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The Articulate Audience and the Fortunes of the Theatre in Halifax in 1816-1819

“The articulate audience, along with text and actors, forms the third and necessary element in the make-up of dramatic art. Eighteenth-century articulateness ran the gamut from quiet attentive acceptance of a play to vociferous denunciations.”¹ How did the audience of a Canadian city in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century appreciate and respond to theatrical presentations? How did the articulate spectators understand or define their role in relation to the fortunes of the theatre in Halifax? These significant but neglected questions about the role of the audience in early Canadian theatre are especially complicated by the fact that many spectators went to see plays with memories of Covent Garden and Drury Lane and inevitably compared with London what the provincial actors presented on a small stage in a pioneer community. In 1817, when some educated residents of Halifax began reviewing performances under lively and erudite pseudonyms like Veritas, Peeping Tom, Open Tom, Honest Tom, Senex, Juvenis, Philo, Dramaticus, and others, they faced a serious dilemma. Should they accept a poor theatre, or should they condemn it and aspire for London? Of all the Canadian cities in which professional performances were being given in 1817—Halifax, Saint John, Quebec City, Montreal, and Kingston—it was the Haligonians who first recognized this dilemma, discussed the connection between themselves and the quality of their theatre, composed lengthy critiques for the *Free Press* and the *Acadian Recorder*, and tried to deal with a paradox seemingly incapable of a satisfactory solution.

These articulate spectators were motivated in their criticism by the lofty belief that “a cultivated and embellished mind united to a good taste, always aids and assists the Drama as a chaste and innocent amusement and as a great support to morality and virtue” and that “an extended and populous town, like Halifax, ought to support an hand-

some and a well-conducted Theatre."² If a theatre did not exist in Halifax to shape the public's "morals, unfold their imaginations, and perfect their judgments," Juvenis warned, "we shall soon, very soon, find ourselves imperceptibly drawn to a level with the Acadian Aborigines." In their desire to encourage and improve their theatre, these spectators were guided by the taste of their London counterparts. "As respects Stage exhibitions, also," Veritas suggested, "we owe such other improvement at which our performers in the mother country have arrived, to the public in which their defects are pointed out and censured, or their merits impartially acknowledged. The popularity of an Actor or a Play depends of course immediately on the favour of the audience, but their judgment will often prove to be formed on insufficient grounds and without a due regard to real merit, unless a proper direction is given to their taste."³ The underlying assumption here is obvious. Halifax, like London, could not have a well-conducted theatre without an articulate audience. Examining this assumption retrospectively, one should note that Veritas and others, guided by their high expectations, revealed not only the actual state of the theatre in a pioneer community but also the difficulty of applying London standards to Canadian theatres.

The specific occasion for this articulation of criticism was the appearance of Price and Company at the Fairbanks Wharf Theatre in the fall of 1816. Veritas and others display in their evaluations of Price's company an adequate familiarity with the London stage, a fair understanding of the craft of acting, a reasonable sense of the appropriateness of scenery, music, and costumes, a strong independence of judgment, an unusual liveliness of style, and an unshaken faith in the institution of the theatre in their town. And they were dedicated to the cause of giving proper direction to the taste of their fellow citizens. But their knowledge of the theatre also created their dilemma. Some of them emphasized only good aspects of Price and Company; but others upheld their standards more rigidly, and vociferously denounced the company's lack of talent. When the company began performing in Halifax, Peeping Tom sensed that "it was too clear they considered the people of this Town so ignorant of dramatic merit, as to flatter themselves that anything like an appearance of acting would afford them sufficient gratification for their money."⁴ Incensed at the company's low opinion of its patrons, Peeping Tom attacked the actors for reducing the best of plays "to language without grammar, sentiment without common sense, and song without harmony."⁵ More tolerant theatre-goers, however, challenged this extreme position. Veritas, for example, stated firmly

that he had "never in any one instance discovered such wilful murder of good plays as he (Peeping Tom) charges them with."⁶

