

SEMINAR IN THEATRE HISTORIOGRAPHY:
A CASE STUDY OF LONDON THEATRE, 1880 to 1920
Professor Thomas Postlewait
Drama 575A, Hutchinson Hall, TTh, 2:3—4:50, Room 150.

This course—which will focus primarily on the London stage (1880-1920)—examines historical methods for the study of theatre and the writing of theatre history. In our investigations of the history of London theatre in this era, we will consider the ways that theatre historians have constructed key narratives and period concepts for the era (e.g., the "age of Henry Irving," "the age of Bernard Shaw", "the age of the theatre managers," "the epoch of West End theatre," "Victorian theatre," "Edwardian theatre," "the era of operetta and musical comedy," "the age of the music halls," etc.) Among other things, we are interested in narratives about the conflict between the West End theatres and the development of modernism. We also want to consider the two-part divisions between high and low cultures (e.g., West End theatres versus the music halls; upper and middle class audiences versus working-class spectators). What are the historical assumptions and narratives that organize our understanding of London theatre? What are the problems in theatre evidence (e.g., documentation on productions, manuscripts, published plays, newspapers and journals, letters, autobiographies, and biographies)? As we consider these matters, we want to examine social, economic, political, and technological developments that contributed to theatrical practices (e.g., British imperialism, the age of empire, the development of electricity, new architectural techniques, new transportation systems, the economics of theatre careers, urbanization, the arrival of professional advertising, the expansion of newspapers and journals, the actor-manager system, the suffrage movement, nationalism, and war).

TEXTS AND CLASS PROJECTS: To begin, we will read Michael Booth's Theatre in the Victorian Age (1991). It will quickly provide the background and foundation for our course. Then we will read the following biographies: Michael Holroyd's Bernard Shaw (vols. 1 & 2; 1988, 1989), Laurence Irving's Henry Irving: The Actor and His World (1952), and Nina Auerbach's Ellen Terry: Player in Her Time (1987). As we will see, their professional careers provide touchstones for key historical narratives about theatre in this era. We will also take up Jonathan Schneer's London 1900: The Imperial Metropolis and sections of Eric Hobsbawm's The Age of Empire: 1875-1914. These books will help us place London theatre within the larger contexts of social, political, and economic developments, both national and international.

The course will also be organized around key topics, themes, and issues that serve as historical touchstones for the era. Each student will present four class reports on the following topics: (1) the career of a theatre manager of the West-End and neighborhood theatres (e.g., George Alexander, Herbert Beerbohm Tree, Charles Wyndham, Oswald Stoll, George August Conquest, George Edwardes, Mary Moore, Oscar Asche, Arthur Bouchier, Richard D'Oyle Carte, George Grossmith, and others); (2) a key production of a play by one of the new playwrights (e.g., Oscar Wilde, Arthur Wing Pinero, Henry Arthur Jones, Harley Granville Barker, J. M. Barrie, John Galsworthy, Cicely Hamilton, W. Somerset Maugham, St John Hankin); (3) a production of Shakespeare (e.g., Irving & Terry, H. B. Tree, William Poel, Johnston Forbes Robertson, Mrs. Patrick Campbell, F. R. Benson, Granville Barker, Lilian Baylis, Ben Greet); and (4) the career of a woman in the theatre (e.g., one of the actresses, managers,

playwrights, and political activists such as Elizabeth Robins, Florence Farr, Lillie Langtry, Lillah McCarthy, Mrs. Patrick Campbell, Violet Vanbrugh, Madge Kendal, Gertie Millar, Irene Vanbrugh, Lena Ashwell, Marie Tempest, Janet Achurch, Vesta Tilley, Marie Lloyd, Cicely Hamilton, Lilian Baylis, Sybil Thorndike). In sum, we want to understand not only how London theatres operated and changed in the late-Victorian and Edwardian eras but also how theatre historians have written that history. A final research paper is required. The topic is open, but it can be developed out of one of the class reports. Indeed, that is a good idea.

For each student in the seminar I will provide (1) a detailed bibliography on London theatre (1880-1918), (2) a chronology on the annual theatre productions in London, 1895 to 1918, (3) a list of Shakespearean productions during the era, (4) a list of London actor-managers, (5) a file on Shaw's career, (6) a map of central London and the theatre district, (7) a list of theatre couples from the era, and (8) my essay "The London Stage, 1895-1918," which is a chapter in The Cambridge History of British Theatre (vol. 3, 2004).

PLEASE NOTE: I have already purchased eight copies of the three biographies: Holroyd's on B. Shaw (2 vols.), L. Irving's on H. Irving, and Auerbach's on E. Terry. I will gather up extra copies in August, if needed, for we likely will have 10-12 students in the seminar. Please let me know, though, if you already have a copy of any of these three biographies (postlt@u.washington.edu). Otherwise, on the first day of class I will sell the three biographies to you (at a very cheap rate).

In addition, I have placed an order at the U. of W. bookstore for the paperback copies of Booth's Theatre in the Victorian Age, Schmeer's London 1900 and Hobsbawm's The Age of Empire. They will probably be available by late August.

Although this is not a seminar on Shaw's drama, I do urge you to read or re-read some of his key plays, including *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, *Arms and the Man*, *Caesar and Cleopatra*, *Man and Superman*, *Major Barbara*, *Pygmalion*, and *Heartbreak House*. Good summer reading. And if you have never read any of his theatre criticism which he wrote for the journal the *Saturday Review* (1894-1897), delve into some of his reviews from Our Theatres in the Nineties. He was one of the greatest theatre reviewers of all time. And another one of our themes is the rise of the professional theatre reviewer (tied to the amazing growth of newspapers and journals during the last decades of the nineteenth century).

Finally, I recommend that you watch Mike Leigh's film called *Topsy Turvy* (1999), a delightful presentation of the world of Gilbert and Sullivan, who dominated musical theatre in London during the 1880s and into the early 1890s (after which the partnership broke up). Among other things the film captures the character traits of both W.S. Gilbert (Jim Broadbent) and Sir Arthur Sullivan (Allan Corduner), and it features some key theatre figures of the era, including the theatre manager Richard D'Oyle Carte and his wife Helen Lenoir and the great comic actor George Grossmith. The film culminates with rehearsals and the production of *The Mikado* in 1884. In the words of the Penguin film guide, *Time Out*: "Leigh's cast [members] are beyond compare, and the whole bighearted, splendidly droll celebration of the entertainer's lot surely stands among British cinema's one-of-a-kind treasures." The U. of W. library has a copy on DVD.

