

Joseph Conrad and the Performing Arts: An Introduction

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Joseph Conrad's first novel, *Almayer's Folly*, was published in 1895 and appeared at a time when literary fiction continued to be the pre-eminent art form in contemporary English culture. Certainly, the situation was a stark contrast to the perceived state of the English theatre which had been regarded as being in steady decline for some decades with, for example, Henry James disconsolately proclaiming in the late 1870s that 'it is sufficiently obvious that the poverty of the English theatre is complete' (1949, 123). Perhaps the most famous – and the most damning – indictment of English theatre appeared just four years before Conrad's first novel when Henry Arthur Jones described English drama as 'a "*Slough of Despond*"' in the wide well-tilled field of English literature' (vii). Jones, of course, wrote this in the preface to his own play *Saints and Sinners*, a play which represented the impetus for an 'English Literary Theatre' that obsessed him and other notable figures in British theatre such as William Archer. However, little had changed by 1897 – the same year Conrad published *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* – with George Bernard Shaw remarking that 'The nineteenth-century novel, with all its faults, has maintained itself immeasurably above the nineteenth-century drama' (1931, 144). In 1898, the year that saw the publication of Conrad's *Tales of Unrest* and the year that he started to write *Heart of Darkness*, we find Shaw 'praying' that 'contemporary drama might be brought up to the level of contemporary fiction' (1931, 303).

However, despite all the gloomy appraisals of the state of contemporary theatre, it would be a mistake to think that English theatre lacked an audience or profile. The despondency regarding the performing arts was not that they were lacking an audience. Far from it. This was the era when the popular theatres of music hall and melodrama attracted habitual and devoted audiences; the era when concert halls, imported operas and home-grown operettas commanded the attention of the press and the public. It was an era when British actors as diverse as the dramatic actress Ellen Terry or the music hall star Marie Lloyd enjoyed extraordinary cult celebrity. Most illustriously, the year that saw Conrad's first novel also saw Henry Irving become the first actor to be knighted. Meanwhile, in Paris, a revolution was to begin when Auguste and Louis Lumière staged the world's first public film screening on 28 December 1895. Such phenomena may have been 'popular,' but, in the criteria of the time, they were not 'serious'. With regard to the performance of written plays, 1895 was the year that saw the premieres of Oscar Wilde's *An*

Ideal Husband and *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Shaw's *Candida* and Janet Achurch's *Mrs Daintree's Daughter*. These works have only gained their full literary significance in hindsight and were at best perceived as good-willed but faltering steps towards the long overdue inauguration of 'Literary Theatre'.

We have said 'inauguration' but perhaps 'resurrection' would be a more accurate word. In the twilight years of the nineteenth century there was a steady rise of the concept of 'English Literature' as a cultural institution (including as an academic discipline) embodying the values, heritage and identity of the nation. And if one subscribed to the notion of an English 'Literary Tradition,' there could be only one figurehead: William Shakespeare. Shakespeare may have been a poet, but his place as a dramatist was paramount, thus making theatre the keystone of English literary culture. In the mid eighteenth century David Garrick had created the Shakespeare industry with his numerous acclaimed stage performances of the plays from the 1740s onwards as well as erecting a Temple to Shakespeare in the 1750s and launching a high profile Shakespeare 'Jubilee' at Stratford-on-Avon in 1769. Although the 'Jubilee' was severely loss-making, the Shakespeare industry was here to stay. For Algernon Charles Swinburne, writing over a century later, Shakespeare continued to be a fascinating and seemingly limitless sea which despite the noble endeavours of other poets and critics had scarcely begun to be navigated (Swinburne 1880). For the contemporaries of Conrad, however, the legacy of Shakespeare could be oppressive. George Steiner describes the situation as one in which 'the Shakespearean shadow' (150) fell between the knowledge that English drama desperately needed to be rejuvenated and the actual process of writing these new plays. Or, as Edmund Gosse reveals when he writes of the wider Elizabethan tradition: 'It haunts us, it oppresses us, it destroys us' (quoted in Steiner, 150). And while they were tangled in the midst of this cultural soul-searching, the champions of the would-be 'English Literary Theatre' could only gaze across from the shores of Britain to mainland Europe with green-eyed envy. After all, as early as the 1870s in France, Émile Zola had declared in no uncertain terms that drama must become real or die. For the likes of Henry Arthur Jones and William Archer, Zola's plea for *realism* seemed to have come true across Europe – most quintessentially with the rise to prominence of the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen – but had not succeeded in sweeping the English theatre along in the wake of its revolution.

