

PALGRAVE STUDIES IN THEATRE AND PERFORMANCE HISTORY

Transatlantic Stage Stars in Vaudeville and Variety

Celebrity Turns



LEIGH WOODS



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TRANSATLANTIC STAGE STARS IN VAUDEVILLE AND VARIETY

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Cover Image Cameo of Sarah Bernhardt set into a Palace Theatre program, 1913 (reprinted by permission of the Theatre Collection, Museum of the City of New York)

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To Ágústa

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My grandmother, Sadie Hill Ritter, was full of stories about the time she’d spent as a musician and chorus girl in New York City. She came alive for me, for a moment, as I sat in the Performing Arts Library at Lincoln Center beginning work toward this book. I came across her maiden name in a program for a musical revue called *Hokey Pokey*, produced in 1912. My grandmother was nineteen at the time, and she appeared onstage as a “Wandering Banderine,” marching, probably dancing, and certainly playing the trombone her father had given her. She appeared with famous faces including Lillian Russell and *Hokey Pokey’s* coproducers and chief comics, Joe Weber and Lew Fields, who were more famous as Weber and Fields. Within a few months, she was touring with the road company. Discoveries like this one may not add much weight to the scholarly enterprise, but, you know, so what.

Finally, my wife, Ágústa Gunnarsdóttir, planned, packed, repacked, and all of it while maintaining her alertness to detail, and, with maybe only a lapse or two, her good humor through two extended stays away from our home. She did this with our two daughters in tow, and by setting aside some of her own work. I haven’t enough words or the right ones. Ágústa has made herself a worthy steward of the diamond my grandmother left me, in her flamboyant, vaudevillian way, and that my grandfather, Walter Ritter, had given to Sadie Hill. I hope this book makes Ágústa, and that it would have made my grandparents, proud.

Introduction ∞

I have always thought the actions of men the best interpreters of their thoughts.

John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690)¹

Locke wasn't thinking of variety entertainment when he wrote these words. Nor is it likely that he would have included the theatre in his inventory of the most consequential places that men take action, and women, too, whom he excluded, casually and entirely, consistent with social and grammatical conventions of his day.

The theatre was a venerable institution when Locke lived, but it figured only in passing in his utopia. His "Second Treatise on Government," written at around the time of *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, remarks that any man facing the range of opinion and vested interest in the world, crammed onto a stage, would despair of comprehending the full scope and follow the noble Roman, Cato, in "coming into the theatre, only to go out again."² Even the theatre Locke invoked so fleetingly was worthy only in its classical lineage and most governable expressions. In this incarnation, at least, the theatre made a place for men to witness actions quickly and then depart, and with greater dispatch if they were systematic and conscionable. The theatre was a kind of sampler for rational men.

Fast-forward 200 years. Vaudeville in its glossier venues—with its nearest British cousin "variety" at the upper end of the beer-soaked music halls—were offering arenas for action, all right. The action they sponsored, though, was scarcely the admirable, utilitarian kind that Locke made key to his social contract. He wanted to reverse the sectarianism that had divided England for nearly two centuries. Given

his high purpose, it may seem far-fetched to apply his words to performers who thrived two centuries after his passing. Vaudeville and variety moved in the spirit of mercantile contracts, not social ones.

Detractors of the day accused variety and vaudeville of stifling thought and nourishing self-absorption, or worse, a herd mentality that could turn ugly and violent. When variety and vaudeville were praised, it was for their ungainly egalitarianism. Locke might have applauded the egalitarianism. He would have disapproved of the escapism that made the bait.

Noted actors were hardly known for being social theorists, much less altruists. But given their almost heroic self-interest, why would they have chosen venues known for being more escapist than the theatre was? And when it came to giving turns, why would they have gravitated toward showing some of life's most heart-wrenching circumstances?

Part of the answer lay in the simple habit formed by the stars' success in the theatre. Another reason lay simply in the large amounts of money stars could earn by showing turns that bespoke noble purpose and high-toned culture. But whatever the reasons, the more fame stars brought with them, the more likely it was that their turn would show suffering, or, in the case of comic luminaries, toil. This went against the grain—except for the toil—but in ways that aggrandized the stars and challenged patrons to lift themselves up by their own bootstraps. The theatre had hosted displays of suffering for far longer and at greater length. But suffering was more arresting, it seems, with nothing but funmaking around it.

