the mechanisation of industry, new technology and an innovative communication industry. Transport systems carried millions of soldiers back and forth to the front, while technology improved 'the rapidity, range, accuracy and lethality of military fire power',⁴⁶⁶ creating casualties on a mass industrial level. The utilisation of an organised and integrated multi-media that encompassed newspapers, the music and film industries, theatre, photography and the electric telegraph became pivotal in transforming news reporting and the way in which the War was experienced. This

⁴⁶⁴ Rüger, 'Entertainments', in *Capital Cities at War*, 105.

⁴⁶⁵ Rüger, 'Entertainments', in *Capital Cities at War*, 109.

⁴⁶⁶ Bourne, *Britain and the Great War*, 12.

meant it was now fought as much at home in the minds and imaginations of the public as it was on the battlefield.

War ceased to be the prerogative solely of military leaders, and came to involve the civilians of all belligerent countries on a scale never known before. For the first time the barometer of public morale needed as much attention as the efficiency of the troops in the front line.⁴⁶⁷

Doubts about the propriety of entertainment during wartime gave way to a recognition of the full possibilities of its use for the war effort to support the nation's morale and to disseminate propaganda in general. The West End therefore became an 'intersection between home and front'.⁴⁶⁸

The tensions between 'home' and 'front' between 'city' and 'war' were mediated by urban entertainments with their peculiar combination of modern, nostalgic and transgressive impulses.⁴⁶⁹

During the first year of the war, revue and popular musical theatre reflected a complex social and political culture of a nation at total war, because the authorities 'appreciated the need for entertainment and the opportunity for propaganda'⁴⁷⁰ it provided. The Lord Chamberlain's censor's comments on *By Jingo If We Do!* provided reason and licence (literally and metaphorically) for the inclusion of such exaggerated scenes, which bonded the community together against the enemy by providing a motive and purpose for the War. By constructing and perpetuating the binary opposition of the evil German Hun against the plucky, honest English Tommie, these revues played on 'preconceived ideas of the behaviour which can be

⁴⁶⁷ Haste, *Keep the Home Fires Burning*, 1.

⁴⁶⁸ Rüger, 'Entertainments', in *Capital Cities at War*, 106.

⁴⁶⁹ Rüger, 'Entertainments', in *Capital Cities at War*, 106.

⁴⁷⁰ Rüger, 'Entertainments', in *Capital Cities at War*, 114.

expected of enemies'⁴⁷¹ and exaggerated stories of German atrocities, contrasting them with representations of the British as the embodiment of courage, heroism and resolution. Within this context the portrayal of the German enemy and of the men and women of Britain and London became central to the role of West End revue as an entertainment during wartime. As a form of satirical topical entertainment, revue reflected tensions and debates in society at large during wartime; as an entertainment, it 'went far beyond the obvious function of distracting and amusing; it offered a space for the negotiation of wartime experiences and emotions'.⁴⁷²

⁴⁷¹ Haste, *Keep the Home Fires Burning*, 3.

⁴⁷² Winter and Robert (eds), *Capital Cities at War*, 3.

Chapter 5

American Ascendancy and Black Cultural Transfer in *Dover Street to Dixie*

From Dover Street to Dixie

We're taking Mr Gay

There we shall see the old Plantation

Down in U.S.A

There we shall see the dear old Cabin

With roses around the door

That's where we'll meet our coal black mammy

Coal black mammy once more!⁴⁷³

Dover Street to Dixie (1923)

The eagerly awaited revue *Dover Street to Dixie* opened in May 1923 at the Pavilion Theatre in London. Displayed on the exterior of the Pavilion theatre among an array of advertisements, cast details and the show title, was an extravagant, even defiant declaration at the top of the theatre that read 'centre of the world'. This statement highlighted the publicist's flair for hyperbole, self-aggrandisement and daring of the producer Charles Cochran. A showman and legendary producer, Cochran understood the need to embellish, to advertise and to position his product against his competitors' for his discerning audiences. The statement also expressed an attitude of putative superiority: it did not just try to situate the 'Pav' theatre or indeed the West End as the foremost entertainment district, but also attempt to reassert that London, and indeed

⁴⁷³ Laurie Wylie, Morris Harvey and Harold Simpson, *Dover Street to Dixie* (London: British Library, Lord Chamberlain's Plays, 1923), n.p.

the British nation, was the apex of world power. In May 1923, however, Cochran's assertive confidence was unravelling on all counts.

Dover Street to Dixie was split into two parts, the first half – the Dover Street section – featured an all-white British cast, including Stanley Lupino, and the second, the cause of much anticipation and controversy, performed by African-Americans from the late-night New York cabaret plantation revue *Nighttime Frolics in Dixieland* (1922). Will Vodery, the musical director and arranger of Florenz Ziegfeld's plantation revues, led the orchestra for this part of the show, which featured Florence Mills.

Mills had been at the heart of the groundbreaking *Shuffle Along* (1921), vividly described by Langston Hughes as 'a honey of a show. Swift, bright, funny, rollicking, and gay, with a dozen danceable, singable tunes [...] it gave just the proper push—a pre-Charleston kick—to that Negro vogue of the 20's, that spread to books, African sculpture, music, and dancing'.⁴⁷⁴ *Dover Street to Dixie*, one of six shows Cochran was simultaneously working on, was a vehicle for Mill's emergence as an international star.⁴⁷⁵ According to her biographer, Bill Egan, 'Harlemites' of the 1920s saw the engagement in terms that went well beyond personal achievement, 'greeting Florence's engagement to perform overseas as a compliment to her race'.⁴⁷⁶

The new show may have seemed like a hotchpotch, even by revue standards, because it combined the travel narrative that was traditional in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century musical theatre with all the contemporaneity of African-American performance, characterised by jazz styling and ragtime. In fact, there were strong structural links and patterns across the piece. The first part, the 'white half',

⁴⁷⁴ Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1940), 223.

⁴⁷⁵ The other five shows were *Anna Christie*, *Partners Again*, *Little Nelly Kelly*, *The Music Box Revue* and *So This Is London*. Cochran was at the same time presenting plays by the avant-garde French playwright Sacha Guitry and a series of matinees starring Elenora Duse.

⁴⁷⁶ Bill Egan, *Florence Mills, Harlem Queen* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 2004), 82.

took a narratological stance on the jazz age, constructing modernity in familiar terms as a comic disorder, a world of dissipated bright young things, ‘jazz jugglers – saxophone syncopaters – hurrying, scurrying, worrying’, whose main activity in life is dancing. ‘We’ve been dancing all the evening’, they exclaim,

At different cabarets.

We find it better exercise,

Than watching pictures or,

Those silly problem plays.

We’re sick of golf and tennis,

We never touch a card.

We’d gladly dance a hundred miles,

But hate to walk a yard.⁴⁷⁷

Act one of *Dover Street to Dixie* opens at the heart of the modern metropolis, with a cluster of fashion-conscious ‘smart revellers’,⁴⁷⁸ leaving a parade of night clubs and celebrating their evening’s frolics with a hymn to dancing. Here is London in what would become known as the ‘Jazz age’ marking its modernity through a dance and music culture in which ‘the new social verve of London’s rich and privileged upper class reconstituted themselves along more glamorous American lines’.⁴⁷⁹ Dancing, and particularly the dance music jazz, had already become associated with a range of emotions and actions from ‘unpredictable, fragmented excitement [...] to anti-social behaviour’.⁴⁸⁰ In many ways it was the image of jazz and its many associations, rather than the music itself, that caused outrage and

⁴⁷⁷ Wylie, *Harvey and Simpson, Dover Street to Dixie*, n.p.

⁴⁷⁸ The London Pavilion, ‘Dover Street to Dixie’, *The Stage*, 7 June 1923, 17.

⁴⁷⁹ Cathy Ross, *Twenties London: A City in the Jazz Age* (London: Philip Wilson, 2003), 35.

⁴⁸⁰ Ross, *Twenties London*, 27.

offence. As Catherine Parsonage highlights, ‘those who were opposed to Jazz had often never experienced the music for themselves’,⁴⁸¹ but its ‘associations with alcohol, drugs and prostitution and also [...] [being] increasingly understood as a black music at a time of growing racial intolerance, served to cement a negative image of jazz for the general public’.⁴⁸²

Jazz polarised opinion, but not along class lines: ‘Jazz music and jazz behaviour were taken up enthusiastically by London’s upper classes’,⁴⁸³ as depicted in the opening of *Dover Street to Dixie*. Jazz developed into a generational marker of rebellion, a call to defy the elders of the establishment, whose thinking was seen as being responsible for the Great War. As Noreen Branson argues, for the new generation

The urge to defy convention was shared by others [...] The sudden realisation that something they had been taught by their elders is untrue comes to many people as they leave childhood behind. The event can be shattering or it can be exhilarating. Now numbers of young people appeared to be collectively experiencing such a revelation.⁴⁸⁴

Jazz became a catch-all adjective for indicating differences in terms of how one saw the world or approached life.

To jazz was to dance frenziedly but ‘jazzing up’ or ‘jazzing’ as in ‘jazzing the classics’, was to make a new, irreverent version of a usually more sedate original, disregarding all accepted conventions of form, harmony and taste.

⁴⁸¹ Catherine Parsonage, ‘Fascination and Fear: Responses to Early Jazz in Britain’, in Neil A. Wynn (ed.), *Cross the Water Blues: African American Music in Europe* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 89.

⁴⁸² Parsonage, ‘Fascination and Fear’, 94.

⁴⁸³ Ross, *Twenties London*, 31.

⁴⁸⁴ Noreen Branson, *Britain in the Nineteen Twenties* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1975), 97.

Jazz was associated with unharnessed energy, revolt against convention and youth.⁴⁸⁵

However, in terms of race, jazz's association with "Negro culture" was reinforced in London by African-American artists and musicians. The 1920s was a decade of 'triumphal capitalism',⁴⁸⁶ and music and dance responded by appropriating black culture to 'use its expressive vitality [...] and make the song-and-dance musical truly modern'.⁴⁸⁷ The reasons for this can be traced to the popularity of Blackface entertainments, which involved both black and white performers in burnt cork make-up and were a standard part of British entertainments in the nineteenth century. They were key in creating 'particular disturbing racio-sexual pathologies [...] [with] Scurrilous misuses of Darwin',⁴⁸⁸ and were engaged in constructing black people as modern day primitives. By the 1920s the 'perceived simplicity and freedom of black culture could be something desirable for whites to emulate, rather than just observe or imitate, and jazz seemed to promise cultural as well as musical freedom for young people'.⁴⁸⁹ This is illustrated in the opening of *Dover Street to Dixie*: a group of fashion-conscious revellers leave a trail of night clubs behind and look for yet more fun. 'Jazz me to Bruton Street, Freddie,' asks a lively young flapper, 'if it's not out of your way.' 'No trouble', replies Freddie, 'I can Tango back to the club afterwards'.⁴⁹⁰

The First World War had in many respects underlined Britain's decline in comparison to a growing American musical, cultural and political ascendancy. In terms of musical theatre, the West End had already been greatly influenced by an Atlantic cultural transfer that had brought a wide range of American acts, styles and

⁴⁸⁵ Cathy Ross, *Twenties London*, 28.

⁴⁸⁶ David Walsh and Len Platt, *Musical Theater and American Culture* (London: Praeger, 2003), 72.

⁴⁸⁷ Walsh and Platt, *Musical Theater*, 111.

⁴⁸⁸ Jayna Brown, *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern* (London: Duke University Press, 2008), 222.

⁴⁸⁹ Parsonage, 'Fascination and Fear', 91.

⁴⁹⁰ Wylie, *Harvey and Simpson, Dover Street to Dixie*, n.p.

performers to Britain.⁴⁹¹ It was American dance and music culture in particular, however, that began to shape European musical theatre at this time. In London before the First World War revue shows like *Hullo Ragtime* (1912), *Everybody's Doing It* (1912), *Way Back to Darkey Land* (1913) and *While You Wait* (1913), a Wild West revue, among others, marked America's growing emergence on the West End musical stage. This was to continue during the war, with the imported revue *Watch Your Step* (1915), a highly successful Broadway extravaganza composed by Irving Berlin with a plot by Harry B. Smith and Harry Grattan. In Britain, American popular music and dance gradually moved into the void left by the ostracised German music and theatre culture. The new technologies of the radio and gramophone, along with growing record manufacture,⁴⁹² made jazz music widely available. America began to provide mainstream popular culture with a zeitgeist soundtrack to an age that sought to reinvigorate a listless and tired post-War British society. In London and across the European capital cities, dance borrowed steps from America, with dances like the Texas Tommy, the Bunny Hug, the Monkey Hug, the Lane Duck, the Black Bottom Fox Trot, the Cake Walk and the Charleston. By 1923 the *Observer* stated:

we are Americanised in our dancing. It is America which invents the fashions and sets the style. New steps and modifications devised in the States and tried out in ballrooms there, consistently appear here a month or two later. All the new dance music developments – the transition from barbarous jazz to today's quiet syncopation, from grossness to spiritedness of sound – have had their

⁴⁹¹ See Dominique-René de Lerma, 'Black Composers in Europe: A Works List', *Black Music Research Journal*, 10 (1990), 275-334; Rainer Lotz and Ian Pegg (eds), *Under the Imperial Carpet: Essays in Black History 1780-1950* (Crawley: Rabbit Press, 1986); Clarkson Rose, *Beside the Seaside* (London: Museum Press Ltd, 1960); Ernest Short, *Fifty Years of Vaudeville* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1946); Thomas L. Riis, 'The Experience and Impact of Black Entertainers in England, 1895-1920', *American Music* 4 (1986), 50-8; Rainer E. Lotz, 'The Black Troubadours: Black Entertainers in Europe, 1896-1915', *Black Music Research Journal* 10 (1990), 253-73; and Howard Rye and Jeffrey Green, 'Black Musical Internationalism in England in the 1920s', *Black Music Research Journal* 15 (1995), 93-107.

⁴⁹² In 1912 there were 3 record manufacturers in Britain; by 1916 there were 60.

birth in America; whilst the American bands and dance music composers decide the tunes we shall hear and the manner of their execution. Dancing – its teaching, and the composing, playing, and recording of its music – is, indeed, a very considerable American industry now. The trade in gramophone records alone is huge.⁴⁹³

Imported American acts such as the Original Dixieland Jazz Band had appeared in *Joybells* (1919), whilst Paul Whiteman (often billed as the ‘King of Jazz’) and his orchestra appeared in *Brighter London* (1923). American adaptations such as the ‘jazzaganza’ *You’d Be Surprised* (1923) at the Covent Garden Opera House were headlined by jazz and dancing, while other American bands such as The Southern Syncopated Orchestra, ‘the first Afro-American Jazz orchestra to make a substantial public impact in the United Kingdom’,⁴⁹⁴ toured extensively around Britain and Europe, popularising the music. This period saw the establishment of New York as the new dominant musical theatre metropolis as American musical theatre and the music recording industry established a ‘symbiotic relationship with one another’.⁴⁹⁵ The self-contained hit tune would be a major element of the song and dance musical, and New York Vaudeville was the central venue for creating hit tunes. Songs were inserted into a show ‘calculated to appeal to the public but which had no particular, if any, relation to the musical’s plot or characters’.⁴⁹⁶ The 1920s were the golden age of the Tin-Pan Alley song – ‘the song with the widest commercial appeal (the hit)’⁴⁹⁷ – and ‘revues acted as venues for Tin-Pan Alley to hawk their wares’,⁴⁹⁸ combining

⁴⁹³ Correspondent, A. ‘New dances and prospects’, *The Observer*, 9 July 15 1923. *ProQuest*, web. Available at: accessed: 16 July 2013.

⁴⁹⁴ Howard Rye, ‘The Southern Syncopated Orchestra’, in Lotz and Pegg (eds), *Under the Imperial Carpet*, 216.

⁴⁹⁵ Walsh and Platt, *Musical Theater*, 73.

⁴⁹⁶ Walsh and Platt, *Musical Theater*, 74.

⁴⁹⁷ Walsh and Platt, *Musical Theater*, 73.

⁴⁹⁸ Walsh and Platt, *Musical Theater*, 73.

‘commerce and showbiz’⁴⁹⁹ to overtake the old European centres of Vienna, London, Berlin and Paris. Musical theatre was no longer dominated by London musical comedy or Berlin operetta but by New York American song and dance.⁵⁰⁰

However this Americanisation could never be wholesale, and nowhere was this more understood than in West End revue itself. For all its imported content and emphasis, the success of revue lay in displaying the right mixture of the local and the global. There had to be enough association with a global cosmopolitan culture and fashions to be exotic and revitalising, but, crucially, too much would alienate its audience. The global had to be mixed with the right amount of local celebratory material to situate and affirm the British position and status over this culture. Such an understanding was a major factor of *Dover Street to Dixie*, and the revue perfectly illustrates this dynamic in its structure, content and emphasis on asserting the British national character against the cultural, economic and political symbols of American ascendancy.

Revitalisation or decline?

As Patrick Wright argues, ‘among the factors which have influenced the definition of Britain’s national past [...] [is] the recent experience of economic and imperial decline’.⁵⁰¹ In this context Wright argues that ‘a growing concern with the preservation of the social order develops’.⁵⁰² The American ascendancy in musical theatre was mirrored in the international politics of the period. America’s entry into the Great War

⁴⁹⁹ Walsh and Platt, *Musical Theater*, 73.