Émile Zola was a novelist, and yet such was his despair at the rotten state of French theatre, he himself turned to writing plays: his 1873 adaptation of his 1868 novel *Thérèse Raquin* is regarded as a key moment in the history of theatrical realism. Zola's fearless endeavour to cross the boundaries of media and write a work of drama explicitly designed to be producible on the stage would be an abiding inspiration for the advocates of the English Literary Theatre and for a fair number of 'men of letters' themselves. For example, an English language writer such as Henry James made numerous ambitious attempts to conquer the stage with his own plays, but the poor and even, on occasion, humiliating reception the works received only succeeded in leaving James defeated and dejected. Zola's

decision to dramatise his own work of fiction – the process of self-adaptation – was a technique that was also employed by James several times but perhaps most notably when he adapted *Daisy Miller* (1878) into a play in 1882 and *The American* (1877) in 1891. Other notable writers of the period also practiced self-adaptation: Arthur Conan Doyle dramatised his short story ‘A Straggler of “15”’ (1891) into *Waterloo* (1894); J. M. Barrie adapted his novel *The Little Minister* (1891) into a play of the same title in 1897; and – once again in Conrad’s key year of 1895 – Thomas Hardy completed a stage version of *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* (1891).

Joseph Conrad would himself endeavour to write for the stage with three works of self-adaptation, turning the short story ‘To-morrow’ (1902) into *One Day More* (1905); dramatising *The Secret Agent* (1907) in 1919; and ‘Because of the Dollars’ (1915) into *Laughing Anne* in 1920. Furthermore, Conrad also wrote a screenplay, adapting the short story ‘Gaspar Ruiz’ (1906) into *Gaspar the Strong Man* in 1920. Written twenty-five years after the publication of *Almayer’s Folly*, and only twenty-five years after the inauguration of the public screening of film, *Gaspar the Strong Man* indicates the remarkable trajectory of Conrad’s writing career, a career which he began very much as a Victorian novelist and yet developed to encompass not only modernist aesthetics but modern technologies.

The fact that – with the exception of *One Day More* (1905) – Conrad’s forays into stage and screen dramatisation all come in the last five years of his life has led to the argument that Conrad’s self-adaptations were, in Frederick R. Karl’s words, a desperate attempt at ‘escape from malaise and stagnation’ (1979, 838). And, indeed, although *One Day More* was composed at a time when Conrad’s writing can hardly be described as ‘stagnant’ or in a state of ‘malaise,’ it has continued to be regarded in somewhat cynical terms: John Stape, for example, explains it as a fairly desperate attempt to procure ‘hard cash’ (2007, 134). Nevertheless, we should not overlook the fact that drama and the performing arts were an extremely important influence on Conrad throughout his career: just as George Steiner perceives a Shakespearean shadow looming large over the English writers of the period, a similar shadow of the performing arts as a whole (including Shakespeare) can be detected across Conrad’s oeuvre. As Zdzislaw Najder reveals, as a child Conrad apparently wrote patriotic plays extolling Polish nationalism (2007, 33), and as early as 1897 Conrad admits in his letters: ‘I greatly desire to write a play myself. It is my dark and secret ambition’ (CL1, 419). In 1909 Conrad confesses ‘I have a theatrical imagination’ (CL4, 218). However, in the same letter Conrad admits ‘I detest the stage.’ Like Henry James and Thomas Hardy who flirted with the idea of becoming a playwright, Conrad can be found to belittle the theatre as an art form but also to have major problems with the concept and presence of theatrical censorship in Britain – stringent legislation which had no equivalent in the freer world of fictional prose – as he unequivocally reveals in ‘The Censor of Plays: An Appreciation’ (*Daily Mail*, 12 October 1907 and reprinted in *Notes on Life and Letters*). Indeed, for some writers of the time, censorship was cited as a major reason for the poor state of British theatre. Conrad also had a problem –

