

*Yashdip Singh Bains*

### **The Spectator's Eye: Impressions of Halifax Theatre in Early Nineteenth Century**

Summarizing the first-hand impressions of the stage in Canada before the Confederation, Michael R. Booth observed that without the comments of the theatrical traveller "we would know very little about theatrical conditions in Canada at this time, particularly the conditions that were faced in innumerable small towns and villages far away from the main theatrical centres."<sup>1</sup> Theatrical journalism in Canada in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries lagged behind that of England by at least two generations. Reviews of productions in local newspapers said little more than that "a numerous and polite assembly" received the plays "with great applause" and that the actors "supported their respective characters with the greatest propriety." As Charles H. Shattuck has suggested about the early American theatre, Canadian theatre "was too young to have worked out traditions and values of its own, and its audiences, untrained in the arts of the stage, lacked standards by which to judge what passed before them."<sup>2</sup>

When Canadians began to develop their standards of judgment, through letters to the editor, they naturally used the prevalent concept of the imitation of nature. Some obviously educated residents of Halifax emerged as the first arbiters of theatrical merit in Canada by commenting on their company's imitation of nature. These vivid impressions of the knowledgeable audience in Halifax, cited here for the first time, preserve for posterity an intelligent and forthright account of what they saw on their boards. This account adds substantially to the meagre information supplied by the theatrical travellers. These letters to the *Free Press* and the *Acadian Recorder*, some of them as long as four thousand words, yield invaluable details about the staging of plays and bear witness to the sophistication of some of the patrons of the Halifax theatre. The impressions of these spectators also define indirectly for an historian the normal staging and acting capabilities of the professionals performing in 1817-18 at Saint John, Quebec City, Montreal, and

Kingston. Historians can rely on these first-hand impressions to conjure up Canada's theatrical successes and failures in the early nineteenth century. These reviews offer something of the forgotten lustre of long-past performers and performances, enhance people's understanding of their theatre in relation to London, and contribute a great deal to modern awareness of Canada's cultural history. Without drawing upon these contemporary reviews, one cannot appreciate a professional company's ensemble of a number of individual functions—the actor's, the scene-designer's, the musician's.

In the early years of the nineteenth century, Halifax was a rapidly expanding town, which "had profited from some forty years of war out of its total existence of sixty-six years."<sup>3</sup> In 1802 the town's population stood at 8,532. According to George A. Nader, "the subsequent resumption of hostilities in Europe in 1803, the American embargo on trade with Britain (and at first with France) in 1807 and the War of 1812 also made substantial contributions to the expansion of the Halifax economy."<sup>4</sup> Soon after the conclusion of the Napoleonic Wars, Halifax grew to over eleven thousand, excluding the army and navy. With economic development, the chances of a professional theatre also improved. In the fall of 1816, Addison B. Price, who had performed in Quebec City in the summer of that year, recruited a number of professionals from Quebec and formed Halifax's first professional company which occupied the Fairbanks Wharf Theatre. The company, it seems, was organized on the commonwealth system, under which everybody took parts on the basis of seniority and equally shared the profits.

Price and Company gave three seasons in Halifax. The first season opened on an unknown date in November, 1816, and came to an end on 20 June 1817. After spending the summer of 1817 in Saint John, New Brunswick, the company returned to Halifax in November for the second season which continued into the summer of 1818. The last season began almost immediately after the second and closed on 8 June 1819. The repertory of Price and Company was large indeed and much wider in range than that of the garrison amateurs. The garrison performers, fully aware of their rather limited talents and the amateurish nature of their enterprise, generally confined themselves to comedies and farces and rarely attempted Shakespeare and the masterpieces of the legitimate theatre. In spite of the small size of the stage and the paucity of scenery, Price and his fellow performers presented a wide variety of tragedies, comedies, farces, operatic farces, comic operas, interludes, melodramas, pantomimes, and dramatic poems. These were popular

London pieces and gave to residents of Halifax a sampling of what appealed to the British audiences. Only one comedy, *The True-Born Scotchman*, was written by a member of the company, Armstrong, and it generated an acrimonious controversy among the spectators.

The anonymous Halifax critics commented on every kind of play and drew attention to the hustle and bustle of the life of the theatre for three years, even if they remarked broadly on the artistic effectiveness of a production or the characteristic technique of a performer. Their comments ranged freely from the scenery to the costumes to the talents of the performers. They vigorously exposed the indiscipline of some of the performers and condemned the managers for abridging or mutilating the texts of plays. The incompetent actors, who cared so little for their chosen vocation as not even to remember their lines, aroused their righteous anger; those who worked hard to prepare their parts earned their praise. Read in its entirety, the correspondence of these Haligonians provides the most complete record of the achievements and failures of a professional company in a Canadian town in the early nineteenth century. Reviews of plays were being published quite often in the Quebec papers also, especially the *Montreal Herald* and the *Quebec Mercury*, but none of them can match the thoroughness and good sense of the Halifax critics.

