

1869 in Stages

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Mark Houlahan

English Programme, University of Waikato.

My question in this paper is very simple. If you went to the Theatre in Aotearoa/NZ in 1869, what could you see? How were theatre goers in 1869 entertained? Indeed I toyed with subtitles, such as Maximus/Russell Crowe's "are you not entertained?", from *Gladiator*; or thought of borrowing the title from *That's Entertainment*, MGM's 1974 homage to its own glorious history of Hollywood musicals.

There's a rich tradition of pre-contact *iwi* performances (as Charles Royal, among others, have shown), but here by "entertainment" I will mean the tradition of commercial performance which British settlers brought with them from the 1840s onwards. If you paid your money, how were you amused? By 1869 there were venues for such entertainments in Dunedin and in Auckland, fitfully in Wellington and Christchurch, in Thames and also in Hokitika on the West Coast.

In the 1970s Peter Downie produced lively general histories of performance across New Zealand in the colonial period (up to and beyond the First World war); and good

ardent simplicity of Romeo makes for a difficult part for young actors to achieve, so that's one of the many 1869 performances I would love to tardis back in time to see.

In 1869 you could also have attended several recital evenings where specific acts or scenes from Shakespeare (such as, for example, the scene from *The Merchant of Venice* where Shylock lends Antonio 3000 ducats in return for his iniquitous bond). These would frame an 1869 episode in what I think of as *meme Shakespeare*, the selection of highlights from Shakespeare's repertory that has been engrained in cultural memory, and which is recognisable as Shakespeare far from the theatre, the study and the classroom.

By my reckoning then, 1869 offered 7 Shakespeares, 6 tragedies (the reviewers and advertisers clearly consider Richard 3 to be a tragedy (DSC 14 Dec), and just one comedy, *Much Ado*, performed in Auckland in February, and which featured Mrs Robert Heir "In her splendid impersonation of Beatrice." (DSC March 1) Under the category, "Shakespeare", (or Shakespearish), I would also include the burlesque *The Enchanted Isle* staged in Dunedin in October (with Anna Forde as Ferdinand), which was probably a cut down version of Dryden and Davenant's 17th century rewrite of *The Tempest*, and the afterpiece *Kate and Petruchio* reported in Dunedin both by the *ODT* and *The Evening Star*, which I also assume would have been a condensed version of Garrick's rewrite of *The Taming of the Shrew* which was one of his most celebrated roles.

than any other playwright. In 1869, however, this was not the case, as the records show that at least nine plays by Dion Boucicault were performed, which is not so surprising, given how prolific Boucicault was as a dramatist and how popular his stage works were in London. Thus you could have seen Boucicault's famous Irish drama, *The Colleen Bawn* (so much a precursor to the Abbey theatre's cultivating of the lilt of Irish English on stage), both in Auckland and in Christchurch; and continued Boucicault's Irish themes by taking in shows of *Ireland as It Is* and *Andy Blake, or the Irish Diamond*. You could have seen his early hit comedy *London Assurance* at least twice; and thrice have seen his slave drama, set in the American South, *The Octoroon*, an example, wrote an Auckland reviewer of the "sensational class of drama in the writing of which Dion Boucicault so eminently excels." You could have seen have returned for his meta-theatrical *Life of An Actress* at Dunedin's Princess Theatre on Friday July the 23rd. Boucicault's adaptation of the Dumas novel *The Corsican Brothers* was staged in Auckland in February, and his translation of the French melodrama *Don Caesar de Bazan*, set in the Hapsburg court of Charles II in the late 17th century. appeared in December. In the contemporary theatre, revivals of *London Assurance* are really the only vehicle for giving Boucicault "live" to the theatre going public. In 1869, however, New Zealand audiences were offered material from across the full range of Boucicault's output, demonstrating all the ways his plays mattered to London audiences. The fondness for Boucicault repeats a pattern visible in the records of performance in Australia as well. Later in the 1880s Boucicault took full advantage of this local taste for his works, and bought his own company to Melbourne, and touring extensively, and lucratively, throughout both Australia and New Zealand, though Peter Thomson notes that he died in 1890, "quite poor."

Republic at the beginning of the 19th century was “always a great favourite with playgoers.” (DSC 14.1.69) The taste for exocitised pathos was further served by the performance in Auckland in May of the two last acts of *Leah the Forsaken*, set in 17th Germany, where the love between a Jewish woman, and Rudolf, a Protestant farmer, is forbidden. This was shown twice in Auckland, in February and in May, first with Mrs Robert Heir, “in her grand impersonation”, and then with Mis Cleveland, who, a reviewer noted, “played her part beautifully. She has acquired [the reviewer continues] a wonderful power in this play.” (DSC 29 May 1869).

A popular variant on the sensation play was the stage adaptation of a sensation novel, hence the *Daily Southern Cross's* excitement at announcing in February the first NZ performance of Elizabeth Braddon’s “sensational novel”, *Henry Dunbar* which Tom Taylor had adapted into a “celebrated sensational drama.” McIntock, in the *Encyclopaedia of New Zealand* describes a Dunedin performance of Braddon’s even more celebrated novel, *Lady Audley’s Secret*, in an adaptation by Julius Vogel, which had premiered in Dunedin to great acclaim 6 years earlier in 1863 (Dalziel). The taste for stage sensation centred around a beleaguered female heroine was very well served in Auckland with the four chances to see *East Lynne or Lady Isabel’s Shame* in February, June, October and December. Mrs Henry Wood’s novel was frequently adapted for the stage, firstly by William Archer in 1864. In February, Mrs Robert Heir was again thought a standout as the saintly heroine. She...

reminded Auckland audiences that the play “had a tremendous run at the Haymarket Theatre, London” (DSC Feb 9); and then praised John Hall’s impersonation of the “wild and uncouth yet kind-hearted and manly American”, Asa Trenchard, who crosses the Atlantic to claim his inheritance. The play features a senior comic role which was often well received, Lord Dundreary a “brainless English nobleman”. Audiences were also charmed in May and November in Auckland with stagings of Tom Taylor’s *Masks and Faces*, a rare example of an historical comedy, set in the late 18th century theatre, with the part of the actress Peg Woffington designed to showcase the panache of the actor impersonating her.

The main play on the bill, of course, never completed the evening. Theatres adhered to the custom of playing an afterpiece, musical, farcical, or burlesque. As an obsessive playgoer (I saw my first professional show from memory 45 years ago when I was 14), this is the most alien part of the theatre in 1869 to grasp, as we are so accustomed to theatre nights which are tonally consistent: absurdist theatre one night, murder mystery the next. As one example, there were frequent performances in the 2nd half of an evening of *Faust D.D.D.D*, a “grand operatic burlesque”. On April 24, the *New Zealand Herald* noted that “the audience repeatedly testified their approbation of the various local hits and songs.” (NZH April 24). *The Otago Daily Times* was dismissive of Henry Talbot’s October evening of Shakespeare hits: “We confess a dislike of these *olla podridas* of acting, but suppose they are occasionally necessary from a business point of view”. (ODT Oct 4). By the 1860s, *OED* shows, the Spanish term for a mixed stew of vegetables and meat had come to mean “a hotch-potch, a medley.” Effectively what the records show is

