

THE RIVALS: TWO GEORGIAN THEATRE MANAGERS

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ABSTRACT

At the beginning of the nineteenth century the respective managers of the Portsmouth Theatre and its neighbour the Gosport Theatre engaged in a professional rivalry in attracting personnel to their companies, vying with each other in mounting spectacular productions and, above all, in securing audiences for their theatres. The article examines the contrasting working methods of the two managers, setting this against the background of the Georgian provincial theatre, and relating the then current repertoire as well as the system of engaging 'star' performers to the two managements. Whilst the article centres on the twin towns of Portsmouth and Gosport, some consideration is given to the rationale governing the disposition of theatrical circuits and the establishment of a particular repertoire for a given audience, unexplored areas of study heretofore.

In 1737 the then Prime Minister, Sir Robert Walpole, after discovering his cabinet had been lampooned on the stage of a minor London theatre, attempted, by an Act of Parliament, to stamp out all theatrical performances, whether in town or the provinces, beyond those given at the Theatres Royal in Drury Lane and Covent Garden. In spite of the penalty of a fine of £50 upon conviction, numerous wandering bands of players travelled, often on foot, from one town to another giving for a few nights at each illicit performances, paradoxically with the permission of local magistrates, in whatever temporary accommodation could be found. Barns in the courtyards of inns often served as makeshift theatres, as happened at the Angel Inn, Andover (WNB). The arrangements made for the audience were comfortless; boxes were constructed from bales of hay and wagons slung from the rafters offered gallery space. The routes traversed by these barnstormers laid down vestigial circuits. By 1788 it was evident that the country theatre was an estab-



Fig 1. The interior of the Portsmouth Theatre by 'Phiz' (Hablôt Knight Browne).

lished institution awaiting legitimization. That year, at the instigation of the Earl of Radnor, a patron of the illicit theatre in Salisbury, a more liberal Act was passed allowing provincial managers to perform for up to sixty days a year in any one location. Thus managers were offered a measure of security which encouraged them to set up permanent playhouses at strategic points on their circuits. By the end of the eighteenth century the majority of English towns, and many a larger village, boasted of a theatre in either a converted mill or malt-house, or, more resplendently, a purpose-built



Fig 2. Gosport High Street c 1890, showing Thornton's theatre building on the right of the picture.

playhouse with an interior decorated by the theatre's scenic artist in green and gold.

So it was that an eighteenth century theatre manager became responsible not for one, but for a group of theatres, around which, at regular intervals, he toured his company. Additional to maintaining the buildings, selecting the repertoire and rehearsing the plays, was the care of the theatrical personnel, a duty to which managers made a response varying from tyrannous despotism to paternalistic benevolence. The challenge of this work developed the character of the man, with the result that managers were viewed as highly idiosyncratic individuals, and in time multifarious anecdotes clustered around them. It is the purpose of this article to look at two such country managers, Thomas Collins and Henry Thornton, who functioned during the latter part of the eighteenth century and the early years of the nineteenth in the neighbouring Hampshire towns of Portsmouth and Gosport, that their methods of organisation and their relationship with each other may be compared. In this process a fascinating insight into a microcosm of the Georgian theatre may be gained.

The Portsmouth Theatre, erected in 1761, was situated in the High Street on a site which later gave way to the Grammar School. This was managed by Thomas Collins. The building was small, containing at ground level the pit, surrounded by a tier of boxes, above which was the gallery. Oil lamps lit the stage, whilst candles in a central chandelier cast a gloomy light on the auditorium. This little playhouse later gained a permanent place in theatrical history in Charles Dickens's novel *Nicholas Nickleby* with his description of Vincent Crummles's company performing there. An impression of the interior may be gained from a drawing by Hablot K Browne ('Phiz') showing a somewhat thin audience reacting to Miss Snevellicci's benefit (Fig 1). Dickens insisted on accuracy in Browne's depiction of the key scenes in the novel, with the consequence that, although the drawing was made nearly eighty years after the building was put up, the intimacy, as well as the economy, of the auditorium may be appreciated (Kitton 1882, 14).

Although some distance by the land route but only a short ferry ride away in Middle Street, Gosport, stood another theatre, this

managed by Henry Thornton (Fig 2). The building still stands in the present High Street, and is now used, as so many eighteenth century theatres were, as a warehouse, hidden behind a shop premises (125 High Street) which in former times was the manager's lodging and the theatre coffee-house. An archway, now blocked, allowed patrons to pass through the buildings fronting the street to the box-office lobby. This playhouse, with its interior ordering, was much the same as the Portsmouth Theatre in size and layout. It enjoyed the advantage of being newly built in 1796 however, and drew to itself the plaudit, 'so complete and elegant a little theatre we never remember to have seen' (HC 19 November 1796). Collins rapidly retaliated by enlarging the lobby of the Portsmouth Theatre, extending the boxes and decorating the interior (PG 21 and 28 November 1796).

The circuit which Thomas Collins built up was compact. He originally established himself at the Vine Inn, Salisbury, and gradually acquired premises in Southampton, Portsmouth, Winchester and Chichester. Coaching routes allowed easy access from one town to another. His first theatres were in converted buildings: that at Winchester, for example, was constructed in a hall above the Meat Market on the edge of the Close, a drawing of which may be seen in the City Museum, Winchester. Later he constructed replacement buildings. Of these the theatre in Chichester still stands at the intersection of Theatre Lane with South Street, and is used today as a shop premises; whilst in Winchester the appropriately named Sheridan House in Jewry Street stands on the site of the playhouse which opened in 1785 with a performance of *The Rivals*, and remained, in a gutted form, until the beginning of the 1980s (Hare 1958, *passim*).