⁵⁰⁰ See Lynne Fauley Emery, *Black Dance in the United States from 1619 to 1970* (Palo Alto: National Press Books, 1972), chapters 6 and 7. See also Wynn (ed.), *Cross the Water Blues*.

⁵⁰¹ Patrick Wright, *On Living in an Old Country: The National Past in Contemporary Britain* (London: Verso, 1985), 25.

⁵⁰² Wright, *On Living in an Old Country*, 52.

in 1917 had not been as ‘an ally but an associate power’,⁵⁰³ with clearly negotiated terms that unequivocally demonstrated America’s intention of dictating and influencing European politics. This positioning protected and extended the United States’ previous foreign policy initiatives such as the Monroe Doctrine (1823) and the Roosevelt Corollary (1904) and saw America start to dominate the international political agenda⁵⁰⁴ in the aftermath of the war. American political power was also furthered by the economic aid it provided to an exhausted and weakened Europe. America had provided huge loans to finance the allies’ war expenditure and Britain had incurred huge debts and owed its major creditor, the United States of America, \$4.6 billion (£920 million).⁵⁰⁵ In the post-War climate, this debt was the most tangible expression of the changed world hierarchy: the ‘debts touched the basic question of [...] who would dominate the peace’.⁵⁰⁶ As Robert Self argues, ‘few issues more pungently demonstrate the complex nature of this profoundly ambivalent relationship [...] than the vexed question of British war debt to the United States’.⁵⁰⁷ In December 1922 the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, Stanley Baldwin, and the Governor of the Bank of England, Montagu Norman, travelled on a ‘Mission to America’⁵⁰⁸ as *The Times* reported. Their ‘delicate task’, was to negotiate a new repayment deal for Britain’s debt despite the fact that ‘the United States adamantly refused to consider readjustment’.⁵⁰⁹ This was to have great long lasting social and political effects because Britain had to re-situate itself in light of this shift in power and status.

⁵⁰³ Robert Self, *Britain, America and the War Debt Controversy: The Economic Diplomacy of an Unspecial Relationship, 1917-1945* (London: Routledge, 2006), 4.

⁵⁰⁴ The United States international political domination was manifest at various international conferences, including the Paris Peace Conference, the League of Nations and the Washington Naval Conference (1921-22)

⁵⁰⁵ Self, *Britain, America and the War Debt*, 15.

⁵⁰⁶ Self, *Britain, America and the War Debt*, 16.

⁵⁰⁷ Self, *Britain, America and the War Debt*, 13.

⁵⁰⁸ ‘The Mission to America. Mr. Baldwin and His Colleague. A Delicate Task.’, *The Times*, Wednesday, 27 December 1922, 10.

⁵⁰⁹ Self, *Britain, America and the War Debt*, 14.

The revellers in the opening scenes of *Dover Street to Dixie* prefer listening to jazz music to ‘watching pictures or silly problem plays’,⁵¹⁰ acknowledging a post-War environment in which ‘civilians were only too glad to suppress all memory of the nightmare from which they had just awakened’⁵¹¹ and jazz ‘primitivism’ became a regenerating modern force that replaced a ruined past. However, there were other reasons these aristocrats might have wished to avoid the cinema and the theatre at this time. Ernest Hutchinson’s play *The Right to Strike* (1923), which dealt with class action, had just been released as a silent film. On stage there was Karel Capek’s *RUR* (1923) with its ‘savage commentary on science and commercialism’⁵¹² and Ernest Toller’s class war drama *The Machine Wreckers* (1923). Political dramas such as these made aristocratic ‘pleasure loving audiences uncomfortable’⁵¹³ because they seemed to be attacking their way of life. The post-War world, for all its celebratory dancing, was a confusing place, and growing social unrest spotlighted class divisions and challenged the old certainties of status and position. The Fourth Reform Act of 1918 had enfranchised most adults, resulting in a weakening of class distinctions. The rise of the lower middle classes mirrored the fall of the economic base of the old aristocracy, and large estates were broken up such that ‘ownership of a landed estate was ceasing to be the hallmark of great social prestige and power’.⁵¹⁴ In *Dover Street to Dixie* these class dynamics are reflected in comical yet poignant ways in the depiction and interaction of the two main characters of the first half.

⁵¹⁰ Wylie, Harvey and Simpson, *Dover Street to Dixie*, n.p

⁵¹¹ Robert Graves and Alan Hodge, *The Long Weekend: A Social History of Great Britain 1918-1939* (London: Cardinal, 1940), 26.

⁵¹² Robert Tanitch, *London Stage in the 20th Century* (London: Haus Publishing, 2007), 68.

⁵¹³ J.C Trewin, Raymond Mander and Joe Mitchenson, *The Gay Twenties: A Decade of Theatre* (London: Macdonald, 1958), 41.

⁵¹⁴ Branson, *Britain in the Nineteen Twenties*, 92.

The show opens with an aristocrat, Lady Welbeck, who enters the raucous opening scene bewildered and bumbling. Seemingly out of place in the midst of the revellers, she flails about unable to find a taxi and is forced to walk the street. In this predicament her status is undermined and she suffers the indignity of being taken for a prostitute by a cockney night watchman who has been awoken from his sleep.

Watchman: Ere – you’d better ‘op it. My old woman’ll be ‘ere in a minute with my breakfast.

The scene plays with status reversal as the watchman orders Lady Welbeck to ‘‘op it’ but also offers a subtle attack on the working class. In a climate of striking and union agitation, this simple representation of a working man asleep on the job encouraged the stereotype of a feckless and lazy working class. The watchman tries to settle back to his ‘work’ of sleeping, only to be disturbed again by the second ‘out of sorts’ aristocratic figure – a ‘Georgian old gentleman clad in garments of 200 years ago’⁵¹⁵ who arises from a hole in the ground to relay his story:

As I journeyed homewards from the Tavern last night, somewhat unsteadily, I fear I must have stumbled into this excavation and thus laid on in a stupor.⁵¹⁶

Confusion reigns. The old English gentleman does not know where he is and he does not understand the cockney night watchman. The old man’s disorientation is completed when the watchman in response accuses him of being a ‘blinking foreigner’.⁵¹⁷ This is taken as a gross insult by old gentleman, who robustly declares his loyalty to the Crown: ‘Sir, I am a loyal subject of King George the First’. This reveals the reason for his confusion. The old gentleman believes himself to be in the eighteenth century; the night watchman lets him know that it is in fact 1923. Informed of this, the old man remembers that he ‘swallowed a drug for a wager’, which, it was

⁵¹⁵ Wylie, Harvey and Simpson, *Dover Street to Dixie*, n.p.

⁵¹⁶ Wylie, Harvey and Simpson, *Dover Street to Dixie*, n.p.

⁵¹⁷ Wylie, Harvey and Simpson, *Dover Street to Dixie*, n.p.

claimed, ‘could make a man sleep for two hundred years’.⁵¹⁸ He has slept from the eighteenth century to the twentieth. Lady Welbeck, overhearing his story, offers to help him by finding him lodgings and showing him around London as well. The two out of place aristocrats find solace and comfort in each other amongst the dance-crazed mass of modernity and the impertinent insults of the working class.

This first scene of the Dover Street section provides a dramatic framework for critiquing the contemporary world through the familiar devices of time travel and travelogue, both of which allow the past to be compared with the present. However, from the start the clever interplay of the past is located firmly in the present of the 1920s through the utilisation of national culture and politics, as Patrick Wright argues:

The national past is above all a modern past [...] it is defined not just in relation to the general disappointment of earlier historical expectation, but also and more pointedly around the leading tensions of the contemporary political situation.⁵¹⁹

The present constructed in this revue is full of ‘tensions’, portraying a world of opposites and contradiction that is simultaneously invigorating and celebratory of modernity and nostalgic and wistful for an imagined past English or British way of life.

The modern world in *Dover Street to Dixie* finds itself in an uncertain condition, framed by nostalgia and insecurity. The show registers a series of traditional signifiers of England: aristocrats selling off family antiques to a *nouveau riche* that earns its fortunes from such modern, soft and plastic commodities as ‘plasticene’; cheeky jumped-up cockneys who no longer know their place; the plangent strains of an ‘old-time waltz’ playing in the ballroom of Lady Welbeck’s

⁵¹⁸ Wylie, Harvey and Simpson, *Dover Street to Dixie*, n.p.

⁵¹⁹ Wright, *On Living in an Old Country*, 24.

fashionable London house in Dover Street. The setting is itself ambiguous, evoking both refined tradition and the hustle and bustle of contemporary urban life. Dover Street, off Piccadilly, was originally residential, the work of a seventeenth-century syndicate of aristocratic developers responsible for other eminently desirable addresses in central London such as Bond Street and Albemarle Street. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, Dover Street had become a much livelier place. It quickly became the hub of a number of historic buildings and hotels frequented by world leaders and historical figures and clubs such as The Arts Club founded by Charles Dickens. In literature Dover Street also has a particular resonance: it is in Dover Street, for example, that P.G. Wodehouse sought to locate the fictional gentleman's club, The Drones Club, which features in many of his novels. Dover Street therefore is not a random setting but a pervasive invocation of the national identity, an iconic symbol of an integrated English national identity under which monuments and landscapes become part of an 'iconography of what it is to be English [...] appealing in one covertly projective way or another to the historical and sacrosanct identity of the nation'.⁵²⁰

The 'Antique fellow'⁵²¹ is therefore a nostalgic display of the British national past. This theme comes to the fore in the second scene, which is set in Lady Welbeck's ballroom as she holds a celebratory party in honour of the time traveller. In an ironic inversion of the nineteenth and twentieth century African exhibits from the 'dark Continent',⁵²² the old white British gentleman is displayed and gazed upon like an ethnological item. The racial and eugenicist connotations become apparent as Lady Welbeck's husband, an antiques dealer, questions the time traveller's authenticity:

⁵²⁰ Wright, *On Living in an Old Country*, 2.

⁵²¹ 'Dover Street to Dixie', *The Stage*, 17.

⁵²² See Bernth Lindfors (ed.), *Africans On Stage: Studies in Ethnological Show Business* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).

‘How do you know he’s genuine? Looks like a fake to me’.⁵²³ This question of authenticity reflects contemporary concerns about changing national, class and race identities as hierarchical structures were being undermined and challenged. Lord and Lady Welbeck are themselves questioned:

Man: What was your husband knighted for?

Lady Welbeck: Surely you remember! For his contribution of antiques to the offices in Whitehall.⁵²⁴

In a veiled reference to the cash for honours political scandal of the time, Lord and Lady Welbeck’s titles come under scrutiny and it is inferred that he has bought his title. The scene continues with an exploration of modern dance culture as new dances are compared to the dances of the past, which the old gentleman interprets as a metaphor of not only a lost age, but also lost values: ‘In my day we danced with grace and dignity’,⁵²⁵ the old gentleman argues. He criticises the new dance forms for embodying the faults of modern life:

Heigho! For my own time! In these times of yours, madam, tis the pace that kills [...] What is there to look forward to? – a chaotic world of jazz jugglers – saxophone syncopaters – hurrying, scurrying, worrying – but to look back – Ah madam, in my youth we danced the stately minuet accompanied only by the sweet strains of the violin – grace, dignity all are gone. Permit an old man to look back.⁵²⁶

During his speech the lights fade and a tableau of an old fashioned minuet is framed at the back of the stage. The cultural nostalgia displayed by the old man had a contemporary political articulation rooted in an emerging notion of British

⁵²³ Wylie, *Harvey and Simpson, Dover Street to Dixie*, n.p.

⁵²⁴ Wylie, *Harvey and Simpson, Dover Street to Dixie*, n.p.

⁵²⁵ Wylie, *Harvey and Simpson, Dover Street to Dixie*, n.p.

⁵²⁶ Wylie, *Harvey and Simpson, Dover Street to Dixie*, n.p.

nationalism that was espoused by the Conservative leader Stanley Baldwin during the 1923 general election. Baldwin had cultivated the persona of an English provincial country gentleman, projecting steady leadership in the face of debt and social agitation. Baldwinite politics advocated ‘not just a politics of values, but also a politics of place and identity’⁵²⁷ in which ‘an indigenous tradition of English patriotism’⁵²⁸ was underpinned by a cultural nostalgia for a pastoral folk ideal, which held a deferential view of the class system and of social status. It perpetuated a myth of a homogenous English society and sought to neutralise ‘working-class consciousness [which was] seen as a foreign import’.⁵²⁹ Baldwin marked a new political approach of ‘compromise and consensus’⁵³⁰ in which the old rhetoric of Empire and imperialism could no longer hold sway and in fact had been completely undermined by those who blamed it for the horrors of the war. The main continuity in his re-imagining was the notion of a ‘nostalgic ideal of English independence’⁵³¹ and a move to adaptation which was espoused in later years:

We must see to it that in some way we can preserve the character of our people to meet the changed conditions of the age, and see that our character triumphs over our environment.⁵³²

Conservative circles now argued for a reformulation of imperialist ideals and for the evolution of a new nationalist ideology that saw an engagement in a return to their roots:

⁵²⁷ Philip Williamson, *Stanley Baldwin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 243.

⁵²⁸ Paul. B. Rich, *Prospero's Return: Historical essays on Race, Culture, and British Society* (London: Hansib Publication, 1994), 31.

⁵²⁹ Rich, *Prospero's Return*, 31.

⁵³⁰ Rich, *Prospero's Return*, 31.

⁵³¹ Rich, *Prospero's Return*, 36.

⁵³² Rich, *Prospero's Return*, 36.

The old narrow nationalism and the old brazen imperialism must pass [...] They have played their part [...] our nationalism and imperialism will not die but they will change, grow more human.⁵³³

It was at this time that the idea of the commonwealth took over from the imperial discourse as, Williamson argues, ‘a slogan to mask from the British public opinion the full impact of the retreat from great power status.’⁵³⁴

This continuing notion [...] that Britain and its monarch remained the hub of the commonwealth was able in part to compensate for this massive loss of international prestige.⁵³⁵

The establishing of a connection to a shared national past provided solace in the recognition of Britain’s unerring quality and character in relation to the changed political and social circumstances of the present. In *Dover Street to Dixie* the character of the old gentleman is symbolic of a constructed “old England” identity that is reminiscent of Augustus Keane’s description of the Anglo-Saxon:

Stolid and solid; outwardly abrupt but warm-hearted and true; haughty and even overbearing through an innate sense of superiority, yet at heart sympathetic and always just, hence a ruler of men; seemingly dull or slow, yet pre-eminent in the realms of philosophy and imagination.⁵³⁶

This is a celebratory cultural re-imagining of the England of Chaucer and Shakespeare, a decadent sentimentalism that evokes a simpler existence associated with the countryside and rural life. This is reflected through a persistent pastoral and rustic imaginary used prominently by conservative literati to define the nature and scope of the English patriotic ideal. British ruralism served as a consoling imaginary

⁵³³ Rich, *Prospero’s Return*, 30.

⁵³⁴ Williamson, *Stanley Baldwin*, 8.

⁵³⁵ Williamson, *Stanley Baldwin*, 9.

⁵³⁶ Augustus Keane, *Man, Past and Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1920), 352.

and implied an ideal that contrasted with metropolitan vanities and propagated a sense of ordinary life and community.

The rural was above all a means of suggesting that there were ancestral voices, immemorial values, ‘old fashioned virtues’ and a common inheritance that bound the nation together. It provided an imagery which reinforced a larger theme [...] the importance of place and historic roots.⁵³⁷

At this time it was argued that one expression of those ‘historic roots’ of the nation was the theatre. Growing calls for a British National theatre resulted in the first British Theatre Conference, which was held in Stratford-upon-Avon in 1919 and called for the ‘development of Acting, Drama and the Theatre as forces in the life of the Nation’.⁵³⁸ A theatre movement emerged that sought to revive what many saw as a neglected British cultural heritage and engaged in saving plays.⁵³⁹ The repertory movement had been one strand of a widespread burgeoning national theatrical culture that had a ‘growing understanding of theatre’s potency as an educative as well as artistic or entertainment medium and therefore of its importance in the cultural life of the country’.⁵⁴⁰ Sir Nigel Playfair, the actor-manager of the Lyric Hammersmith from 1919 to 1932, was an influential figure in the repertory theatre movement. His revival of John Gay’s *The Beggar’s Opera* at the Lyric in 1920 was much in keeping with the vogue for reclaiming British theatrical works from the past. *The Beggar’s Opera*, a British ballad opera, was in many respects an early forerunner of the revue style, with

⁵³⁷ Williamson, *Stanley Baldwin*, 249.

⁵³⁸ Clive Barker and Maggie B. Gale (eds), *British Theatre between the Wars, 1918-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 15.

⁵³⁹ The Phoenix Society, an off-shoot of the Stage Society, the British Drama league and the Workers’ Educational Association were key players in this movement, along with such luminaries as T.S. Eliot and Willaim Poel.

