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‘One entire nation of actors and actresses’ - Reconsidering the Relationship of Public and Private Theatricals

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‘The rage for dramatic entertainments in private families has increased astonishingly’ announced the *St James’ Chronicle* in 1776, ‘scarce a man of rank but either has or pretends to have his petit theatre, in the decoration of which the utmost taste and expense are lavished’.¹ Although somewhat of an exaggeration, the craze for private theatricals was certainly a dominant feature of late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century culture. Sir William Wynn’s theatre at Wynnstay, Lord Derby’s at Blenheim, the Earl of Sandwich’s at Hinchinbroke House, and Lord Barrymore’s at Wargrave were just a few of the ‘theatres of our people of rank’ which appeared regularly in the papers.² Beyond such ‘bon ton theatricals’ however there were also a number of urban private theatres - including William Fector’s at Dover, and the theatres in Well’s Street, London, and in Fishamble Street, Dublin - which were run by subscription. Unlike the gentry’s private theatres, where the audience was mostly made up of invited guests and where theatrical performances were often part of wider festivities which might include masques, balls, ‘pic-nic’ suppers, and games of cards, the urban theatres offered an evening’s entertainment more analogous to their public counterparts, were open to a broader spectrum of local society, and often operated their own theatrical seasons.³ Private theatricals, it becomes clear, were not only proliferating across the country at the turn of the century, but were also diverse in their nature.⁴

Historically the term ‘private theatricals’ has led to associations with the domestic, intimate, and amateur, and resulted in such theatrical activity being sidelined within a field

largely focussed on the sphere of ‘public’, commercial, professional theatre.⁵ Yet whilst our contemporary use of the term ‘private’ might suggest the binary division of ‘private’ and ‘public’ theatres, there was, as John Brewer reminds us, no fixed definition of ‘private’ in the late eighteenth century.⁶ ‘Private theatricals’, as Ellen Gjervan has noted in a similar vein, signified a number of different understandings of ‘privacy’ including the nature of the place itself and the performance’s accessibility to the general public⁷. Recognising that the term ‘private’ had broader meanings in the eighteenth century than are often considered today, particularly in the wake of Habermas, and that the term ‘private theatricals’ covered a range of different forms of theatrical activity, the historic division between public and private theatres therefore becomes open to debate⁸.

It is to this debate that the first part of the essay turns. By examining what John Brewer has described as the ‘borders or boundaries [between public and private] which repeatedly shift and which are repeatedly crossed’ it explores how areas of overlap and interaction between the public and private theatres problematised the distinction between these two realms.⁹ Arguing that private theatricals were often considered in comparable terms and as part of a wider theatrical network, rather than as a separate sphere of activity, the second part of the essay then examines the challenge this presented for public theatres. Undermining the public theatre’s newly attained professional identity and, on occasion, engaging in direct commercial competition, private theatricals, the essay argues, presented a considerable threat: a threat which was reflected throughout the period in tracts and commentaries which sought to find ways of defining a clear division between these two theatrical realms. Yet whilst such discourse might have sought to reinforce the division of public and private, the relationship between these two realms was rarely clear-cut. And as the essay demonstrates throughout, only by re-evaluating this received idea of the division of public and private theatres can we counteract the elision of private theatricals from theatre

history, and in the process, shed new light on our understanding of the theatre industry as a whole.

The Interconnected Network of Public and Private Theatres

Throughout the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries private and public theatres were part of a thriving and interconnected theatrical network. Rather than being separate from their public counterparts, private theatres frequently attempted to emulate the public mode of performance, whether in the design and building of the theatres themselves, or in the production and advertising of the performances. Often such imitation was achieved by engaging public theatre personnel to assist in a performance's production. Drury Lane's scene painter Thomas Greenwood, for example, was engaged to paint scenes designed by Philip De Loutheberg for the Duke of Richmond's Privy Garden theatricals, and both Mr Cox, the carpenter at Covent Garden, and Tobias Young, the scene designer at the Haymarket, were engaged at Wargrave.¹⁰ Public performers were also brought in to provide advice on acting, staging, and costume, with Mrs Yates, Miss Farren, and Mrs Siddons all assisting at Richmond House, and Mrs Abington at Wargrave.¹¹

Another way of gaining advice on the staging of a play was to watch it in the public theatre. As one anonymous writer notes in 1783, a number of years earlier he had:

Had the honour to perform in that play [*The Fair Penitent*] with his late Royal Highness the Duke of York, and many other persons of distinction, in a private theatre ... his Highness appeared in Lothario; and, before he appeared, he desired Garrick to perform it at Drury-Lane, that he and the rest of the honourable persons might receive some instruction from the performance.¹²

