Rebecca L. Smith

Charlottetown Amateur Theatre to 1824

The first dated account of a contemporary English-language theatrical production in Charlottetown that has thus far been located is an advertisement announcing the opening of the Charlottetown Amateur Theatre for the season on 26 November 1817. The theatrical season opened with the play *Raising the Wind*, followed by the farce *Fortune's Frolic*. However, other references indicate that the Charlottetown amateurs had been active since a much earlier date. The prologue for the opening of the Amateur Theatre season in February 1830 nostalgically states:

Time flies—we reckon almost thirty years
Since first our Stage beat up for volunteers:
'Gainst prejudice our force was then directed,
And public smiles declared we were protected.
Tho' few friends here bore witness to that sight,
Its two first veterans appear tonight.

Further support for the idea that Charlottetown, like Saint John, New Brunswick, and Halifax, Nova Scotia, was theatrically active quite early is the assertion in an 1817 description of the theatre building that the current theatre "possesses far more accommodation both for audience and performers than the last." ²

Apparently, at the turn of the nineteenth century when the island gained its new name of Prince Edward Island and when Charlottetown was well established between the Hillsborough and North rivers, replacing Port La Joie as the central settlement, a lively and controversial local amateur theatre group began its attempts to bring some diversionary and cultural activity to a seaport town that, according to Duncan Campbell's 1875 account of the *History of Prince Edward Island*, was just about as wicked as any other seaport town of its time. The people interested in moderating the wickedness by raising the cultural level of the burgeoning seaport centre constituted "an upper
class, who are by no means backwards in cultivating the amusements and refinements of civilized life.” These people included “the members of the council, the employés of government, the superior classes of the military, merchants, and traders of all sorts who have attained a tolerable degree of affluence . . .” In his two-volume record of early nineteenth-century Canadian life, entitled The British Dominions in North America or a Topographical and Statistical Description of the Provinces of Lower and Upper Canada, Joseph Bouchette explains that “those who are received at the castle, or government-house, being deemed the superiors, have assemblies, balls, dinners amongst themselves, and sometimes amateur theatricals.” No handbills, programmes, or advertisements (or even relevant diary entries) concerning those amateur theatricals prior to 1817 have been located. But from the information available from several sources after 1817, it seems clear that Charlottetown’s amateur theatre must have been typical of its North American counterparts in Saint John and Halifax in operation, plays presented, and problems encountered.

The amateurs must have expended considerable time and money in fitting out a theatre building. An editorial in the Prince Edward Island Gazette for 1817 gives a quite complete description of the theatre, also implicitly supplying other valuable information about the conditions surrounding early theatre productions in Charlottetown, especially about the probability of a rowdy audience when admission controls were not imposed:

[T]he Boxes are made to contain about two hundred persons, the Stage Boxes are reserved for the Manager and Performers—the Pit is necessarily small, and to ensure as select an audience as possible, the Gallery is not to be opened this season, the front of the Stage and Orchestra are neatly decorated—the Paintings of Thalia and Melpomene, and other emblematic Figures are placed on each side of the Stage: in the centre over the Stage, and in front of the Proscenium is a transparent Painting representing the likeness of the Godfather of our Island, His Royal Highness the Duke of Kent, with the figures of Britannia and the British Lion underneath. The scenery for the most part is entirely new—in short the tout ensemble is handsomely arranged, well fitted up and in all respects appropriately adopted for the purpose.

A later announcement of the opening of the 1819 season indicates that the Charlottetown amateurs knew that their audiences would demand at least minimal comfort and elegance at the performances. The brief article in the Prince Edward Island Gazette of 18 December 1819 includes this information:
we are instructed to say that much pains have been taken to render the Building warm and comfortable as well as the fitting up of the inside. Large and substantial Stoves are placed in the most eligible parts of the House, and the stage is fitted up in a neat style.7