Thornton's circuit was acquired and run in a more elaborate fashion (Fig 3). His first aim seems to have been to set up a chain of theatres running the length of the Bath Road. These were situated at Windsor, Henley, slightly off the beaten track, Reading, Newbury and Hungerford. When plotted on a map

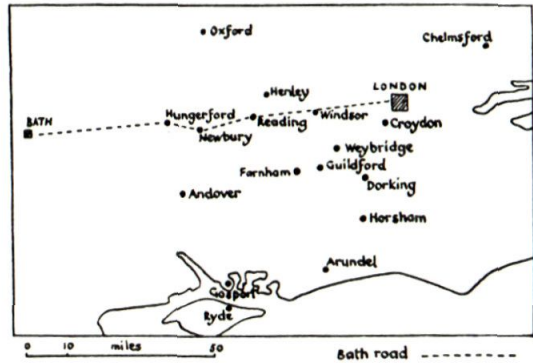


Fig 3. Henry Thornton's circuit of theatres.

it becomes evident that a number of these are roughly thirty miles distant from each other. This was a convenient length for a journey by coach on a winter's day, and it may have been that Thornton had in mind not only an easy ride by public transport between each theatre for the performers, but also the opportunity of catching passengers stopping overnight in a strange town as potential members of the audience. Thus it seems that Thornton was a methodical manager carefully planning the locations of his theatres.

A group of playhouses, relevant to this article, was set up in Gosport, Horsham, Arundel and Ryde. As a pattern was observed in the establishment of the Bath Road circuit, it follows that one may expect to discover this, too, in the disposition of the Hampshire and Sussex theatres. A study of Thornton's life reveals that, once established as a manager, he often wished to return to the haunts of his youth which may account for his choice of Gosport as a base. As a young man he had held his first position of authority in the early 1780s under George Mattocks at the Portsmouth Theatre where he served as prompter, a task more akin to company manager than the title today suggests. By the end of the decade Thornton found the managerial post at Portsmouth securely held by Collins. Although other minor theatres had occasionally opened in the town, Thornton was presumably unwilling to risk a direct confrontation. He seems to have searched along the coast for a

suitable opening. However, in the nearby towns Trotter was capably managing the theatre at Worthing, and at Chichester and Southampton Collins held sway. Gosport was the nearest convenient town, and so it was that, in spite of earlier unsuccessful attempts to establish regular theatres there by other managers, including Collins, Thornton opened his first temporary theatre in 1791. By 1796 he had established the permanent base in Middle Street. A second purpose in selecting Gosport as his base was a possible intention to use the town as a sailing point to a group of theatres he hoped to establish in the Isle of Wight, of which that at Ryde was the only one eventually to prosper.

Henry Thornton arrived in Gosport at a favourable time. The Gosport Bank was in the process of formation; assemblies and balls were held regularly in the coffee-room of the White Lion Hotel, and an attempt was made to establish the town as a cross-Channel port linked to Havre de Grace. This new social awareness may have been developed further by the regular winter seasons at the new theatre.

In order to complete this picture of Thornton's theatres mention must be made of three other branches of the circuit. The market towns of Weybridge, Farnham and Dorking, and the county town of Guildford, each held one of his theatres. In the face of almost insuperable opposition from the Vice-Chancellor of the University, Thornton managed to open two theatres in Oxford; for both he used indoor tennis courts off Blue Boar Lane. Paradoxically these belonged to Merton College and to Christ Church. The former, a more spacious building than the majority of Thornton's theatres, still stands. Geographically removed from all of his other theatres was that at Chelmsford, a pleasant building standing on the banks of the River Chelmer, surrounded by a garden. In old age Thornton spent much of his time in this town, entrusting some of the duties of management to other hands. Here he was recognised and respected as a man of substance and at his death in 1818 he was buried in the churchyard of St Mary's, now the Cathedral (Ranger 1978, 130-136).

The respect with which both managers were treated when they reached maturity is significant. This was a far remove from the notion propounded by the 1737 Act, that a provincial player was no more than a wandering vagabond. By the early years of the nineteenth century the manager held the responsibility for the livelihood of a large company of performers, as well as such servants to the theatre as the stage-hands, artists, costumiers, box-office keepers, cleaners and the candle snuffer. The manager was, too, a man of property, leasing one of the town's largest buildings in a pretigious central location; he might even own the property himself, as Thornton did at Reading and Windsor. The respect managers had gained by the last decade of the eighteenth century denotes a rapid rise in their social status.

Having described the formation of the circuits, it is opportune to look in closer detail at the management of each of the companies. Both managers were family men and the nucleus of each company consisted of the family members. Thomas Collins's wife and their son regularly appeared on the stage. Collins was blessed, too, with a partner, James Davies, with whom he worked for over thirty years. Davies's daughter, Henrietta, married Thomas Collins's son of the same name. Although Collins senior spent his life in the provinces, his son moved to London at the invitation of Richard Sheridan in 1802, and appeared with great success for several years at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, at that time managed by Sheridan himself. Here the theatrical portraitist, Samuel de Wilde, made a painting of the lad in the role of Slender in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, which now hangs in the foyer of the National Theatre. On looking at the portrait one is reminded of a description of the young actor given in the *Hampshire Chronicle*:

The grand requisite for acting is vivacity, and this Mr C. possesses to an uncommon degree. He seems to have a wonderful flow of animal spirits, and fully to feel in himself the different sensations which it is his business to excite in others (11 October 1802).

It is pleasant to know that an actor who often entertained Hampshire people is thus commemorated at the National Theatre.

Likewise Thornton's company embraced his wife and her brother and sisters. The manager's sons, educated at Gosport Naval Academy, also appeared. The Academy fostered drama by providing the young students with a 'play room' at which public performances were occasionally given and in 1805 one of the Thornton boys not only played Polydorus in the *Thermopylae* but also recited the epilogue (TJ May 1805). Two of Thornton's sons-in-law, Arthur Hatton and Edward Barnett, became useful additions to the company. Hatton was occasionally a performer at the Little Theatre in the Haymarket. It may have been this London experience which prompted him to undertake a number of highly polished, spectacular productions on behalf of his father-in-law. Edward Barnett regularly acted and maintained the management of some of the theatres after Thornton's death, making his base for much of the time at the Guildford Theatre which he did not relinquish until almost the middle of the nineteenth century. Late in his career Thornton attempted to shed some of the administrative burden by enlisting a partner, a Mr Dawson, whom he met at Chelmsford. The success of the Collins-Davies partnership was not replicated here. Three months after their agreement Dawson decamped with the actors' salaries, and the company was forced to put on a special performance at which an appeal for funds was made (CC 4 October 1816).