Whilst on this occasion the Duke of York had had some sway with Drury Lane's manager, in the majority of cases private performers did not have such influence over theatrical management. And with managers only announcing plays approximately a fortnight before the performance, there was only a remote chance of a public performance matching the play selected by private players. The benefit system however, where each actor had one performance a year where they could select their own play and where they received the evening's profits, provided an opportunity for private actors to request the performance of plays that they themselves were going to stage. On 31 March 1781 it was therefore, 'at the particular request of some persons of fashion who intend to perform [*Jane Shore*] at a private theatre', that Mr Henderson performed this play for his benefit.¹³ And although there is no evidence for the advantage of this set-up for actors like Henderson, the promise of ticket sales, and the patronage of fashionable society would certainly have been advantageous.

This emulation of public performances on the private stage also extended beyond the main-piece, with the inclusion of interludes, ballets, afterpieces, prologues, and epilogues, mirroring the whole performance experience of the public theatre. Beyond the performance itself, contextual materials also replicated those of the public playhouses. Playbills produced at a number of theatres, including Brandenburgh House, were indistinguishable from those of a public theatre and, in February 1788, Richmond House even produced and sold merchandise: engravings of portraits which had originally been painted for the scenery.¹⁴ It was not only the performers who sought to reproduce the experience of the public theatre: on at least one occasion the audience also replicated elements of their behaviour at public theatricals. In a playbill for the Privy Gardens on 12 January 1795 the audience were warned that 'no persons were to be admitted behind the scenes', a phrase which would be familiar to audiences from London playbills, where managers had long been trying to eradicate the

practice of spectators going backstage. On this occasion it seems, spectators were attempting to replicate this ‘public’ practice, and to gain access behind the scenes of this ‘private’ theatre.¹⁵

Many of the attempts by private theatres to emulate the offering and quality of their public counterparts appear, at least from contemporary puffs and reviews, to have been successful. Performances were praised for having the ‘regularity and propriety that would even have done honour to Drury Lane or Covent Garden’ and for being ‘as complete as at regular Theatres’, whilst a standard commendation for performers was that they ‘excited powers that would have done honour to veterans of the stage’.¹⁶ In making such comparisons it was, of course, the most celebrated and successful performers who were the bar by which private players were judged. ‘The Julia of Miss Wattle was inimitable’ commented the *London Chronicle* on a performance at Freemason’s Hall in 1788, ‘Mrs Siddons could have added few improvements’, praise also lavished on Miss Smith at Lord Grandison’s who, ‘Mrs Siddons alone excepted ... is said to be the *best female performer existing*’.¹⁷ Whilst Siddons was the primary point of comparison for women however, the men were compared to Garrick. William Fector, actor-manager of a private theatre in Dover, was therefore praised for performing ‘with such consummate ability, that the audience ... confessed they did not think it even possible for Garrick to be greater, if even equal, at so early a period of life’.¹⁸

Of course the veracity of such lavish praise is questionable, and with little further evidence on most of these performances there is little to bear out such claims. Many reviews, we must also remember, might well have been written by the performers themselves, as the two-act farce, *Private Theatricals*, suggests when the private-theatre obsessed Lady Grubb composes her own review for a performance to be given later that evening. It will be, she reflects amusingly, ‘so delightful’:

To read in the newspapers to-morrow morning, under the head of *Private Theatricals*, ‘that the tragedy of Romeo and Juliet, at the elegant Lady Grubb’s, last evening, was attended by the most numerous and brilliant assemblage ever witness’d at a thing of the kind ... every thing was in the first stile’.¹⁹

In echoing the language of real reviews, this amusing scene offers a valuable reminder of the tenuous reliability of the newspaper sources which we are largely reliant on when working on private theatricals.