This 1819 announcement also explains that any profit made by the amateurs was to “be appropriated at some future day to erect a Building for a permanent Theatre and School Room under one roof.” In 1823, a letter to the editor of the Prince Edward Island Register, signed by “A Performer,” suggests that the theatre had not yet been constructed: defending the actors and actresses against apparent accusations of unnecessary delays, the Performer insists that “should the proposed new Theatre be completed, we shall see as much dispatch in the entertainments, or very nearly, as much, as at the public Theatres.”8 (This statement, of course, gives rise to speculations concerning the location of public theatres in Charlottetown at the time. However, no evidence for such theatres has been located; and the Performer could have travelled either to London or to Boston relatively readily in 1823 and could be referring to the performances in public theatres at either of those cities.) A building that was used by the amateurs for performances, and possibly the theatre referred to in the 1819-1823 notices of plays, was a building owned by Samuel May Williams, located on town lot No. 41, in the 2nd hundred of assigned town lots. This would place the theatre very near the water, at the end of what is now called Sydney Street. An advertisement in the 10 November 1821 Prince Edward Island Gazette states that “the House [and lot adjoining] now occupied as the Amateur Theatre in this town” will be sold by auction.9 However, the property apparently did not sell, because in 1823 the amateurs announced that a benefit performance of the Mock Doctor and Cumberland’s The West Indian (although A Bold Stroke for a Wife was the title used in the 30 August 1823 advertisement for the performance) would “be performed in the former Theatre, at Mr. S. M. Williams’ Premises, which is now fitted up for the purpose.”10 This makeshift approach must have continued until 1827, when the Prince Edward Island Register carried the notice that proposals would be received by Robert Pyke “for Building the new intended Theatre in this Town. A plan and specification of the same is left with the Subscriber, who will give every information on the subject.”11 A regular series of dramatic performances begins in 1828, and the uncommon regularity of advertisements for plays suggests that the new building may have been constructed and in use.
The Charlottetown Amateur Theatre membership seem to have had just cause for worry about their facilities. Logistic problems apparently plagued the amateurs despite their concern, eliciting complaints from theatre patrons. A 31 March 1821 review in the *Prince Edward Island Gazette* laments the "thin" audience in attendance at the 22 March 1821 performance of *The Count of Narbonne*, even with the added attractions of a tableau vivant—The Statue of Alphonso—and an afterpiece descriptively entitled *The Romp*. Complaints concerning the length and slow pace of the plays and the excessively long periods between scenes must have been raised by the audience and offered as explanation for the dwindling attendance, because the writer of the article states that at a recent meeting the performers "found it necessary to adopt new measures":

> It has been determined that redoubled exertions shall be used in bringing forward new and popular performances,—commencing at an early hour, and proceeding with dispatch . . . The performers in the Orchestra will probably be amended, we have good reason to hope for the assistance of some tasteful Amateurs then; and upon the whole, we are of opinion, that a change advantageous to the public will take place . . .

The anticipated dispatch must not have been forthcoming, however, because in 1823 the actors were still attempting to explain the causes of the late beginnings and the extensive delays which caused complaints:

> [T]hose delays can be readily accounted for. In order to leave all possible room on the stage, the space left behind is so limited as not to admit of dressing rooms, or persons to assist in dressing; the actresses dress in the next house; each male performer dresses in whatever place he can find room for his trunk. Forty different dresses were required for last night: Colonel Feignwell changes his dress five times in the comedy. I think, sir, that if the public could take a peep behind the curtain, it would rather appear extraordinary how the performers could use so much dispatch.

Although curtain time had been moved from 7:30 p.m. to 7:00 p.m. by 1819, the players must have been negligent in beginning the performance on time, and further explanations are offered publicly:

> The entertainments certainly commenced too late in the evening, I understand that the next performance will commence earlier; this again arises from measure, from the want of room, for the performers generally go to the Theatre ready dressed, and as they are not much in the habit of sporting close carriages, they are obliged to pop through the town in the dark.
Along with the problems of inadequate theatre buildings and inefficient physical facilities, the Charlottetown Amateur Theatre group also faced financial problems. Reports of unexpectedly high expenses for mounting productions recur, and many notices mention the debts of the amateurs. In 1819 the group apparently reorganized in an attempt to become more financially sound, as an editorial in the *Prince Edward Island Gazette* explains:

The Theatre is to be managed by a Committee of seven Persons, 5 of whom are to be Amateurs, and 2 other Persons of the Committee; one of the latter to be the Treasurer. It is the intention of the Committee, after defraying the present expenses incurred, to let the funds rest in the hands of the Treasurer . . . 15

Another internal reorganization took place in 1823 because of financial problems:

The accounts of the Theatre are under investigation and the performers have given up their free admission Tickets, and it is supposed that three Plays will discharge, or nearly discharge, the debt of the Theatre, and the establishment will then be carried on by private Subscription . . . 16

The cost of producing an evening's entertainment could run quite high, as is made clear in a letter battle that was waged in 1823 in the *Prince Edward Island Register* following the abortive attempt of the amateurs to raise money "for the benefit of the poor female children, at the National School,"17 an educational institution in Charlottetown run by the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge. The amateurs calculated that their expenses for producing the evening's entertainment would be approximately five pounds. The group raised £23 10 through the ticket sales, but they did not stay within their budget, as a letter to the editor from "H.T." explains:

... in fact, the sum raised was £23 10, but on comparing that with the disbursements attending the play, the latter was found to exceed the sum received by three pounds, or that the performers had actually played themselves into debt, instead of a benefit . . . 18

If the amateurs habitually exceeded their budget for expenditures by nearly five times the proposed amount, it is not surprising that they had cause to worry about finances. The usual price for tickets until 1823 seems to have been 2s 6d for adults, with children paying half fares; after 1823, the admission price was raised to 3s for adults and 6d for
children. But ticket price increases apparently were not sufficient to meet all the theatre’s expenses.

Obviously, the Charlottetown Amateur Theatre faced physical and financial problems during its early history, but their problems did not end there. Remarks in editorials and articles in the newspapers of the time indicate that the audience was not altogether sympathetic when the amateur actors and actresses had difficulty with lines and cues. For example, the announcement to “the Lovers of the Drama” of the commencement of the 1817 theatrical campaign includes this clearly defensive assertion:

The Performers who are all Amateurs act solely for their own amusement and the entertainment of their Friends—with Innocence and Mirth to beguile a Winter’s night away—“to shoot folly as it flies, and laugh their hearers into virtue’s cause,”—if such their aim, who then can feel but pleased. We cannot anticipate dissatisfaction anywhere, however if grumblers there are, we recommend them to peruse the motto which the Theatre have adopted of

“Pause before you Blame.”

Similarly, when announcing the opening of the 1819 season, the writer for the Prince Edward Island Gazette feels compelled to state “that the Performers are taking every pain to sustain their parts, and there is every reason to believe that those who may witness their first performance, will find, that the remarks, which have been already circulated to the prejudice of the cast are not to be relied on in future.”

The most interesting attempt to anticipate and defuse the reactions of the theatre’s critics occurs in the Prologue to the 22 December 1819 performance of John Bull. In this Prologue, various kinds of hostile reactions are identified and made ridiculous through parody:

Receding waves of holy Lawrence fled,
And Edward’s Island gently rais’d its head;
Peace claim’d its emerald bosom as her own,
And Ceres bless’d it from her bounteous throne;
Fortune, in other climes, bestow’d her wealth,
But Nature sent a guest here—ruddy health,
And gave our ancestors this sage command,
“Unite—and you’ll support a happy land.”
“To industry and arts direct your views,
“And turn your own resources to their use;
“Nor scorn refinement;—nor the influence fair,
“Of gentle sympathy—her smile or tear.”
The bow unbent—remaining but a day
Springs the next hour—with renovated sway;
Labour and pleasure variegate the scene,
And the mind's action finds its proper mean.
    But soft—some critic, with sarcastic smile,
Says—"pleasure!—in this dull sequestered Isle!"
    Let's try the Drama: pleasure's not extinct,
Amusement and instructions there are link'd,
    (illegible line)

(I've lost my deal, and laid turn'd up an ace;)
"I hate their ribaldry, and shew—and action,
"Give me a sober game at kind detraction."
See Captain Tipple—from the sideboard totter,
"The Drama did you say?—mere noise and splutter."
"La Sir! you've thrown my Coffee o'er my bread and butter!"