As in the theatre, the greater seamlessness that stars could suggest between themselves and their characterizations, the more compelling audiences found the exercise. And as surely as the theatre provided vehicles for stars to recapitulate their successes, vaudeville and variety offered more regular, indeed relentless sources of repetition that, in the stars' cases, required more frequent performance. Two daily shows were standard in big-time vaudeville and grew common in variety as well after a lag of a few years. The regimen called for repeating bills and each turn on them, including the song-and-dance and sharp-tongued comedy that were fixtures, and in America more than Britain, blackface. Actors profited from offering the least familiar and least frivolous turn on view.

Stars joined bills grudgingly oftentimes, and almost as often out of necessity. They risked losing face in the change, and this put its own strain on them. On the good side, the same professional and, when it could be known or visible, personal strain made another way of folding the actors and their characters into a single suffering entity. It was a familiar formula, but it offered a fresh way to put the pursuit of happiness on sale.

* * *

This book scrutinizes the actions that took the stars into halls of mirth and the actions they took while there. I press producers' actions, too, when they recruited stars. I try to proceed to audiences' actions, with caution, in finding reasons for their interest in the entertainment and their responses to it, where known or determinable. My premise is that popular taste influenced stars and producers who inflected popular taste, or tried to, to favor their own interests. To identify some of the linkages, I've named each chapter to suggest a mode of exchange.

The first chapter, "Patronizing," shows three actors hoping not to compromise themselves too grievously by leaving the theatre. On the other side of the curtain, simple acts of purchase show audiences fairly glorying in the added range of their consumption. Vaudeville producers profited from promising stellar attractions in compressed form at lower prices.

"Precious Brits" treats four stars in search of gain from an unfamiliar source. Americans' sense of cultural deficiency often demanded, in vaudeville as in theatre, actors who seemed superior to native ones. Reciprocity lay in the pay British stars took from producers as hungry for their presence as crowds were, and in the value crowds took from the occasion, or had come convinced that they should.

"Growing Pains" focuses on topline stars achieving mythic proportions. These actors endowed themselves in greater suffering than other actors could command. The foremost players appealed across lines of class and gender and showed how deeply sacrifice was inscribed in the two leading English-speaking, heavily Christian, evermore distinct imperial powers.

The fourth chapter, "Suffer the Women," shows fame applied to a political cause. A string of noted actresses showed turns to promote women's right to vote, or issues thereon contingent, such as divorce, separate property, equal protection under law, and greater discretion in sexual behavior. Activism will be seen coinciding, and at times colliding, with star turns right through the peak of the battle over women's suffrage. The British stars challenged their American sisters' relative reticence. Foreign stars took native ones' places, in effect, in broaching suffrage in vaudeville.

Chapter 5, "War and Peace," accounts for fully a dozen stars who gave turns during World War I. The paucity of American noteworthies owed more than a little to a national difficulty with engaging the same level of distress that left British subjects with little choice. A number of important actresses, emboldened by suffrage turns, trouped into ones on behalf of the war, or in fewer cases, the peace. In vaudeville, again, foreign stars stood in for native ones, in effect, in supporting the Allied war effort or, in fewer cases again, the cause of peace.

The final chapter, "Parting," captures the decline of vaudeville and variety as stars grappled with conditions that turned stardom over more quickly in the postwar era. Audiences took interest in seeing once-mighty actors struggle, and they found it easy to tax the formerly great for not living up to expectations. "Afterthoughts" considers celebrity's current state in light of figures from the book who pointed the way into politics, in the United States especially.

As "Celebrity Turns" suggests, celebrity is a shadow-player throughout. Partly this is because it was so ingratiating, and partly because it was still largely an unknown quantity. Celebrity will be seen winding its way through the lives of those who possessed it, who wanted it, and who were mesmerized by it. Celebrity will be seen taking on different contours depending on where and how it figured, and from the ways it was pursued, adapted, and applied.