tantamount to a kind of agoraphobia – with the lived experience of watching a play in the theatre. Nevertheless, Conrad is a paradoxical writer, and such sentiments are at odds with the fact that he did see plays: his visit to London's Grand Guignol at the Little Theatre in 1920 inspired him to write *Laughing Anne* just as visiting a film version of *Les Misérables* in the same year would lead to the *Gaspar the Strong Man* screenplay. Perhaps even more revealing is the enthusiasm with which Conrad advises Basil Macdonald Hastings on the adaptation of *Victory* from 1916 onwards and the gusto with which he attends the subsequent rehearsals prior to the premiere in 1919.

Although Conrad's plays are steadily enjoying a naissance of interest and reappraisal (Hand 2005; Joy; Wheatley 2002 etc.), Conrad's greatest abiding achievement and reputation is inevitably going to remain as a writer of fiction. However, Conrad's novels and other prose fictions are not by definition anti-theatrical. On the contrary – and this is the critical impetus that underlies this collection – Conrad is evidently a writer who is inspired by the performing arts as a source for intertextual reference and allusion. Conrad is a writer who composes and orchestrates narratives of disciplined, occasionally operatic, structure. He is also a writer whose works are frequently imbued with theatricality and the strategies of dramatic metaphor, dramatic irony and dramatic actualisation. Since the first screen *Victory* in 1919, Conrad has remained a significant source for screen adaptation, a task undoubtedly facilitated when one recognises how remarkably and consistently cinematic many of Conrad's works are.

The essays in this collection explore Conrad's relationship with the performing arts through various means. Linda Dryden and Susan Barras open the collection with their discussions of the importance of performativity in Conrad's Malay fiction. Whilst considerations of performativity have taken their time to filter into literary scholarship they have been in use rather longer in the fields of cultural studies and anthropology. Explorations of who is performing or acting for whom, why a given performance or act takes place, and how that performance or act is informed by cultural mores can be as interesting for fictional as for real actions. Of course for fiction there are potentially many more layers of interpretation to be had from these questions since the answers given in the fictional realm of the text may conflict with the answers given in the authorial realm.

Linda Dryden takes as her starting point Conrad's imagined breakfasts with characters from his fiction. At the breakfast table all are able to speak, and Dryden suggests this mode of composition is behind Conrad's palpable determination to incorporate Malay voices in his fiction set in the region. However, Conrad also recognises the alienated aspect to those Malay voices, their separation from the world of his European protagonists and readers. His method for representing this separateness is frequently a recourse to theatrical motifs, whereby the actions of the Malays are given an unreal, staged quality. Their actions are dramatised but their motivation to dramatised themselves in such a way remains obscured from view.

As if in response to finding themselves on an exotic stage the Europeans of Conrad's fiction also frequently drift into self-conscious performances, like Josephine Baker's heroine Zouzou who perpetuates her dance in delighted response to seeing her own giant shadow dancing on the back wall of a stage.¹ Finding themselves in an alien environment these Europeans choose to ignore the possibility that it contains a meaningful reality beyond their knowledge. Instead they treat the East as a theatrical space in which to perform their fantasies against a painted backdrop augmented by a troop of silenced local extras. This theatrical space is both liberating and entrapping: it provides a stage for expressions of new emotions but also curtails the expression of others. The risk these Europeans run is that they become as alienated from their European self-identity as they are from their Malayan surroundings. Jim, for example, remains unincorporated into the world of Patusan, existing at its centre by virtue of his difference. And yet his plight is such that his allegiance to his fantasies disallows him from returning to European society. Edith Travers similarly cannot usurp, only ape (albeit beguilingly), the Malays of Lingard's affection. Moreover her theatrical flirtation with the East only disenchanting her further from her European culture, embodied by her husband, to which she must inevitably return.