In addition to the family members each company employed a number of long-serving performers, many of them husband and wife teams. Each performer, family or otherwise, specialised in a number of stock roles. A young fellow such as Thomas Collins, junior, would perform light, heroic roles: thus in *Netley Abbey* by William Pearce, Collins took on the role of Gunnell, a sparkish sailor who was responsible for capturing a French frigate. His description of the fight, with its many technical terms, would have delighted sea-faring audiences. Henrietta Davies, also a singer who frequently

performed in local oratorios, would pair with her husband-to-be as the light heroine of comedies, operettas and farces in brief after-pieces such as *The Deserter*. In this she played Louisa, 'a piece of singing which would have done credit to a London theatre' (HC 17 November 1794). Older members of the company would take on such roles as the mature flawed hero (de Monfort and Macbeth are examples) and the villain (the Earl Osmond in *The Castle Spectre*). There were stock parts for older women, too. Some found roles as comic servants (the Nurse in *Romeo and Juliet* was played by Mrs Thornton) or in a range of mature tragic characters such as the title role in *Adelgitha* by Matthew Lewis.

Each performer specialised, too, in a vaudeville routine: a selection of these was given in the interval between the main and the after-piece. Bills of the day promised displays of horn-pipe dancing, the Newmarket Jockey Dance performed in boots and spurs, tight-rope walking or a recitation of William Collins's 'Ode on the Passions' complete with stylised attitudes to portray the emotions. The fare may not have been sophisticated, but it was varied.

By the end of the eighteenth century most provincial actors were earning between eighteen shillings (90p) and one guinea (£1.05) per week. Salaries in both the companies under consideration approximated to this amount (Rede 1827, 9). One's wage was augmented, at least once during the stay in the locality, by the takings at a benefit performance. The beneficiary would choose his play with the role he was to perform and select his cast from other members of the company. Thus a minor actor was given a chance to take on a major role. He would then advertise the performance, print or hand-write special commemorative tickets and sell these to influential people in the neighbourhood whose presence would act as a draw to the *hoi polloi*. Takings at the box-office would pass to the actor receiving the benefit after the expenses of the house, such as the cost of candles and payment of the playhouse servants, had been met. It was customary for the manager to take

his benefit on the last night of the season, members of his family on the preceding nights and other performers prior to these reserved nights (Troubridge 1967, *passim*).

The benefits advertised at the Gosport and Portsmouth theatres are a reflection of the plays which actors deduced would offer a lucrative return. Those at Gosport for the spring of 1800 serve as representative examples. In April Mrs Aikin decided on *Speed the Plough* by Thomas Morton, a play recently written which gave a picture of rural life and manners. She advertised in the *Portsmouth Telegraph* that tickets could be obtained from 'Mr Earl's, Seahouse Lane', an indication of where she was lodging for the season. This was followed by Fitzgerald's benefit, a 'New Historical Tragedy', *Adelaide*, by a Miss Alderson. Topicality was achieved by the beneficiary reciting 'The Pretty Girl of Gosport', possibly lines of his own composition, after the main piece. Bristow followed this with *The Enchanted Island*, an adaptation of *The Tempest*. Several nights later his wife staged *The Deserted Daughter* by Thomas Holcroft, a writer whom Thornton in his youth had met and dismissed as an illiterate. Thornton's evaluation was unreliable: Holcroft became a prolific playwright and translator, amongst whose writings was numbered the famous nineteenth century melodrama *A Tale of Mystery*. In the interval of Mrs Bristow's benefit her husband rendered a song written by himself, 'The Wonderful Bell-Ringing Portsmouth Ghost'. Members of Thornton's family rounded off the series of benefits: his daughter, Mrs Barnett, chose *The East Indian*, a new play by Lewis whose melodrama *The Castle Spectre* had three years earlier proved to be an amazing money-spinner in London and the provinces. The last advertised benefit of the season was that of Arthur Hatton who staged the spectacular music-drama *The Virgin of the Sun*, a sequel to the highly successful play by Sheridan, *Pizarro*, which he had mounted in Gosport earlier that year. The full houses which the earlier entertainment had drawn must have prompted him to work on this new production also set in Peru (PT 21 April -19 May 1800). Even from so short a list

of benefits as this, it is observable that the performers chose new plays with a commendable degree of frequency rather than becoming reliant on old favourites. However, sagacity dictated that the benefit plays should be by established authors whose previous work had held a strong attraction for the audience.

In addition to these benefits for the performers each company held benefit nights for various charitable causes. The Napoleonic Wars were taking their toll of the seamen of coastal towns, with the result that the recipients were often the widows and children of men killed. As the war progressed there was a necessity to relieve the privations of English prisoners-of-war in France and benefits were held for these. Sometimes sadness gave way to rejoicing. To celebrate festivals Thornton had been in the habit of placing coloured candle-lanterns on the ledges of the Theatre Royal at Windsor, a custom he brought to Gosport, so illuminating the building when news of a victory at sea was announced.

Each manager augmented the permanent company by employing a number of London performers for short seasons ranging from part of a week to a couple of months. Collins relied on very few visiting artists, unlike Thornton who was constantly drawing them to Gosport. It is possible that Thornton, having introduced a visitor from London to one of his proximate Bath Road circuit of theatres, would then be in a position to persuade him to play on the coast, a twenty-four hour coach journey from London. Collins had no similar easy catchment area on his circuit. Nevertheless it is possible to look at several of the performers who did arrive in Portsmouth.