Rare is the show nowadays, in any venue, that mixes registers of culture as promiscuously as "refined" vaudeville and its British counterpart did a century ago. The bills showed, besides staples of song-and-dance and comic patter, hoofing of every sort with ballet, ballroom dancing, and some of what came to be called modern

dance well represented. There could be sentimental- or torch-singing, dreamy crooning, or classical music played, sung, or both. There were minstrels in blackface as often as not, and *émigrés* from the circus—slackwire artists, jugglers, acrobats, contortionists, animal acts, strongmen and strongwomen. Films, including some of the earliest ones shown for profit, seasoned bills first in the mid-1890s.

In this menagerie, dramatic stars were never the whole show or even the turn audiences relished most, necessarily. This book, for dwelling on star turns rather than the bills they headlined, grants the actors a prominence that, as you're about to see, didn't always match with responses they met.

Stars' doings, however, reveal decisions they made on their ways to the moment when all eyes would fall on them. In decisions the actors made, I look for ties that John Locke thought he saw between deed and thought. I hope to offer nearer if phantasmagorical glimpses into life from the 1890s into the 1930s. Stars' gift for searching out the heart of their audiences makes their actions, if not consequential in Locke's sense, indicative of the thoughts of many who sat in attendance, and of what had drawn them there in the first place.

Star turns were easy to list among life's simple pleasures. But the spectacle of pain set squarely into harmless diversions suggests that pleasure is never just simple. The patrons needed help to understand a world picking up speed at a rate that could be alarming. The patrons, with the stars and producers who catered to them, left their actions to speak, and in Locke's word, interpret thoughts that stood at some distance from customary notions of utility and reality.

1. Patronizing, 1890–1901 ∞

The music-hall of our youth was a thing of tinsel and orange peel, reeking with smoke and obscenity. There are people who affect to deplore its disappearance. They exalt its freedom, its carelessness, its honest mirth. What they fail to recall is the fact of its filth. It was a noisome sewer, and one of the best signs of the times is that the sewer has been cleansed.

A. G. Gardiner, “Pillars of Society” (1914)¹

In 1890, the Empire house of varieties was not the most savory spot in London. It was, however, the choicest establishment of its kind. In the third year of its existence, with a prime location overlooking Leicester Square at the heart of the city’s glittering West End, the Empire had gained a reputation not for being a sewer, exactly, but for needing cleansing nonetheless.

To remove some grime and raise the tone, variety hired a stage actress who was familiar though hardly famous. Amy Roselle (1854–1895) had chased fame long enough to know how stern a taskmaster it could be. She was ready to try a new approach. Variety wanted to woo a higher trade. Roselle’s respectability, as much as anything, added to her luster.

Born the daughter of a stage-loving schoolmaster, Amy, if that had been her name, acted as a child opposite her brother, Percy, an “infant phenomenon” of the kind popular in nineteenth century. She soon established herself as a child-star in her own right in Wales. She passed Percy by on joining a stock company in England. An Anglo-American actor-manager named E. A. Sothern saw her and hired her to tour the provinces as his co-star. She traveled to America and through it with Sothern when she was still, by report, only sixteen. As an adolescent phenomenon, she made her debut in London the following year, in the early 1870s.

In the capital, as she would have been told to expect, her competition stiffened. As a mature actress she took work, as others did, when it came. She still aspired to stardom, though, and her ambitions were whetted by Arthur Dacre (*né* Culver James), the former physician turned striving actor whom Roselle married and made her agent and sometime co-star. The Dacres would take to the road to ply their trade, or play secondary roles in London. To tide themselves over, they gave readings for professional groups, religious fellowships, and literary societies. Roselle's voice was expressive and her delivery assured. She specialized in what were called "recitations" of inspirational, sentimental, or devotional verse.

She had the bad luck to reach her thirties with four times as many actresses looking for work as when she'd been born.² The large numbers of women trying the stage had created a glut of performers in London and left Roselle underemployed among those who had lost the bloom of youth. Music halls and variety were putting more women than ever on the stage, to be sure, but those were mostly younger ones, and flashier, who could sing, dance, and pose in skimpy outfits.