A concrete idea of the staging and acting capabilities of Price and Company at the Fairbanks Wharf Theatre can be gained by examining in their own words the audience's assessments of different types of plays: tragedies like Moore's *The Gamester*, Kotzebue's *The Stranger*, Lewis's *Adelgitha*; melodramas like Lewis's *The Castle Spectre*, Colman the Younger's *The Battle of Hexham*, and Hook's *Tekeli*; operas like Colman the Younger's *The Forty Thieves* and Coffey's *The Devil to Pay*; and farces like Allingham's *The Fortune's Frolic* and Cross's *The Purse*. These popular pieces in the first season were followed by Lewis's *Alfonso*, *King of Castile* and Lillo's *George Barnwell*, Colman the Younger's *The Heir-at-Law*, Centlivre's *The Wonder*, *A Woman Keeps a Secret*, and Bickerstaffe's *The Spoiled Child*. The play which stirred a lively and scurrilous debate was, of course, Armstrong's *The True-Born Scotchman*. In the repertory of Price and Company, pride of place went to Shakespeare; his plays, however, are not included here for reasons of space.

Moore's *The Gamester* was a tearful and simple tragedy, which appealed to Veritas for its message: "Let all who are addicted to it [gambling], take warning before it is too late, and by timely amendment avoid the misery and perdition which sooner or later inevitably attend

their perseverance in it." "Allowing for the discouraging effect which a thin house has on a good actor," Price in the role of Beverly bravely "kept up the interest of the character with success." Portraying Mrs. Beverly who represented her husband's best self, Mrs. Young "was everything that could be wished, and succeeded in what the perfection of all acting consists—the close imitation of nature." She expressed her "proper virtuous feeling" with "becoming dignity." Moss's action in the part of good-natured Lewson "was good and his idea of the character appeared correct." Charnock, however, marred his portrayal of Jarvis by his aptitude for "a character of dry humour [more] than for the expression of serious feeling, altho' I have seen him act such a part with success; but he more generally allows too much indifference to appear in his voice and manner."<sup>5</sup>

Price, whose Beverly was just adequate, proved far more effective in the title role of *The Stranger*: "During the whole of his performance he did not appear once to forget that he had to express the proper feeling of a tender husband, from whom 'all that his soul held dear had been allured,' but who, notwithstanding, still loved and mourned for the treasure [his guilty wife] he had lost."<sup>6</sup> In a latter performance, Price acted "with much judgment and effect, and I am happy to observe, seemed at last to take the numerous hints which have been thrown out to him—to say he paid great attention to his part is one of the best encomiums an actor can obtain, and wipes away many little errors which otherwise might be discerned; and it is a certain proof he has a clear conception of the Author."<sup>7</sup>

Mrs. Young represented "the genuine spirit and manner which the author intended to give the character of Mrs. Haller," according to Veritas.<sup>8</sup> This part should have been assigned to Mrs. Aldis in the May performance. For, according to Peeping Tom, Mrs. Young gave "a monotonous display of 'grievous lamentations,' interspersed with the white handkerchief." In the character of Mrs. Haller, Mrs. Young "preserved throughout such unvaried quivering shake of the voice that its effect on the ears of the audience was more like proceeding from the impulse of horror than from repentant sensibility." For Peeping Tom, Mrs. Aldis's Countess was truly moving: "Her acting was chaste and expressive—her figure interesting, commanding and dignified—her voice harmonious, feeling and sympathizing." Armstrong showed little skill in his acting. His Baron Stemfort "was inanimate, stiff and undignified," Peeping Tom remarked. "In listening to, or counseling his friend, he did it without any appearance of concern, feeling or anxiety for his unfortunate situation, and mouthed his words more as if he was

attending a rehearsal than a public representation, which, with his occasional glances at the audience when the sensibility of his soul ought to have been wrapped up in the miseries of his friend, gave his acting, if not an appearance of the ridiculous, at least that of contempt."<sup>9</sup> The company's basic weakness was that it had too many mediocre actors who refused to learn their parts studiously and thus disfigured the efforts of the talented ones.