Miss Mouth says—"Oh! the plays are most absurd
"One must sit hours—and scarcely speak a word,"
"Yes Ma'am," says Mr. Skip—"for hours we sit
"Confin'd there—in their hideous—stupid pit.
"Let me the pleasure of the Ball-Room feel,
"Your pretty hand—and Lord McDonald's Reel."

"I can't see what's the sense in all their plays,"
Says Mr. Gobble. "Catgut, paint, and baize!
"Of all the modes a merry hour to pass on,
"Give me a pic-nic party—up the Glasson."

Miss Warble says—she "hates those players strolling,
"Nor is she more attach'd to carrioling,
"Give her the cadences of Tramezanni,
"The Treble octave span of Catalni."

"Miss Dismal says the Drama's well enough,
"For Tragic scenes; but Comedy's such stuff,
"She hates to laugh and hates John Bull still more,
"Give her Calista or the Mourning Shore."

"A Catch Club and hot punch—says Mr. Riot,
"Beat all the plays that ever Shakespeare wrote."
Squint—don't like plays—he "paid with pleasure hearty,
To see Drake's painting of his Bonaparte."

"Well—says Dick Smash,—"I say before all faces,
"My fun is highest at the Royalty Races."

Is such the gen'ral sense?—pray let me know!
Your faces—the dear fair especially—say No!
They say,—and sweetly do they say, and smile,
‘Thalia’s sons are fav’rites in this Isle.’
Their imperfections liberally you’ll view
And fancy talents in performers new.
Bid stricture and severity to cease.
Assemble to be pleased,—and thus—to please.
May such predictions crown our humble cause,
With the imperial wreath of your applause?21

The problems of financing, production of efficiency, and theatre acquisition were persistent for the Charlottetown Amateur Theatre, but those internal concerns were not as threatening as the other persistent problem facing the P.E.I. actors—that is, attacks on the reputed immorality of the theatre and its supporters. A document in the Prince Edward Island Public Archives that is among the oldest original documents relating to theatrical events on the island is not a handbill or advertisement lauding a dramatic performance. Instead, it is a handwritten sheet—probably from the late 1810’s—that is in obvious imitation of the style used to write advertisements for the plays presented by the amateurs. This paper was posted as a warning:

NOTICE

The gentlemen performers of the Charlotte Town Playhouse, and those that frequent it, are here by notified that speedily will be performed a solemn and deep tragedy, called—

THE DAY OF JUDGMENT

The performance will be altogether spiritual
The scenery chiefly taken from views in Heaven and Hell.
Principal parts by the Redeemer of the world, assisted by many of the Celestial Company, together with the Devil and his angels . . . . The Happiness of Heaven and the torments of Hell will be faithfully and strikingly represented.
The whole to conclude with two processions, the one consisting of souls purified by the blood of the Saviour, attended with delightful music, the other, composed of damned souls sending forth the most bitter cries, groans and imprecations.

Free Admission.

LORD! SAVE THE PEOPLE.22

Such a direct attack makes it clear why the amateurs felt it necessary to announce that they intended to use innocence and mirth in order “to shoot folly as it flies, and laugh their hearers into virtue’s cause” and why they chose their motto: “Pause before you Blame.”23 Other defenders of the theatre insist on its usefulness and morality, claiming that support of the theatre is “a public duty”: 
Independent of the moral lessons which are there so charmingly and artfully introduced, to carry your feelings with them—the very recital of those lessons promote the study not only of history but of eloquence, and an emulation in just accent and ease of delivery highly necessary in the youthful and the mature—an emulation which has pervaded in all refined countries from the days of Thespis and Aeschylus to the present hour.\textsuperscript{24}