Squeezed between aging and the laws of supply-and-demand, Roselle saw prospects in variety. What she could earn there would pay her better than the music halls could, and it would shield her from at least some of the disdain that mere music halls were attracting. Her experience reciting had taught her how to keep audiences attentive and to improve them if they would have it. Dacre almost certainly blessed the Empire engagement by helping to arrange it.

Under the Empire's stage lights, between late January and early April 1890, she gave four different turns. They came, in order, in Alfred, Lord Tennyson's poem "Rizpah" for her first week and his better-known "Charge of the Light Brigade" for her next three. Then she changed into the American Frank Gassaway's "The Dandy Fifth, A Story of the American Civil War" for three more weeks, and finally into Henry Savile Clark's "The Siege of Lucknow" for her last five. She might have acted in a short play or in several. Her giving recitations owed at least partly to the Empire's having been prosecuted not long before for producing plays in defiance of the theatre's longstanding monopoly.

Roselle can't have missed hearing about the Empire's legal troubles. She knew that solo turns would cost her less than more fully cast and mounted pieces. "Rizpah," like each of the turns she used after it, had her onstage alone. Speaking lines from Tennyson made for a momentous occasion, though not for boisterousness of the kind variety was known for. Tennyson's Rizpah was the namesake of a Biblical character stricken with loss. The actress played the reincarnated Rizpah, "worn with sorrow and harrowed with grief" and looking ghoulish, actually, wearing "garments of a semi-mourning type" and a wig of "long grey, almost white hair hanging round her face."³ Regulars at the Empire would have been struck by the difference between the Laureate's somber lines and the frolicsome turns on the bill. More in the ordinary line, for instance, was Geraldine, "as graceful as she is beautiful" hanging from a trapeze. Tending toward the excessive were production numbers called "Dream of Wealth" and "Paris Exhibition," both of them alive with leggy Italian dancers.⁴

It's possible that some of the Empire's better-heeled patrons had seen Roselle's Rizpah before at smaller, more genteel gatherings. Those who hadn't seen it would have been startled by the sight of Roselle's playing a "half demented mother . . . rescu[ing], bone by bone . . . the remains of her darling son [a thief], hanged in chains at the cross-roads."⁵ Grimness and moralizing offered variety a way to purify itself. Moral laxity, for anyone who cared to look, lay in the number of easy women ranging the Empire's auditorium and the squads of continental chorines filling the stage with their colorful gear and shining bodies.

"Rizpah's" wallop had *Era* praising Roselle for silencing "the chatter of a music hall audience."⁶ The reviewer felt, though, that she could do even better by showing some more "simple and sympathetic subject" to replace "Rizpah." *Stage*, another weekly trade paper, suggested that she try "a more stirring selection" such as "a transparency of a battlefield, or the saving of a crew from shipwreck." Although the Empire was paying Roselle to build its trade from the middle up, its management saw no reason to let its less moneyed patrons move on.

"Rizpah" and its preachifying commanded an upper-end traffic that drew more of the lower end with it. "Aristocratic men and

women" were reported coming to see her, and they were "only too delighted to be supplied with those 'variety' features of entertainment" that the staid theatre couldn't provide.⁷ Roselle had chosen a character lowly enough to flatter anyone, and who expressed mother love at its fiercest. Still, "Rizpah's" creepiness put off some of the diehards whose reactions the critics registered. Aiming to broaden her appeal, Roselle chose her next turn along more uplifting lines.

She stuck with Tennyson and spent the next three weeks reciting "The Charge of the Light Brigade." The poem would have been familiar to many as a bitter requiem for the doomed British cavalry who'd met their ends in the Crimea. For her third selection, after "The Light Brigade," she touched on battle again in "The Dandy Fifth," about the American Civil War. It let her strike a more triumphal note for calling up events at a more comfortable remove from her crowds' deepest sympathies.

Her last recitation, and the best received, came in "The Siege of Lucknow." Its author Clark was only a hack playwright, not in Tennyson's league. But he had written a tribute to empire tailored not only to Roselle's strengths but to the range of patrons at the Empire Varieties who had dreams of glory in India.