Veritas and Peeping Tom disagreed with each other quite often, but they agreed about the artistic capabilities of some of the prominent actors and actresses in Price's company. Price's "talent is evidently for tragedy", but his acting was marred by a "few defects, such as too great elevation of his voice and violence of action."⁷ Price employed exaggerated declamation to "call forth a burst of applause from the undiscerning and the gallery."⁸ Charnock succeeded best "in comic characters, and by the natural easy manner with which he plays his part on all occasions has acquired a very considerable share of the public favour."⁹ Placide was "irresistibly comic", but he failed in tragedy "for it appears hard for him to avoid mixing a little of his comic humour with tragic seriousness."¹⁰ He was "an actor of much sterling comic merit and true originality," according to Peeping Tom.¹¹ In Robinson, Peeping Tom found "a sameness" that rendered him stationary, and he compared him to those musical talents whose "acting is too often destitute of merit." Peeping Tom labelled Francis and Carey as "good supernumeraries", and Veritas dismissed Armstrong as "too stiff and immoveable". The leading lady of this company was Mrs. Young who "had been tried in all characters—in the playful vivacity of Comedy, where she shines with undisputed superiority—and also in the more commanding path of Tragedy—in which she has succeeded in rousing the noblest feelings of the soul," but "it is the imitation of nature in the various parts which she has appeared in here, that makes Mrs. Young such a general favourite."¹² "Her voice and figure are neither of them adapted for tragedy," observed the more critical Peeping Tom; "she aspirates at every breath so loud that the effect is painful to an attentive hearer, and often destroys the effect of the sentence she is repeating." About Mrs. Aldis, Veritas wrote that "her figure is calculated for tragedy, and if her voice were better she would do great justice to some of the noblest characters that are admired on the English Stage." Mrs. Foster was a good addition to the company, said Peeping Tom, "Her singing is pleasing, her voice clear and distinct, and her acting passable." Peeping Tom singled out Mrs. Charnock as the worst of the actresses; she "claims no pretensions to acting, she may rest satisfied the critics will never disturb her."

What could Haligonians expect from a company whose tragedian could not control his voice and gestures and whose leading lady aspirated loudly at every breath? In spite of the limitations of talent, the small size of the stage and poor scenery, Price's company offered a large

and varied repertory of legitimate as well as popular plays which had appealed to London audiences and thus gave to residents of Halifax a sampling of good plays from the mother country. This repertory consisted of Shakespeare, tragedies, comedies, farces, operatic farces, comic operas, interludes, melodramas, pantomimes, and dramatic poems. Veritas, Peeping Tom, and other correspondents reviewed this large repertory, but since their correspondence is too lengthy for inclusion here, this study focuses only on the articulate spectators' discussion of the virtues and defects of Price and Company's productions of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, *Othello*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Richard the Third*, *The Tempest*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Hamlet*.

On the evening of the performance of *Macbeth* Veritas noted that the house was "crowded to overflowing, notwithstanding which, I was pleased to observe that great order prevailed."¹³ The scenery "was good, and upon the whole tho' there was something for a 'surly critic' to censure, there was very much for him to applaud." With a "perfect conception of the character", Price in the hero's role "acquitted himself inimitably well in the scene where he enters from the murder of Duncan, and I think that the horror and remorse of Macbeth for that deed could not have been better depicted or expressed than they were by Mr. Price both in his countenance and voice." Mrs. Young's "dress was superb", and she looked the character of Lady Macbeth "uncommonly well". Her correct elocution and "her fine voice would alone render her a pleasing performer on any stage; but to these necessary qualifications she adds a very correct taste and nice discrimination of character." Armstrong was "very deficient in action" as Duncan, and Moss who played Malcolm "would improve much if he took a little pains to acquire more distinct elocution and appropriate gesticulation." The actor who played Macduff "possessed so much of the tell-tale brogue of the Emerald Isle" that Veritas advised him "to confine himself to characters more suitable to him."