Collins had befriended a young Miss Smith whose widowed mother was a member of the Salisbury Comedians. The daughter enjoyed a meteoric career, progressing from Salisbury to York, from there to Bath, and so to London where she appeared at Covent Garden on a three-year contract at a salary of £18 a week. In a brief reappearance with Collins's company she played such parts as Catharine in David Garrick's version of *The Taming of the Shrew*, Jane Shore in the play of the same name and

Lady Randolph in *Douglas*, a role made famous in her generation by Mrs Siddons (HC July 1805). Collins was friendly, too, with John Quick. In 1799 Thornton engaged him to appear at Gosport and he went from here to Portsmouth. Quick was the originator of Tony Lumpkin in *She Stoops to Conquer*, but twenty-five years later he was specialising in the part of Lovegold in *The Miser*. He possessed a highly mobile face and a voice which made the aged characters he was portraying seem to be whimsical creations (*Theatrical Dictionary* 1805, n.p.). A talented visitor to several of Collins's theatres was Signor Moritz with his Phantasmagoria. This was a primitive back-projection device which threw pictures onto a gauze. The gallery of representations included 'the Prince of Wales, the Duke of York, Louis XVI which changes to a skeleton, Lord Nelson . . . the Ghost Scene in *Hamlet*, Macbeth and the Witches, the Witch of Endor, etc., to conclude with the Striking Likeness of His Majesty and God Save the King' (HC 30 August 1802). One of the disadvantages of the Phantasmagoria was the necessity to dim the auditorium in which, for dramatic performances, the candles were normally left burning. Moritz was an engaging performer with a number of other skills. He could 'balance an Egg upon the top of a Straw! . . . Also a musket and bayonet fixed, the point resting on his Forehead without any deception'. Another display based on the growing application of scientific apparatus to the stage, which again made its way round the circuit, was a series of 'Hydraulic Experiments'. The puff in the *Hampshire Chronicle* described in advance the effect:

The different devices in the above Experiments formed by Real Water: the Prince of Wales feathers, most correct; Globes, Umbrellas, etc., etc., and the ascending and descending of a Ball by a small jet of Water, is esteemed by the admirers of the Fine Arts to have the most pleasing and astonishing effect . . . (20 May 1805).

Although these performers lent variety to the shows at the Portsmouth Theatre, visitors

were not common. Thomas Collins relied on the talents of his own company, strong enough to draw a regular audience, and a respectable repertoire of plays and operettas was the standard fare.

Henry Thornton had a wider set of theatrical connections than Collins, and he frequently introduced visitors to his audiences; indeed it was rare for his company not to include a famous performer. The 'Hydraulic Experiments' were shown at his theatre, too, as was the Phantasmagoria. Thornton was so taken with the latter that he asked Moritz to repeat the showing on several occasions and the manager wrote a rhymed address which he recited whilst the images were projected. This fascination with the apparatus led Thornton to invite another projectionist, Monsieur Leonardi, to demonstrate 'dead or absent persons' which appeared full length on the gauze (HT 5 April 1802). Appropriately enough, the showing was followed by a performance of the ghost-ridden play *Hamlet*.

The Miss Smith who played in Collins's theatre came to Gosport over a decade later to perform. Whilst the roles were much the same, the performance was tainted with vulgarity:

The features of Miss Smith are certainly admirably adapted to delineate the passions of the 'green-eye'd monster' [in *The Jealous Wife*]. The forced smile and the rolling eye, excited in the breasts of the audience those feelings, which it was her wish to inspire. . . . In her pretended hysterics in the last scene she was too violent; her rage denegated into coarseness (TI September 1813).

One performer who appeared throughout her working life on Thornton's circuit was Dorothy Jordan, a radiant comedienne with an infectious chuckle. In her early years Mrs Jordan established herself in a series of transvestite roles. She continued to present these occasionally after she became the mistress of the Duke of Clarence, later William IV, but gradually the number of her performances decreased. Jilted by the Duke, she was forced

to return to the stage in her latter years. Thornton welcomed her to Gosport in 1812 where she played, amongst other roles, Lady Teazle in *The School for Scandal*, a part she had portrayed on the London stage. It was, declared the newspaper reviewer, 'delineated with that peculiar strength of colouring, intelligence and vivacity of expression which in the present state of dramatic representation is above compare' (HT 30 November 1812). Mrs Jordan enjoyed her three weeks in Gosport and wrote to her son George: 'I have met with great kindness and civilities here from everybody both on and off the stage' (Aspinall 1951, 241).

In his youth Thornton had met various members of the famous theatrical family, the Kembles. Possibly John Philip Kemble, the acting manager at Drury Lane, and his sister Sarah Siddons, were too important for Thornton to invite to his provincial theatres, but their brother, Stephen Kemble, made a number of visits to the circuit. His inordinate weight, said to be almost thirty stone, pointed to the suitability of him playing Falstaff at Gosport. The performance earned him commendation: '... his figure, aided by just discrimination, has given him a decided superiority over his competitors' (PT 8 November 1802).

The turn of the century was the time for Juvenile Phenomena to appear at London and provincial theatres. Realising their commercial worth, Thornton took an interest in these. In January 1805 the renown child actor, William Henry West Betty, played at the Gosport Theatre to great acclaim such roles as the Earl Osmond in *The Castle Spectre*, Achmet in *Barbarossa*, Romaldi in *A Tale of Mystery* and Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*. This was but the first of a number of visits to the town. Critics varied in their appraisal of the boy. There was an incongruity in the sight of a frail twelve year old lad leading a cast of adults. His voice was shrill and piping, but his small stature was powered with a dynamism which commanded attention (Bisset 1804, 19). Of this set of performances the critic of the *Monthly Mirror* wrote: 'His powers of memory, energy and docility, unequalled in juvenile

memoirs, form the true eulogium of this young man' (August 1804).

Betty suffered many imitators. To mention but one, the following year a child described as 'the Comic Infant Roscius' played in Gosport. Unlike Betty, who had the power to sustain a season, the Comic Infant lasted in town but a week (HT 18 May 1805). A fictional Juvenile Phenomenon played later, across the water, at the Portsmouth Theatre. This was Charles Dickens's creation in *Nicholas Nickleby*.