Yet, whilst we must certainly take newspaper reports with a pinch of salt, we must not be too hasty in dismissing the possibility that *some* private theatricals might have achieved a quality comparable to public performances. After all, a number of plays and pantomimes which were written for and debuted at private theatres were subsequently performed by the patent companies. *The Widow of Malabar*, which was a resounding success at Covent Garden in 1791, was probably first performed at Mrs Crespigny’s Camberwell theatre (although there is some dispute over this), and *Blue Beard, or the Flight of Harlequin* which debuted at Covent Garden on 21 December 1791, had previously been performed at Wargrave.²⁰

Audiences were also accustomed to seeing private actors performing alongside their public counterparts. Whether the actors were from local theatres - like Mr and Mrs Clarke, formerly of the Exeter theatre, who performed at Powderham in 1805 - or whether they were from London - like the Haymarket actresses Miss Darell and Mrs Edwards who played with the Kentish bowmen in November 1798, and the Drury Lane and Covent Garden actors who performed at Wargrave in 1792 - audiences were familiar with directly comparing public actors with their private counterparts.²¹

With such cross-overs and interactions between the private and the public theatres, and the possibility that the quality of each might be comparable, the division between these two realms becomes increasingly hard to define. And nowhere is this more apparent than in Lord Barrymore's theatrical practices. In the summer of 1790, Lord Barrymore produced two performances which, both individually and together, teased at the boundaries between public and private theatricals. The first was a performance on 11 August, in which he took to the stage of the Theatre Royal Richmond-Green in a public benefit for the comedian Young Edwin. Dancing in the burlesque *Pas de Russe* with Mr Delpini of Covent Garden and playing Scaramouch in the pantomime of *Don Juan*, in a evening's entertainment which also included the company of Richmond Green, the regular Wargrave performers Captain Wathen and Young Angelo, and the celebrated mimic Mrs Wells of the Haymarket, it was a performance which exemplified the overlapping and interactive nature of public and private theatres and the difficulty in clearly defining the boundary between the two.²² Only one month later, Barrymore teased at this boundary even further when he reversed the engagement, bringing Delpini and a number of Richmond-Green actresses to perform in *The Follies of a Day* at the re-opening of his private theatre at Wargrave.²³ Mixing public and private actors across both public and private spaces, Barrymore's performances in 1790 exemplify the unstable boundary between the public and private theatre.

Private Theatres as Competition for Public Patenthouses

With public and private theatres interacting in these ways however, it was not long before concerns were raised over the threat this posed to the distinctive identity of the public theatre, and in particular to its newly attained identity as a profession. Over the course of the eighteenth century, as Penelope Corfield notes, the number of occupations identified as

professions had been steadily growing, and by 1803 ‘persons employed in theatrical pursuits’ had joined their number.²⁴ Central to this professional identity however was the regulation of access *to* the profession, and the sole control of a superior offering or expertise, aspects which were brought into question by the intermingling of public and private theatres discussed above.²⁵ Equally important moreover, as Corfield has highlighted, in order to achieve this regulation and control, and thereby claim professional status, occupations had to ensure the ‘mystery’ of their work.²⁶ A direct result of private theatricals’ increasing popularity however, and of their overlaps with public theatricals, was that the theatre, and in particular acting, was no longer seen as either specialised or ‘mysterious’. As Richard Cumberland reflected in 1791, whilst ‘the art of acting’:

was till very lately thought so rare and wonderful an excellence ... now the trade is laid open, this prodigy is to be met at the turn of the street; the nobility and gentry to their immortal honour have broken up the monopoly.²⁷

Although exaggerating the numbers of what he described as these ‘new-made players’, Cumberland’s central point, that private theatricals had ‘laid open’ the theatre trade, demonstrates the extent to which private theatricals were seen as having demystified and undermined the idea of ‘acting [as] an *art* ... only to be acquired by the sedulous cultivation of superior talents²⁸’. Previously, ‘perfectly to attain’ excellence as an actor had required, as the actor-manager Thomas Betterton noted early in the eighteenth century, the ‘studious Application of a Man’s whole Life’.²⁹ Actors had learnt their ‘trade’ directly from the previous generation of performers, and were praised, as the early eighteenth-century actor Robert Wilks was in 1733, for having ‘entered *thoroughly* into the Parts, which he *studied* after those *who had gone before him*’.³⁰ Throughout the eighteenth century, whilst ‘nature’

was given some credit, it was primarily through learning from senior members of the theatre companies that actors were inculcated in their trade and learned how to translate ‘natural’ talent into performative skill: a practice which cultivated the sense of ‘mystery’ and specialism essential for professional identity.³¹ Private theatricals however, in operating outside of this hereditary tradition of training, directly challenged the idea that performance was either ‘mysterious’ or specialist, suggesting instead that theatrical excellence was attainable by almost anyone. And as one commentator despaired in 1802, every private performer praised by friends might now immediately ‘think of rivalling Garrick and driving Kemble from the stage’.³²

