"The Modern Actor"


"The Modern Actor" was originally a lecture given in conjunction with Oscar Wilde to the Playgoers’ Club on 7 February 1892. In their separate lectures, both Gray and Wilde proposed a common theme, the radical redefinition of the actor: Wilde arguing that puppets would be preferable to actors; Gray that the true actor is none other than the vaudeville performer. Their obvious collaboration in this performance further fuelled rumours that Gray was, in fact, Wilde’s protégé.

Such publicity obviously affected the reception of this lecture. But its impact should also be assessed in terms of the claim Gray was making for the artistes of the music hall. In Gray’s day, the music hall was a venue for variety acts of all kinds, from the singers of popular (particularly Cockney) songs to clog dancing, acrobatic acts and even girls swimming in water tanks to the accompaniment of music. The ballet found an early home there when it was banned by the licencing laws which prescribed either music and dance or dramatic entertainments but prohibited any combination of the two. Although at the time of this lecture music halls were gradually becoming more respectable—some were even patronized by families—in general the audience was both classless and rowdy (as well as drunken) and they were regarded by young gentlemen as venues for picking up women. Gray’s acclamation of these places as the "real" theatre was, therefore, both startling and offensive.
The Modern Actor

O spare any possibility of mystification, let me announce at once that by the modern actor I mean the Music Hall singer, the "artiste" many estimable and rightly inquisitive people have never seen, the "professional" thought of by some only with horror and disgust. Most, I suppose, look upon this person as more or less of a pariah. Those who so look upon him are perfectly right.

Every actor, and indeed, every artist, is properly an outcast and unclassed person; and in most right-minded times and countries he has been so treated, to the advantage and content of all. Instances will swarm at the bidding of a moment's reflection. Ostracism of the artist is very often called upon, and satisfactorily supplies explanations, even in these dilatory days. Among the great artists of the world Leonardo ranks with the foremost. I, for my part, would rather believe it fate than fortuity that his dust lies in exile beside the yellow Loire. 1 There is delicate quiet for what rests of his body in the little chapel of St. Hubert, which poises itself on the perilous rim of the rock of Amboise; and the lilies fade in the flagstones above him, and the house of kings of France crumbles around him. How unseemly to eyes of the Fifteenth Century would be the position of the fashionable portrait painter of this Nineteenth! And compare a portrait of Piero della Francesca 2 with a picture of any noble lady in any Academy.

Poets offer more convincing instances, having, in contrast with painters and sculptors, so little to do in the furnishing of life. Never
have these known peace, except when under the protection of queens and dukes. According to the legend Homer was a blind and pitiful beggar. When the finger was pointed at Dante Alighieri, and it was said: that is the man who has been in hell, those who said it were not far wrong. François Villon was lashed and imprisoned and condemned to death. He who bears today the tradition of Villon’s song lies at this moment sick and hungry and naked. England has been rich in singers; the best of these have been done to death. Give her the advantage of one or two doubtful exceptions; all the rest she has driven to exile and suicide and misery.

Come now to the particular case of the actor. Whole classes of English society still look upon the theatre and all its belongings as closely linked to the devil’s hell, and with a vehemence of loathing that never can be wholly accounted for. The feeling of which this distrust is the present manifestation does not date only from the Methodist revival, nor from the asceticism of the Seventeenth Century. It is as old as the institution of the actor. One of the degradations to which, in old Roman law, the status of a properly moral citizen was liable, was the levis nota, the slight brand of disgrace with which he became marked who followed a low calling—or, as we say now, “profession”. Of these the actor was typical; and however much he might be pampered for his antics and mimicry, he was marked, civically disgraced, disqualified, unprivileged, to a greater or lesser degree, at almost every incident of his life.

In the middle age the actor (leaving aside the monks with their mysteries and miracles) is a most accidental person, wandering about from place to place—a vagrant, with his little repertory, very humble, ready to mount and present in a few moments whatever his patrons would have of him. And until the great burst of English poetry, our splendid Jacobean period, the mummer who trailed his rags and masks about the country had a very strange bag of tricks indeed. For my part I see it very similar to some impossibly low and humble variety performance of the present day. You would have farce and
pantomime, half historical, clouded with myth and of uncertain origin; added to these, songs and dances, playing upon instruments of curious mould and use. Then there would be a learned animal, some feats of jugglery, and possibly, if the company were very complete, an exhibition of physical contortion. All whereby, the lord would be moderately well pleased; the ladies of his house would have had their little shudder at the sight of a man walking with his head the wrong way on, or eating lighted pitch, or swallowing knives; and the nice, grimy knights would have each his theory about the mechanism of a certain trick, and go about crooning to themselves the "Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay" of the period. But the mummers? were they hurried up at once to a seat beside their hosts, and coaxed over a chosen goblet to give a select repetition of some minor trick? On the contrary, it never occurred to the patron that his clever visitors were in any way different from the pedlar. He gave them food and shelter in Christian and gentlemanly hospitality, and presents for the pleasure they had afforded him; but absolutely in the same spirit as he would have given them to the merest, humblest stranger at his castle.