⁵⁴⁰ George Rowell and Anthony Jackson, *The Repertory Movement: A History of Regional Theatre in Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 2.

its satirical lampooning of contemporary values and politics. It ran for 1,468 performances and was still playing in May 1923.⁵⁴¹

It is therefore not a coincidence that Lady Welbeck takes the time traveller to see *The Beggar's Opera*, because it represents both the present and the past of British culture. As they watch the opera, it is discovered that the old man is in fact the playwright John Gay himself, watching his own play: 'Can it be true that my opera is [s]till being played?'⁵⁴² With this realisation that it has not dispensed with his play, Gay has a change of heart regarding the modern world, because he has been accommodated into its high culture: 'Madam, the progress of your modern civilisation astounds me. You have motor cars, aeroplanes, wireless – and *The Beggar's Opera*'.⁵⁴³ The scene comically plays on the author's ego, but it has a wider significance because it shows a mutual transformation whereby both the time traveller and the modern world are refreshed and reconstituted by this link to the past. *The Beggar's Opera*, and by association John Gay, become culturally and socially significant, part of inherited memory, part of a national cultural tradition that is celebrated as a mark of Britain's undiminished pedigree and character. This first half of *Dover Street to Dixie* is primarily an acknowledgement and celebration of British culture and history. It forms a re-assertion of imagined British qualities and character in a modern world in which, outwardly, their position and value have been usurped. However, this is very much a sentimental history located in a past, a fiction that enables Britain to maintain its status. In the finale of Act I, we see not only Mr Gay's acceptance of his new status and surroundings, but a celebration and fervent adoption of this new world as Gay moves through the first stage of a new articulation of British identity through history and culture. The first scene of Act II repositions America and

⁵⁴¹ See John Gay, *The Beggar's Opera and Polly* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁵⁴² Wylie, Harvey and Simpson, *Dover Street to Dixie*, n.p.

⁵⁴³ Wylie, Harvey and Simpson, *Dover Street to Dixie*, n.p.

Britain, not as rivals and not with a subservient Britain, but as Anglo-Saxon equals. Hence Gay's acclimatisation to the modern world is cemented by his journey to the centre of the new world itself, America. As they drink to his health, the song 'Over the Way' situates Mr Gay firmly at the new 'centre of the world' – New York and America – in a celebration of British and American friendship. However, the song and the following scene presents this relationship ambiguously. The America that Mr Gay is introduced to reflects his new persona, a mixture of the modern firmly located in an imagined past. It is a re-imagining of black America, Dixieland.

Hullo London! Hullo New York!

Act II of *Dover Street to Dixie* is far stranger than Act I. In comparison to the Anglicised 'Dover Street' celebrations of British cultural heritage of the first half, the new 'Dixie' section seems completely out of keeping because it presents an array of contradictory "Americana" locations and images: first New York, representative of modern urban America, and then the rural, black, south of a minstrel-style American plantation revue. However, the 'Dixie' section continues to highlight and explore the previously established themes of British national identity, Anglo-Saxon hierarchy and a pastoral cultural imaginary, this time in a new, trans-cultural location. The revue travelogue aesthetic allows for such juxtaposition, presenting the strange multiplicity of the modern world and responding by establishing Britain's place at its core through the introduction of a white supremacist discourse.

In this version of British and American relations, Britain is not subservient to the new dominant power but is an equal partner, and the similarities between the countries are celebrated. This is reflected in the staging, with the two great cities of

London and New York depicted on either side of the stage, with two characters crossing from either side of the stage.

Silas: Say – You’re English, ain’t you?

Joshua: I guess so

Silas: What?

Joshua: I mean not ‘arf.

Silas: Waal – I’m an American.

Joshua: You astonish me.

Silas: Put it there. (clasp hands)

Joshua: Ah! Hands across the sea!⁵⁴⁴

This crossing to America could be seen in many respects as an acquiescent gesture, an acknowledgement of a shift in position and power. However, the scene is constructed such that it re-establishes Britain’s status: the ‘Americanisation’ of British popular culture is presented not as an invasion but as a special closeness.

We’re getting closer everyday

From England to America to America to-day

From England to America

Is just across the way/.

There’s Yankee Doodle I can hear/

And Rule Britannia, and Johnny Get your Gun/

We’re both so close together now/

That we sing them all in one.⁵⁴⁵

⁵⁴⁴ Wylie, *Harvey and Simpson, Dover Street to Dixie*, n.p.

⁵⁴⁵ Wylie, *Harvey and Simpson, Dover Street to Dixie*, n.p.

America mediated

Additional political and cultural shifts in British identity were also highlighted by *Dover Street to Dixie's* utilisation of African-Americans in the 'Plantation' section of the revue. At this time black artists had a number of contradictory objectified associations. In some quarters they were seen as culturally backward and childlike, but also admired as an exotic re-invigorating force that was symbolic of a modern age, romanticised as primitive savages and lauded for their supposed innate animalistic naturalness. For many intellectuals of this period, black performances 'functioned as the original, incomplete germ of humanity against which the modern [white] European could measure, humanize, or culturally regenerate himself'.⁵⁴⁶ Black performance at this time exemplified a particular kind of cosmopolitan identity, which until then had been 'restricted to a selected elite',⁵⁴⁷ but now entered into the mainstream consciousness through spectacular revues in Paris, Berlin and London. However, this was not a cosmopolitanism that challenged ethnocentrism or that was 'committed to the idea that all persons are in a fundamental sense equal and free'.⁵⁴⁸ Rather, it sought to mark white Europeans as racial superior and modern, 'sophisticated or urbane'⁵⁴⁹ through an association with a contrasting primitive black culture. There had been a long history of African-American acts and performers in the West End but in the 1920s their presence coincided with great social unrest brought about by national and racial tensions across Europe and America. In Britain race riots took place as white and black sailors fought over jobs in 'Glasgow, South Shields, Salford, Hull, London, Liverpool, Newport, Cardiff and Barry between January and August 1919. Further sporadic rioting took place in 1920 and 1921. Five people were

⁵⁴⁶ Heike Raphael-Hernandez (ed.), *Blackening Europe: The African American Presence* (London: Routledge, 2004), 37.

⁵⁴⁷ Montserrat Guibernau, *The Identity of Nations* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 152.

⁵⁴⁸ Guibernau, *The Identity of Nations*, 150.

⁵⁴⁹ Guibernau, *The Identity of Nations*, 152.

killed, dozens injured and at least 250 arrested'.⁵⁵⁰ Various interpretations of national identity emerged from metropolitan and colonial opinion during the 1919 riots, but 'Britishers first'⁵⁵¹ was their overriding sentiment. In the press the inclusion of high profile Afro-American performers and musicians on the West End stages in revue shows such as *The Rainbow* and *Dover Street to Dixie* was constructed as a re-run of the seaport troubles: another example of blacks taking white jobs. The journalist Hannen Swaffer led the attacks with his columns in the *Sunday Times* and the *Daily Graphic*⁵⁵² (both London publications), writing an 'exposé' of 'the Scandal of Negro Revues'. 'While the actors and actresses of England', he wrote, 'are concerned about their bread and butter [...] Sir Alfred Butt and C.B. Cochran are quarrelling apparently about which niggers they have got'. Producing a lengthy list of out-of-work performers, Swaffer concluded with a series of rhetorical questions: 'If good revue artistes are wanted, why is Nelson Keys not working now? And why is Daphne Pollard not in a show?'⁵⁵³ In *The Observer* review of the show, the theatre critic, St John Ervine, mentioned that he had 'received a round robin [...] asking me to protest against the employment of coloured people on stage'.⁵⁵⁴ Such was the strength of opposition that *The Era* reported that on opening night 'there would have been some broken heads on the pavement had not wiser counsels prevailed'.⁵⁵⁵

Such vitriol went well beyond employment issues. It exposed deep racism and powerful insecurity about Britain's place in the world. Just as the black presence in the seaports riots challenged 'the legitimacy of Britain's imperial rule and raised questions about the identity and status of colonial peoples both within the metropolis

⁵⁵⁰ Jacqueline Jenkinson, *Black 1919: Riots Racism and Resistance in Imperial Britain* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2009), 1.

⁵⁵¹ Jenkinson, 'Black 1919', 4.

⁵⁵² Hannen Swaffer, 'The Scandal of Negro Revues', *Daily Graphic* (London), 5 March 1923, 7.

⁵⁵³ Swaffer, 'The Scandal of Negro Revues', 7.

⁵⁵⁴ St John Ervine, 'Dover Street to Dixie', *The Observer*, 3 June 1923, 11.

⁵⁵⁵ *The Era*, June 6, 1923, 11.

and in the colonies', so black performers on the West End stage, exotic, attractive and very much the 'newest thing' were a challenge to a white, West End entertainment culture that had dominated since the 1890s.⁵⁵⁶

C. B. Cochran famously removed Hannen Swaffer from his seat in the stalls on the opening night of *Dover Street to Dixie*. He shared Florence Mills concerns about 'the possibility of racial demonstrations'. According to theatre history legend, 'the tension was palpable',⁵⁵⁷ until, that is, Mills herself took the stage, at which point a mesmerising calm apparently descended. The 'Plantation' revue had started with 'spirited music from the Plantation Orchestra, then the chorus entered dancing frantically, followed by a statuesque blues singer, Edith Wilson, singing the blues'. Mills, however,

knew a jazzy din would not protect her entry. Her opening number was the soft, dreamy music of 'Down among the Sleepy Hills of Ten-Ten-Tennessee'. She would occupy the stage alone, dressed in the ragged costume of a pathetic plantation boy carrying a hobo's bundle [...] There was a hush as the audience got its first glance of the tiny Black figure that had attracted so much attention. Florence's sweet, high tones spread through the theatre as she sung of 'a little rest beyond the fields of golden grain...down among the hills of Ten-Ten-Tennessee'. The people in the audience sat forward on the edge of their seats and Cochran sat back with relief. He knew she had won them over.⁵⁵⁸

Or, as one reviewer put it so tellingly, 'All our prejudices against these *café au lait* entertainers melt when Florence Miller begins to sing'.⁵⁵⁹

⁵⁵⁶ Jenkinson, *Black 1919*, 3.

⁵⁵⁷ Egan, *Florence Mills*, 87.

⁵⁵⁸ Egan, *Florence Mills*, 87.

⁵⁵⁹ Egan, *Florence Mills*, 33.

As a cross collaboration, *Dover Street to Dixie* highlighted the wider world politics between Britain and the United States of America as competing nations battled for supremacy. The revue sought to mark commonalities and present a relationship in which the countries were equals. American vitality is shared with British heritage and character in comic exchanges that burlesque each country's differences and highlight familiarities. American ascendancy is mediated and made accessible to mainstream Britain by containing it and by allowing Britain to still have authority over it. The modern world that is presented is not an alienating, all conquering American invasion; rather it is mixed with a non-threatening southern pastoral American plantation setting that would have been more than familiar to British audiences and which allows Britons equality with America through discourses of white supremacy and primitiveness. The 'Dixie' section brings America to the London stage in a Southern guise. Far from representing modern, cosmopolitan culture, *Dover Street to Dixie* presents a rural idyll, reproducing a Southern homeland in which the audience and characters alike are reassured by their reunion with a familiar stereotype: 'Coal Black Mammy/Coal Black Mammy once more'. Ironically enough given the reputation for vitality, scandal and the racialised controversies surrounding the show, African-American music and dance are reproduced here in the context of a curiously static spectacle, set outside narrative development. Under a double disguise of minstrelsy, the black part of *Dover Street to Dixie*, so up-to-date in terms of sound and movement, is confined in a *mise en scène* that simply fails to register any version of contemporaneity at all.

Of course revue was notoriously idiosyncratic in its characteristic juxtapositions. In this genre, it was quite usual for a sylvan ballet to follow a satirical sketch or an opera parody. But *Dover Street to Dixie* was not formulated in that way.

This show of linked halves and migrating sections was emphatically structured around difference, antitheses even: tradition/innovation; age/youth; London/New York (Dixie?); English/American. With its “white” and “black” halves, the play was also deeply imbricated in the politics of race and Otherness, drawing an audience attracted not least by the assumed exoticism of the Dixie section. Far from being a random collection of materials, *Dover Street to Dixie* was explicitly formulated out of these contrasting elements and worked in terms of their relation to each other. In this respect, it represented a very particular, highly mediated version of cultural exchange that took place across a number of controversial and potentially destabilising borders and checkpoints. What, then, were the contexts producing this strange concoction, which strained so hard at its own seams – if not for coherence, then, at least, for some kind of imagined containment?

Cultural transfer and containment

In the ‘Dixie’ half of the show, Lady Welbeck and Gay are in New York, where they are invited to see a musical cabaret called the *Plantation Revue*. The plantation style of performance retained a vocabulary images and characters that was already familiar to British audiences, having been established through a plethora of plantation literatures, slave narratives and blackface minstrel shows that became prominent in the mid-nineteenth century. As with Gay’s *The Beggar’s Opera* in the ‘Dover Street’ half, the *Plantation Revue* has a number of connotations on and off stage for the British public. ‘Dixieland’ is staged through song and dance as a display of blackness as a consumer product: ‘I can hear the Whip-poor-will callin’ / To me from the hill, ain’t no wonder / That I’m feeling lonely, I can see the / Waving corn wavin’ how – d’y every morn’.

In this growing fascination with black culture we see a British national ideology re-asserting a particular order through a revisionist, romanticised fantasy of black culture. Within these revues Britain's national and racial supremacy is maintained through a broad continuum of stereotypical representations of black people. European ideas of primitivism at this time, however, had opposing connotations. Primitivism was appreciated in terms of art forms from other cultures such as Africa, which were taken to signify a spiritual wholeness and purity that was felt to have been lost in an increasingly materialistic, mechanised and decadent society. However, the "primitive" was also 'the bottom line in a hierarchy of categories that placed European civilization at its pinnacle'.⁵⁶⁰ Connected to nineteenth century theories of race and racial difference, primitivism, while investing blacks with enhanced passion and sexuality, also made familiar identifications with savagery and deviance – a 'process through which Europeans suggested their own superiority by placing inferior status on others'.⁵⁶¹

This rendering of America through black culture engages with a number of themes already established in the first Act. Firstly it is another retreat into an imagined pastoral folk culture. This reading of American modernity through a southern plantation pastoral is connected to the wider 'ideologies of empire' that 'demanded that colonized people be put and kept in their place – sometimes a jail, but more often a figurative place on the lower rungs of a hierarchical racial order that positioned white Europeans above them'.⁵⁶² The 'Dixie' half of the revue constructed a particular expression of British national identity that negotiated American ascendancy through a racial imaginary that allowed Britain both parity with and racial

⁵⁶⁰ Archer-Straw, *Negrophilia*, 11.

⁵⁶¹ Archer-Straw, *Negrophilia*, 12.

⁵⁶² John Clement Ball, *Imagining London: Postcolonial Fiction and the Transnational Metropolis* (London: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 8.

supremacy over America on the West End stage. *Dover Street to Dixie* encapsulated contemporary British concerns about “foreigners” from the “Empire” taking British jobs, and mirrored other similarities with the race riots of 1919 as the revue engaged in an exploration of Britain’s status and identity. The black presence in *Dover Street to Dixie*, like the seaports riots, challenged ‘the legitimacy of Britain’s imperial rule and raised questions about the identity and status of colonial peoples both within the metropole and in the colonies’.⁵⁶³

Previous readings of revue see it not as an intercultural theatre but as situated in a conception of theatre as a unitary and homogenous geo-political site that is unaffected by the flux of people, pressures of difference and diasporic movements that go hand in hand with current forms of globalisation. However, as illustrated by *Dover Street to Dixie*, the cultural transfer of black performance involved circulatory systems of movement across Europe, which often engaged in constructing a ‘divine emollient’ for its audiences that mixed nostalgia with a racial imaginary in which ‘characters exist in a self-contained, make-believe world where, on the whole, order prevails and virtue is, indeed, triumphant’.⁵⁶⁴ In the case of *Dover Street to Dixie*, this was a construct that could accommodate Britain in a white supremacist discourse that eroticised the black body through a discourse of primitivism within a pastoral setting. Racial spectacle on stage and its formulation through the presence of black and oriental performers has a long history in the British psyche. ‘U.S. plantation lore and British and European colonial lore’ had become especially related in the middle of the nineteenth century following the success of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. The book and its setting saw the emergence of a ‘popular iconography especially in children’s literature, [that] blended plantation myths of the black child

⁵⁶³ Jenkinson, *Black 1919*, 3.

⁵⁶⁴ Ian Bradley, *Oh Joy! Oh Rapture! The Enduring Phenomenon Of Gilbert and Sullivan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 95.

with colonial imaginings'.⁵⁶⁵ Black characters such as Little Black Sambo (1899), the Golliwog series (1895) and the picaninny shows at London's Palace Theatre in 1905 reflected how 'plantation fictions from [the] United States were linked and overlapped with European and British imperial fictions'.⁵⁶⁶ The 'Dixie' section was staged around 'plantation conventions long circulating throughout Europe'⁵⁶⁷ in which the fictive representation of the south functioned as a desirable other and as another retreat from a 'world governed by [...] new technologies and international capital'.⁵⁶⁸ These performances functioned as 'forms of romantic nationalism' that constructed 'fantasies of a black "folk" sprung from the soil of the United States'.⁵⁶⁹

The plantation symbolism of the Dixie section reflects a social imaginary ideal that conjures what John M. Grammar calls the 'southern pastoral [...] a refuge from modernity'⁵⁷⁰ in which 'racial hierarchy is unquestioned and benevolent', as depicted in the nineteenth century novels *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) and *Uncle Remus* (1880). The plantation is represented as where conflicts are healed and reconciled through the 'mutually agreeable cause of restoring white supremacy',⁵⁷¹ just like 'ole Man river' it keeps on rolling along. *Dover Street to Dixie* is part of a long and complex tradition of commodified black performance that was ambiguous and contradictory. As Samir Dayal argued, this type of black performance has its origins in slave survival and resistance methods and is part complicit white fantasy and part subversive performative self-parody:

⁵⁶⁵ Brown, *Babylon Girls*, 55.