In challenging the grounds by which the theatre’s recently attained professional identity was defined, private theatricals also presented a commercial challenge to their public counterparts. As Magali Larson notes, professionalisation is the translation of ‘special knowledge and skills’ into ‘social and economic returns’.³³ With the private theatres’ challenge to the former therefore, they also posed a threat to the latter. Of course in many cases this challenge would never be realised, not least because many of the gentry’s theatres were located at a distance from their public counterparts, and/or performed in the summer season when the public theatres were resting. The only direct commercial threat from such theatres therefore, was that the large amounts of money spent on private theatricals - whether the seven hundred pounds spent by the fictional Lady Grubb in *Private Theatricals* or the sixty thousand pounds apparently spent by Lord Barrymore - would reduce the gentry’s financial support for those public theatres which, with the ‘great expense of scenery, decorations, dresses, [and] the large salaries paid to the actors and actresses requir[ed] ample retributions from the public’.³⁴

Yet whilst the gentry’s private theatres might only pose this somewhat intangible threat of co-opting the money that might otherwise have been spent on the public theatre,

urban private theatres were a very different matter. As the *World* noted in 1791 ‘rural mansions in the Christmas and summer recesses are the place and time’ for private theatricals’, yet ‘those who have instituted *their Theatres*, in, or near, the METROPOLIS, have mistaken time, place, and means’.³⁵ Unlike the private theatres of the gentry, urban, subscription theatres, which often shared not only location but also the theatrical season with their public counterparts, could pose a very real and substantial threat.

The potential for a private theatre to compete with an established public playhouse is one which is demonstrated well by events in Dublin in the 1790s. In 1793 a group of Dublin gentlemen, led by Frederick Edward Jones, decided to open up a new, private, subscription theatre in Fishamble Street, specifically in order to compete with, and offer an alternative source of theatrical entertainment to Dublin’s sole, and widely denigrated public theatre, Crow Street. Since 1786 the actor-manager Richard Daly had held a parliamentary *de facto* monopoly over all public theatricals in Dublin and, although he had overseen a couple of successful years, since the 1790s a combination of factors including a public libel suit, disturbances at his theatre in Crow Street, and poor relations with his actors, had resulted in calls for the establishment of a second, alternative patent theatre.³⁶ In holding the monopoly of course, Daly was able to successfully prevent any such public competition. Yet as the monopoly did not extend to private theatres he had no control over the opening up of competition in the form of a subscription theatre. It was this route therefore that Jones and his group of Dublin gentlemen took in attempting to break Daly’s theatrical vice.

From the first performance, on 6 March 1793, the Fishamble Street theatre was a great success, attracting Dublin society as both performers and spectators and, being ‘always extremely full ... [giving] perfect satisfaction to every one but DALY’.³⁷ With such references to Daly, and with praise for Jones’ ‘conduct as manager of this amusement [being] uncommonly lavish’, Fishamble Street was clearly in direct competition with Daly’s Crow

Street, irrespective of their respective labels as private and public theatres.³⁸ For the following three years moreover, this private theatre outperformed the established, public, patent-house with such success that, in 1796, Jones was in a position to successfully petition the attorney-general arguing that Crow Street was no longer a viable theatre. Only one year later, with the public theatre collapsing in the face of Fishamble Street's success, Daly ceded his Crow Street patent to Jones, and with Jones purchasing the theatre itself only three years later, by 1800 the private subscription theatre had fully triumphed over its public competitor.³⁹ Although Crow Street had been in a tenuous position when Fishamble Street was opened, the success of this private theatre in attracting audiences from the patent-house, and the fact that a private manager could outperform his public counterpart to such a degree that he could effect a take-over, highlighted the very real threat that an urban, subscription theatre might pose. Such a theatre, as Fishamble-Street demonstrated, could provide audiences with a viable alternative to a public theatre and, as a result compete with and even outmanoeuvre its public counterparts.

It was understandable therefore that it was on these events in Dublin that the London patent-houses reflected when an attempt was made to set up a subscription theatre in Tottenham Street in 1802. Whilst there is no evidence that this theatre was ever intended as competition for the patent-houses in the way that Fishamble Street had been, the Tottenham Street theatre nevertheless posed a similar threat. Being located only a mile from Covent Garden and Drury Lane, having a capacity of four hundred, offering additional entertainments as balls, cards, and 'pic nic' suppers, and being run by 'persons of the first rank, taste, character, and fortune' including a number of old hands at private theatricals, from its inception this new dilettante theatre was seen as posing a significant threat to the 'rights and property either of the proprietors, managers, or performers of the lengthy established Theatres'.⁴⁰ Looking back to the ways in which Fishamble Street had grown,

commentators were also concerned over the ways in which the theatre might, once established, extend its reach. Concerns that fortnightly performances would become more frequent were accompanied by fears that the theatre would grow in size (even now, asked one commentator, ‘Is an assembly of 400 a *select* number, a *private* meeting?’), and that its support from fashionable society would result in the public theatre being abandoned *en masse*.⁴¹