"Lucknow" has a woman speak to her fiancé in the British garrison's last stronghold. She can hear hordes of Indians howling for their blood. She has been reduced, in the words of one reviewer, to "praying to her lover to save one shot for her heart, so that if all fails, they can at least die together." "But in the midst of all" as the critic recalled it,

a sound of [bag-] pipes is heard. Nearer and nearer they come. "It is the sound of the Pibroch [made by bagpipes]," deliverance is at hand, the marching of the Scots coming nearer still is a reality—their piping becomes louder and louder, the steels of the gallant fellows glitter—the waiting ones knew that "The peril was ended, that sorrow was past—they knew they were saved at last!"⁸

The Empire's management had laid on bagpipers to conjure up the Scottish saviors. The house orchestra joined the music that swelled with Roselle's voice to ring down the curtain, rescue and victory at hand.

Stirring stuff it was. *Stage* praised “the wisdom of the Empire management” in featuring such a noteworthy actress to show the one true Empire so stoutly defended. The turns around hers weren’t inspirational in the same way, but they didn’t need to be. For her first week in “Lucknow,” Roselle was joined on the bill by Loie Fuller among others. An American pioneer of the modern dance, Fuller wore a white satin robe to sing and glide her way through “Rock-a-bye Baby” and the old Scottish air, “Coming Through the Rye.”

The themes “Lucknow” sounded were as familiar as any Scottish air. The Empire was shown to prevail, and a gallant warrior’s wife-to-be was saved from the fate worse than death. Roselle upheld Britain’s imperial mission at a time when, as Martha Banta has written, “More often than not, the types that stood for national values were female.”⁹ Showing nations as women softened charges of exploitation and advanced more nurturing images. Any hostile colonized people could be shown to be aggressors, different in kind from the heroic British women joining the men to keep savagery in check. The women’s steadfastness made them more worthy of defending, at home and abroad.

“Lucknow’s” curtain-line, “The banner that never goes back,” called up a Union Jack that flew over more parts of the world than ever. Clark’s mention of the banner, with the sight of it onstage, rallied Britons of every stripe, poorer and richer, women with the men, and children, too. All British subjects had a stake in helping their small nation do its duty where the sun never set.

Those who had made the Empire on Leicester Square into variety’s centerpiece were also using Roselle toward more parochial ends. The London County Council, then in the earliest months of its existence, was considering the proper role of variety around the metropolis. Killjoys on the council were intent on cutting variety back. The council’s membership was dominated by urban reformers who wanted, at the least, to enforce a more wholesome tone. Concern for what measures the council might take had variety’s chief entrepreneurs seeking attractions to protect their halls from moral censure and legal penalties.

Roselle did so well that she had *Era* credit the Empire Varieties for pointing audiences in the right direction. The correspondent

ventured to hope that

not only the Theatres Committee but many of the members of the Council itself will be paying patrons (at their own expense) of the London music halls during the ensuing year; and not only elevate the audience and the entertainment by their presence, but speak with unbiased minds of what they have actually seen and heard. This will be better for all parties than a system of perpetual passes which might easily lead to abuse.¹⁰

Variety, according to its dearest partisans, was ready to stake its standing on the culture it commanded rather than on the bribes it could bestow.

The Empire's management was hoping to draw leniency or even endorsement from London's civic officialdom. Such initiative would have satisfied many of "sensible people" who, as *Era* had written a while back, wanted only to

divert their minds from politics and business alike [and not] to have the opinions of the daily papers reproduced in verse and flung at their heads by a music hall singer. . . . persons who go to a place of amusement to be amused, are too sensible to care to proclaim their private opinions by applauding senseless rubbish with a political meaning.¹¹

Roselle's job was to help hold the fort by serving up bromides about the scourge of crime, the sanctity of love, the glory of God, and devotion to country, honor, and duty—always duty.

The reception she got showed, among other things, how essential consensus or its promise was to the conduct of empire. Whenever fresh ways of inspiring the faithful could be found, they were treasured and multiplied. And so it fell out at the Empire in the heart of London during the winter and early spring of 1890.

* * *

For all the services Amy Roselle performed, she never returned to variety nor flourished anywhere else. She didn't give way easily. While she was still in mid-engagement at the Empire and considering how

best to follow “The Charge of the Light Brigade,” she had Dacre turn down an offer from a rival variety house. She’d made “previous arrangements,” or so he said.¹² This may have been true, or he may have been driving up her price. The couple may have feared that her giving too many turns would compromise whatever future they saw for themselves in the theatre.