The passing procession of actors, tight-rope walkers, singers, dancers and illusionists brought a welcome variety to the daily round at the theatre; it held a drawing power for Thornton's audience and gave the impression that the manager was in touch with a vast throng of celebrities who would brave the journey southwards from the metropolis in order to play in this small south coast theatre.

Thornton was not above filching people who worked for Collins. William Cave serves as an example. This Winchester-based artist had decorated Collins's new theatre in Jewry Street prior to its opening in 1785, as well as later painting numerous scenes for him. In the first year of the opening of the Gosport Theatre Thornton had enticed Cave into painting a drop-curtain depicting the ruins of Rome and other scenes for him, although he employed a scene-painter of his own, 'Little' Harvey. A more serious example of poaching was the gain of Collins's principal tenor and light actor, Stanwix; possibly he offered him a higher salary than he was getting at Portsmouth. Dejected, Collins recorded: 'Stanwix has gone over to the enemy' (HC 21 January 1797). A difficulty in replacing him meant that the company was then unable to stage numbers of comedies and light operas. A further advantage to Thornton was that Stanwix was a mason: it was customary for masons to support *en-bloc* those theatres on certain nights in which one of their fraternity was performing. Soon Stanwix was singing masonic songs in honour of their arrival.

A distinctive mark was set on each company by the manager's own approach to creating a role and his individual acting style. A pam-

phlet entitled, *Candour: the Real Merit of the Salisbury Comedians*, published in 1767, describes the style of Thomas Collins's acting as a young man. He was a small person, animating his figure with a quirky energy which went down well in comedy, although it proved to be a disaster in tragedy:

Next Collins comes, I know him by his strut—

A hero quite, the scene at Lilliput.

See how he grinds his teeth and strikes his head,

And on his toes he scorns the earth to tread;
Such monstrous acting never can be just,
Too oft repeated, it must give disgust.

Unfortunately in the last years of his life Collins suffered from a growing disfigurement to his face caused by cancer. This cut down the number of his appearances, although spasmodically he was to be found on stage until the final couple of years. Not an idler, he willingly employed himself in the box-office selling places, and thus provided himself with an opportunity to meet his public more frequently. Few personal reminiscences exist about this actor. He was a private person, quietly industrious, confining his public life to his five theatres.

In contrast, however, theatrical gossips collected a host of anecdotes, many apocryphal, about Henry Thornton. The story of his shirts took on many forms in verse and prose and it was even transposed to other managers (Egan 1892, 83). Elizabeth Thornton packed her husband six shirts for one of his tours. Thornton put on all six and as the outermost one became soiled he peeled it off to reveal a clean one beneath. Many of the stories devolve on his absent-mindedness and his inability to learn lines. James Winston, an actor turned writer, who had no love for Thornton, accused him of neither reading nor learning his parts, but of inserting words from a favourite play into whatever role he was performing (Winston 1805, 18). Certainly Thornton paraphrased the text. A harrowing narration of Sir

Philip Blandford's crimes in *Speed the Plough* by Thomas Morton found its climax in the words:

...with one hand I tore the faithless woman from his damned embrace and with the other stabbed my wretched brother to the heart.

In Thornton's performance the text was transmuted to:

I tore the faithless woman from his damned embrace; with one hand I stabbed my wretched brother to the heart, and — what do you think I did with the other? (*Biography of the British Stage* 1824, 205).

An incident at Gosport occurred when he played Biron, the young hero of *Isabella* by David Garrick. The complicated plot was to be unravelled by his handing a letter to his father when at the point of death. Walter Donaldson described the circumstances:

...he died without giving up the letter which unravels the plot; and as he lay prostrate in the last scene, one of the performers on the stage whispered to him, 'Mr Thornton, the letter, the letter.' Thornton then rose up, took the letter out of his bosom and said, 'One thing I had forgotten through a multiplicity of business. Give this letter to my father; it will explain all;' and he lay down again in the arms of death (Donaldson 1881, 113).

This habitual disdain for both lines and moves rubbed off on the other members of the company and for some years the presentation of plays was slipshod. Winston highlights this in his account of a performance in the Andover Theatre where a new comedy was about to be presented:

Mr Thornton, examining the audience through the usual fissure in the curtain, observed a book in the hand of a gentleman in the boxes, which he could not but conjecture to be a *copy* of the *play*. What was to be



Fig 4. Cut-out figures for a toy-theatre production of *Timour the Tartar*.

done?... With such a potent evidence of their incorrectness, it was impossible to proceed; time elapsed; the audience were clamorous: the fiddles weary.... The spectators (the few who had assembled), were informed ... that the *prompt-book* having been unfortunately mislaid, was the sole occasion of this unusual procrastination. The gentleman alluded to, politely offered to accommodate them with the loan of his, hoping it would prove a tolerable succedaneum. This was the very thing they were in quest of; the evidence dismissed, the performance was carried on with the utmost vivacity (Winston 1805, 9–10).

As the eighteenth century waned Arthur Hutton was able to effect major changes in the company's style of presentation. It gained a reputation for productions in which spectacle, massed effect and elaborate stage machinery gave a satisfying evening of wonders. This reached its zenith in 1814 when Thornton

introduced hippodramas into his theatres. These were basically stage plays with interludes in which horses and riders appeared in a variety of battles, stampedes and rescues. There was little danger to actors in a purpose-built hippodrome such as Astley's Amphitheatre in Westminster Bridge Road, for here the pit was superceded by a circus ring, and there was a clear divide between the actors on the stage and the horses. However, in the small provincial playhouses such as Gosport the horsemen had to perform on stage amongst the actors, with the result that accidents from flying hooves could occur only too easily. Thornton's acquaintance, Lord William Pitt Lennox, who saw the horsemen at the Reading Theatre, remarked that the horses appeared to move with a greater rapidity than in the amphitheatre, and so increased the excitement for the spectators.