With this multitude of concerns about how ‘adverse the projected new playhouse, in the fashionable world, would be to the regular theatres’ the patent house managers took a strident approach, turning to the law and arguing that in order to operate the theatre needed a patent or license.⁴² Seeing in the scheme the ‘wish for the establishment of a third Theatre’ the managers drew on legislation only relevant to public theatres and argued that the proposed theatre should be treated in this light.⁴³ As the author of pro-Tottenham Theatre tract, *Dramatic Rights*, aptly surmised, it was a strategy which effectively threatened that ‘if you will not come, for such amusement, to see us perform, you shall not have a theatre of your own’.⁴⁴

It soon looked as though this approach would succeed. With the police magistrates declaring that they would ‘treat all such unlicensed persons according to the rigour of the law’, and several lady patronesses withdrawing in late February, the scheme appeared to be collapsing before it had even had a chance to be realised.⁴⁵ In mid-March however there was a turn-around, and with opposition falling away, Sheridan, the Drury-Lane manager who had spearheaded the campaign against Tottenham Street, proposed to withdraw his objection subject to two conditions: firstly, that there would be a maximum of ten performances per season, and secondly, that there would be no performers who were either paid or taken from existing theatres. In attempting to prevent Tottenham Street from ‘gradually become a regular establishment like our public Theatres’, this final clause, in particular, is significant, and far

more so than either the fact that the scheme's supporters, refusing to comply, went ahead in opening the theatre, or the fact that the venture ultimately failed after only three months.⁴⁶ Less than ten years earlier, after all, and as Sheridan was probably aware, the fact that paid and 'private' actors had performed side-by-side, had been a key factor in obfuscating the distinction between the public and private theatres in Dublin, and a key factor therefore in Fishamble Street's success. And although Sheridan could not know it, six years in the future, in 1808, renewed dissatisfaction with Dublin's public theatre was to see the private Fishamble Street theatre re-opened as direct competition, with the main grounds of its competition being its offering of paid engagements to professionals on all sides of the curtain.⁴⁷ The payment of performers (and other employees), it becomes clear from these examples, was a prime means by which private theatres might challenge their public counterparts. Responding to the Tottenham Street scheme therefore, Sheridan saw that in order to demarcate the private theatre from its public counterparts, and to contain its commercial threat, he would have to assert the public theatre's *sole* rights to employ paid performers, or more broadly, performers with public theatre experience.⁴⁸ Sheridan's refusal to allow such performers to work on the private stage is therefore a prime example of the theatre attempting to maintain its 'mystery', and to regulate its boundaries in order to secure its 'claim to sole control of superior expertise' and the concomitant economic returns.⁴⁹ It is, in other words, a prime example of the theatre asserting its professional identity in response to the perceived threat from urban private theatres.

Defining the Relationship between Public and Private Theatres

Whilst the public debate surrounding the Tottenham Street scheme provides an informative example of the ways in which the public theatres were trying to control their

professional boundaries this was not the first time that such attempts had been made. Since the early 1790s commentators, with varying attitudes towards private theatricals, had been debating the relationship between the public and private theatres and attempting to define the former's professional and distinctive identity. For those in support of private theatres, who sought to negate the threat such activities posed, a popular strategy was to embrace the potential of the private theatre as a school where enthusiasts might learn the skills needed in order to be able to break into the profession. Private theatres, these commentators suggested, were a 'nursery for genius; for the initiation of virtuous and respectable performers; and for the encouragement of those who, like Otway and Shakespeare, can write plays much better than they can act them'.⁵⁰ With the public theatres at the same time being called on to provide 'excellent lectures' and the performers being designated as 'tutors' to private enthusiasts, a mutually-beneficial relationship was envisioned in which the private theatre coexisted alongside and supported the public theatre but, importantly and by offering a stage for 'trainees' rather than fully-fledged professionals, a relationship in which it posed no commercial threat.⁵¹

Those however who felt that private theatricals should be 'cautiously indulged and narrowly confined', as Richard Cumberland did, often sought to separate the professional and amateur more rigidly.⁵² Advising that no professional actor should 'be consulted in dressing or drilling an honorary novice in the form and fashions of the public stage' (23); calling for private theatres to be 'planned upon a model new, original, and peculiar to themselves ... industriously distinguished from our public play-houses' (22); and demanding dramas which were 'purposely written for the occasion' (24), Cumberland, perhaps not surprisingly since as a playwright he was a member of the public theatre profession, envisioned a private theatre which was separate and distinctive from its public counterpart.⁵³ By justifying these propositions, moreover, on the basis that they would protect the private 'performers of

distinction' from the 'unpleasant conditions' associated with the public stage (21), Cumberland also, and rather strategically considering the readership for his tract were likely to be those involved in private theatricals, presented this separation as being for the benefit of the private, rather than the public, theatres.