⁵⁶⁶ Brown, *Babylon Girls*, 55.

⁵⁶⁷ Brown, *Babylon Girls*, 208.

⁵⁶⁸ The American South, Plantation narratives

⁵⁶⁹ Brown, *Babylon Girls*, 191.

⁵⁷⁰ John M. Grammar, *Pastoral and Politics in the Old South* (Louisiana State University Press, 1996),

61.

⁵⁷¹ Grammar, *Pastoral and Politics*, 72.

slaves performed parodies that subtly undermined the presumptive superiority of the white master, but in which the white masters themselves did not quite cotton on to the fact that the joke was on them, that their own sense of self was dependent on the black slaves occupying a role that confirmed the master's place in a presumed hierarchy of humanity.⁵⁷²

In this sense, under European modernity of the 1920s

blacks functioned as the original, incomplete germ of humanity against which the modern European could measure, humanize or culturally regenerate himself [...] They were at once intimate and abjected – extimate others.⁵⁷³

The 'Dixie' section's collection of songs and dances is in many respects a romanticised nostalgia for a pre-civilised or primitive folk culture that is constructed by emphasising distinctions between the black and white worlds. However, *Dover Street to Dixie* also becomes 'part of a shared space of multiple racial impersonations' rather than a binary opposition of whiteness and colour, reflecting Claire Jean Kim's formulation of how race was triangulated as age, gender and race identities are used in the creation of a British identity.

Border crossings and resistance

The black presence on stage therefore highlights a complex and ambiguous performative history. Although the public transcript of the black performance in *Dover Street to Dixie* is seemingly complicit in its own subordination, the black performers also signalled the growth of what Laura Doyle has argued was a 'critical

⁵⁷² Samir Dayal, 'Blackness as Symptom: Josephine Baker and European Identity', in Heike Raphael-Hernandez (ed.), *Blackening Europe: The African American Presence* (London: Routledge, 2004), 36.

⁵⁷³ Dayal, 'Blackness as Symptom', 37.

cosmopolitanism'.⁵⁷⁴ Under such a cosmopolitanism, a politicised black diaspora marked the uncertainty of Britain's colonial position through the 'eruption of black expressive culture and political initiatives in the 1920s'.⁵⁷⁵ *Dover Street to Dixie* and the African-American performers highlighted a mode of resistance to hegemonic structures.⁵⁷⁶ the performers' very presence in the metropolis entails a postcolonial narrative of 'a form of appropriative resistance from below' whereby 'using the metropolitan spaces in new ways, begin[s] to detach them from traditional meanings and associations'.⁵⁷⁷ West End popular musical theatre, like imperialism, was 'a culture of travel',⁵⁷⁸ with 'the comingling of differences, – the crossing of geographical, cultural and linguistic boundaries between peoples – that travel always entails'.⁵⁷⁹ A key result of such comingling is a re-inscription that starts to change the space and tempo. *Dover Street to Dixie* spotlighted 'London's decentredness' as the old notions of 'a racially proscribed "British" identity [...] started cracking at the seams'. The centre, in other words, 'has become decentred',⁵⁸⁰ and is engaged in a complex dialectic which 'alter[s] the identities of the persons inhabiting, viewing or passing through [it]'.⁵⁸¹

The play of border crossings at the beginning of Act II tacitly introduces other possibilities of transgressing boundaries and highlights the agency of the African-Americans and other black performers who were touring European centres. As bell

⁵⁷⁴ See Laura Doyle, 'Atlantic Modernism at the Crossing: The Migrant Labours of Hurston, Mckay and the Diasporic Text', in Len Platt (ed.), *Modernism and Race* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). See also Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

⁵⁷⁵ Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora*, 3.

⁵⁷⁶ See Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, translated by Steven Rendall (London: University of California Press, 1984) and Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).

⁵⁷⁷ Ball, *Imagining London*, 10.

⁵⁷⁸ See James Clifford, 'Traveling Cultures', in Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson and Paula Treichler (eds), *Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 96-112.

⁵⁷⁹ Ball, *Imagining London*, 8. See also Platt, Becker and Linton

⁵⁸⁰ Ball, *Imagining London*, 5.

⁵⁸¹ Ian Baucom, *Out of Place* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 39.

hooks argues, such border crossings involve ‘the disruption of the colonized/colonizer mind-set’⁵⁸² because the black performers have literally moved from the margins to the mainstream. In doing so they engage in W.E.B. Dubois’s cultural strategy for ‘disturbing the conventional, acceptable politics of representation’.⁵⁸³ Certainly the show’s audiences were presented with a binary relationship, but it was a confused, ambiguous one. The demarcation between modernity and black America suspended in a non-threatening rural idyll, clear as it was, also constituted a blurring of the lines. In a very real sense, African-American music and dance was bursting through the barricades. Performers like Mills and Vodery had brought to Europe, with all the usual provisos, the idea that contemporary popular culture at its most exciting was African-American. In *Dover Street to Dixie* this was both visual and aural, as an account of the revue’s introduction by Constant Lambert’s friend and fellow student Angus Morrison highlighted:

The scene was laid ‘Way down South’ and the setting utterly simple and unpretentious. Some typical Dixie landscape I suppose, painted with the unobtrusive competence and complete lack of artistic self-consciousness of the professional music-hall scene designer. A view of hills and river in which (as I remember) the members of Will Vodery’s [Plantation] orchestra were grouped at the back of the stage on an old river boat moored at the side of the bank – evoking the same atmosphere of the warm Southern States and ‘Old Man River’ that the Drury Lane musical comedy *Showboat* (1927) was to make so much more fashionable and popular a few years later.

The arresting start of the whole performance was a sort of fanfare-like fantasia on the tune of ‘Carry me back to old Virginia’. The Delius-like harmonies

⁵⁸² bell hooks, *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations* (London: Routledge, 1994), 5.

⁵⁸³ hooks, *Outlaw Culture*, 5.

were made to sound even more lush and glowingly clear, uninhibited playing of this magnificent Negro band in much the same way that ‘The Last Rose of Summer’ say, played on a cornet solo, can hit below the belt emotionally far more effectively than when heard under more musically respectable conditions. It was indeed the memory of the very opening flourish played by the superb first trumpeter, Johnny Dunn (described in the programme as ‘the creator of Wa Wa’) that remained with Constant all through his life [...]⁵⁸⁴

After the humdrum playing of the English orchestra in the first part [of the revue] it was electrifying experience to hear Will Vodery’s band playing the Delius-like fanfare which precluded the second. It definitely opened up a whole new world of sound.⁵⁸⁵

Morrison’s description of the ‘Dixie’ opening captures its juxtaposition of old and familiar signifiers and stereotypes and contrasting modern sounds and attitudes, at once creating a yearning for nostalgia and a sudden unbounded boisterousness.

The audience is exposed to a binary relationship, which is shifted and disrupted to highlight its instability. The black Atlantic cultural transfer is shown literally on stage, with black performers moving from metropolis to metropolis. This simplistic image had profound symbolism and associations because it was seen as replicating the cultural transfer of black artists and intelligentsia active throughout Europe.

The black performers in *Dover Street to Dixie* were not unique to British theatre. There is a long well documented history of black performers in British

⁵⁸⁴ Angus Morrison, draft Manuscript Royal College of Music Library, quoted in Stephen Lloyd, *Constant Lambert: Beyond the Rio Grande* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2014), 96.

⁵⁸⁵ Constant Lambert, *The New Statesman and Nation* ?(1932)? Could be from his book 14.

entertainment⁵⁸⁶ and black and oriental representations have been a staple part of British entertainment in one form or another for centuries. Blackface minstrelsy, which involved the application of black burnt cork to the face and the aping of black people, was immensely popular in Britain, becoming the most prominent entertainment at the seaside in the nineteenth century. Equally successful were what were known as ‘nigger minstrel shows’, which featured in London at venues such as St James Hall Piccadilly in 1843. Blackface minstrelsy in Britain in the nineteenth century entailed an investiture in black bodies that seemed to try on the accents of blackness and to demonstrate the permeability of the colour line. These previous racial representations, along with those in revue, keyed into indigenous hierarchical structures and highlighted race as a construct that operated in society as knowledge, authority and power. The African American presence at this juncture, however, took on a new cultural application for audiences and performers, exposing both possible agency and changing colonial power tensions.

Dover Street to Dixie exemplified the cultural fascination with African and oriental forms of expression of this period and exposed a complex fear of and fascination with black cultural forms among a white avant-garde intelligentsia and the general public. As Petrine Archer’s work on negrophilia shows, black culture in the 1920s became synonymous with being modern and fashionable among white Europeans. Black performance, song and dance offered an opportunity to appropriate another identity. These constructs of black identity fed into white fantasies: black people were seen as embodying certain traits of behaviour or states of being, such as freedom. As Laura Doyle highlights, a racialised discourse of freedom developed around black people, who were perceived by certain white intellectuals to be free

⁵⁸⁶ See Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (London: Pluto Press, 1984) and Harry Reynolds, *Minstrel Memories 1836-1927* (London: Alston Rivers, 1928).

from a ‘world-conquering and levelling machine civilization [and] the ever tightening mechanical organisation of modern life’.⁵⁸⁷ In this respect, primitive discourse imagined black people as simplistic children outside of western modernity and therefore free. This outside status became attractive to white intellectuals who associated black culture with rebellion and alternative lifestyles that seemed to oppose the status quo. Indeed, the ‘Jailbirds’ song and dance routine in *Dover Street to Dixie* epitomises a black vernacular cultural tradition of narratives that celebrate an alternative masculinity: two men tap dance in convict outfits, literally free from the shackles of western modernity. For white men seeking alternatives to patriarchal capitalism, black men, particularly musicians, seemed, ironically, to embody freedom. Black masculinity became ‘fantasized [...] in the racist white imagination as the quintessential embodiment of man as “outsider” and “rebel”’.⁵⁸⁸ Black masculinity has always been problematic: black vernacular culture celebrated a rebel masculinity, which was both idolised and romanticised on stage, illustrated in the song ‘He May Be Your Man But He Comes to See Me Some Time’, which celebrates a phallogentric masculinity⁵⁸⁹ based purely on sexual conquest.

Black performance

Black performers ‘figured centrally in contestations within both white and black discourses, around miscegenation, cultural heritage, nationalism and the folk and the consequences of capitalism’.⁵⁹⁰ However, it is important to recognise the complexity of the different aspects of this black performance, not only as an economic, social and cultural action, but also as a parallel exotica. Black performers and black performance

⁵⁸⁷ Laura Doyle, ‘Atlantic Modernism at the Crossing’, 126.

⁵⁸⁸ Rich, *Prospero’s Return*, 96.

⁵⁸⁹ See chapter 3, ‘Business as Usual’.

⁵⁹⁰ Brown, *Babylon Girls*, 191.

aesthetics had a number of meanings, relations and effects across the different occasions and contexts in which it occurred. It found favour in the West End as a potent marker of the peculiar energies that were emerging artistically and socially, but this did not signal an equal exchange or a shared understanding between artists. Under such dynamics a ‘commodity racism’⁵⁹¹ emerged in which understandings of racial difference were shaped by consumerism and goods rather than by experiencing actual bodily contact through theatrical representations. Therefore such representations could often surpass scientific discourse in their production of racial messages that sought to define and structure black existence and behaviour. The phenomenal success of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) and its dissemination through theatrical performance was pivotal to the construction of a black identity for British audiences and for an emergent paternalism towards black people.⁵⁹²

Black performers on the West End stage, moreover, were ‘part of a lexicon of racialised types and identities in the centripetal pull of the colonial and imperial context’⁵⁹³ that reflected countless black British colonials who had made the move from the imperial margins to the metropolitan centre. The War had seen a huge influx of black colonials in the form of soldiers, workers and sailors who saw themselves as British.⁵⁹⁴ Their presence became indicative of a growing resistance to imperial power, and calls for freedom from colonialism were articulated in a discourse of internationalism that urged support for nationalist movements. British imperialism was challenged by a variety of cross-cultural colonial struggles for liberation in

⁵⁹¹ Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (London: Routledge, 1995), 207.

⁵⁹² In ‘September of 1852 a dozen versions of the play [Uncle Tom’s Cabin] awaited licensing in England’ for countless productions in London and touring throughout the country. See Gretchen Holbrook Gerzina (ed.), *Black Victorians, Black Victoriana* (London: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 5.

⁵⁹³ Michael Pickering, *The Black Face Clown*, 169.

⁵⁹⁴ ‘By the end of the war there were some 20,000 blacks in Britain’. See Lotz and Pegg (eds), *Under the Imperial Carpet*, 180.

Egypt, India, Africa and other parts of the world, all of which were connected by London. The first Pan-African Conference was held in London at Westminster Hall in July 1900 and the Universal Race Congress was held in the city in 1911, marking London as the ‘nexus of anti-imperialisms’.⁵⁹⁵

Resistance

The black presence called into question the monocultural vision of Britain as the prominent black British population became more visible and vocal and began to mark black British agency. Britain had developed a vision of itself as a nation that was both culturally and ethnically homogenous. The reality, of course, was ‘that Britain has been forged in the crucible of fusion and hybridity’⁵⁹⁶ across the cultural, political and social spectrum. J.B. Priestley’s *English Journey* recognised this multicultural community and Priestley’s observations were pertinent in ‘challenging the equating of Britishness with whiteness’.⁵⁹⁷

A growing anxiety over immigration from the commonwealth revealed racial fears as newspapers reported a black and oriental underbelly moving into the mainstream. The black revue performers acquired a conspicuousness in the public eye and became pervasive presences beyond the stage and part of a visible international black presence of students, artists, writers, actors and musicians in London. This visible black and oriental presence seem to represent a gradual loosening of white imperial control as Britain struggled to come to terms with a different dialectic of empire, through a multicultural identity that was now conspicuously at “home” and was no longer contained abroad. The riots of 1919 had highlighted the contested

⁵⁹⁵ Jonathan Schneer, ‘Anti-Imperial London: The Pan-African Conference of 1900’, in Gerzina (ed.), *Black Victorians*, 175.

⁵⁹⁶ Caryl Phillips (ed.), *Extravagant Strangers: A Literature of Belonging* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997), x.

⁵⁹⁷ Gerzina (ed.), *Black Victorians*, 2.

meanings of national identity: ‘those on opposing sides during the riots held differing opinions of what was meant by “being British”’.⁵⁹⁸ The British Nationality and Status of Aliens Act of 1914 stated that ‘Any person born within His Majesty’s Dominions and allegiance [is][...] a natural born British subject’.⁵⁹⁹ However, Britishness was ‘colour coded, and only grudgingly and infrequently were the rights of black British subjects recognized and considered’.⁶⁰⁰ imperial thinking and white supremacy had led to a feeling of power over black colonial peoples. This resulted in demarcation by racially defined difference: some races, it was thought, were more advanced than others, and ‘imperial subjects with dark skin pigmentation were less well regarded than white colonials’.⁶⁰¹

The African American performers coming to England after the war had a shared understanding and consciousness of black politics. They exemplify a critical cosmopolitanism that drew together figures from the Caribbean, Africa and the Harlem renaissance through migration from the periphery to the centres of western modernity. Indeed, they were in many respects at the forefront of an international universal discourse of civil rights and black Atlantic activism through their performance. As bell hooks argues:

Wherever Africa Americans created music, dance, poetry, and theatre it was regarded as testimony, bearing witness, challenging racist thinking which suggested that black folks were not fully human, were uncivilized.

Dancing and music were primary expressions of cultural distinctiveness and were represented as an authentic primordial voice or experience in contrast to a defunct and tired Western modern culture in such work as Duse Mohamed Ali’s *In*

⁵⁹⁸ Jenkinson, *Black 1919*, 4.

⁵⁹⁹ *British Nationality and Status of Aliens Act*, 1914, 33.

⁶⁰⁰ Jenkinson, *Black 1919*, 5.

⁶⁰¹ Jenkinson, *Black 1919*, 6.

the Land of Pharoahs (1911), an anti-imperialist book that ‘forecasted the fall of the British Empire’.⁶⁰² Black performance is complex and problematic, because, as James C. Scott highlights, the private transcript differed greatly from the public transcript, which was often a performance for the dominant power hegemony. The greater the oppression, the greater the disparity between the private and public display, often resulting in grotesque self-presentations such as those seen in blackface minstrelsy. These performances identified as ‘staged marginality’, in the work of Dean MacCannell, seemingly depict minority groups dramatising their own subordination for the dominant group. Yet this relationship is far from straight forward as this behaviour may act as a site of resistance.⁶⁰³

America and Britain

Dover Street to Dixie proffered a vision of a ‘special relationship’ between America and Britain as a ‘fraternal association of the English peoples’ celebrating a ‘semi-racialist notion of pan-anglo saxondom on both sides of the Atlantic’.⁶⁰⁴ The revue was a pivotal moment in the process of bringing black expressive forms directly into mainstream white culture, profoundly effecting this charged space and transforming its practices, institutions and philosophies through their active voice and complex interplay. These changes occurred not in isolation but in relation to the specific historical circumstances and wider political and economic exigencies of the period, and they were part of a constantly shifting cultural discourse. Black performance entered the mainstream as naturally antagonistic to other versions of reality because of its emphasis on unseating language and textuality and recognising that dance, music, movement and gesture are forms of expression that are just as important as speech and text. *Dover Street to Dixie* also highlighted changing understandings of

⁶⁰² Fryer, *Staying Power*, 288.