Bluebeard and *Timour the Tartar* were the two plays which Thornton presented at Gosport with an equitation troop. The first play, writ-

ten by George Colman the Younger in 1798 was revived in 1810 at Covent Garden with the horse interludes added. So great was the acclaim for the horses that Matthew Gregory Lewis wrote *Timour* in 1812 (Fig 4), incorporating in the piece similar interludes. A sense of the excitement, not confined to the London presentation, can be gained from Thomas Dutton's enthusiastic report:

Such clapping, such hurrying! such prancing, such neighing! such fighting and such playing! – the rams-horns of Jericho were a mere penny-whistle, a paltry Jews-harp, in comparison to the delicious noise, hubbub, roar, vociferation, rout and confusion of this delectable evening (Dutton 1814, 18).

So confident was Thornton of the success of this venture that he allowed no half price, and, even so, the newspaper was able to report that there had been 'overflowing houses' (HT 24 January 1814). Success with the horses was not to continue. Thornton had divided his company into two sub-sections. By the autumn of the following year these were playing in Reading and in Oxford where the performers were joined by the Equestrian Troop, again presenting *Timour*. The actors had suffered enough from the animals; an hour before the show was due to start they attempted to bargain with Thornton for compensatory payments. Immediately Thornton discharged them. In order to keep the Oxford Theatre going he transferred the company from Reading to appear with the horses. But this was the last season in which the troop arrived (JOJ 16 and 23 September 1815).

As Collins had had to make a gradual withdrawal from the stage because of ill health, so too did Thornton. He suffered badly from gout which prevented him attempting many roles. One of Thornton's last benefit performances was in 1815 in Gosport after which his daughter and her husband, the Barnetts, organised the company and gave the rhymed addresses which Thornton had instituted. In 1817 a final break was made as Thornton prepared to go into retirement: it

was at Chelmsford that he played the part of Sir Christopher Curry, the benign father, in George Colman's Polynesian romance *Inkle and Yarico*. At the end of the performance he advanced to the footlights and made his formal farewell. Possibly the words had been repeated at his other theatres; certainly the sentiments must have been felt as he journeyed around the circuit for the last time:

Nor gout, nor pain, can keep me from your view,
When I reflect how much I owe to you. . .
But now the power – the acting power is past,
Leaving one glow – one only glow at last –
A grateful glow, that kindles at the heart
That feels an impulse it would fain impart
(CC 29 August 1817).

A passing mention has been made of some of the plays staged in Thornton's and Collins's theatres. Some consideration of the repertoire at these theatres would not be out of place. Most of the plays of the period are neither read nor seen nowadays and little would be served by merely listing titles; instead it seems appropriate to comment on the most popular works which were staged. There was no substantial difference between the repertoire of the London patent houses and that of Gosport and Portsmouth. A time lapse occurred before the plays reached the provinces, but this was usually not more than four months, during which time the managers either purchased the published text or attempted to gain a manuscript copy from either the author or the prompter of the London theatre.

Revivals offered a staple fare. Of these a limited number of Shakespeare's plays were regularly presented. Mention has been made of *Catharine and Petruchio*, a version of *The Taming of the Shrew*, which was often staged as an after-piece, and of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. *Twelfth Night* was revived by Collins's company and given a rare performance. Of the tragedies *Macbeth*, *Othello* and *Richard III* offered portraits of the disintegration of villain-heroes, an entertainment enjoyed by the Georgian public.

Revivals of several of Sheridan's plays were also popular. Occasionally *The Duenna* was given an airing; more frequently, however, *The Rivals* and *The School for Scandal* were staged. Sheridan worked against the taste for sentimental comedies, yet alongside his plays the archetypal sentimental drama, *The West Indian* by Richard Cumberland, was regularly presented. The gothic drama, too, tore at the emotions of the audience. This genre is represented by *The Castle Spectre*, often to be seen in both theatres. The castle of the title is Conway, then remotely situated, and the plot revealed the iniquities of the Earl Osmond as he immured his brother for sixteen years in the castle dungeons, murdered his sister-in-law and lusted after his niece. Chases through corridors and subterranean passages led to the impression that vice was continually in pursuit of virtue, with a view to possessing and corrupting it. The highlight of the piece was the appearance of the spectre, the murdered Evelina, to Angela her daughter in the oratory of the castle. Provincial theatres, with their limited budgets and their small stages, found the transformation from Angela's apartment to the chapel difficult to achieve and so a projection of Evelina's spirit sometimes replaced the flesh and blood representations. So popular was the play that performances were given in Gosport and Portsmouth during the same weeks.

Heroic tragedy may be represented by two frequent revivals: *The Grecian Daughter* by Arthur Murphy and the older play *Douglas* by John Home. The first play is one of the few in which a woman is the principal figure, although the text offers scant opportunities for histrionic fireworks. In the lifetime of the two managers Sarah Siddons made the part her own; John Galt, writing in 1831, noted that the play was 'one of those pieces which young actresses think necessary to go through before they consider their reputations established' (Galt 1831, 2, 125). *Douglas* had first been performed in 1756 and was constantly revived during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Home wove his plot around the often used theme, satirised by Sheridan in *The Critic*, of a parent's discovery of a long-lost

child, and the latter role on several occasions offered an opportunity to re-invite to Gosport Master Betty. His visit in 1807 drew full houses with the result that the engagement was extended (HT 30 November 1807).

Towards the end of the eighteenth century productions in the London theatres tended to become more spectacular. With their limited resources it was difficult for provincial play-houses to keep up with this; nevertheless plays were staged which called for inventiveness on the part of the stage carpenters and scene painters. Prior to the introduction of horses into the piece, Collins staged *Blue Beard* on his circuit and advertised the visual delights which were to be witnessed:

Act I – the Oriental Procession of Blue Beard. The view of a Turkish Village and an extensive mountainous tract of country beyond it. After some time the Sun rises in a beautiful and transparent Manner. – Distant Music is heard; and Abomelique seated under an elegant Canopy, on a LARGE STUPENDOUS ELEPHANT (HC 15 July 1799).