Like Cumberland, the teacher and writer Vicesimus Knox also emphasised the need to 'protect' the amateur player from the dangers involved in theatrical activity. Unlike Cumberland however, who called for moderation and caution, Knox saw such a range of 'evils' in the 'dramatic mania' that he advised readers to avoid theatrical activity entirely.⁵⁴ Not only, Knox warned in 1787, did 'the time, as well as attention, employed in the preparation for and performance of a play, preclude the due degree of parental attention to a family' but more troublingly, the woman who 'melts into tears on the stage at the sight of woe' would soon neglect her real children because her 'attention to them must be in the retirements of the nursery, where there is no audience to see the tears of sensibility and reward them with applause'. And if this was not enough, with 'beautiful dress, enraptured speeches, [and] tender embraces' private theatricals were also to blame for the 'low state of conjugal felicity and fidelity, in the present age'. Warning that such activities inspire 'ideas of love in the bosoms of those who cannot harbour them without criminality', however, Knox was not simply rehashing familiar anti-theatrical discourse. Instead he subtly adapted it to distinguish between the private amateur and the public professional. Whilst the amateur player was *unable* to control herself, and might be injured by, for example, having to remember the 'shamefully immoral' dialogue of Congreve or Farquhar, the public player, by contrast, was subject to no such dangers. Being 'professionals', as Knox described them, the public players were able to tackle the 'dangers' of performance without being at risk. And, in case the private actor thought s/he might learn these skills Knox laid out a further reason for public actors being at reduced risk: only those 'whose profession it is are less likely to be hurt

by such dialogue because they are labouring in their vocation for subsistence'. The ability to perform 'safely' was intrinsically tied up with the fact that the performer worked for monetary return and not simply out of a desire to perform, an argument which is notable for paralleling Sheridan's 1802 association between being paid and being a professional. With amateur actors being at such unavoidable risk, Knox's position, unlike that of contemporaries like Cumberland, who sought to demarcate the boundaries between the public and private theatres, was that public theatres should be the sole source of theatrical entertainment. Concluding by enjoining the amateur actress to 'be no longer desirous of personating the afflicted parent on the stage but [to] go home and be the good mother in your nursery and at your family fire-side', it was in the public theatres that Knox urged dramatic enthusiasts to spend their time, reminding them, as he did, that 'the pleasure and improvement to be derived from the drama may be obtained without the trouble and expense of supporting and supplying a private theatre'.

Ultimately however, whilst Knox sought to suppress private theatricals, and others, like Cumberland, sought to contain them as distinctive and separate, such attempts were unlikely to translate into material practices. Feeding off, imitating, and, at times directly competing with the public playhouses, private theatricals were, in practice, a significant piece in the wider theatrical jigsaw of eighteenth century theatrical culture. Examining them not only highlights the overlaps and interactions between the public and the private, and the professional and the amateur, but also points to the ways in which the theatre was attempting, at the turn of the century, to define itself as a profession. Rather therefore than considering private theatrical activity, as Cumberland perhaps might have wanted us to, as separate and distinctive, its reintegration into our theatrical history sheds light not only on the private theatrical itself but on understandings of eighteenth-century theatre more broadly.

¹ *St James' Chronicle or The British Evening Post*, 2 November 1776.

² References to these theatres and others can be found in British Library, A Collection of Playbills, Notices and Press Cuttings dealing with Private Theatricals, 1750-1808 (hereafter Collection of Playbills); On 20 April 1792 the *Morning Chronicle* notes that 'Private Theatricals, at the theatres of our people of rank, are become a very fashionable amusement'.

³ Although subscription theatres were open to a broader spectrum of local society, they were nevertheless tailored to a largely middle class spectator, as a 1792 report from Birmingham reveals. On this occasion, with the public theatre having been destroyed by fire, there were hopes that a private theatre might be used by the public theatre company, however 'the Magistrates, fearful of disturbance from the lower class of people, refused it, as, from the whole House being in Boxes, there could be no admission for them' *World*, 27 August 1792.