⁶⁰³ See Graham Huggan, *The Post Colonial exotic- marketing the margins* (London: Routledge, 2001).

⁶⁰⁴ Self, *Britain, America and the War Debt*, 2.

British identity in relation to racial construction. The entry of African-Americans into the West End after the First World War had particularly poignant national and racial identity connotations concerning the ‘considerable shifts in British international status and power’.⁶⁰⁵ Following the race riots of 1919, African-American performance had an added significance because it marked a strong and visible black cultural intersection in Britain at the time. An emerging black colonial presence in British cities highlighted the realisation of imperial inter-connectedness between colony and metropole and issues of citizenship, national identity and equality between colonisers and colonised.

The *Dover Street to Dixie* revue opened up ‘a creative space for exploring the paradoxes, ambiguities and complexities around issues of tradition, identity, authenticity and belonging associated with nation’.⁶⁰⁶ By incorporating old blackface minstrelsy and emerging new British and black identities, the portrayals in *Dover Street to Dixie* moved between illusion, reality, presence and absence, singing, slapstick, tomfoolery, emotional and physical license, social comment, parody and satire. In doing so, the revue exposed the powerful role of British and American national iconographies on stage in the construction of a homogenous national image. However, *Dover Street to Dixie* also captured the ‘rampant eclecticism of nations as they shift and change through the impact of migration, globalisation and transnational exchange’.⁶⁰⁷

⁶⁰⁵ Rich, *Prospero's Return*, 27.

⁶⁰⁶ Nadine Holdsworth, *Theatre and Nation* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 7.

⁶⁰⁷ Holdsworth, *Theatre and Nation*, 7. See also Catherine Ugwu (ed.), *Let's Get it On: The Politics of Black Performance* (London: ICA Publications, 1995).

Chapter 6

Class Distinction and National Identity in 1920s West End Intimate Revue

The producers of West End entertainments at the beginning of the twentieth century adapted and refashioned revue at various times as they sought to cater for the changing tastes and desires of their audiences. During the First World War, revue had ceased its dalliances with avant-garde associations of experimentation,⁶⁰⁸ which were perceived to be Germanic and therefore anti-British,⁶⁰⁹ and situated itself as the nation's foremost popular entertainment, focusing on spectacular, patriotic productions of distraction and titillation employing American musical theatre's razzmatazz as well as its stars. However, subsequent wartime shortages and the post-War economic downturn saw revue change again, moving away from extravagant Broadway aesthetics to what became known and presented as English 'intimate' revue.

The 1920s saw the continued popularity of American Tin-Pan Alley songs and their challenge to the supremacy of the old European entertainment centres of Vienna, London, Berlin and Paris. However this was never a one-way traffic or a wholesale Americanisation, but a complex transnational space where the dominant and the subordinate, the coloniser and the colonised, old Europe and the New World interacted. Nowhere was this more understood and these contradictions more magnified than in revue and popular musical theatre.⁶¹⁰ For all the American, Viennese, continental, orientalist and exotic displays of the 'Other' in West End

⁶⁰⁸ See Huntly Carter, *The New Spirit in the European Theatre 1914-1924* (London: Ernest Benn Ltd, 1925) and Gordon Williams, *British Theatre in the Great War: A Re-valuation* (London: Continuum, 2005), chapter 2 'Musical Comedy and Musical Anarchy'.

⁶⁰⁹ See Arthur Marwick, *The Deluge: British Society and the First World War* (London: The Bodley Head, 1965).

⁶¹⁰ See Len Platt, Tobias Becker and David Linton, *Popular Musical Theatre in London and Berlin 1890-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

revue, the success and popularity of the form lay in it having the right mixture of the local and the global, the contemporary and new and the old and familiar, and the intimate revues of the 1920s exemplify this negotiation. This chapter focuses on two intimate revues produced in the West End in the 1920s, *The Co-Optimists* (1921), a pierrot revue, which ran in various guises until the 1940s, and Noël Coward's landmark revue, *This Year of Grace!* (1928). Although seemingly dissimilar in many respects, both of these intimate revues exemplify artistic shifts in West End revue and had a particular resonance in the context of a post-War national discourse because they were engaged in constructing distinctive cultural and class perspectives that charted complex shifts in national identity.

The intimate aesthetics of *This Year of Grace!* and *The Co-Optimists* can be seen in earlier shows by the innovative revue producers Charles Cochran and André Charlot such as Cochran's *Odds and Ends* (1914), *More (Odds and Ends)* (1915), *Pell-Mell* (1916) and *On With the Dance* (1926) and Charlot's *Samples* (1915), *Some* (1916) *Buzz, Buzz* (1918) and *London Calling* (1923). Stressing economy, both in production costs and performance aesthetics, these revues evoked an intimacy, through smaller casts, little or no set design, and by employing popular performance techniques, (such as directly addressing the audience) that suggested an old music hall familiarity between the performers and audience. The chorus too, which had become a staple element of revue, often consisting of twenty or more girls, was also downsized for reasons of economy ('Charlot's choruses rarely numbered more than eight.'⁶¹¹), although both Cochran and Charlot emphasised that this change was also for performance reasons. Employing performers for their skills, 'personality'⁶¹² and

⁶¹¹ James Ross Moore, *An Intimate Understanding: The Rise of British Musical Revue 1890-1920* (PhD thesis, University of Warwick, 2000), 165.

⁶¹² See Oliver Double, *Britain Had Talent: A History of Variety Theatre* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), Performance Dynamics, 95-196.

versatility, rather than glamour, they developed ‘revue specialists’ who had ‘the ability to play many characters or possibly more precisely “types” in an evening’.⁶¹³ *The Co-Optimists* consisted of just ten performers who sang, danced and played an array of characters, while Gertrude (Gertie) Lawrence, an actress, singer, dancer, impressionist and comedienne in *This Year of Grace*, along with Beatrice Lillie, Jack Buchanan and Noël Coward, provided the ‘image of revue performance that others copied for succeeding decades’.⁶¹⁴ Intimacy was also derived from the literal physical space of the theatre: many of these revues were now located in smaller theatres such as the Vaudeville or Duke of York’s, in contrast to the spectacular revues performed at the cavernous Alhambra and Hippodrome theatres. These elements, along with a brisk pace and a lightly comic, ironic perspective, all contributed to what producers such as Cochran and Charlot used to market the shows as a “new” product for a more sophisticated and select audience. A mixture of these elements was presented in the New York production of *Charlot’s London Revue of 1924*. This amalgamation of sketches and songs, predominately by Ronald Jeans and Noël Coward from previous revues and past successes, was represented not only as a different type of revue but as a ‘London or English intimate’ revue. As West End revue producer André Charlot declared,

When the American theatre-going public is given a chance to see my London Revue, they will understand the difference between this type of show and revue in America, which in some ways, is too subtle to put into words. Over the years we have developed an intimate understanding between players and audience, such as you do not know in this country in which everyone – not

⁶¹³ Moore, *An Intimate Understanding*, 166.

⁶¹⁴ Moore, *An Intimate Understanding*, 167.

just the principles – can, sing, dance act, but also on lighting and scenic effects which are simple and artistic.⁶¹⁵

Implicit in this statement is the idea that the delineating factor for West End intimate revue, beside aesthetics, was a distinct new sensibility or character in its construction based on an English identity. Attempts to situate revue as an English national product had been crudely made before by the West End revue producer Albert De Courville, who had promoted his Hippodrome revues as ‘English revue’⁶¹⁶ during the war in the hope of exploiting wartime national fervour. This new positioning, however, I contend was reflective of particular, and at times contradictory, contemporary expressions of class, empire and a nostalgic English identity that were key to intimate revue’s popularity and success. In part this developed as a reactionary response to the national, social and economic challenges to Britain’s fading hegemony, but revue reflected the zeitgeist of the decade and West End revue was illustrative of the ‘exuberance’ of 1920s London, ‘a place plugged into global currents of energy and ideas’,⁶¹⁷ and sensitive to the growing ‘local’ struggle between left and right class politics.

Noël Coward in particular seemed to epitomise this new identity. As Simon Callow observes, Coward represented ‘a new type’

that is everywhere, in the street, in the clubs, at supper- everywhere, that is, except on stage or screen. Then one of them finally makes it into those media, and immediately becomes iconic [...] Noel Coward [was one] in his day.

When he first appeared on the London stage as an adult, he seemed to

⁶¹⁵ James Ross Moore, *André Charlot: The Genius of Intimate Musical Revue* (London: McFarland & Company, 2005), 84.

⁶¹⁶ Theatre Programme, ‘A Souvenir of Push and Go: The Story of Four Revues’, The Hippodrome, 1st May, 1915.

⁶¹⁷ Cathy Ross, *Twenties London: A City in the Jazz Age* (London: Philip Wilson, 2003), 9.

epitomise all the bright young things of the mid-1920s: he was quick, brittle, cynical, electric. He was now.⁶¹⁸

Noël Coward's persona off-stage, characterised by his quick 'clipped consonants',⁶¹⁹ mirrored his caustic contemporary revue characters on-stage, and these combined to highlight a new 'cosmopolitan style' which became seen 'expansively as attitude, stance, posture and consciousness',⁶²⁰ and seemed to reflect something fresh and different. On Broadway, this shift from spectacular revue to a smaller intimate revue, which was marketed and presented as an "English" style, became the vogue in New York and established London West End revue as the embodiment of wit, sophistication and 'cool'.⁶²¹ As Charlot's biographer James Ross Moore highlights, the impact of the show and the performers in New York was 'quick and intense garnering praise and the ultimate show business compliment: imitation'.⁶²² Whereas Florenz Ziegfeld's spectacular revues had huge sets and mass choruses, intimate revue sought to distinguish itself literally against the "crowd" in terms of size and content by representing itself, partly as a result of commercial imperatives and partly because of conscious aesthetic effort, as the antithesis of the American spectacular revue and therefore as a English form.

The Co-Optimists – revue and nation

Folks go fippy

On the Mississippi

Sing of Arizona and the Wild West call,

⁶¹⁸ Simon Callow, Can you Spot the Difference, (On the Changing Styles of Acting) The Guardian, G2, Monday 11 May 2009, 19.

⁶¹⁹ David Cannadine(get page)

⁶²⁰ Rebecca L. Walkowitz, *Cosmopolitan Style: Modernism Beyond Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 2.

⁶²¹ See RossMoore PhD thesis.

⁶²² James Ross Moore 93.

Then they wish again
They were in Michigan
But I know a place that's more romantic than them all.
I don't want Tennessee
There's just one place for me.
(another verse)
Battersea – You're always haunting me
Battersea – where I was born
You'll find the sunshine, roses, magical skies,
You'll hear the nightingale on Battersea Rise [...] ⁶²³

In the song 'Battersea' the American southern pastoral plantation idyll often evoked in blackface minstrelsy is exchanged for an ode that celebrates an English urban homeland called Battersea. This reassertion of England and Englishness takes place through a comic burlesque that uses idioms from American popular blues music and style. In *The Co-Optimists*, the exhibition of a celebratory English identity was a recurring theme: just as the pierrot had placed themselves against blackface minstrelsy, so *The Co-Optimists* became a response to the American imports of the 1920s.

The first ever feature-length talking picture was *The Jazz Singer*, an American musical starring Broadway star Al Jolson, which was released by Warner Brothers in 1927. The incredible financial success of the film initiated a sea change in the industry which saw film companies gradually move to the new technology of synchronised sound in films. In 1929 the British film company New Era National

⁶²³ *The Co-optimists* (London: British Library, Lord Chamberlains Play's, 1923).

Pictures produced their first sound film.⁶²⁴ Like Warner Brothers, New Era opted for a musical and choose *The Co-Optimists*, a stage revue that had been popular throughout the twenties. As the *Observer* critic noted, the film is

all good-natured and good fun in the typical English mood. I do not think that their humour will have a wide appeal outside this country, but the readers of 'Punch' and A.A. Milne, the follower of the Gilbert and Sullivan tradition will find much to please them.⁶²⁵

This review engages in defining Englishness and marking *The Co-Optimists* as a typically English entertainment. What was it about *The Co-Optimists* that registered it as English in this way? How did this happen? What does this tell us about revue's engagement with national identity?

The *Times* drama critic James Agate opened his 1926 review of *The Co-Optimists* with a series of statistics about British theatre of the time.

of the fifty-four plays which have achieved a run of six months and over during the last twenty-five years, twelve only were serious pieces against forty-two light comedies and farces. Yet in the same period no fewer than eighty-five musical comedies and revues had run six months and over.⁶²⁶

Agate does a number of things that challenge our notion of revue and its place in theatre and cultural histories: firstly, he recognises the currency of revue as a genre of British theatre in its own right, now firmly established and acknowledged as an aesthetic; secondly, he signals revue's crucial importance to the popular national imagination of this period, reflecting and influencing public opinion; and, thirdly, and of particular importance to this thesis, he begins to express and acknowledge a

⁶²⁴ Rachael Low, *The History of British Film (Vol. IV): The History of the British Film 1918-1929* (London: Routledge, 1997), 183.

⁶²⁵ 'The Pictures: Two British Talkies', *The Observer*, 25 November 1929, 20.

⁶²⁶ James Agate, *Immoment Toys: A Survey of Light Entertainment on the London Stage 1920-1943* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1945), 142.

particular relationship between *The Co-Optimists*, revue and ideas of class and nation identity. *The Co-Optimists* reflected the complex interplay of class, memory and national identity of the period, which was driven by a middle England consensus politics of compromise and concession. The basis for *The Co-Optimists*' popularity and success, I argue, was that it championed an English identity that sought in an "age of anxiety" to neutralise class tension by presenting a contradictory communitarianism that adhered to a hierarchical view. The statistics Agate quotes reveal the particular preference of West End audiences for musical theatre over dramatic works, and Agate infers that this preference reveals a great deal about the British nation as a whole. The truth about 'the English race is that whenever it goes to the theatre it considers itself to be on leave',⁶²⁷ intent, in Agate's view, on amusement and frivolity. Similarly, Harley Granville-Barker, an actor-manager, producer and playwright, bemoaned the fact that 'the English [...] as a nation, apparently cares nothing for' English drama or English acting, highlighting the fact that 'the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, our National Theatre of the past [was] occupied [...] by American musical comedy',⁶²⁸ while Shakespeare was to be found in the slums. Barker and Agate's views reflect the status of musical theatre and revue at the time and its particular relationship to culture and the idea of nation. Drawing on the views of Matthew Arnold, their critique aligns musical theatre with a denigrating, homogenous mass culture, but also connects it to wider debates of the period about the importance and role of theatre and the British nation.

Barker and Agate's views reflect criticism that popular theatre was divorced from real social experiences. However popular theatre, amidst its varied styles, was able to present heightened versions of everyday middle and working class life.

⁶²⁷ Agate, *Immortal Toys*, 143.

⁶²⁸ Harley Granville-Barker, *A National Theatre* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1930), 2.

Musical comedies and revues often established formulaic Cinderella scenarios that depicted the transformation of ordinary lives: ambitious “shop girls” or “maids”, for example, would marry into the aristocracy or find their fortunes. Simplistic, romanticised and even conformist, these narratives nonetheless connected to a class conscious, highly aspirational and no longer deferential audience that was intent on getting on in the world.

The Co-Optimists was a homage to Edwardian England. It presented ‘a well-defined social order with a fixed division of labour, and with the classes and sexes knowing their proper roles’.⁶²⁹ It became a hugely successful revue franchise that ran throughout the 1920s in the West End and toured the country extensively. By presenting a combination of intimate revue and pierrot aesthetics, it celebrated a romantic, innocent version of England through a complex mix of nostalgia and class politics.

There were growing calls for a national theatre during this period which were concerned with the promotion and preservation of the theatre not just as drama, but as an intrinsic part of English national identity. A recurring theme amongst the theatrical intelligentsia was the sense of an American “occupation” of British theatre: the seemingly ubiquitous presence of American culture was seen to be threatening on a number of fronts, but especially in musical theatre. The London commercial theatre industry, recovering from the post-War slump, had taken to importing American shows and stars to fill its stages, with African-American revues being the most prominent and controversial (see Chapter Five). Post-War anxieties about the rise of socialism and democratic populism became twinned with concerns about America’s growing prominence and rapid rise as an economic power. These along, with the

⁶²⁹ François Bédarida, *A Social History of England, 1851-1990* (London: Routledge, 1976 ?), 168.

influx of American cultural products such as music, art, design, theatre and dance, led to concerns about the loss of a British identity on stage and consequently to calls to protect British culture and theatre from Americanisation.