Whatever was driving the Dacres, they spent most of the rest of their careers together. They’d been known for requesting outlandish salaries before her engagement at the Empire, and it had cost them jobs. They found work not long after Roselle left variety when they gave a “recitation entertainment” entirely on their own—without benefit from any bill around them—at Prince’s Hall near London’s Piccadilly Circus. Even the bustling location didn’t bring them much notice.

Toward the end of 1890 Dacre turned up in New York, suing an American star named Mrs. Leslie Carter for firing him. “My name was to be featured in the bill,” he complained to the *New York Times*. He was bitter, he said, because “After selling out everything in England I came to this country, only to find that the part for which I was cast was a mean insignificant one.”¹³ Roselle joined Dacre in the ‘States, but they couldn’t pick up enough work for the two of them together. They returned to England, though not before flopping in what proved to be their last venture in the ‘States, in a play called *Love and War*. They barely made it home after taking charity from a band of Yankee actors who threw a hasty benefit in their honor.¹⁴

Restored to London, they rented a theatre to star themselves in an American play called *Man and Woman* in which they can have done no better than to break even.¹⁵ They lowered their fees, but not enough, according to *Stage*,

and even then strove to preserve the letter of them. That is to say, the old terms might figure in an agreement, but by private arrangement a portion of the joint salary might be returnable to the manager. This pathetic admiration and exaggeration of each other’s abilities had much to do with the failure of the Dacres to obtain engagements.¹⁶

A trip to Australia proved conclusive. It was not to be the happy ending they were looking for.

Their tour of the antipodes faltered so badly that they felt as if they'd been cursed. Feeling stranded and alone, they gave way to despair. *Era*, whose readership included many of their friends and colleagues, saw that

all the particulars of the Dacre-Roselle tragedy tend[ed] to show premeditation and the existence of a complete understanding between husband and wife. Both, in fact, had spoken to their friends from time to time of contemplating suicide.¹⁷

Roselle found her relatively picturesque end at the hotel she'd made her last stop in Sydney. There,

Mr. and Mrs. Dacre remained in their bedroom throughout the morning of Sunday last [November 17, 1895]. In the afternoon their bell was rung violently, and the servant on entering the room found Mr. Dacre with his throat cut, but still alive. His wife lay on the bed in her nightdress, apparently asleep. Examination, however, showed that she was dead, with two bullet wounds in the breast. . . . The wounds showed medical knowledge.

Dacre, the one with medical knowledge, wasn't so lucky. When he was discovered,

he gasped out, "Oh, my God, what agony!" and died. A doctor was at once sent for, and on arrival saw that Dacre had been struggling to throw himself on the bed beside the body of his wife. . . . At the inquest held on Monday the jury found that Amy Roselle had died by her husband's act, and that Dacre had committed suicide.¹⁸

This version of the Dacres' final hours joined other accounts in removing Roselle from any responsibility for her own death, even after the writer conceded that she appeared to have shown "complete understanding" in the manner of her demise. She'd taken a sleeping draught, the story went, before leaving her husband, the former physician, to shoot her in the most humane way before dispatching himself as best he could, which wasn't very well.

Eerily, this scenario resembled the one she'd played out in "The Siege of Lucknow." Sadly, this time, there was no expeditionary force to come to the lady's aid. Arthur was left to play the savior Amy needed. He made himself into something like the unseen soldier in "Lucknow," ready to kill his beloved rather than leave her to the fate worse than death. The fate worse than death for the Dacres in Australia was not rape, but their fear of humiliation and disgrace. Arthur was left, like Romeo, reaching out to his beloved with a last, dying, dutiful flourish.

Such images leaped straight from the stage, of course, and from what had grown into a teeming literature around suicide. The prevailing wisdom held that Roselle was heroic for the devotion and submissiveness she'd shown her husband. Dacre, on the other hand, was unmanly, unstable, and cowardly for taking his own life and hers. His dragging himself toward her body to redeem himself did make an arresting image. But it could never have matched the interest in Roselle's cleaner death, which put her more in the news than she'd been for some time. She had to die, and in quite the striking way, to reclaim the attention that had followed her through the provinces during her prodigal phase.