Price who understood Macbeth so well could not succeed in the role of Othello. This production "was got up in very tolerable style", and Price "got through that difficult and trying part with very tolerable success."¹⁴ Nevertheless, Price delivered the speech to the Council "with much grace and manliness, and the concluding chamber scene he acted well." Armstrong made a forceful Iago, because he was "best in a character that does not require the expression of any tender feeling, and in which much action can be easily dispensed with." Robinson's acting as Cassio "was very awkward, and he did not seem to feel anything of what he uttered." One of the poor actors on this occasion was Francis

"who has as little pretension to dramatic merit as the Amateurs that have appeared on this Stage." The part of Desdemona suited Mrs. Young perfectly, "as it is one in which feminine softness, simplicity and conscious innocence are the prominent features." Mrs. Young "played, as she generally does, with a nice attention to the spirit of the character, and was favourably received by an overflowing House." Mrs. Aldis justified herself in Emilia "as far as she had an opportunity."

Price's most disappointing role was that of Skylock in *The Merchant of Venice*. He "appeared to mistake the character of Shylock entirely, and instead of the sly, crafty, vindictive spirit of the Jew, he gave it all the open violence of Othello."¹⁵ Francis's Duke put Veritas in a rage: "Never was the character of Shakespeare's Duke so much disgraced as by this disgusting pretender to the name of an Actor." Veritas asked him "to leave the Drama for ever to those who have some claim to ability, and turn to reefing topsails, to his grog, and to his tobacco, and all the other delights of his former station." Unlike Price and Francis who did so poorly, Mrs. Aldis "played the part of Portia with eminent ability." When she assumed the lawyer's disguise, "she appeared to leave the woman behind her altogether, and changed her manner with great effect, tho' her head was not exactly dressed like that of a gentleman of the Bar." Mrs. Young's Jessica "was not the less pleasing from the circumstance of her omitting to appear in the dress of a boy—a species of stage-effect which ought not to be resorted to oftener than is absolutely necessary."

The size of the stage in Fairbanks Wharf Theatre, which did not matter in plays like *Macbeth*, made it difficult for Price to do *The Tempest*. The stage "in this little Theatre" was "not spacious enough to allow *The Tempest* to be got up as it ought to be." Peeping Tom pointed out that "it is one of those Plays in which Scenery forms a striking feature and greatly assists the sublime and imaginary ideas of our immortal bard; to effect this purpose, the extent of the stage does not admit of the Scenery being judiciously arranged, and consequently a greater degree of improbability occurs to the minds of the audience than what flows from the incidents of the piece."¹⁶ Armstrong, who struck Peeping Tom as "a good reader . . ., but no true performer", appeared "to greater advantage in the character of Prospero than in any other character I have seen him." Price made "a poor Trinculo", Robinson as Ferdinand "was more respectable than usual", and Charnock deserved "great commendation" as Caliban. Young as Antonio, Moss as Gonzalo, and Francis as Alonzo "may all be shaken up in one bag, and it is an even chance

which turns out the worst." The women as usual performed better than the men. Mrs. Aldis in *Hypolito* "preserved her well-earned reputation; her acting was chaste, her figure good, and her fencing elegant." Mrs. Young's *Dorinda* and Mrs. Foster's *Miranda* were "both entitled to praise." The "greatest novelty" of the evening was Master Stanley in the role of *Ariel* who "sang 'Full fathoms five thy Father lies,' & 'Where the Bee sucks there suck I' with great judgment and taste."