Susan Barras chooses to answer the questions posed by a performative analysis primarily in the fictional realm, applying anthropological and cultural studies theories about *latah* to the performances of women in Conrad's early Malay fiction. Her discussion relates Conrad's fiction to a growing interest, in the late nineteenth century, in racial and cultural psychology. This interest found its way into medical periodicals, publications relating to the colonies, monographs in anthropology, as well as more everyday journals. In some instances the discussions are based on little more than racist conjecture, such as the argument made by T. Duncan Greenlees concerning insanity amongst the indigenous South African population:

If we consider the theories of those who maintain that while mania represents a loss of the lower developed strata of the mental organism, melancholia indicates an absence of the highest and latest developed strata, then this prevalence of mania among natives of low developed brain-functions goes far to prove this theory. (72)

Elsewhere discussions are based on observation or reported observations of particular behavioural patterns. Once again the interpretation of these behavioural patterns is in no way immune from assumptions of racial superiority on the part of the authors, and the tone of interpretation is predominantly patronizing for all its genuine inquisitiveness.

Whether Conrad followed the debates and accounts of *latah* in any great detail or not he would no doubt have been aware of the phenomenon. In his Malay fiction Conrad was not necessarily straining for a photographic reconstruction of the East

¹ *Zouzou* (Marc Allégret, 1934).

nor did he seek to throw a literary glamour over the European imperial experience, but rather, following writers like Louis Becke with his tales of the South Pacific, he explored the frequently destructive relationship between East and West in their imperial and colonial engagement, whilst attempting to withhold moral judgement. He was aware of how people performed differently in different locations whose apparent exoticism could transform them, as if by costume and set, to the point that their actions might even seem strange to themselves. By including scenes of mental breakdown Conrad took this subject to an extreme, whilst also suggesting the cultural barriers to understanding one another's performances of madness.

Returning to the world of the author, Richard J. Hand explores how Conrad drew purposely on theatrical paradigms to structure his fiction. As in *The Rescue* Conrad shows up the insincerity of European bourgeois culture through the stagy behaviour of his protagonists in 'The Return'. But elsewhere Conrad is more playful in his references, drawing attention to the artifice of his own narrative as much as to the artifice of his characters. For all the value that is placed on his veracity, his realism, Conrad was also an arch caricaturist with a satirical bent. Sylvère Monod has enumerated, even alphabetised, the various ways in which Heemskirk, in 'Freya of the Seven Isles,' is disparaged as emphatically Dutch. But Conrad also invoked stock figures of *commedia dell'arte*, loading the horror of Heemskirk with an inflection of stereotype. This use of *commedia dell'arte* invites us to distance ourselves from the protagonists as stock characters in a tale, whilst encouraging us to expect a conventional happy ending. Yet the story veers away from such an ending. This sabotage of readerly expectations is Swiftian in its discomfiting satire. We, as readers, have been encouraged to see the protagonists as puppet-like fools who are bound to act in a particular way. And yet that this is our view is a result of our own puppet-like response to the manipulation of literary tropes by the author. As a result the shallowness of our expectations is shown up through our feeble disappointment with an unconventional yet arguably realistic ending. This turn from predetermined expectations, set up by way of reference to traditional theatrical forms, to the performance of unexpected and tragic action leads us into the realm of melodrama. Conrad's own predilection for melodramatic performance is indicated by his operatic taste for Meyerbeer, discussed later by Laurence Davies.

Richard J. Hand, Robert Hampson, and Suzanne Speidel also explore in their respective essays Conrad's use of melodrama drawn from stage and screen. One crucial aspect of the incorporation of melodrama in Conrad's fiction is the increased prominence it gives to the female characters, and our appreciation of them. The debates that have always run concerning the plausibility of Conrad's female protagonists are nuanced here by questions of pose and performance. Just as in the early Malay fiction performativity wove itself into issues of politics and cross-cultural relations, so too in the domestic dramas of 'The Return,' *The Secret Agent*, and *Chance*, as well as in *Victory*, female action is presented as performance, taking its lead from the stage and later the silver screen. In one sense this can be seen as reinforcing the implausibility of Conrad's heroines. They

are, we might argue, no more than a conglomeration of clichés of femininity, the Achilles' heel of Conrad's skill in characterization. However, it is also possible to see these clichés as purposeful, adopted either by the Conradian narrator or by his female protagonists themselves, or by both.