At the end of the Sixteenth Century, by reason of the youth and strength of the song that burst simultaneously from the lips of a hundred poets, poetry became a sort of fashion, and for the first time in England the interest of the patron in the art of his protégé began to be really intelligent and intimate. Yet, though great was art, neither poet nor actor ever sought in that a pretext to become respectable, and the conditions of an aristocratic society would not have allowed them to realise their wish if they had.

The poet today draws his rents, if he has any, and sits down to reason out that he is really a hated and a hunted thing. He pictures his mother cursing and crying against God that among all women she has been chosen to be the disgust of her revolted husband and bear the hated child. But in spite of his mother's loathing the cursed thing grows up, under the tutelage of an angel, wild with the sunlight
that dances in his veins. And he talks with the winds and the clouds, and sings like birds among green branches, so that the spirit that guides him weeps to see him so gay. Those he would love look upon him with dread and hate, or, taking courage from his harmlessness, try which of them can first draw from him a sob of pain. They mix ashes and offal with his food and his drink, and pretend themselves defiled by touching the thing that has left his hand, or by treading in one of his footprints.

The notion is a charming one, exaggerated, as you have it here, into an artistic motive by so great a master as Charles Baudelaire;—for radically, mark, it is a true description—yet to the ordinary person, the worthy, practical man, to whom artistic motive is a thing of the least possible interest, it must seem very finnikin indeed.

Nowaday passions of appreciation and aversion are weak and poor. If you let your neighbour rifle your pockets, he will—sometimes—leave you alone to be whatever you choose, to talk to the winds and the clouds as you will.

Under King James there was more candour; and the distance between prince and poet was better insisted upon. Where did this latter pass his days? Was it not in wine-shops and places of evil allure, drinking and brawling with the vile, with serving men and ruffians? But though the men were debased, the artists were strong and pure and noble, aristocrats in their measure, preferring to lie upon the clouds of their proper divinity, though those clouds were but the fumes of wine, than to sit upon the mere velvet of a duke's furniture. And the actors meantime? Depend upon it, when Kit Marlowe lay sleeping across the table in a tavern, it would have been a safe bid to look for Will Hughes beneath the table.7

And so right down, even into present generations, the actor has been an outcast and a pariah, identified always with Bohemia—a condition of life hard enough for those who lead it, in some ways, but surrounded with all sorts of graciousness and pleasant sentiment.
The actor used to be branded with contempt. This, by odd perver­sion, was in some way a pleasure and satisfaction to him. Look to the generic names by which he had been called: mummer, mime, mountebank, play-actor; smelling contempt, there is yet about them a fondness almost as great as about the word Bohemian. Hélas, la Bohème! Bohemia is under the hammer, I am afraid, of an auctioneer who represents amalgamated School Boards, County Councils and Exeter Halls. 

All this to insinuate that the descendants of the true actor, the heirs of the authentic branch of the family, are no longer to be sought in the place that wilfully calls itself the Stage Proper, but in the Low Music Hall. The pretty miss and the university young man have driven out the rightful inheritors. For these, the artists, cannot be bothered to cavil with the ponderous and the serious. When the rain comes in through the roof of one booth, the artist, being what he is, and not a carpenter, merely walks quietly to another, to continue his reason for existence, leaving the irritated enemy in possession.