The most popular of Shakespeare's plays to be attempted by this company in its first season was *Richard III*. "There is perhaps no character more conspicuous in our Theatrical history, in which candidates for Theatrical fame have tried their respective powers than that of *Richard 3d*," remarked Peeping Tom.¹⁷ "Kemble and Cooke were great rivals in it, and criticism was certainly never more penetrating than upon that occasion." Modelling himself poorly on George Frederick Cooke, Price exerted "himself in this arduous part considerably; in fact, to a degree faulty." His "countenance had little or no variety, but from profound seriousness to a harsh and staring smile, and with his delivery he played the most unaccountable tricks, at one time giving no force whatever to the strongest passages, at another swelling out into a sort of outcry unexpectedly." Without being aware of it, Price was "rendering himself liable to the too common fault of ranting, for on a sudden he swelled out like a trumpet, without the least appearance of a motive as though in addition to his common sensations, he had had some invisible stimulus from a twinge of the gout, or a malicious pin at his elbow." It was "reported that after the conflict with *Richmond* he was so exhausted as to require help to take him off the stage." Armstrong "acquitted himself as *Henry 4th* greatly to his credit"; but Charnock as Stanley "did not appear to that advantage he generally does." Robinson's *Richmond* "might have been better had he been more perfect in his part." Mrs. Young's *Lady Anne* was merely "interesting", but Mrs. Aldis "obtained a good deal of deserved applause in the part of the *Queen*; her forte is evidently in the line of tragedy, her acting was graceful, delicate, and skillful, and she managed well that gradual declension of the voice at the close of tender speeches, particularly in the tower scene." Mrs. Foster "delineated the *Duchess* with much ease, judgment and ability."

Veritas and Peeping Tom reviewed Price and Company's first season of Shakespeare with sympathy and discretion and with a due regard for artistic merit. However, their criticism, especially that of Peeping Tom, gave their readers the impression that people should stay away from these poor productions. Honest Tom suggested that Peeping Tom was "one of those who have during the past winter been amusing themselves

by taking from the Company a great part of that patronage by which they are to get their Bread" and protested that this behaviour was "disgraceful to the rank he holds in society and dishonourable to him as a man."¹⁸ Open Tom strongly disapproved of the "scurrility and meanness" of Peeping Tom's style.¹⁹ But all the financial difficulties of the company cannot be blamed on articulate spectators like Peeping Tom. The company reduced its chances of success, Veritas proposed, by "their neglecting the appearance of the inside of the theatre, as much as they do. If a little paint were expended in the wood, and more pains taken to light the house properly, they would find it turn out eventually to the advantage of their establishment."²⁰ Ryan and Hursts, the musicians, bored the spectators by repeatedly playing the same tunes.

Before opening its second season in November, 1817, Price and Company got the theatre painted, but Peeping Tom could not "say much in favour of the artist's brush. If the wide cracks in the ceiling were stopped, and the candles not suffered to have so long snuffs, it would certainly afford some relief to the dirty white with which it is covered."²¹ The company also offended its patrons by cutting the text of plays. For Peeping Tom, cutting the text "was a species of public robbery, in as much as it takes away from the audience that which they have paid for, and have a right to."²² To improve receipts and the quality of acting, the company decided early in the second season to play two nights a week instead of four and "established certain Articles and Regulations" to enforce discipline.²³ Whatever the reasons for poor attendance, Price tried to give a season as efficiently as he could and staged a wide range of plays, including Shakespeare.

The first of Shakespeare's plays this season was *Romeo and Juliet*, about which Peeping Tom said little more than commending Moss's "conception and performance of Mercutio".²⁴ This was followed by *Richard III* in which a new actor named Cuthbert appeared in the title role. Cuthbert's "voice is good, his articulation clear and distinct, and his countenance capable of expressing the deep, artful and diabolical features of Gloster."²⁵ Cuthbert also modelled himself on Cooke, but his imitation was unfortunate, for his right arm "kept one invariable twirling round, which his prototype only used when he wished to express some dark dissembling or sneering feeling." Cuthbert would "do well to study the stage step and the advantage of a good exit." When he slew the good King Henry, Cuthbert "was too tame, too dispassionate and quite unmoved at the atrocious deed." In spite of these weaknesses, Cuthbert "appeared to possess confidence, which was greatly in his favor, for he was undoubtedly very ill supported." The ill support came from men.