Mrs. Aldis, who Peeping Tom praised so much, played the title role in *Adelgitha*. Her "action was appropriate and her attitudes were good." In the part of Imma, Mrs. Young's "dress was beautiful and she looked the character well." Placide undertook the difficult role of Monica, an old peasant woman, a role which "has ever been found extremely difficult for the best male actors, however they may excel in their proper characters, to personate that of a female with any degree of success." Placide played the old woman "with great apparent ease; and when we regarded his figure, bent down as if by age, the alteration of the tone of his voice and his infirm step, it was difficult to believe that he was not really what he seemed to be." Price's Lothair this evening was considered inferior to his previous ones when he "fully gave to the character that impassioned manner and youthful ardour which it ought to have—whereas on this occasion he was in many parts much too tame."<sup>10</sup>

In comparison with its performance of tragedies like *Adelgitha*, this company found it more challenging to present melodramas, like *The Castle Spectre*, with its limited technical and artistic resources. Mrs. Price played Angela in this costume drama. Even though she possessed "a considerable confidence upon the stage," Peeping Tom found her wanting in elocution. He observed that her voice was "too weak even for so small a Theatre, and her emphases were not always well applied, the former I fear she has it not in her power to correct, so as to appear to advantage in any lofty character—practice I have no doubt will remedy the latter." Robinson should not have been assigned a double role, since "his style of acting is always the same." Price's Earl Osmond was "very respectable, although in some parts he rather overdid it." One of the mishaps of this evening was Young's Muley, "for he could not, it seems, entice his legs to carry their burthen out of the green room, as he was so stupidly obstinate until he had snored his nap out, by which time, fortunately, the play was over. No apology it appeared was considered necessary to the audience, for omitting the character, the company no doubt thinking they could do better without than with him."<sup>11</sup>

*The Battle of Hexham* received a better treatment at the hands of the company than *The Castle Spectre*. Young, the drunken Muley in the

preceding piece, "made a good Fool," Price's Gondibert "exalted his Theatrical reputation," and Placide's Gubbings "was an excellent display of comic acting." Mrs. Aldis's Queen was "full of greatness and majesty," but Mrs. Young's Adeline "was by no means a character suitable to her talents." The weakest character, as usual, was Armstrong whose Marquis was "too stiff and inanimate." Armstrong appeared "to have no idea of a nobleman but what is made up in a great measure of stars and ribbands,, a bigwing and a stately demeanour; he cannot paint one to himself like any other reasonable gentleman, unaffected in his habits, and to a proper extent, unconscious of his rank; he must have him stalk about, wear a lofty countenance and not even venture upon a gesture without a certain air of lordship and preparation."<sup>12</sup>

Though handicapped by a small stage and inadequate scenery, Price and Company attempted the grand melodrama of *Tekeli* in an "handsome style," according to Veritas: "The scenery, notwithstanding the obvious disadvantages of the House, was uncommonly good, particularly the representation of the Fortress and the two Mills." Price was too indisposed to play *Tekeli* effectively. But Charnock as the Miller who "receives *Tekeli* in his distress and exile, altho' an enemy, preserves him at the risk of his own personal safety from injury, did justice to the disinterested and virtuous hospitality of the character." Mrs. Young acted Alexina, the heroine of *Montgatz*, "with a dignified regard to the heroism of the character." Some of the actors betrayed a major lack of skill in the use of the sword: "If some of the performers do not practise their fencing more frequently, they will be apt to find that their fair opponent may excel them in that exercise, which would make rather a disadvantageous comparison for the gentlemen, and it might besides not be so pleasant if by their clumsy defence a Lady were to give them a wound in the hand." This melodrama fascinated the public so much that the company could "have a good house for a third or fourth exhibition of it."<sup>13</sup>

Another piece in which the scenery played an essential part was the operatic romance of *The Forty Thieves*. According to Veritas, the scenery was "very good, and the Company are entitled to much credit for getting it up in such handsome style."<sup>14</sup> Mrs. Aldis and Mrs. Young were "winning and captivating," and Mrs. Foster displayed "much vivacity and a sweet voice." Charnock as Ali Baba "exhibited some chaste acting and kept the house in a roar of laughter." Even Armstrong as Orcobrand "was very commanding, and looked and acted the character well."<sup>15</sup>

Sometimes the performances of afterpieces ended in confusion on account of the indiscipline of some members of the company. Some of the actors got so carried away by the rowdiness of a scene in the ballad opera of *The Devil to Pay* that they removed the prompter and his book off the stage with them. The exhibition "was in consequence obliged to be suspended," Peeping Tom reported, "and the audience were amused for their money, by being permitted to gaze upon an empty stage for the space of seven or eight minutes." The audience booed; the piece was "then gobbled over and the curtain fell before an insulted but forgiving audience."<sup>16</sup>