⁴ Although not considered within this essay, private theatricals also include performances onboard ships, in military camps, and in schools.

⁵ Similar tendencies to marginalise non-commercial activities can be seen in literary histories. See Margaret J. Ezell *Social Authorship and the Advent of Print* (Baltimore, 1999), p. 25.

⁶ John Brewer, 'This, That and the Other: Public, Social and Private in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries', in Dario Castiglione and Lesley Sharpe (eds.), *Shifting the Boundaries: Transformation of the Languages of Public and Private in the Eighteenth Century*, (Exeter, 1995), p. 10.

⁷ Ellen Karoline Gjervan 'Private Theatricals: private in what sense?', Royal Holloway, University of London, *What Signifies a Theatre 2: Private Theatricals and Amateur Performance, 1780-1900 Conference*, 18 June 2011.

⁸ Jurgen Habermas' seminal study, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry Into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, 1989) argued for an increasing ability to distinguish between the public and private spheres in the eighteenth century. The

public, was sited in the urban and embodied in institutions such as clubs, coffee houses and salons whilst domestic affairs were deemed private. For a comparable discussion of the private sphere and measures of privacy see Philippe Ariés, *A History of Private Life III: Passions of the Renaissance*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (London, 1989), pp. 1-11.

⁹ Brewer, 'This, That and the Other', p. 10.

¹⁰ The scenes by Greenwood and De Louthembourg were donated to a subscription theatre in Chichester in 1792, *Star*, 2 May 1792. Sybil Rosenfeld notes Cox and Young's involvement in *Temples of Thespis: Some Private Theatres and Theatricals in England and Wales, 1700-1820* (London, 1978), p. 18.

¹¹ Yates and Farren jointly superintended a performance of *The Way to Keep Him* in April 1787, see *Collection of Playbills*. Rosenfeld notes that Siddons advised on costume at Richmond House, *Temples of Thespis*, pp. 35-36. *The Times*, 29 Sept 1790 reports that 'Mrs Abington has been consulted by Lord Barrymore on theatricals - she has properly advised his Lordship to TRY AGAIN and get up a favourite OLD PIECE'.

¹² *Parker's General Advertiser and Morning Intelligence*, 24 April 1783.

¹³ *Morning Herald and Daily Advertiser*, 31 March 1781

¹⁴ *Collection of Playbills; World*, 8 February 1788.

¹⁵ *Collection of Playbills*

¹⁶ *Public Advertiser*, 20 October 1784; *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser*, 9 February 1788; Unnamed paper, 9 June 179 in *Collection of Playbills*. For further examples comparing private theatres to their public counterparts see *Morning Chronicle*, 8 October 1781; *General Evening Post*, 25 January 1785; and *Morning Herald*, 10 June 1791.

¹⁷ *London Chronicle*, 10 May 1788; *World*, 11 October 1787 in *Collection of Playbills*.

¹⁸ *Public Advertiser*, 20 October 1784. For similar praise see *London Chronicle*, 18 October 1785 and *Morning Chronicle* 26 November 1788.

¹⁹ James Powell, *Private Theatricals* (London, [1787]), p. 26.

²⁰ *The Widow of Malabar* was first performed at Covent Garden on 5 May 1790 and subsequently eight times at Covent Garden in January and February 1791, see Charles Beecher Hogan (ed), *The London Stage 1660-1800, Part V 1776-1800, Volume 2* (Carbondale), p. 1250 and pp. 1315-1325. *The Public Advertiser* and *Star* on 13 January 1791 both report that it had originally been performed at Mrs Crespigny's Camberwell theatre, although the *World* disputes this, 22 January 1791. It is unclear which is correct but Mrs Starke, the author, certainly wrote a number of plays for Mrs Crespigny's private theatre, as noted in *Whitehall Evening Post*, 6-8 May 1791. *Star*, 22 December 1791, notes that part of *Blue Beard*, had previously been shown at Wargrave and Rosenfeld notes that *Blue Beard* was first performed at Wargrave on 13 July 1791, see *Temples of Thespis*, p. 180.

²¹ *Courier*, 24 October 1805; *Morning Post and Gazetteer*, 23 November 1798; *World*, 2 February 1792 in Collection of Playbills. Michael Dobson reminds us that this practice continues today with professional actors often being employed to work with amateur companies in the American theatre system, see *Shakespeare and Amateur Performance: A Cultural History* (Cambridge, 2011), p. 7.