Mrs. Aldis, who "seldom fails in making an impression wherever pathos is required . . . , shone in the Queen, with her usual discrimination." Mrs. Young "personated Lady Anne with great judgment and taste, and particularly called forth the approbation of the audience, when she exclaimed, 'Forgive me Heaven as I forgive this man'." Some of the staging errors in this production irritated Peeping Tom: "Why the corpse of the King was not brought on the stage, the Manager can best explain—these kind(s) of omissions, and the cutting their parts, often render an expression foolish, inconsistent and ludicrous." A delay after the third act also spoiled the tragic effect: "The audience were kept waiting full half an hour; their minds were diverted by music, and the interest of the piece lost that link of connection which it is the manager's duty to keep alive, so far as depends upon the scenery and stage effect."

Price and Company displayed its defects most glaringly in *Hamlet*. Dramaticus noted first of all how the conditions of the theatre contributed to this failure: "The proximity of the audience to the stage, the want of appropriate scenery, the distress and awkwardness of the supernumeraries, and the palpable inferiority of the subordinate members, are causes of failure uniform in operation and pernicious in effect."²⁶ Another problem was the deletion of some of "its most shining passages": "Among these I noticed, in the first act, the soliloquy of Hamlet, after his first encounter with the Ghost; in the third, the King's private and rankling reflections on his crime; and in the fourth, the Queen's beautiful description of Ophelia's death." The "great fault" of Price's *Hamlet* was "his neglect, in reducing or elevating, with different characters, his tone and style of action." Price's "most unsuccessful attempts were his soliloquy beginning with, 'Oh that this too too solid flesh would melt, / Thaw and resolve itself into a dew,' the whole of which was execrable, and the description of his father in the interview with his mother. In the first of these, in place of that 'maiden softness' which his voice ought to have occasionally assumed, it grated upon the ear, with a most querulous harshness; and to increase the effect, he never ceased, during the whole thirty lines, combing his hair with his inverted fingers, in that elegant and peculiar gesture, by which all his high-wrought exhibitions of passion never fail to be disfigured." As regards the rest of the play, "most of the other scenes passed away in the 'aurea mediscritas' of Horace, with the exception of two passages in which he betrayed much good acting—the one his conversation with Polonius in the second act, the other his interview with Ophelia in the third." Cuthbert as the King "did well—if he could only correct the general awkwardness of his figure and of his arms in particular." "In

Laertes, by his confused and mouthing delivery," Moss "contrived to throw a dusky veil over the meaning of almost every sentence, and succeeded in rendering the part at once devoid of interest and innocent of expression." In the role of Horatio, Robinson "had the same air of hustling and forward pertness, which is his perpetual characteristic, whether as an officious waiter, as a polite gentleman, or as a Peruvian Emperor." "For almost the first time in my recollection", Mrs. Aldis as the Queen "played ill. She was inanimate, unimpassioned, and neither looked nor spoke like herself." As Ophelia, Mrs. Young "shone with her usual lustre, and preserved her high fame, 'unsullied by a spot.' The bewitching naivete with which she admonished her brother, and her just delineation of the mad scene were alike admirable."

In July, 1818, Price brought to Halifax two outstanding performers—Frederick Brown and Mrs. Wheatley—both of whom "met with the most favourable reception", particularly in *Othello*. Othello was Brown's most memorable role. "In the Bed-chamber scene, it may truly be said he surpassed himself; those who have seen and heard Mr. Kemble in the same part must have been forcibly struck by the similarity, both of tone of voice and sublimity of expression, in which he delivered the subjoined 'It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul!'"²⁷ Brown spoke the "whole passage in one of Mr. Kemble's mournful piteous tones, that transported my imagination to the boards of Covent Garden." His dying scene "was grand; his staggering efforts, to reach the lifeless body of Desdemona, after he had stabbed himself, the giddy whirling of his brain, and his point blank fall, were all excellencies that entitle him to be ranked among the first-rate performers." Mrs. Wheatley, however, "fell short of public expectation" in her Desdemona. Similarly, Price "failed in Iago; he personated a villain without sufficient approach to the grandeur of crime." The character of Emilia "admitted of little scope for Mrs. Aldis's exertions. To confine her in such a part was like binding the opening bud, to prevent its expression."