The Halifax spectators did not discuss the farces in as great detail as the mainpieces. The public's favourite actor in farces was Placide who, as Robin Rough-head in *The Fortune's Frolic*, "exhibited very considerable comic powers, which were peculiarly remarkable in the propriety with which he preserved the manner of the clown after his sudden elevation to a higher rank."<sup>17</sup> Robinson sang well in *The Purse*, in which Price played the drunken sailor in such a manner as "to gain him the approbation of the galleries."<sup>18</sup>

The most controversial production of the first season was *The True-Born Scotchman*, composed by Armstrong for his own benefit on 7 April 1817. After pointing out the eagerness with which a full house waited for the curtain to rise, Peeping Tom dismissed Armstrong's piece thus: "Instead of a Comedy worthy of a writer, out comes a flat, insipid thing; a string of commonplaces, rendered the more unsightly from the few pearls mingled with them. An unambitious, undignified, and most unworthy compilation of disinterestedness, void of pun and equivoque, and of what might at least be expected from an Actor turned Author, even hackneyed clap-trap." In the course of his commentary, Peeping Tom also ridiculed Price's acting skills: "Mr. Price would do well to rid himself of a great portion of that conceited vanity which he always assumes, and to pay more attention to the stage and less towards the audience; if in his amours he could look as if he felt what he professed, and restrain that unmeaning smirking peak of his chin when addressing the fair one, his acting would be much more natural." Peeping Tom claimed to have been guided by this Johnsonian motto in his review, "The Drama's laws the Drama patrons give,/And those that live to please must please to live."<sup>19</sup> When Armstrong tried to defend himself through a letter in the *Commercial Advertiser* of 17 April 1817, Peeping Tom intensified his campaign further: "Of all the Drama's dunghil none belong,/That cut so lame a figure as Price Armstrong." He went on to say with a sneer: "What a pity it is that an actor instead o

studying his own proper walk, and elevating as much as possible the character of the higher stage should suffer his ambition to degenerate into the vanity of attempting to write such trash as is scarcely fit for a Theatre of Pantomimes."<sup>20</sup>

Peeping Tom's rash generalizations about Armstrong's comedy did not go unchallenged. They were called in question by Veritas, Honest Tom, and Open Tom. The cool-tempered Veritas remarked that Armstrong's work in many ways "bears evident marks of being the production of a man of general reading and classic taste and is far superior to several plays that have been admired and applauded by a London audience, without possessing any intrinsic merit of their own, but which have merely met with success from falling into the hands of popular performers."<sup>21</sup> Honest Tom may have been a friend of Armstrong's and attacked Peeping Tom personally: "I cannot but admire the candour of Peeping Tom in the sentence [in which] he tells us of himself that 'his mother was ignorant as a Lord Mayor's fool,' and we must allow that her son is a truly dutiful one. Unless he had sprung from such a stock he could never have 'pitched in his witticism so pat,' nor could they have lasted thus long without the aid of the inexhaustible family Vocabulary."<sup>22</sup> Open Tom strongly disapproved of the "scurrillity and meanness" of Peeping Tom's style.<sup>23</sup>

Price and Company maintained its practice of offering a wide range of plays and songs and dances in the second season. One of the new season's attractions was Lewis's *Alfonso, King of Castile*. This tragedy tended "rather to create sensations of horror at which human nature shudders and revolts than those desirable feelings of interest which every good moral ought to excite." Price as Orsino "created a lively interest" as it "afforded him great opportunities to exercise his judgment, and to make strong points which he accomplished with tolerable success." In the extremely long part of *Caesario*, Robinson "laboured so immoderately without any modulation of voice, that he made a comma rest almost after every word, so as to render some passages nearly unintelligible." Peeping Tom singled out for special praise Mrs. Aldis who played Otilia; he liked her because he had "never been able to detect her guilty of cutting her part, a truth to which in a great measure may be attributed, that harmony of sound and force of imagination she displays in every passage where a favourable impression is possible to be made."<sup>24</sup>

Two other tragedies appealed to the public in December of 1817—*The Gamester* and *George Barnwell*. Price did not give Beverly "that force I expected he would; he indulged too much in the feelings of



hatred and despair, without mixing occasionally the extravagant turns of gaiety and indifference, which the Gamester now and then has in spite of bad luck."<sup>25</sup> But Price was a little more forceful in the role of George Barnwell. According to Peeping Tom, "he looked the character better and truly delineated the weaknesses of nature in dealing with the seduction of Milwood." Price made a mistake, though, "by appearing in the Prison Scene without being in irons which greatly lessened its effect; the rattling of the chains would probably have drowned the unbecoming sound of the hiccups, which troubled him."<sup>26</sup> These reviewers could be merciless in their humour.