One account of the funeral mentioned the "small packet of English earth" she'd carried with her should she die far from home. She'd left instructions that the dirt be spread over her grave "so that she might be buried in English soil."¹⁹ It would have mattered little, to all but the few who remembered, that she'd been raised and shown her quality first in Wales.

Her apparent innocence in folding Wales into England confirmed—to English eyes at least—that there was the *United Kingdom* that Henry Savile Clark had used the crack Scottish regiment in "Lucknow" to show. Roselle's last reading at the Empire evoked a nation united and worthy of the empire that had given London's leading variety establishment its name.

Amy Roselle entered variety in pursuit of fame and riches. She ended her life in an outpost of the Empire. In her last hours, locked to Arthur Dacre in their "previous arrangements," she saw no reason to look for anything other than the quick death that ended a career that had left her evermore haunted by the promise of her youth.

Her legacy wasn't one to celebrate. It showed how high the cost could be of seeking a public eye that tracked ambition to the grave.

* * *

Amy Roselle died a failure in her own eyes. For her, in the end, it had not been enough that she'd applied herself to upholding the Empire global at the Empire Varieties. Her variously inspiring turns helped draw crowds mixed enough by class to have pundits speaking of the gatherings in Shakespeare's time.

Variety's adherents believed that lowlier patrons stood to gain by soaking up what culture serious acting could supply. The common people's betters, said the party of tolerance, would do well to cultivate the broad-mindedness that came with communing with laborers.

Oscar Wilde was best known among the betters to frequent variety. He was drawn there, to the Empire especially, because he could see more polished acts than the music halls could offer, and racier ones than theatres would allow. He was only one of the men of means who could be seen slumming at the Empire, where it was easy, it seems, to take stimulation from sources other than the stage. The presence Wilde lent the proceedings showed a certain good humor on his part, snob that he was, and ever so mouthy.

Mixing the classes was one thing but degeneracy was another. Moralists decried the young men consorting with the well turned-out prostitutes that Leicester Square was known to attract. Reformers fulminated against the illicit contact that variety houses seemed to foster more than theatres did. The party of propriety pressed its case hardest against the Empire, known before and after Roselle played there for ladies of evening who strolled through what was called the "promenade" that took up the main lobby.

Less talked about were the men consorting with other men, or boys. Wilde himself, of course, may have been among those seeking dalliance in the upper galleries, or if that was too risky for his blood, winking at the goings-on there. Such a clientele and the concerns it raised helped keep serious actors, and all but a few respectable women, away from the Empire and variety at large for nearly a decade after Roselle came and went. Meanwhile, men of means,

young and not so young, and the boys and the ladies for hire, kept the Empire and other varieties nearby flourishing as precincts of abandon.

During the summer and early fall of 1889, within months before Roselle turned up at the Empire, London authorities had closed the hall down, not for being a den of vice but for staging productions to rival the theatres'. The closing of the Empire had all the leading variety houses cozying up to customers with more savory connections than Oscar Wilde could claim, on the whole. Variety needed people other than invert, pimps, and showpersons to stand up to some of London's most zealous Christians.

There were Christian zealots in New York City, too, and in other American cities. But mixing social classes didn't seem so subversive where egalitarianism might just as well have been embossed on the national seal. What had taken to calling itself "refined" vaudeville felt no need to bear up under the punishment its British counterpart was absorbing in the crossfires of class. The entertainment freshly named "vaudeville" had seen its audiences grow larger *and* more mixed by class, gender, and age after smoking and drinking were prohibited there in the 1880s. Any patron who entered its portals had to maintain a certain decorum to protect the sensibilities of the women and children in the house.

Vaudeville's trappings of respectability didn't persuade every pious American of its good intentions. Many guarantors of culture called it mindless. Vaudeville replied, in among other ways, by tapping the theatre as variety had done. The theatre fought back by warning actors that their reputations would suffer from giving turns. Foiled, partly, by such doom-saying, vaudeville went hunting for attractions from the grand opera, operetta, ballet, and classical music. It found them.