Following the convention established at Drury Lane, the elephant was a mechanical one; indeed, the machinist there, Alexander Johnston, used to declare that he could create a far superior elephant to those hired out by Pidcock's Menagerie in Exeter Exchange (Foote 1829, 122). Collins's audiences were not disappointed in the sumptuous display, although some allowance must be made for provincial pride in this report written after the presentation in the Salisbury Theatre:

The splendid pageant of *Blue Beard* has been brought out in a style that does credit to the liberality of the Manager. Those who have seen the popular piece in London would scarce be persuaded it was practicable in a country theatre in so close a resemblance. Blue Beard's Castle, Corridor, and the Blue Chamber by Mr Jeboult do great credit to the artist and are allowed fully equal to the same in town (SJ 4 February 1799).

For once Collins had mounted a production

before Thornton: it was on at the Portsmouth Theatre during February 1799. Not to be outdone, his rival quickly advertised that the play was in rehearsal at Gosport, and by the end of March it was to be seen there (PG 1 April 1799). Another spectacular production which both managers staged in the following year was *Pizarro* by Sheridan; a more detailed reference will be made to this later.

Thus the repertoire was wide-ranging, reflecting metropolitan taste. Although it is possible to discern in some neighbouring theatres a distinctive repertoire for a separately identifiable audience (Ranger 1982, 61–84), much the same plays were staged at the Gosport and Portsmouth Theatres. Indeed, sometimes the same play was performed at each theatre on the same night. It is noticeable, though, that Collins's company tended to stage more revivals of old-established comedies than Thornton's, an indication of the audiences' conservatism at Portsmouth and other theatres on the circuit. Thornton's habit of dividing his company into two, or at times three, sections made for a wider choice of repertoire as each specialised in certain plays, which then transferred. Collins, for his part, maintained his company as a single entity. When he played in Portsmouth, apart from the occasional leasing for a lecture or recital, his other theatres were closed.

The composition of the audiences on which the two theatres drew is a matter for conjecture. Neither manager enjoyed a distinctive following; indeed, the frequent statement in newspaper advertisements, 'Boats will attend for the convenience of persons who wish to cross the water', points to the interchangeability of members of those audiences. That they were mainly forces personnel was only to be expected with Portsmouth a naval base and Gosport a victualling yard. The local newspapers regularly listed the groups which chose plays and made block bookings: amongst these were the officers at the Royal Hospital at Haslar, the Gosport Fusiliers, the Gosport and Alverstoke Yeoman Cavalry, and the Loyal Corps of Artillery. Rarely do civilian and aristocratic names appear.

The interior of each playhouse indicated the various strata into which society was divided. In the boxes, for which a charge of three shillings (15p) per seat was made, were to be found army and naval officers, titled and monied people. Traditionally the pit, at two shillings (10p), was filled by the merchant classes, although in these two coastal towns many forces personnel were to be found there also. The gallery, for which a charge of one shilling (5p) was made, at Gosport and Portsmouth was filled with sailors and apprentices. John Bernard described the spirit which reigned amongst the sailors in the Plymouth Theatre and his words are equally applicable to these Hampshire playhouses:

The pit [the sailors] called the hold; the gallery, up aloft, or the maintop landing; the boxes, the cabin; and the stage, the quarter-deck (Bernard 1830, 2, 129).

The women in the play became the 'frigates' with their 'stems and sterns'.

Reports on the decorum of audiences are contradictory. Charles Dibdin recorded that he was delighted by the attentive reception he received at Collins's Portsmouth Theatre:

I own I always dread to occupy the theatre there, for I had conceived that in a seaport where it cannot be but that vice and infamy must be found, a playhouse would exhibit every sort of vice and quarrelling. I never was so much mistaken in my life. An assembly room, regulated by a master of ceremonies, could not be better conducted. It is true prostitutes were seen there in plenty, but there was a great space set apart for them, where they were obliged to conform to the rules and orders, or be turned out. They did not dare to bar up the lobbies and insult modest women. Better discipline was never observed (Dibdin 1801, 2, 373).

On the other hand, whilst playing at the same theatre Dorothy Jordan wrote home to her son:

I shall be glad when this engagement is over – part of the audience are shocking. There is not a word of the play to be heard. This is a wretched company and I have consequently more trouble and fatigue (Aspinall 1951, 241).

Mrs Jordan was not young at the time of this appearance and, somewhat unwisely, she had attempted to resurrect some of her earlier transvestite roles. The audience mocked. Later a complaint appeared in the newspaper:

...we trust that an example will be made of a certain [section] of the audience, whose senseless noises and often shamefully indecent expressions insult and disturb the respectable part of the audience (HT 30 November 1812).

Collins had, in fact, engaged the Peace Officers to stand guard inside the building, but they seem to have been ineffective in keeping order.

Edward Cape Everard reported (Everard 1818, 104 and 136) that when much shipping was in Portsmouth, not only was the house noisy, but the stage became dangerous with salvoes of apples, oranges, hot potatoes and quart ale bottles flying past the performers. The audience was gripped by performances of Shakespeare's tragedies, and some kind of quietness ensued; but any hint of wild living on the stage brought out the worst in the gallery. During a performance of *The School for Scandal*, when the shutters opened to reveal Charles Surface sitting at home carousing amongst his friends, sailors shinned down the pillars and leapt onto the stage to join in the conviviality. Several years later, on joining Thornton's company at Gosport, Everard found the noise and misbehaviour even worse than that at Portsmouth. Constables were engaged by Thornton, too. On one occasion in 1806 a riot broke out, lasting for several evenings, amongst the army and navy officers. Some were arrested and after a court appearance they signed an apology to the manager and contributed £20 to the Patriotic Fund (HT 13 January 1806).

Obviously various factors affected the behaviour of the house. Ships, newly arrived, brought sailors who had been cooped aboard and were now ready to cause noise and disruption. The play, too, had a bearing on the audience's attentiveness. Some performers easily quelled any sign of disturbance; Mrs Barnett, Thornton's daughter, had a reputation for rounding on officers in the stage boxes who made over-loud remarks about the effectiveness of a production. But there were London performers who were unable to deal with the lively wits packed into the cramped conditions of the provincial playhouse.