One of the praiseworthy comedies of the season was Colman the Younger's *The Heir-at-Law*. Charnock, who had selected it for his benefit, "played the Baron Duberly tolerably well, but he could, and no doubt would have played it better, had there been a better house." This correspondent noted that "for some time past there has appeared a careless kind of turn towards his parts [by Charnock] seemingly indifferent whether he gave satisfaction or not—a kind of sourness probably the effect of causes yet to be explained." Robinson as Dick Dowlas "neither gave offence, nor excited praise." In his Pangloss, Armstrong "appeared to understand the author. It was in the delineation of the character wherein he failed. It required more life, more activity, more volubility, and a greater share of pertness." Mrs. Powell, the widow of Charles Stewart Powell who had managed the local Theatre Royal from 1797 until his death in 1810, played the role of Lady Duberly. Peeping Tom could not help observing that "her time of day is gone—some remains of theatrical talent, notwithstanding, now and then appeared; fortunately for her, the part was not long, because her voice gave evident symptoms that it is declining with her years. Her spirit, however, seemed good, she was perfectly easy, not deficient of grace, unembarrassed and confident." Mrs. Aldis "was not so fortunate as usual in Caroline, and Cicely Homespun by Mrs. Young was sustained highly to her credit."<sup>27</sup>

In July of 1818, Price brought to Halifax two outstanding performers—Frederick Brown and Mrs. Wheatley—both of whom "met with the most favourable reception." The two stars opened in Centlivre's *The Wonder, A Woman Keeps a Secret* in the roles of Don Felix and Donna Violante. Mrs. Wheatley conveyed "the dignity of Violante's deportment and her internal sense of innocence" so forcefully that her performance deserved "to be recorded as a sample of as chaste a piece of acting as ever graced the stage." Brown's Don Felix "was equally successful." Mrs. Wheatley "in her love was a woman, and Mr. Brown in his jealousy a Spaniard."<sup>28</sup>

Mrs. Wheatley's movements, carriage and voice enchanted the audience immensely in her Little Pickle in Bickerstaffe's *The Spoiled Child*. Peeping Tom asserted fearlessly that "her Little Pickle (with the exception of the late Mrs. Jordan) is the best, I recollect, ever having seen. She was at home to a hair." He admitted that he had "always admired Mrs. Young in this character, but admiration became ecstasy, by witnessing it in the hands of Mrs. Wheatley. Her voice is powerful, melodious, and expressive." The spectators "rapturously applauded her in the favourite air of 'Since then I'm doomed'."<sup>29</sup>

As the educated spectators were voicing their opinions about the performers' ability to imitate nature, the theatre began to suffer an irreversible decline. This downfall must have puzzled the critics who had attended so many performances and written perceptively so many reviews in the hope of giving a proper direction to their theatre. What was the actual result of their long critical labours? By sustaining an informed and judicious evaluation of dramatic performances, they created the rudiments of a tradition of theatrical journalism in Canada. They began the long process of the education of theatre-going public in the appreciation of acting and vocal skills, costumes and scenery. They articulated the values and standards by which a well-regulated theatre could be judged. Neither simplistic nor sectarian, the Halifax critics raised the serious questions about acting and staging which later commentators have echoed and to which they have found no easy answers.

## NOTES

1. "The Actor's Eye: Impressions of Nineteenth Century Canada," *Canadian Literature*, XIII (Summer, 1962), 23.
2. *Shakespeare on the American Stage* (Washington, D.C.: Folger Shakespeare Library, 1976), p. 17.
3. George A. Nader, *Cities of Canada*, 2 vols. (Toronto: Macmillan, 1975-76), II, 32.
4. *Ibid.*, II, 31.
5. *Free Press*, 4 February 1817.
6. *FP*, 4 March 1817.
7. *Acadian Recorder*, 17 March 1817.
8. *FP* 4 March 1817.
9. *AR*, 17 May 1817.
10. *FP*, 18 March 1817.
11. *AR*, 28 June 1817.
12. *Ibid.*
13. *FP*, 18 February 1817.
14. *FP*, 20 May 1817.
15. *AR*, 17 May 1817.
16. *Ibid.*
17. *FP*, 4 February 1817.
18. *Ibid.*
19. *AR*, 12 April 1817.

20. *AR*, 19 April 1817.
21. *FP*, 3 May 1817.
22. *FP*, 13 May 1817.
23. *FP*, 3 June 1817.
24. *AR*, 6 December 1817.
25. *AR*, 10 January 1818.
26. *Ibid.*
27. *AR*, 6 June 1818.
28. *AR*, 18 July 1818.
29. *Ibid.*