The Co-Optimists was originally performed by Davy Burnaby, Archie de Bear, Laddie Cliff and Clifford Whitley, ‘a group of well-known musical comedy and variety artists [...] acting on a co-operative basis’⁶³⁰ who shared the costs of production as well as any profits.⁶³¹ In theatrical mythology, *The Co-Optimists* emerged from the economic slump,⁶³² battling the ‘heat wave and coal strike’⁶³³ of 1921, both of which had adversely effected the West End: ‘12 theatres closed’⁶³⁴ in the week *The Co-optimists* opened at the Royalty Theatre. An overt national and class politics was perpetuated in marketing *The Co-Optimists*, which was portrayed as embodying the particular values of an enterprising home-grown revue company, formed by British fortitude and intelligence and contrasted with the Bolshevik styled ‘un-British’ striking railway workers and miners. From the beginning *The Co-optimists* had and sought a particular local, political and national significance, which is reflected in its name, which was derived from the combination of two words that were prominent in the national imagination of the period, “optimism” and “co-operation”. Both words were used in different ways to express responses to the horrors of the First World War and to mounting issues of economic and class conflict. “Co-operation” partly reflected a retreat to a pre-War Edwardian imaginary of national duty, but also evoked working class solidarity, while “optimism” captured a

⁶³⁰ ‘The Theatres’, *The Times*, 20 June 1921, 8. The Times Digital Archive, Web. Available at: Accessed on 27 September 2013.

⁶³¹ The original cast members of the 1921 revue were Stanley Holloway, Melville Gideon, Davy Burnaby, Laddie Cliff, Gilbert Childs, H.B. Hedley, Betty Chester, Phylis Monkman, Elsa Macfarlane and Babs Valerie.

⁶³² James Agate, ‘The “Co-Optimists”’, *The Times*, 28 June 1921, 8. The Times Digital Archive. Web. Available at: Accessed on 27 September 2013.

⁶³³ Clifford Whitley, ‘Letters to the Editor: How the Co-Optimists Were Born’, *Daily Telegraph and Morning Post*, 14 September 1961, 17.

⁶³⁴ ‘The Theatres’, *The Times*, 8.

hope for lasting peace and prosperity across the nations. Therefore “optimism” and “co-operation” were exemplified in the formation of the international League of Nations, which sought to use a new diplomacy of arbitration and negotiation to solve international conflicts and maintain world peace. Although the War had ended, a new conflict had arisen: people sought real and tangible change to the social order in terms of better pay and working conditions, leading to a battle of ideologies between the established old order and a growing working class. The use of “co-operation” and “optimism” in *The Co-Optimists* was an attempt to reconcile their opposing meanings under a single patriotic national identity, which called for the country to unite and advocated civic duty, pride and conformity. Along with its name, *The Co-Optimists*’s adoption of the pierrot aesthetic was a crucial signifier. Derived from the Pierrot character of commedia dell’arte, British pierrot performance emerged in the middle of the nineteenth century and was reinvented as a popular al fresco “end of the pier” seaside entertainment that consisted of songs, dance and comedy.

Pierrot was a mainstream metropolitan performance: not a fringe or marginalised style, but family entertainment. The nineteenth century seaside pierrot troupes had engaged in specific identity construction by differentiating themselves from the blackface minstrel performance that had become so popular and widespread across Britain and was associated with America. Dave Calvert argues that the white face pierrot ‘emerged from the black-face form, constructing a racial and national imaginary whiteness [...] predicated on ethnicity and language’.⁶³⁵ As has been highlighted above, blackface minstrelsy’s popularity had complex economic, social, political and racial convergences, and pierrot had a similar cultural interplay. Calvert situates the British pierrot tradition within a symbolic network concerned with

⁶³⁵ Dave Calvert, ““Royal Pierrots” and “White Coons”: The British Pierrot Troupe in the Racial and National Imaginary,” *New Theatre Quarterly* 29:2 (2013), 117.

national identity and nostalgia that emerged as part of a ‘shared project to reaffirm confidence in the nation’s sense of itself’. *The Co-Optimists*’s pierrot engaged in a similar process through a return to another time or, as David Cannadine notes ‘the preservation of anachronism’⁶³⁶ that seeks to allay ‘domestic anxiety’⁶³⁷ through a sentimental celebration of England. *The Co-Optimists* revue of this period was very much a revivalist culture. Nationalistic, anti-modern and anti-trade union, it defined itself wholeheartedly in terms of a constructed and mythical Anglo tradition. In the context of British vulnerability, the idea of Englishness became integral to *The Co-Optimists* and substantially contributed to its popularity. The imaginary of the Edwardian pierrot was central to this Englishness registration and was used to reposition a new English identity for 1920s audiences.

The pierrot ‘marked clear distinctions along racial lines with an ‘exhibition of whiteness’⁶³⁸ and nationalism. Like the blackface minstrel, the pierrot ‘provided a set of symbolic bearings for the on-going production of identity and social relations’⁶³⁹ that were magnified by the juxtaposition of the white face mask on white actors. The servile, romantic, comic characteristics of the pierrot became reinterpreted as “British traits” of loyalty, trustworthiness and optimism, grounded in a patriotic framework that was consistent with invented traditions of Englishness. The white face pierrot became, as Dave Calvert asserts, one of many emerging national symbols of the nineteenth century that engaged in constructing a sense of belonging through performative patriotic spectacle, ceremony and monarchic association, becoming a

⁶³⁶ David Cannadine, ‘The Context, Performance and Meaning of Ritual: The British Monarchy and the “Invention of tradition”, c. 1820-1977’, in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 122.

⁶³⁷ Calvert, “Royal Pierrots” and “White Coons”, 114.

⁶³⁸ Calvert, “Royal Pierrots” and “White Coons”, 117.

⁶³⁹ Calvert, 10

focus of national unity and having ‘deep-seated resonances within the British context of the time’.⁶⁴⁰

In the mid nineteenth century, ‘throughout the country and at all social levels, the celebration of royalty took root’.⁶⁴¹ The monarchy evoked new images of nation and patriotism that expanded the basic repertoire for expressing Englishness. Moving from “John Bull”, “Roast Beef” and “Rule Britannia”, monarchy combined place, ritual, myth, the past and present; it was rooted in history but timeless. In her novel *The Edwardians*, Vita Sackville-West captures the signification that monarchy had in its evocation of England as she imagines the thoughts passing through the heads of those waiting in Westminster Abbey for the coronation of George V in 1910:

It is to be doubted whether one person in that whole assembly had a clear thought in his head. Rather, words and their associations marched in a grand chain giving hand to hand; England, Shakespeare, Elizabeth, London; Westminster, the docks, India, the Cutty Sark’, England: England, Gloucestershire, John of Gaunt; Magna Carta, Cromwell, England.⁶⁴²

Similarly, in post-War Britain the symbolism of monarchy and nation, provided positive meaning in various forms: ‘where so much contemporary experience [...] of economic and imperial decline can only disappoint or frustrate [...] In this respect the nation works to re-enchant a disenchanted everyday life’.⁶⁴³ Likewise, nineteenth century pierrot companies such as the Royal Pierrots or The Imperial Pierrots used a symbolic national identification with monarchy to mark their allegiance to country and empire. *The Co-Optimists* found widespread popularity across the country during the economic and social turmoil of the 1920s because of its sentimental return to an

⁶⁴⁰ Dave Calvert

⁶⁴¹ In Robert Colls (ed.), *Englishness; Politics and Culture 1890-1920*, 300.

⁶⁴² Vita Sackville-West, *The Edwardians* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1935), 249-50.

⁶⁴³ Patrick Wright, *On Living in an Old Country: The National Past in Contemporary Britain* (London: Verso, 1985), 24.

Edwardian sensibility: their image of the pierrot reflected a number of particular significations about English identity in the national consciousness.

In 1929 the publishing phenomenon of J.B. Priestley's novel *The Good Companions* caught the nation's imagination. The characters Jess Oakroyd, Miss Trant and Inigo Jollifant, seeking a change from their old lives, find adventure on the open road with a broken-down pierrot company and tour the pavilions and provincial theatres of England. The novel is a "condition of England" chronicle that explores English life, reaching deep into the decaying towns, dingy seaside lodging houses, market fairs and fading traditions of the 1920s. The 'characters leave various old static regional versions of England behind in order to create a new dynamic centralized one'⁶⁴⁴ in the guise of a pierrot troupe. As Lawrence Napper argues, the characters of the pierrot company in Priestley's novel represent 'different Englands':⁶⁴⁵ the 'honest respectability of the British working class', the 'public school tradition' and 'the responsibility of the rural gentry'.⁶⁴⁶ In the film version of *The Good Companions*,⁶⁴⁷ images of England are shown in 'sequences of symbolic montage reminiscent of the documentary film-making techniques then being developed by John Grierson and Stephen Tallents [...] as part of their project of "projecting England"'.⁶⁴⁸ The pierrot company becomes a 'metaphor for the nation in the midst of cultural transition'⁶⁴⁹ embarking on a common enterprise. The film version of Priestley's *The Good Companions* offers a descriptive montage of England as the company tours round the country. Priestley's pierrot metaphor was preceded

⁶⁴⁴ Lawrence Napper, *British Cinema and Middlebrow Culture in the Interwar Years* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2009), 82.

⁶⁴⁵ Napper, *British Cinema*, 82

⁶⁴⁶ Napper, *British Cinema*, 82

⁶⁴⁷ Here the film montage techniques mirror revue's "compare and contrast" style, providing an immediate visual shorthand.

⁶⁴⁸ Napper, *British Cinema*, 82.

⁶⁴⁹ Napper, *British Cinema*, 83.

by a repertoire of performative acts that *The Co-Optimists* revue was to reestablish throughout the 1920s, which combined the revue aesthetic of juxtaposition with the pierrot costume and white face, which were representative of the nation itself, highlighting English culture.

In *The Co-Optimists* the revue aesthetics provided a fragmented and topical snapshot of contemporary concerns. The re-introduction of pierrot in *The Co-optimists* had specific nostalgic resonances and revived national and racial imaginaries of the past: the sympathetic and trusting Pierrot became a symbol of England's pre-War innocence. The performances in this sense were connected to a national heritage that was to be reclaimed, preserved and saved in from the threats of the Bolsheviks, America or the striking working class. The pierrot aesthetic was a move away from American cultural performance and towards an imagined English sensibility. In this respect *The Co-Optimists's* pierrotic revue differed in many respects from the cosmopolitanism and transfer of Coward's revue and much of the musical theatre of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Musical comedy and German operetta were both engaged in extensive international networks and even the revues of Charlot, Cochran and de Courville engaged in a widespread transfer, exchange and translation of artists, writers and shows between Paris, New York and London. Yet *The Co-Optimists*, through its origins, personnel and aesthetic, had more local dimensions to its conceptualisation and performance, of which pierrot was essential. In stark contrast to other revues, which acknowledged exchange and translation, *The Co-Optimists* revived a nostalgic form associated with British culture and heritage to provide a deeply conformist and sentimental celebration of England. More introverted and local, *The Co-Optimists* was the antithesis of a threatening global musical culture and marked a return to order, after the dislocation and

disruption of war. Through the steadying hand of a familiar and trusted performance aesthetic, the revue evoked a nostalgia for the seeming consistency and stability of earlier times. This was recognised by James Agate, who sensed that *The Co-Optimists* was trying to preserve a way of life that was under threat it is ‘trying by the force of personality to defeat the “slump”, the drought and all the evils that are at present besetting the London theatres’.⁶⁵⁰ The evils besetting London theatres included the threat of revolution, embodied by the spread of strikes and social agitation, and a growing American presence that was both real and imagined. In its intimate form *The Co-Optimists*, using the imagery and symbols of pierrot, presented itself as part of an English performance tradition, providing a contrasting response to the advances of a modern world of class, racial and national antagonisms.

‘Herds’, ‘crowds’ and the erosion of distinction

Personally I have always believed more in quality than quantity, and nothing will convince me that the levelling of class and rank distinctions and the contemptuous dismissal of breeding as an important factor in life, can lead to anything but dismal mediocrity.⁶⁵¹

The playwright and seminal revue performer Noël Coward wrote an insightful foreword to Raymond Mander and Joe Mitchenson’s book, *Revue: A Story in Pictures* (1971). Coward, as the ‘star’, situates himself at the centre of his revue historiography and marks a number of salient points. Coward’s brief introduction provides a literary example of the revue style, which is ‘quick, sharp, funny (or sentimental) and to the point’,⁶⁵² but also topical, cutting, self-effacing and self-absorbed. Coward highlights

⁶⁵⁰ Agate, ‘The “Co-Optimists”’, 8.

⁶⁵¹ Coward, 1956, 27

⁶⁵² Noël Coward, ‘Foreword’ to Raymond Mander and Joe Mitchenson, *Revue: A Story in Pictures* (London: Peter Davies, 1971), vii.

revue's continuing engagement with a contemporary popular culture and a destabilising modernity as a commercial, experimental and deeply polarising theatre form. He draws attention to revue's experimentation with narrative or, as it is known in the theatre 'running order' – the sequence or order in which scenes or acts follow each other in performance. The fragmented or non-linear narratives of revue, 'an essential aspect',⁶⁵³ Coward argues, require just as much structure, attention and direction as any performance. He also touches indirectly on the nature of 'appearances', because the revue form is apt to play with notions of perception, identity and representation, sometimes complying with convention or undermining or resisting it. Coward's narrative places revue, 'a difficult and delicate art',⁶⁵⁴ within a national and transnational frame: he remarks that he has 'seen almost every revue worth mentioning in London, Paris and New York from *Hullo, Ragtime!* in 1912 to *Oh! Calcutta!* in 1970'.⁶⁵⁵ In moving between the syncopated music and dance craze revue of 1912 to the sexually controversial, avant-garde revue of the 1960s, Coward presents a tacit understanding of revue's connection to a theatre world of competing cosmopolitan territories and national identities. In doing so he signals revue's importance as a transnational performance form within which, during the 1920s, Coward was to find his revues marked and marketed as a distinctive and 'high class' English product.

Patrick Balfour 'diagnosed' the 1920s as a 'period of change' of a democratic sort in which one kind of upper-class existence was turning imperceptibly into another'.⁶⁵⁶ His analysis of the twenties focused on how class distinctions and

⁶⁵³ Coward, 'Foreword', viii.

⁶⁵⁴ Coward, 'Foreword', vii.

⁶⁵⁵ Coward, 'Foreword', vii.

⁶⁵⁶ D.J. Taylor, *Bright Young People: The Rise and Fall of a Generation: 1918-1940* (London: Vintage, 2008), 34.

positions were no longer stable: ‘Society [...] was in flux to the point where fundamental questions had to be asked about its scope, scale and composition.’⁶⁵⁷

Peers became Socialists, and Socialists became peers, actors and actresses tried to be ladies and gentlemen and ladies and gentlemen behaved like actors and actresses, novelists were men-about-town and men-about-town wrote novels, persons of all ranks became shopkeepers and shopkeepers drew persons of rank to their houses.⁶⁵⁸

Yet Balfour’s observations of British high society after World War One had already been articulated by Noël Coward in his revues, which were in many ways a forerunner of the analysis that was to be written a decade later. Coward expressed concern with the changing class structures of London in the 1920s, presenting a tired aristocracy and a mediocre and regimented mass populous both undone by modern living. In his song ‘World Weary’, included in the New York production of *This Year of Grace*, Coward uses an interior monologue as an anthem for the tired and privileged who covet a different world:

When day is done
Far from a telephone
Bustle and the weary crowd
Make me want to cry out loud,
Give me something peaceful and grand
Where all the land
Slumbers in monotone

I’m world weary, world weary,

⁶⁵⁷ D.J. Taylor, *Bright Young People*, 36.

⁶⁵⁸ D.J. Taylor, *Bright Young People*, 35.

Living in a great big town,
I find it so dreary, so dreary,
Everything looks grey or brown,
I want an ocean blue,
Great big trees,
A bird's eye view
Of the Pyrenees,
I want to watch the moon rise up
And see the great red sun go down,
Watching clouds go by
Through a winter sky
Fascinates me
But if I do it in the street,
Every cop I meet hates me,
Because I'm world weary, world weary,
I could kiss the railroad tracks,
I want to get back to nature and relax.

The 1920s' crazes for dancing and music, much celebrated in revue, become symbols for moral decay and disorder in Coward's revues, which left the old disorientated and the young disillusioned and disaffected. This weariness was associated with a modern Americanised urban existence and was also reflected in images and metaphors about the 'crowd' or 'herd' and its behaviour, especially dancing. In the song 'Dance Little Lady' from *This Year of Grace* (1928), Coward is more explicit in his conclusion, declaring that this is 'a world of lies'.⁶⁵⁹ An ensemble number, 'Dance little Lady,'

⁶⁵⁹ Noël Coward, *This Year of Grace*, 4

introduces ‘a modern ballroom peopled with perpetual dancers whose personality has been lost; their clothes glare foolishly, their faces are mere masks’.⁶⁶⁰ Arnold Bennett saw the scene as a critique of the ‘dancing craze’: the group of revellers all in grotesque masks, designed by Oliver Messel, move ‘horridly like a swarm of run-down robots’.⁶⁶¹ The symbolism of a girl without a mask being swamped by the crowd of dancers only to emerge ‘masqued like the rest, defeated’,⁶⁶² directly engages with the contemporary themes of erosion and of being overtaken. Bennett described it as ‘original, fundamental, sinister, beautiful and extraordinarily impressive’.⁶⁶³ Coward’s use of dance culture as a metaphor for modern living continues with the song ‘Teach Me to Dance like Grandma’, a nostalgic ode to the past which contrasts with the dance frenzy of, ‘Dance Little Lady’.

I’m getting tired of jazz tunes

Monotonous,

They’ve gotten us

Crazy now...

I want an age that has tunes

Simple and slow

I’m feeling so

Lazy now.

Teach me to dance like Grandma used to dance

I refuse to dance – Blues.

Black Bottoms, Charlestons, what wind blew them in,

⁶⁶⁰ ‘A review of revue’, *Glasgow Evening Times*, 2 March 1928.