Brown attracted large crowds in Halifax, but after his departure attendance dropped again. Price himself left town in the fall of 1818, and Betterton from Covent Garden took his place as leading actor and manager. Betterton could not draw full houses either. "What then is the reason", asked a perplexed Senex, "that this rational recreation should be so much neglected? and the Theatre so much deserted?"²⁸ Philo speculated that this decline may be "attributable to the spirit of opposition having then expired, to one of the whims of ever-changing fashion, to the novelty having worn off, or to a decrease of talent among our

Canadians."²⁹ "It is perhaps owing to a combination of all," Philo surmised, "but the full houses attracted by the admirable performance of Mr. F. Brown during his short stay here indicate that the falling off is in some measure to be attributed to the latter of these four causes." While pointing at the lack of talent as a probable cause of the decline of the theatre, Philo said that he realized that he would not expect "to see upon our boards the equals of an O'Neil, Kean, or a Kemble" and wanted to "make every allowance for such as are amongst us, and would wish to see encouragement given to those of the Company, who to a desire to please, join such abilities as entitle them to consideration."

By talking about the lack of talent Philo certainly touched upon a long-term dilemma of the Canadian theatre. Would Philo rather encourage some members of Price's company than rushing to the theatre to watch a Frederick Brown or a Kemble? Would the articulate audience be willing to groom a local actor or look toward London for standards of real merit? There is perhaps no satisfactory solution to this dilemma. Price's company at Fairbanks Wharf Theatre did not get a chance to develop because they were being evaluated by spectators who wanted it to be Covent Garden. Theatrical activity ceased in Halifax in 1819 and was not to be revived until the Amateur Theatre opened on 14 March 1822,³⁰ and the problem of the proper relationship between an articulate audience and a performing troupe did not get resolved except in the negative.

NOTES

1. George Winchester Stone, Jr., *The London Stage 1747-1776: A Critical Introduction* (Carbondale & Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1968), p. clxxxiv.
2. Juvenis, *Acadian Recorder*, 6 June 1818.
3. *Free Press*, 28 January 1817.
4. *AR*, 28 June 1817.
5. *AR*, 12 April 1817.
6. *FP*, 15 April, 1817.
7. Veritas, *FP*, 24 June 1817.
8. Peeping Tom, *AR*, 28 June 1817.
9. Veritas, *FP*, 24 June 1817.
10. Veritas, *FP*, 24 June 1817.
11. *AR*, 28 June 1817.
12. Veritas, *FP*, 24 June 1817.
13. *FP*, 28 January 1817.
14. Veritas, *FP*, 25 March 1817.
15. Veritas, *FP*, 20 May 1817.

16. *AR*, 31 May, 1817.
17. *AR*, 28 June 1817.
18. *FP*, 13 May 1817.
19. *FP*, 3 June 1817.
20. *FP*, 18 March, 1817.
21. *AR*, 6 December 1817.
22. *AR*, 6 December 1817.
23. Playbill, cited by Peeping Tom, *AR*, 6 December 1817.
24. Peeping Tom, *AR*, 6 December 1817.
25. Peeping Tom, *AR*, 2 May 1818.
26. *FP*, 26 May 1818.
27. Peeping Tom, *AR*, 18 July 1818.
28. *FP*, 15 December 1818.
29. *AR*, 3 April 1819.
30. *Halifax Journal*, 18 March 1822.