The early weeks of 1800 afford an opportunity to watch the managers vying with each other in their respective productions of the same play, *Pizarro*, the last dramatic work, and untypically a tragedy, by Richard Sheridan. It was not an original piece. One of the most popular of the German dramatists, August von Kotzebue, had written a version, *Die Spanier in Peru*, of which two English translations were made by Matthew Lewis and Anne Plumptre. Knowing no German, it was from these translations that Sheridan worked.

The plot was woven around the conquest of the Peruvian people by the Spanish commander, Pizarro. A central character was the young native hero, Rolla, who, in the face of appalling odds, political treachery and brutish cruelty, valiantly urged his people to stand fast against the encroaching enemy. The Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, had staged the play as soon as it was written in 1799, giving audiences a spectacular production in which the great tragic actor, John Philip Kemble, played the part of Rolla (Fig 5). It was a definitive performance, and for a number of years actors modelled their portrayal on that of Kemble. The theatrical climax occurred when Rolla rescued the child of Cora, set the lad on his shoulder, and ran with him up the steep face of the precipice in the Valley of the Torrent. Sir Thomas Lawrence captured that moment in a fine painting which is now in the William Rockhill Nelson Collection in Kansas. By January of the following year the Gosport Theatre had mounted the play. Normally a



Fig 5. John Philip Kemble in the role of Rolla (*Pizarro*), based on a painting by Sir Thomas Lawrence.

number of plays ran in repertoire at provincial and London theatres, so that in the course of a week as many as six different plays could be seen. But that convention was broken: *Pizarro* could command a full house in Gosport night after night (PT January-March 1800).

Opportunities for spectacle existed in the rich cavalcade of settings; of these the Temple of the Sun was unsurpassed with its chorus of the Virgins of the Sun entering in procession to sing their hymn, only to be cast in sudden confusion by the news that the Spaniards had declared war. Both the scenes and the massed effect on this small stage were commended by the local paper:

The richness, character and splendour of the dresses, the beauty of the excellence of the scenery, trophies, banners and

appendages could only be equalled by a London theatre (PT 20 January 1800).

The costumes for this production, it was claimed, cost more than £150, and the costumiers, Brooks and Heath, who had dressed the London show, visited Thornton's provincial theatres in order to provide for the company (RM 16 September 1799; JOJ 21 September 1799). Attention to detail of this complexity would have been foreign to Thornton; this was a production on which Arthur Hatton worked. In spectacle he excelled, much to the gain of Gosport.

By February Collins was advertising that he, too, would present *Pizarro*, later in that month. Furthermore, the Portsmouth Theatre was to close for one evening, so that Collins's company could view the rival production. 'From the manner it has been got up,' reported the newspaper, 'we have no doubt of their reaping some advantage from their visit' (PT 17 February 1800). When the Portsmouth production opened audiences were surprised to discover that, at the age of fifty-six, Collins had cast himself in the role of the young Peruvian hero. 'Mr Collins must be sensible,' a correspondent wrote, 'that his age and stature were entirely inadequate to the appropriate representation of the Peruvian leader who is in the prime of manhood and possessing the most athletic energies.' (PT 24 February 1800). One marvels at how the miscasting could have happened. Possibly Collins was tempted by the oratory which Sheridan gave to Rolla: the text was not only poetic to the extent that it contained many iambic feet embedded in the prose, it was also highly patriotic. There were parallels between the plight of the Peruvians awaiting an invasion from the Spanish soldiers, and the people of these English seaport towns who daily anticipated a sighting of Napoleon's fleets crossing the Channel. Rolla's call to arms was an invitation to Hampshire men as much as to the native Peruvians:

You have judged as I have, the foulness of the crafty plea by which these bold invaders would delude you. THEY by a strange

frenzy driven, fight for power, for plunder and for extended rule – WE for our country, for plunder and for extended rule – WE for our country, our altars and our homes. THEY follow an adventurer whom they fear – and obey a power which they hate – WE serve a Monarch whom we love – a God whom we adore.

A further foray was made during March from Portsmouth to see how the Gosport production was developing in the course of the run, only to find that a calamity not unknown in the Georgian theatre had befallen the company:

On Thursday a large party went from Portsmouth and Portsea to a representation of the much famed *Pizarro* of Gosport; but we are sorry to say, they suffered some disappointment as the Spanish leader had evidently made too free with the bottle that evening which in some measure lost the effect of the piece (PT 17 March 1800).

By this date Collins felt he could issue a puff in the spirit of Thornton, and he proudly proclaimed: 'The performance of *Pizarro* at our theatre would do credit to a Metropolitan theatre' (PC 24 April 1800).

Pizarro enjoyed many repetitions during the season of 1800 at both theatres, after which the play vanished from Thornton's Gosport repertoire. Perhaps it was impossible to retain the extravagant spectacle; he possibly sold the costumes and scenes. As with many a spectacle, the show blazed brightly for a few

weeks by which time, comet-like, it had burnt itself out.

From this picture of the two managers who came, year after year as the eighteenth century waned and the nineteenth took up the challenge of warfare and growing industrialisation, to spend the winters in the windswept towns of Portsmouth and Gosport, we gain an impression of two contrasting characters. Collins was in essence a performer, and he reduced his administrative tasks by maintaining a compact circuit of five theatres for which a small, but versatile, company, rarely expanded by the inclusion of metropolitan performers, proved to be sufficient. Thornton, on the other hand, a manager of some ambition, planned a circuit which necessitated long journeys; in order to maintain activity in his theatres he divided his company into a number of sections, augmenting the players by the inclusion of numerous guest performers. The audiences on the south coast differed from these at the other theatres on both circuits. Noisy, irreverent in the Temple of Thespis, unsophisticated, they nevertheless seemed to appreciate the warm welcome which each playhouse offered. Their stages gave audiences a wider view of life than the cramped conditions of ships and barracks would allow. The conservative taste of Royalty limited the offerings at the Windsor Theatre; a degree of sophistication was to be found at Newbury, with the presence of the Margravine of Anspach in her crimson box; but at Gosport and Portsmouth there was housed an audience which vociferously showed its pleasure at the plays presented on the minute stages.

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