⁶⁶¹ Horace Horsnell, ‘The Drama, A Brilliant Revue’, *The Outlook*, 17 April 1928.

⁶⁶² Arnold Bennett, ‘Miscellany – This Year of Grace’, *The New Statesman*, 31 March 1928.

⁶⁶³ Bennett, ‘Miscellany’, .

Monkeys do them in zoos.⁶⁶⁴

The song juxtaposes the contemporary popular dance culture of the time (associated with African American music) and a nostalgic notion of familial dancing tradition. Clever, satirical and refined, the sketches and songs of *This Year of Grace* are a defiant response to a modern world that is portrayed as succumbing to American democratisation, which is epitomised by the primitive physicality of black dance being performed in London West End revue in the 1920s in such shows as *Dover Street to Dixie* and *Blackbirds*.

Fears about the political demands of the working classes and the perceived 'dictatorship of the masses [...] the accession of the masses to complete social power'⁶⁶⁵ were deep. Coward's clipped, brisk comedy of style and manners constructed a structured and stable world of distinction and hierarchy, with upper and working classes intent on adhering to the old values and beliefs in the face of disturbing changes. The working class is imagined as a compliant but confused subject whose place in the world has been disturbed by the recent democratic changes.

Harry: You know the trouble with you Fred, is you're a bit of a Bolshie.

Fred: Don't you know the reason there are so many Bolshies about?

Harry: No, why?

Fred: Nobody seems to know their place any more everything's getting so mixed up you can't tell the upper ten from Upper Tooting.

Harry: Who wants to?

⁶⁶⁴ Noël Coward, 'Teach Me to Dance like Grandma', *The Lyrics of Noël Coward* (London: Methuen 2002), 39.

⁶⁶⁵ John Carey, *Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice among the Literary Intelligentsia 1880-1939* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), 3.

Fred: No one wants to, but it makes you sort of bewildered – when I was a lad we all knew we was common and enjoyed it – Mother was in service and Father was a bus driver and liked it, but now – can you see my missus going out to work? [...] All this democracy makes life ‘ellish uncomfortable.’⁶⁶⁶

This portrayal critiques British socio-political life and inverts the politics of class through identity construction. An emollient, dutifully passive working class character is critical of the new democratic enfranchisement of women and the working class, presenting an image of the working class disturbed by the social changes, nostalgic for the past and desirous of the reassertion of old hierarchical structures.

Down with the idle rich!

The bloated upper classes.

They drive to Lord’s

In expensive Fords

With their jewelled op’ra glasses.

Down with the London P’lice!

We’ll have them shot.

We’ll spread destruction everywhere,

Burn things up in a fine old flare.

What about the lions in Trafalgar Square?

Down with the whole damn lot!⁶⁶⁷

The song ‘Down with the Whole Damn Lot!’, written by Coward for *The Co-Optimists* (1922), provides a clever satirical commentary of the 1920s British political

⁶⁶⁶ Noël Coward, Charles B. Cochran’s 1928 Revue (This Year of Grace 1927/1928).

⁶⁶⁷ Noël Coward, ‘Down with the Whole Damn (Darn) Lot!’, music by Melville Gideon, lyrics by Noël Coward, *The Lyrics of Noël Coward*, 93. The song was used in *The Co-Optimists* (3rd programme of the original run, Palace Theatre, May 1922), and published in 1922 Francis, Day & Hunter. The bracketed title is how it appeared in print, ‘Damn’ being too offensive a word to print in the early 1920s. The piece was subtitled ‘A Democratic Quartette’.

landscape, which was riven by class conflict and fear of revolution. It is an example of how revue performance engaged with serious, topical and political issues, highlighting the complexity of the form and its negotiation of changing social contexts. The song gives an exaggerated and biased portrayal of strikers, presenting their acts of protest and political agitation as mindless, aimless violence intent, as their anthem declares, on not only attacking the upper classes and the establishment but on destroying everyone and everything – the whole damn lot!

Down with the working man!

We'll starve his wives and sisters,

For any sin

Can be fitted in

With our Democratic Vistas'.

Down with the London Stage!

We'll let them have it hot.

If Laurillard or Sachs resists

We'll kill them both as Royalists.

What about the frolicking Co-Optimists?

Down with the whole damn lot!

This is a vision of left wing politics that had a particular currency in conservative circles at the beginning of the century. The song is a far from subtle display of establishment concern about changes that were affecting patterns of work, power and class relations and challenging the established order. An intelligent, poignant attack, the song inverts and undermines the emancipatory ethos and 'Democratic Vistas' of the strikers in favour of a cynical and brutally pessimistic depiction of mob rule. This view drew on the intellectual pessimism of pre-War thinkers such as Matthew Arnold,

Edmund Burke and Friedrich Nietzsche, which was by the 1920s ‘commonplace in the cultural commentary’,⁶⁶⁸ particularly in high-brow journals such as *The Calendar of Modern Letters*, *The Criterion* and *The Adelphi*. It was ‘a pessimism, generally in middle class quarters, about the emergence of contemporary “mass society”’, or mass culture, which effected great social change through industrialisation, urbanisation and the rapid growth of cities populated by anonymous crowds. It was this developing democratisation, exemplified by the newly educated and politicised working classes, that had come to represent the greatest challenge to the old social order; class politics swept across Europe, culminating with revolution and the overthrow of Tsarist Russia in 1917. For many the prospect of the masses taking centre stage was galling: too much ‘massification’, it was argued, represented a process of social change from a ‘better or preferable past to a degenerating and uninviting present and future’.⁶⁶⁹ The ‘notion of massification involves more than centralisation and collectivism. It implies the erosion of previous social distinctions’,⁶⁷⁰ and in the era following the Russian Revolution, it held an implied threat of working class taking control. This is articulated by Noël Coward in his Ruritanian romance drama *The Queen Was in the Parlour*, which premiered at St Martin’s Theatre a few months after the general strike of 1926:

The air is full of voices of cheap people crying out against the existing order of things, trying to tear down Kings, queens and loyalties and establish themselves on the throne in their shirt sleeves with their feet on the mantelpiece.

The image of ‘cheap people [...] in their shirt sleeves’ had for some become a frightening reality during the general strike as the ‘old political axes on which a great

⁶⁶⁸ David Ayers, *English Literature of the 1920s* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Press, 1999), 99.

⁶⁶⁹ Dominic Strinati, *An Introduction to the Theories of Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 1995), 9.

⁶⁷⁰ Ayers, *English Literature of the 1920s*, 100.

deal of pre-war social life had turned had been thrown into disarray by the changing landscapes of Westminster'.⁶⁷¹ The election of the 1906 Liberal government, along with a smattering of representatives from the Labour party, had signalled a shift in the political landscape. This was accentuated by the Liberal government's implementation of social reforms such as a reduced income tax for lower wage earners (1907) and pensions (1908). The growing trade union demands for better pay and improved working conditions also challenged the monopoly of power held by industry bosses and led to various strike actions. 'New' drama like John Galsworthy's social realist plays *Strife* (1909) and *Skin Game* (1920) had charted the social change and the breakdown of conventional class structures before and after the War, highlighting the rise of unions and the challenge they posed to British industrial companies, as well as portraying the declining patrician class and the erosion of Victorian and Edwardian sensibilities.

The aftermath of the First World War saw continued widespread dissatisfaction with the old social order that could no longer be dissipated. After the snap "Khaki" general election of 1918, there was a national landscape where a new national and political identity had emerged. The people were 'beginning to discover themselves, and this was a disruptive feature of the national life, full of both promise and of menace. The workers were becoming organized'.⁶⁷² The Fourth Reform Act of 1918 enfranchised most adults and saw the new urban and industrial working class erupt into the political sphere and demand fundamental changes in the political and social fabric of the country. The strikes by railway workers in 1919 and miners in 1921, which called for flat rates of pay awards, were for some an example of how democratisation seemed to be ending class hierarchy and eroding standards. The

⁶⁷¹ D.J. Taylor, *Bright Young People*, 36.

⁶⁷² Harold Hobson, *Theatre in Britain* (Oxford, Phaidon Press Ltd, 1984), 17.

fragmenting of the cultural landscapes of class led to calls for a re-centring as Britain's sense of self was perceived to be undermined. Cultural critics such as Q.D. and F.R. Leavis bemoaned what they saw as the demise or levelling-down of society by a growing mass culture that was eroding individuality and homogenising experience and ideas. This emergent mass society consisted for them of the Northcliffe press, advertising, the BBC, the cinema and the popular mass-produced best-selling literature and magazines. These, they argued, had led to the erasure of the elite and the championing of the mediocre, lowering cultural standards and reducing everything to the lowest common denominator.

The “spectacle” in popular musical theatre was attacked as a contributor to this perceived dumbing down and lowering of morals, even to the point where Albert De Courville wrote a defence of the form in the programme of his 1919 revue *Joy-Bells!* Yet the spectacle of the West End stage and in minority cultural traditions was not new, recalling as it did nineteenth century pictorial drama and the theatrical traditions of pageantry, panorama and tableaux in Shakespearean dramas, which often saw the stage flooded with “supernumeraries”, vast numbers of people in non-speaking roles who were on stage purely for their visual impact. West End revue had, of course been influenced by Florenz Ziegfeld's spectacular New York shows. His productions celebrated the ‘abundance of the [American] culture’⁶⁷³ and wartime revues followed suit, celebrating a consumer culture that doubled as a synonym for Britain and filling the stage with an abundance of talent, chorus girls, boys, fabric and design to champion Britain's sense of superiority and fashionability. In this respect wartime spectacular revue was seen as epitomising mass culture, particularly in its celebration of the ‘average man’ in recruitment drives and in the type of diversionary

⁶⁷³ Michael Kantor and Laurence Maslon (eds), *Broadway: The American Musical* (New York: Bulfinch Press, 2004), 26.

escapist entertainment that became common as the War progressed. The collective mass spectacle of wartime revues, which had been seen as having the communal and democratising tendencies needed to boost morale and national pride, now encountered dissenting voices from both the left and right. On the left, popular culture and entertainment was seen as a means of pacifying the masses, providing false consciousness through consumption. On the right, it was seen as a part of a new low culture that was contributing to the end of distinction and a growing homogeneity of society. Yet, ironically, revue reflected part of the intellectual response to mass culture by adapting and repositioning itself as the intimate revue through a mixture of modernity and nostalgia exemplified by *The Co-Optimists* and *This Year of Grace*.

This Year of Grace was produced by Charles Cochran and opened in the West End at the Pavilion theatre. It has often been described as Noël Coward's finest revue and featured the talents of performers like Sonnie Hale, Jessie Mathews, Douglas Byng and Maisie Gay, scene designers and painters like Oliver Messel, Doris Zinkeisen, Gladys E. Calthrop and Marc Henri and dancers like Tilly Losch, Jean Barry and Jack Holland. The revue was a perfect example of the form's multidisciplinary aesthetic, mixing design, music, dance, text, drama, comedy and satire. Through Coward's sophisticated style and by charting topical and contemporary concerns, *This Year of Grace* evoked a revitalising cosmopolitan persona, which, crucially, mixed the global with the right amount of celebratory national material to situate and affirm Britain's position and status over popular musical theatre culture. During the 1920s and 1930s, Coward wrote revue sketches and songs for Charlot, Cochran and *The Co-Optimists* and was at the forefront of a diverse contemporary British culture. As an actor, singer, composer, lyricist, sketch writer, fashion icon and playwright, he came to embody the attitudes and concerns of

a younger post-War generation. The recurring theme in his early dramatic works such as *The Vortex* (1923) *Easy Virtue* (1924), *Hay Fever* (1924) *Semi-Monde* (1926), *Private Lives* (1930) and *Design For Living* (1932) was an exploration of the ‘complexities, ironies, deceptions and hypocrisies of personal relationships’,⁶⁷⁴ and he continued to explore these themes in revue. His artistic output during this period crossed different genres and styles and established a body of work that has become part of the canon of British theatre, yet his work in revue remains overlooked.

Noël Coward’s intimate revue *This Year of Grace* begins with a dark, social commentary on society in the modern metropolis, with a crowd of suburban commuters waiting at a tube station. The location and imagery of the crowd seems innocent enough, but we are soon confronted with the pessimistic cultural vision of ‘massification’ and the idea that it leads to the erosion of distinction. A ‘street urchin’ begins to whistle a ‘very definite dance rhythm’ through his teeth, and one by one the commuters are infected by the rhythm, moving their feet unconsciously until ‘everyone starts moving slightly (until) it swells louder until everyone is dancing hard’.⁶⁷⁵ All have been transformed by the experience of urban life and modernity, symbolised by the tube station and the rhythmical dance music. There is also a class commentary in the scene’s suggestion that the products of modern living have led to an unthinking and anonymous “herd” and to the loss of individuality. This idea of homogenisation finds full expression in the ensemble song and dance number that follows, ‘Waiting in a Queue’:

In a rut

In a rut

In a rut

⁶⁷⁴ David Cannadine, *In Churchill’s Shadow: Confronting the Past in Modern Britain* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 245.

⁶⁷⁵ Coward, *This Year of Grace* (1928).

We go along
Nothing but
Nothing but
Nothing but
The same old song
To those who view us lightly
We must seem slightly
Absurd
We never break the ritual
One habitual
Herd

The novelist Arnold Bennett, reviewing the show in *The New Statesman*, saw the scene as a particularly ‘original’ criticism of the urban condition and its homogenising effects. As Bennett highlights, the scene ‘begins – appropriately, seeing that to the Londoner life means transport as much as anything – with a criticism of life in a tube station’. This ‘criticism of life’ was two-fold: as well as highlighting the dehumanising effects of the new technology, it also included a less than flattering depiction of the petit-bourgeois commuter, trundling home to the new suburbs on London’s periphery which symbolised the wasteland of modernity to the intelligentsia of the period. In some literature, the ‘crowd’ began to be depicted metaphorically and literally as leading to the suppression of individuality, subsuming it in favour of a collective mass identity and creating a mindless, unthinking anonymity. The ‘construction of the suburbs around London in particular and the emergence of the

office commuter',⁶⁷⁶ the 'man in the street', were common targets because they were seen as embodying the worst aspects of modern life, as Douglas Goldring expresses:

During the twenties a horrifying sub-human suburban type came into existence [...] This odious homunculus and his revolting wife – ignorant, stupid, a moral craven [...] exemplified one of the worst outcomes of the so-called 'peace'.⁶⁷⁷

The concern was not just about the rise of the masses but specifically about their ability to swamp and override hierarchical distinctions. This concern was highlighted in Henry Green's novel *Party Going*, which illustrates fears about invading masses literally: a group of socialites travelling by train find their plans for a holiday frustrated by fog and observe the crowd of commuters stranded on the railway concourse, described as a swarm of 'water beetles',⁶⁷⁸ an urban herd coming 'out in ones and threes [...] a flood [...] coming out and spreading into the streets round'.⁶⁷⁹

Nineteenth century theories about the new urban masses of people – the 'crowd'⁶⁸⁰ – saw them as having a dangerous, destructive nature and linked crowd behaviour with a loss of humanity and a descent into barbarism. Such ideas are satirised in the tube station scene of *This Year of Grace*. Barbarism here takes the comic form of two bumbling aristocrats, Lady Gwendoline Verney and the Honourable Millicent Bloodworthy, who are losing control, as they attempt to purchase travel tickets from a machine at the station, in the modern urban environment. Elaborately and expensively dressed, they are bewildered and inept but

⁶⁷⁶ Ayers, *English Literature of the 1920s*, 99.

⁶⁷⁷ Douglas Goldring, *The Nineteen Twenties: A General Survey and Some Personal Memories* (London: Nicholson and Watson, 1945), ?

⁶⁷⁸ Henry Green, *Party Going*, 395

⁶⁷⁹ Green, *Party Going*, 388

⁶⁸⁰ For crowd theories see Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd: The Study of the Popular Mind* (1895), Sighele and Tarde and Simmel (see Barrow 1981 Borch 2005 and Stewart-Steinberg 2003 and Fransisco Budi Hardiman 2001). Jaap Van Ginneken, *Crowds, Psychology, and Politics, 1871-1899* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 131. Jeffrey T. Schnaap and Matthew Tiews (eds.), *Crowds* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006).

enthralled by the modern process of dispensing tickets by placing coins into a machine.

Lady G: I'm thrilled. We must have some more. (She puts in several pennies.)

M: (Also cramming pennies in.) What tremendous fun.

Captivated, they start cramming pennies into the machine to see more tickets come out, only to break it. They have been observed by Harry and Fred, the booking clerks

Fred: Ere's a couple of bejewelled duchesses bunging up one of the 'ow-d' yer-do's.'

Harry: (Shaking the machine) What do you want to come mucking about ere for? You ought to be at home looking after children.

The allegory of bewildered 'toffs' not knowing what they're doing and mucking things up, only to be rescued by a discerning working class character, was potent in the aftermath of the War. In some quarters the waste and carnage of the war was seen as the direct result of a detached and inept upper class. Here class position is overcome: the working-class men reprimand the upper class women for 'slumming it' and causing chaos. As Fred declares, 'Wot do they want to come nosing round 'ere for bloated aristocrats'. The scene is a commentary on the leisured upper classes and their condition in a world in which old distinctions and hierarchies are no longer fixed. Using the common revue technique of inversion and stereotype reversal, class snobbery is reversed: it is the upper classes who are portrayed as the ones who do not know their place and instead cross boundaries and cause chaos. The women storm out after their rebuke:

M: Come away Gwen, dear they're insulting us.