Across the water, Roselle had shown how stage actors could raise the level of the entertainment and the quality of the assembly. But respectable turns of the sort she'd shown demanded a restraint that sometimes provoked patrons to heckle, or what was worse, to take their patronage elsewhere. For popular entertainment to be of the people, truly, it had to build audiences, not narrow them as the theatre was doing to protect its fairly freshly hatched legitimacy.

Vaudeville recruited actors not only to enlarge its viewership, but to plunder what was still its major rival among entertainments. The word “vaudeville’s” vaguely French derivation—the mere sound of it, really—offered a dash of pretension to spice up all the slapstick and the schmaltz.

In Maurice Barrymore (1849–1905), vaudeville found a man on whom to hang its refinement. He knew how to play the gentleman in life as onstage. Amy Roselle had drawn only a few thousand Londoners, at most, on her own account, and probably few tourists, if any, to see her at the Empire. Barrymore had star quality. He would stand as the cynosure of any bill he joined.

He’d been touring America for more than two decades. His eminence extended beyond the stage and those who’d seen him there. The impression he’d made on New York society, even before taking up his acting career in the ‘States, had put him in line for celebrity as it emerged in the newer land. He hadn’t become as celebrated as he’d hoped to do, given his talents. Vaudeville, he thought, might give him the boost he needed, or at least tide him through some tough times.

Barrymore was known to have pursued the bubble reputation more than anything else—unless, of course, it was the pretty ladies, including stars, whom he bedded before, during, and after his marriage to America’s own Georgiana Drew, from one of the nation’s leading theatrical families. Acting had come naturally to him, and he never showed it the devotion Amy Roselle did, or his own wife for that matter. Nor did he have a stage parent to drive him from the outset. Quite the contrary. He came from a family dismayed at the thought of one of theirs acting for hire.

Born in India as Herbert Blyth, the man who became Maurice Barrymore claimed ancestors of some means from England’s County Essex. His father had gone out to India as a young surveyor before spending most of the rest of his life yearning for the gracious existence of an English country squire. In India, the senior Blyth had found other winters of discontent after his first wife, Herbert’s mother, died bringing the boy into the world. The father had a hard time thereafter in giving his son the benefit of the doubt.

When Herbert was eight, his father remarried and shipped him back to England. The measure was taken at partly for the sake of the

boy's education, and partly for his safekeeping around the time of the Sepoy Mutiny, in which the siege of Lucknow was only a single element. In England, the boy eked out an uneven education at Harrow, the Blackheath Proprietary School, and for a single undistinguished year, at Oxford. Still as Blyth, he fought his way to the all-England amateur middleweight boxing championship.²⁰ Boxing had been refined recently by the Marquess of Queensberry, who made it respectable for young swells such as Herbert. Championship in hand, Blyth carried some small recognition when he decided to try the stage. Out of respect to the family name—his father was mortified at his choice of profession—the young man who'd been christened Herbert Arthur Chamberlayne Hunter Blyth chose the moniker "Maurice Barrymore." His father disowned him anyway. Not long after, the father died, though not before being persuaded to restore his prodigal son's patrimony.²¹

Barrymore had advantages besides his legacy. He was highly companionable and very good-looking. He had a fine body, wore nice clothing well, and filled the stage with an animal grace (see figure 1). For the first two years of his career, he played a round of mostly upper-crust roles through the English provinces. He found that he was only one among a number of young actors of breeding to enter what had long been a rogue profession.

It's not clear how or whether he intended to resume acting on landing in America in 1874. He did try the stage there, and advanced to stardom fairly quickly. Still he craved something that would be more gratifying. Few on the stage or anywhere could rival him in ease, volubility, or wit. Once he'd settled into his new name—he was "Barry" to his friends and lovers—he spoke in ways that, even with a little slippage, sounded mellifluous to Yankee ears. He flourished in romantic roles of title, standing, and military rank. By the early 1880s, he'd put himself near the head of the most accomplished British expatriates and native Anglophiles in the American theatre of his day. He'd made himself a literary man, too, writing plays as vehicles for himself and the actresses he admired and adored, including Georgie Drew Barrymore, an important player in her own right and under her maiden name.

In 1897, the novelist and critic William Dean Howells saw fit to complain that America lacked "society in the rich, full, English