²² For reports on the performance see *World*, 13 August 1790, for playbills see Collection of Playbills.

²³ Collection of Playbills and *Whitehall Evening Post*, 21-23 September 1790.

²⁴ Penelope J. Corfield, *Power and the Professions in Britain 1700-1850* (London, 1995), pp. 29-30; 'An Attempt to exhibit a General View of Society, and to estimate the National Income' 1803 in P. Colquhoun *A Treatise on Indigence* (London, 1806), p. 23.

²⁵ Corfield, *Power and the Professions*, p. 28; Magli Sarfatti Larson, *The Rise of Professionalism* (Berkeley, 1977), p. 138. For a further discussion of the difficulty of

distinguishing between professional and amateur see Dobson, *Shakespeare and Amateur Performance*, pp. 5-8.

²⁶ Corfield, *Power and the Professions*, pp. 20-21. Larson also discusses professional societies' efforts to regulate competition and access in *The Rise of Professionalism*, p. 12.

²⁷ Richard Cumberland, *The Observer Vol. IV* (Dublin, 1791), p. 18.

²⁸ *Morning Chronicle*, 22 October 1802.

²⁹ Thomas Betterton, *The History of the English Stage, From the Restoration to the Present Time* (London, 1741), p. 29.

³⁰ Edmund Curll, *The Life of that Eminent Comedian Robert Wilks, Esq* (London, 1733), p. 38.

³¹ For examples of discourse emphasising the role of nature see Colley Cibber, *An Apology for his Life* (London, 1740), p. 52; and Charles Churchill, *The Rosciad* (Dublin, 1761), p. 14.

³² *Morning Chronicle*, 22 October 1802.

³³ Larson, *Rise of Professionalism*, p. xvii.

³⁴ Powell, *Private Theatricals*, p. 8; Rosenfeld, *Temples of Thespis*, p. 18; *World*, 10 February 1791

³⁵ *World*, 10 February 1791.

³⁶ John C. Greene, 'Daly, Richard (1758–1813)', in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, (Oxford, online edn, May 2007) <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/7073>, accessed 1 July 2011.

³⁷ *Star*, 30 March 1793.

³⁸ *Star*, 30 March 1793.

³⁹ Greene, 'Daly, Richard'

⁴⁰ *Morning Post*, 22 February 1802; *Morning Post*, 26 February 1802.

⁴¹ *Morning Post*, 26 Feb 1802.

⁴² Unnamed newspaper, 22 February 1802, in Collection of Playbills.

⁴³ *Morning Post*, 26 Feb 1802.

⁴⁴ W. Cutspear, *Dramatic Rights: or, Private Theatricals and Pic-Nic Suppers* (London, 1802), p. 9.

⁴⁵ *Morning Post*, 22 February 1802; *Ipswich Journal*, 27 Feb 1802 reports patronesses withdrawing from the subscription.

⁴⁶ *Morning Post*, 26 February 1802; The reason for the theatre's failure appears not to be Sheridan's opposition but rather its popularity with French and Italian nobles and its appropriation by an 'intriguing French junto, who expected...to establish a French Theatre in this metropolis', *Morning Post*, 21 June 1802. The theatre continued to operate in various guises in subsequent years, but only as a minor private theatre.

⁴⁷ See *The Sock and Buskin: A Prelude in One Act, Written for and Performed at the Re-Opening of the Private Theatre, Fishamble Street, January 27 1808* (Dublin, 1809).

⁴⁸ This dual emphasis reveals that for Sheridan, professionalism is associated not solely with paid employment but also experience within the public theatres. As Dobson similarly notes, distinguishing between amateur and professional solely on the basis of who gets paid can be problematic, *Shakespeare and Amateur Performance*, p. 6.

⁴⁹ Larson, *The Rise of Professionalism*, p. 138.

⁵⁰ Cutspear, *Dramatic Rights*, p. 29.

⁵¹ *World*, 10 February 1791. For a further example of this discourse of the private theatre as nursery see *Morning Chronicle*, 8 October 1781.

⁵² Cumberland, *The Observer Vol. IV*, p. 26.

⁵³ Cumberland's point about the drama is echoed in the *World*, 10 February 1791, where the author advises short plays of only two or three acts.

⁵⁴ Vicesimus Knox, 'Winter Evenings; or Lucubrations on Life and Letters' in 'Of the Prevailing Practice of Acting Plays by Private Gentlemen and Ladies, Writing and Speaking Prologues and Epilogues and Building Private Theatres' *London Chronicle*, 27 December 1787.

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