Further defense of the theatre occurred in 1823 in an editorial from the \textit{Prince Edward Island Register}, in which the writer quotes “a very just and pithy extract” from an unnamed contemporary English publication. The writer insists that “the moral influence of the drama, does not perish with the feelings of the moment. We do not attempt to say, it incites at once to the attachment of any peculiar virtue, but, it ultimately blends itself with the mass of our feelings, and becomes incorporated with our general ideas.” Dramatic production is valuable, the writer continues, because it is linked with some of the “noblest productions in our language, and many of our proudest recollections” and with “the most perfect of our arts and sciences: music, painting and architecture, here all combined to illustrate and adorn it.”\textsuperscript{25}

This early public battle reached its most intense point in 1822, by the inclusion in the 26 January 1822 \textit{Prince Edward Island Gazette} of “A Serious Address to the Frequenters of Theatres, By A Clergyman of the Church of England,” taken from an 1818 edition of \textit{The Methodist Magazine}. This 3,300-word attack on the theatre as an epidemical, infectious, fatal distemper contends that “the theatre tends to corrupt the morals of those who attend it,” with its evil language, arousal of passions, and waste of time and money. The theatre, according to this attacker, fills one’s head with wrong ideas, rendering one unfit for religious meditation and practice. The theatre, he says, did not exist among God’s original chosen people, and it has continued to be condemned throughout the centuries by wise and holy men. The writer concludes with an appeal for the theatre-goer imaginatively to consider his or her death bed scene and the futile attempts to justify to God the time spent at the theatre.\textsuperscript{26}

The rebuttal followed in 2 March and 27 April 1822 editions of the \textit{Gazette}, containing letters from “An Actor.” He asserts that the drama works positively to “preserve health, promote refinement of manners in society, [and] give elasticity to the human mind” as it works through “delight and improvement.”\textsuperscript{27} The actor quotes Portia’s speech on mercy from Shakespeare’s \textit{The Merchant of Venice} to demonstrate the value of ideas contained in plays and defends the morality, regularity, inexpensiveness, and educational value of the theatre. He specifically argues
that the "pieces which have been performed at the Charlottetown Theatre (such as it is) are divested of those exceptionable passages" that offend some people. Charlottetown's Amateur Theatre is a positive, not a negative, force:

[T]he historical character and costume are very fairly kept in view there: the action is not extravagant and the accent and pronunciation are each day improving; attention and encouragement would soon render this little stage a great public object, particularly to youth ... The performers of the Charlotte Town Theatre have sedulously avoided reflection or attacks on the Character of any Class, Sect or individual ... 29

As difficult as it remains to locate information about the conflicts, problems, and operation of the Charlottetown Amateur Theatre around the turn of the nineteenth century, it is even more difficult to find critical analyses of the plays presented by the group. Records of twenty-one performances between 1817 and 1824 have been found (see Appendix A). Presumably, there were many more performances on a somewhat regular basis during that period, but advertisements have not yet been located, so that remains a speculative statement. The twenty-one known presentations by the Charlottetown amateurs consisted of a full evening's entertainment, with the main dramatic attraction, a farcical afterpiece, and, frequently, interspersions of poems, comic songs, a pantomime, or a tableau vivant. The major offering usually was a comedy, with a title such as John Bull, Speed the Plough, or Lovers' Vows or the Natural Son. The amateurs also performed versions of more famous comedies such as Sheridan's The Rivals and Cumberland's The West Indian. Melodramas began to be performed, such as The Miller and His Men, and infrequently a tragedy was chosen for presentation—ranging from Jephson's The Tragedy of the Count of Narbonne to Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet and Othello.

Reviews of the performances appear only rarely, and those that do occur are little help in assessing the quality of the production, the acting, or the interpretation of the script. A typical review from the local newspaper provides the following kind of critical comment:

On Wednesday the 22nd instant, the Amateur Theatre opened in this Town with Colman's popular comedy of John Bull or the Englishman's Fire-side: with the after-piece of Doctor Last's Examination. The Performance went off with great applause to a full House. 30

In another instance, Samuel Johnson's analysis of Romeo and Juliet is quoted in part in announcing the forthcoming production of that play,
but no later comment is added by the local writer concerning the quality of the local production. However, in one instance, following the 22 March 1821 performance of The Tragedy of the Count of Narbonne, some analysis accompanies the writer’s comment that “the piece was well sustained”:

[The female characters were particularly well performed—the Countess was a finished performance; Adelaide was very interesting, and Jaqueline, in her line, not less so—they shew increasing talent and energy. The male characters shewed much judgment and impressive acting. The Acts followed in quick succession, and great regularity prevailed, with a small exception in the last scene. Several of the dresses, were new and in appropriate costume, and the Statue of Alphonso was well executed.]