LG: There are your ridiculous tickets. (She throws them over both of the men and goes out grandly.)

They leave the workingmen to observe and comment on this transgression sagely.

Harry: Well I'll be damned.

Fred: There you are – that's class.

Coward's critical observations in his revue sketches were marked by class dynamics and captured the politics of the times. Although he was often critical of all the classes, it was the upper classes he most often portrayed as being affected by the changing modern world of urbanisation and democracy. In many ways Coward's work mirrored George Bernard Shaw's play *Heartbreak House* (1919), which showed an irresponsible middle class without leadership. Coward depicts the fall from grace of the upper classes through generational disconnect, sexual infidelity, drug-use and intellectual pomposity. In his earlier revue, *London Calling*, Coward infamously ridiculed Edith Sitwell and her brothers Osbert and Sacheverell, aristocrats who exemplified in their 'modern' free verse poetry a particular aristocratic intelligentsia and were subjected to the full ire of Coward, who cruelly burlesqued the trio as the Swiss Family Whittlebot.⁶⁸¹

As David Cannadine has argued, Coward devoted a large part of his output to 'telling the English (and it was very much the English, not the British) about themselves, their country and their Empire'.⁶⁸² Coward's work in revue often directly and indirectly addressed the climate of the nation's class politics by highlighting the erosion of the aristocracy through mockery and satire. Yet Coward also engaged in a 'sentimental celebration of England', which would find a fuller expression later in his epic musical *Cavalcade*. Coward was 'born into the age of high imperialism',⁶⁸³ and

⁶⁸¹ Hernia Whittlebot, 'festooned with bunches of grapes', with her brothers Gob and Sago 'grate on their scrannel pipes' as the 'ultra modern poetess' declaims her 'rhythmi-coloured verses'. (Agate 133).

⁶⁸² Cannadine, *In Churchill's Shadow*, 245.

⁶⁸³ Cannadine, *In Churchill's Shadow*, 247.

the themes of ‘Empire, monarchy, aristocracy and class were to pervade his work’.⁶⁸⁴ This was an attitude defined by the narrative of the British Empire, which in the 1920s still controlled vast swathes of the globe. For many during this period, it was the narrative of empire that in a large part provided definition and identity. Empire provided the core representational elements for nation building and belonging: the myths of superiority, the traditions of service, pageantry and racial “Others” over whom to rule. As Jim English highlights, Empire Day, the annual celebration of empire on 24 May, traversed class boundaries and helped to sustain traditional hierarchies, especially after the First World War:

when unrestrained jingoism became inappropriate, Empire Day retained its hegemonic potency by amalgamating the emerging traditions of sombre commemoration into the repertoire of imperial festivity.⁶⁸⁵

Coward’s 1930s patriotic pageant *Cavalcade* might appear to be at odds with his dramatic writings of the 1920s, but, as theatre critic Harold Hobson observes, Coward’s recreation of the age of ‘our Imperial splendour, of the Empire on which the sun never set’ highlighted his imperialist side, which ‘always loved’ the empire. As Hobson further explains, ‘He did not give his devotion to deeply loved parts of England: to the church clock at Grantchester, or to the stripling Thames at Bablock-Hythe. It was empire that he loved, far more than England as he wrote to me in the last days of his life’.⁶⁸⁶ Coward’s revues championed England but were often critical of the upper class for its lack of a sense of moral obligation and indulgence in what he saw as vulgar ostentation. Coward’s work presents at times a conflicting vision of the modern world and the state of the bright young people in it. His is a response to those

⁶⁸⁴ Cannadine, *In Churchill’s Shadow*, 248.

⁶⁸⁵ Jim English, ‘Empire Day in Britain, 1904-1958’, *The Historical Journal* 49 (2006), 247-276. doi: 10.1017/S0018246X0500511X. See also Jim English, *The Impact and Social Meaning of Empire Day in the British and Colonial Context* (PhD Thesis, 2010).

⁶⁸⁶ Hobson, *Theatre In Britain*, 32.

who he saw as letting the country down, and therefore a recurring theme is that the country and especially the established order should re-organise and reinvent themselves.

We're here to make confession,

We're forming a triple alliance.

Our years of drab repression

Have burst into open defiance.

We've bid goodbye to faces dear

And mother-in-laws and wives.

We now intend to disappear

And reconstruct our lives.⁶⁸⁷

In *This Year of Grace* the changing socio-political relations of class hierarchy and national identity are in constant interplay in a changing contemporary world. This is a sharp contrast with *The Co-Optimists* in their pierrot costumes of yesteryear. *This Year of Grace* is clothed in modernity and includes a plethora of signifiers of the times such as travel, cocktails, dance and music, which also double as markers of bohemian cosmopolitanism. Coward was seen to epitomise such cosmopolitanism, nowhere more than in the famous picture of him on the cover of *Sketch* magazine, which showed him as a dressing-gown-clad, cigarette-smoking, cocktail-drinking, drug-taking rebel, 'part angry young man, part bright young thing, the self-appointed scourge of conventional behaviour, establishment attitudes and theatrical conservatism'.⁶⁸⁸ By 'falling foul of the Lord Chamberlain' and through his associations with the 'more raffish members of the royal family' he created the impression in some quarters of a 'pampered pansy and perfumed playboy on the

⁶⁸⁷ Noël Coward, 'Back to Nature', in *The Co-Optimists* (1923).

⁶⁸⁸ David Cannadine, *In Churchill's Shadow, Confronting the Past in Modern Britain* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 245.

make'.⁶⁸⁹ This was of course as much a construct as one of his plays, part self-created, part media-induced.

As Cannadine notes, Coward's lack of education left him with an 'abiding distrust of ideas and a deep dislike of intellectuals (whom he regarded as left-wing subversives) bordering on the philistine'.⁶⁹⁰ Coward's revue operated as a 'disciplinary metonym of Englishness'.⁶⁹¹ Through his work in revue there emerged a patriotic and conservative voice that displayed a bold 'love of England' and its pageantry, as Coward's persona and artistic output marked the zeitgeist of the 1920s.

Coward's critique responds by constructing a new attitude that relies on a reworking of old class identities. In *This Year of Grace* a series of British identity formations are constructed and juxtaposed around a compliant, loyal, duty-bound middle class characterisation and a straight talking, stiff upper-lipped, no nonsense, improvisational upper class, as the shop-girl scene from *This Year of Grace* highlights. In the Duchess of Pangbourne's shop showroom, as 'the curtain rises [...] at about noon', Lady Violet, Lady Cicely and Vera the Duchess are drinking cocktails and intent on selling off the family furniture. As a customer approaches, Violet exclaims devoutly 'please God, let it be an American!' In the midst of hardship the grit of the aristocrats enables them to adapt and survive, notably at the expense of the Americans. Through a defiant attitude, marked by the cruel humour of which Coward became the 'Master' (the 'greatest cruel-verse genius since Alexander Pope'⁶⁹²) a re-invention occurs on stage. In *This Year of Grace* Coward presents varying pictures of the English as they go about their daily lives. In the 'English Lido' scene, Coward

⁶⁸⁹ Cannadine, *In Churchill's Shadow*, 250.

⁶⁹⁰ Cannadine, *In Churchill's Shadow*, 249.

⁶⁹¹ Out of Place 39.

⁶⁹² A.N. Wilson, *After the Victorians* (2005), 239

gives voice to an English middle-class, allowing them to express their frustrations and fears in a way that seems to ridicule them as narrow and set in their ways:

Our tastes are far from Oriental,
We have a very fixed idea of fun,
The thought of anything experimental
Or Continental
We shun.
We take to innovations very badly,
We'd rather be uncomfortable than not,
In fighting any new suggestion madly
We'd gladly
Be shot!
We much prefer to take our pleasures sadly
Because we're thoroughly contented with our lot.⁶⁹³

Coward's satire of the English is a classic tender mockery, steeped in the tradition of Gilbert and Sullivan. The conservative ways of the English appear to be being mocked, but this scene is in the "compare and contrast" revue tradition, in which a subtext of distinction and individualism is championed through comic burlesque. It was this construction and celebration of English difference and attitude that was crucial in asserting the British national character against the cultural, economic and political symbols of America.

⁶⁹³ Coward, *This Year of Grace*, 43

Afterword

My engagement with revue stems from my background in applied theatre arts practice. Primarily I am interested in story telling. How do stories get told? Why, when and where are they told? Why do certain stories take preference over others? Once you begin to understand theatre as a cultural practice you see how it engages in issues of power, agency as well as representation and identity. My initial research began by exploring the remnants of revue scripts held in the Lord Chamberlain's play collection in the British Library. I entered the hallowed grounds of the British Library excited by the prospect of having access to in many cases unpublished manuscripts. Yet my excitement was cut short as I was handed an unkempt and scruffy folder of scripts which had been stored in the library but with little care. These scripts proved to be a vital record of theatre history and a wealth of critical commentary and engagement with the social and political issues of the day.

My background as a performer drew me to exploring the form practically. I started working with students at Kingston University on revue performance practice. The experience provided me with a greater understanding of the form but more importantly it highlighted revue as a social and cultural practice. The 'liveness' of the students' performance through their choice of subject matter and the immediacy of the audience response- the tacit in jokes between the performers and their audience but more than that - it was the complexity of this form. How its critical commentary even in its simplest references created a relationship with the audience. That understanding provided great insight into how revue cultivates a sense of participation and belonging and engages with community and forges an accessible common identity. I provided the students an overview of revue performance history and practices and application and was interested in what they would create. Working in

groups and focusing on their contemporary world, the students covered a range of topics. As drama students they were a diverse group consisting of a range of strong personalities, experiences and nationalities. Initially cultural differences became the source of creative inspiration as they created a travelogue revue. Imaginatively travelling between locations, their individual, cultural and social identities provided the subject for a range of sketches. Revue from the start sets out to do more than just mirror but to take a stance, have an opinion, intentionally commenting on the social and cultural actions of the moment and the work they created began to touch on this.

Revue performance history is much like its composition. A non-linear, fragmented narrative, which sees the amalgamation of text, dance and music with other theatrical forms and styles driven by the harsh economic realities of a commercial enterprise competing for an audience in the open market. Indeed a central thrust of my hypothesis is that the formulation of revue aesthetics is as much dependent on and a product of the artistic and cultural climate as it is the social, economic and political factors. It was the profit and loss markers of the open market, dictated by an ever-changing public within a shifting twentieth century urban landscape that became the constant indicator and pacesetter for revue performance, style and content. The rapid impetus challenged traditional popular performance and led to changes across the process of making and marketing theatre. Propelling its necessity to continually refresh itself leading to a multitude of shoddy, bland, weak, terrible, mindless rag tag, thrown together productions. However and this is crucial to recognising the significance and the agency of revue performance, it was intelligent, challenging, ingenuous, innovative and experimental as well.

The theatre is a sublimation of certain social institutions, whether it idealises them, parodies them, or calls for them to be transcended. The theatre is

simultaneously a sort of escape-hatch from social conflicts and the embodiment of these conflicts. From this point of view it contains a paradoxical element, or ambiguity. The theatre is society or the group looking at itself in various mirrors.⁶⁹⁴

The ‘various mirrors’ of London West End revue of the 1920s consisted of many performance styles and genres such as the ballad opera, pantomime, burlesque, ballet, stand-up, monologue, film, music and modern dance, reflecting and capturing cultural and social tensions.

When we talk of the history of the performance we are talking of shadows and shards on the one hand, but on the other we are constructing a new history of the invisible; we are redefining for ourselves what we mean by history in a new context.⁶⁹⁵

The shadows and shards in this case are the often remnants of revue scripts and other archival material that has provided a point of departure for my exploration. It is only by situating revue within and across the range of theatre and performance narratives that we can begin to understand revue’s numerous registrations, which reveal its significance both as a practice and also as a reflective social action of its time. West End revue affirmed a particular perspective that was bound to conservative traditions, which sought to frame public sentiments within a right wing context.

It celebrated and constructed a particular type of national identity at a volatile time in British history. Revue engaged in the construction of types of “Englishness”, which in line with a stereotype is paradoxical and needs to continually reconstruct

⁶⁹⁴ Georges Gurvitch, *The Sociology of Theatre*, in Elizabeth Burns and Tom Burns (eds), *The Sociology of Literature and Drama* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), 76.

⁶⁹⁵ Peter Holland and W.B. Worthen (eds), *Theorizing Practice, Redefining Theatre Practice*. (New York: Palgrave, Macmillan, 2003) 6.

itself. One of the ways this was manifested was through the element of memory and 'nostalgia'. In this regard revue celebrated a type of England and Englishness very much reinvented in the memory. These English and British memorisations, forms and narratives were constructed against an 'other' which consisted of a long list of essentialised constructs. Black versus White, the colonising versus the colonised, the Yank versus 'Brit', the Jew versus the Gentile, the flapper, new woman, "bolter" versus the weak, gay, dandy man. However the primary 'other' was the 'now', comparing and contrasting the past with the present. These memorisations had 'ideological functions, though their politics varied and are forged in particular historical conjunctures.'⁶⁹⁶ West End revue at the historical juncture of the early twentieth century was forged by a number of salient themes, which have run through this thesis and intersect and link with one another. As popular culture, the idea of the new, the contemporary, is linked with the old and becomes a major force. As O'Shea argues it is 'within modernity that tradition is invented, and that the past is an essential tool for addressing the new.'⁶⁹⁷ As taken up across this thesis as a 'new' form revue was particularly salient as it addressed, the issue of a changing national identities as well as the role, idea and definitions of both men and women in wartime capturing the processes of redescription and reinvention. The war had brought about further social and political change as the growth of the Unions, and the loss of Britain's position as a world power and the rise of the United States of America. In *Dover Street to Dixie* we see a significant cultural negotiation of political and social challenges to dominant hegemonic structures through the revue's representation of "Britain", "Empire" and "America".

⁶⁹⁶ Mica Nava and Alan O'Shea (eds), *Modern Times: Reflections on a Century of English Modernity* (London: Routledge, 1996),3.

⁶⁹⁷ Mica Nava, and Alan O'Shea (eds), *Modern Times: Reflections on a Century of English Modernity*, 4.

It was both local and contemporaneous to the British way of life, but it was global and intercultural, reflecting in its form a multicultural empire and a cast of multi-national performers, actors, dancers, producers, writers, designers, directors, choreographers changing and challenging the idea and sense of the British nation. Early revue had primarily been an end of year compilation of highlights of the past year. Here the past in revue was celebrated and became a synonym for imaging a better life or better times. This often meant 'simpler' times both socially and politically, when class, gender, sexuality and race positions and places were firmly applied and adhered to. This world and function had already been long established in popular entertainments in song and music with the particular popularity in the 19th century of black face minstrelsy providing a fertile metaphor for the presentation of a safe idyllic place and time

The centrality and importance of women in revue not only as performers but also as the embodiment of 'cocksure women',⁶⁹⁸ challenging the social order provides an example of the complex and contradictory nature of revue. Frank Vernon defined musical comedy and revue as clear feminised spaces,⁶⁹⁹ with revue advancing women to the forefront of popular entertainment. In appropriating popular topical themes and issues revue found itself appropriating certain progressive attitudes at odds with its political position. As the heroines of revue sought to imagine a world in which, relationships particularly those between men and women could be differently organised on women's terms. The strategic positioning of women in revue highlighted tensions and contradictions between men and women but also across society. Portrayed as the epitome of modern life revue women were both objectified

⁶⁹⁸ 'A really up-to-date woman is a cocksure woman. She doesn't have a doubt nor a qualm. She is the modern type.' (D.H. Lawrence, *Cocksure Women and Hensure Men*, (Phoenix II. Ed Warren Roberts and Henry T. Moore 1968), 65.

⁶⁹⁹ Frank Vernon, *The Twentieth-Century Theatre* (London: George G. Harrap & Company Ltd, 1924). Chapter XII *The Theatre of Flappers* 118.

within a narrow sexualised construct of the chorus line and vilified as ‘flappers’ and the ‘new women’ seen as challenging old patriarchal impositions that restricted their autonomy to find some agency.⁷⁰⁰

Revue’s definition has always been simplistic; as with the case of art forms not held in high regard it has generally been lazily defined. There was a constant questioning of theatre and debates about the direction of theatre and of its function. Revue was also part of the investigation into alternatives to realism through the revival and championing of older forms of popular performance with the likes of the Group Theatre, Workers Theatre Movement and other practitioners such as Joan Littlewood. As practitioners sought to escape from the social naturalism and superficial psychology of the contemporary theatre and to find means of establishing a direct relationship with the audience. The use of revue by the avant-garde as well as the “Theatres of the Left” needs to be further explored and documented as experimental and political groups used the model of a Charles Cochran- type revue to present “Cochranesque: scenario” for T.S. Eliot’s *The Rock* where they argued that their objective ‘should be to take a form of entertainment and subject it to the process which would leave it a form of art.

Revue of this period was a highly significant yet complex practice as its engagement with national identity discourse highlights. As popular drama it served the status quo’s social needs through reinforcing desirable social and moral conclusions, but also provided subtle and overt resistances at different times.

⁷⁰⁰ Maisie Gay, Beatrice Lillie, Florence Mills, Cicely Courtneidge, Gertrude Lawrence, Binnie Hale

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