Now, being well assured who it is that, as a type, represents the genus actor, to seek to find who, for all practical and exalted purpose, the sentiment of tradition apart, is The Actor. To this end a remark or two is necessary upon the theatre as it exists to-day. Let us say that the time produces all that is wanted in the shape of plays. Let us say that the actor is great and wonderful. Let us say that the play-houses are well-ventilated in summer, perfectly warmed and free from draughts in winter; and assume that there is no charge for programmes. But the theatre, for the health and sanity of which the society that supports it is responsible? Why not say what we all know, that it is dead; dead, and buried under the boulders and pyramids of its own ponderousness. The corpse, of that thing that in life was so wondrous fair and so poetically neglected, is become matter of strange interest. Though as undoubtedly and ultimately dead as the crater of a model volcano, it is a source of continual anxiety, not only to itself, but to everybody else, by reason of the incidents of a frail
digestion. Apart from the porridge and pepsine which forms the staple of its sustenance, it can only take the apple-dumpling of melodrama occasionally, and much more rarely it indulges what it pretends is a most pronounced taste, for truffles. But when it is question of the strong meat of young vigorous drama, or the wine of romance, it has to resort to artificial digestion. The Jacobean drama it treats as game, hanging it up till it is rotten, then cutting away the breast of the bird and feasting morbidly on the skeleton. As a working concern the theatre is become a limited liability company, that engages a specialist and hopes to thrive.

So, in spite of much that compensates the weakness and poorness and vanity of the dead theatre, its army of beautiful and talented mercenaries, the mechanism of its astounding stage effects, the splendour of the stuffs it gets from Mr. Liberty, the third rate, catch-penny bric-a-brac with which it is forever ogling an over-educated pit, those of us who care at all about the matter must turn, if with sorrow, from the house of death, with its mocking and unseemly airs of vitality, to ferret out histrionic art in the humble lodging to which she has been driven. There she is for ever young, light of heart as of foot, gay and insouciané as on the day when shyly she first saw the light. She flouts the foolish lie that she had grown old and hideous and deformed. She has the magic to escape all these misfortunes.

The essential note in the tact and right wisdom of the Music Hall I take to be this: Never for a moment does it forget—or only in the rarest instances—for what purpose it exists. ENTERTAINMENT is its watchword. While it remembers that it is in the safe way. Manifestations of art come always bitterly to grief when seriousness overtakes them and they desire to instruct or elevate or philanthropise in any way soever. The spirit of art flees away by caprice, or is driven out; the cold, inert thing that is left, helpless, tries to galvanise itself into a semblance of life by uttering no matter what foolish propaganda.
Of course the pursuit of folly goes on. The blind and deaf throng madly to see and hear the tract in five acts; no doubt they do it with much pleasant feeling of self-congratulation. These are the lovers of Robert Elsmere, Germanism and the tendenzroman in all its aspects.\textsuperscript{11}

There is scarcely a comparison possible between the warm, living stage and the dead one. The latter is naturally pompous, surrounded as it is with all its doctors and nurses. The other is sweet and coquette, clapping its hands as it dances, asking nothing of anybody.

A theatre, in the abstract sense, as I said earlier, is brought about by means of everybody who has anything to do with it. Its managers, playwrights, histrions,\textsuperscript{12} and audiences are all responsible, though the division of responsibility varies from time to time. At this moment we have to thank the “artiste” for most that is of highest fascination upon his stage. He has brought elements of wonder almost gratuitously. Standing, as so many of them do, upon high pedestals of fame, these actors do not rest upon their laurels as they might. (For, once arrived at favour, these ladies and gentlemen get reputation and a following as serious as Mr. Irving’s or Madame Sarah Bernhardt’s.)\textsuperscript{13} No, forever they bring new and newer, more consummate performances. And with how much accessory are their effects produced? Their properties are always of the rudest and simplest. The best, indeed, often do without them altogether, and are even indifferent to changes of light. Scenery, accessory of every sort, let us have them by all means; but the Music Hall, for whatever immediate reason, is practically without them. Its trashiest artiste has to face a difficult, a master feat—he must act, in the absolute sense of the word. His work is, by strength of personality and personal insight, to make something out of nothing, to so utter the words of his song as to give an illusion, to so dance that mechanical movements are rightly combined to a complete, a satisfying result in art. The evident indifference with regard to properties is significant. In my mind it goes to support a conviction, which is really perhaps only a fervent hope, that the Variety Stage of today is the embryo of a great
theatre, a theatre that will evolve in ways at which we can only guess, that in its maturity will be absolutely different from the comedy house we are asked to look upon as ultimate.
It was a bright morning of late summer. A broad salt-smelling heath lay between the boulder-heaped cliffland and the sea; the naked sea whose tumbling expanse no foot had ever trod, the unpassed country lying away for ever nowhither, to the mouth of the sun's own cave perhaps, or perhaps indeed nowhither. Above it the sky, blue, blue as the sea was green,