After this very early period in Prince Edward Island theatre history, records become more accessible and indicate that despite the many problems faced by the Charlottetown Amateur Theatre—financial, physical, social, and “moral”—the amateur theatre movement continued strong in Charlottetown until the middle of the twentieth century, when it fell victim to television, urbanization, and, possibly, the construction of the Confederation Centre of the Arts. By the 1830’s, travelling performers—circus troupes, musicians, lecturers, tightrope walkers, and even Mr. Varna!, the African Roscius—had begun arriving regularly in Charlottetown, and the influx of professional entertainers and entertainments began to enliven the city, along with the continuing amateur theatrical performances. Indeed, like other Maritime centres, Charlottetown has been theatrically active since its early days of settlement.

NOTES

1. Prince Edward Register, 23 February 1830.
5. Bouchette, p. 177.
7. Prince Edward Island Gazette, 18 December 1819.
8. Prince Edward Island Register, 6 September 1823.
10. Prince Edward Island Register, 9 August 1823.
11. Prince Edward Island Register, 13 March 1827.
13. Prince Edward Island Register, 6 September 1823.
14. Prince Edward Island Register, 6 September 1823.
APPENDIX A

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Advertised Date</th>
<th>Main Piece of Performance</th>
<th>After Piece</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>26 Nov. 1817</td>
<td>Raising the Wind</td>
<td>Fortune's Frolic</td>
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<tr>
<td>20 Dec. 1817</td>
<td>The Flitch of Bacon</td>
<td>Lovers' Quarrels</td>
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<tr>
<td>2 Jan. 1818</td>
<td>The Jew and the Doctor</td>
<td>The King and the Miller of Mansfield</td>
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<td>14 Jan. 1818</td>
<td>The Cure for the Heart-Ache</td>
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<td>22 Dec. 1819</td>
<td>John Bull, Colman</td>
<td>Doctor Last's Examination</td>
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<tr>
<td>12 Jan. 1820</td>
<td>Cross-Purposes</td>
<td>The Miller and His Men</td>
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<tr>
<td>19 Jan. 1820</td>
<td>Raising the Wind</td>
<td>The Miller and His Men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Feb. 1820</td>
<td>Speed the Plough</td>
<td>Bombas Furioso</td>
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<tr>
<td>77 March 1820</td>
<td>Romeo and Juliet</td>
<td>The Highland Reel</td>
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<tr>
<td>23 March 1820</td>
<td>John Bull</td>
<td>The Merry Millers</td>
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<tr>
<td>7 April 1820</td>
<td>Lovers' Vows or the Natural Son</td>
<td>The Turnpike Gate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26 April 1820</td>
<td>Lovers' Vows</td>
<td>The Turnpike Gate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 June 1820</td>
<td>Othello in rehearsal</td>
<td>plus new afterpiece</td>
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<tr>
<td>6 Sept. 1820</td>
<td>The Rivals, Sheridan</td>
<td>Two Strings to Your Bow</td>
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<td>27 Feb. 1821</td>
<td>The Poor Gentleman</td>
<td>Flora, or the Hob in the Well</td>
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<tr>
<td>22 March 1821</td>
<td>The Count of Narbonne, Jephson</td>
<td>The Romp</td>
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<tr>
<td>4 April 1821</td>
<td>The Count of Narbonne</td>
<td>The Indians</td>
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<tr>
<td>1 Sept. 1823</td>
<td>A Bold Stroke for a Wife</td>
<td>Mock Doctor</td>
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<td>21 Oct. 1823</td>
<td>The Midnight Hour</td>
<td>The Blue Devils</td>
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<td>1 May 1824</td>
<td>The Honeymoon</td>
<td>The Agreeable Surprise</td>
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