In 'The Return' the staginess of the Hervey's house, a Shavian accumulation of aesthetic props, indicates the emptiness of the intellect that those props are intended to vouch for. This emptiness is reinforced by the melodramatic poses which husband and wife adopt in their interactions with each other. These poses are produced unselfconsciously for the most part, and even catch the actors unaware. As the Herveys awaken to the sham of their lives together the reader is encouraged to diagnose their predicament as endemic to the couple's social caste. In this case performance and pose is indicative of sham and insincerity. Thus the implausible characterization referred to before becomes exactly the trait Conrad wishes to identify in his protagonists. Conrad's use of theatrical motifs and devices plays the notion of 'suspension of disbelief' as a metaphor for the operations of bourgeois society.

In *Victory* Lena's various performances elicit a more complex response. She is from the start a performer, one of Zangiaco's touring ladies' orchestra. Moreover, this early role is itself ambiguous since the ladies of the orchestra appear to be expected to play more lucratively in the intervals than on stage, during their performances at Schomberg's hotel. But Lena is not a good player nor a particularly fine violinist in so far as we can tell (although her failure to respond to Schomberg's overtures only excites him further), and it is only on Heyst's island that she is able to find a role that she can play with gusto. However, like the Hervey's, although with a more tragic outcome, Lena and Heyst are unable to act with full authenticity, and are further plagued by doubt in their own worthiness and each other's honesty. As the novel's denouement approaches Lena adopts a series of postures that seem drawn directly from the melodrama of stage and screen, postures that, ironically, she imagines will realise, in the full meaning of the word, the self-image she aspires to.

Lena's actions may appear contrived, her recourse to the poses of melodrama limited and limiting, and yet this very contrivance indicates the depth of her plight. Her melodramatic performances at the end of the novel are in some sense no more nor less than her musical performances at the beginning. In both cases their result is the semi-satisfaction of male appetites, and their intended outcome is shelter and security. True, Lena's passion for Heyst elevates the terms of her performance in the second half of the novel, yet it remains a performance. What is highlighted here is the lack of freedom in action available to Lena. Even on Heyst's magical island, the boundaries for female action are limited, reaching no further than the conventions of melodrama. No wonder then that Lena has seemed to critics psychologically unconvincing. She is no more so to Heyst or to herself. Nor is Lena alone, for Flora too, in *Chance*, is consumed as the passive object of masculine desire by a series of hungry male gazes. Flora seems less in control of her performance than Lena, particularly in the first half of the novel, and yet

her very passivity appears a protective performance through which she breaks occasionally, as with her 'horribly merry' look to Mrs Fyne during her retrieval by her box-making relative (171). Moreover, as Robert Hampson explores, Flora's passivity mirrors the silent heroine of early cinema whose body by virtue of being filmed performed erotically under the thoroughly male lens of the camera. Once again the actions available to the female protagonist are limited, framed on all sides by a masculine gaze that includes, ironically, Mrs Fyne's militant feminism.

If the explorations of theatrical and cinematic melodrama in Conrad illuminate the performances of Conrad's heroines, in particular, Stephen Donovan's discussion of shadowgraphy animates the very shadows of nature. Whilst Conrad rarely attempts to mimic an extended performance of shadowgraphy, as he might with melodrama, he draws upon shadowgraphy's play of light and darkness quite specifically at times to recreate the impression of glimpsed action, and decontextualised movement. Of course shadows are in themselves a familiar Conradian motif extending far beyond specific allusions to nineteenth-century entertainments. However, the very familiarity of the language of shadows in Conrad's work, and in Western culture more generally, can often blind us to particularised references which recall mechanical rather than numinous actions.

Conrad's use of such references is both retrospective and at the same time historically accurate, in that his stories and their narrators are set in a Victorian past contemporary with the popularity of amusements such as shadowgraphy. Yet their use also acts as a retrogressive counterpoint to the cinematic stylistics discussed previously. In one light we can see these references as part of Conrad's production of his self-image, whereby the early twentieth-century author nostalgically displays his roots in the previous century: here is one whose old fashioned values of honour and duty are to be indulged sympathetically because he is not really of this century but of the last. And yet it is also possible to see these references as thoroughly modernist, combining old and new technologies in a mosaic of allusions, fusing memory and the contemporary to create surprising new images.

Conrad's engagement with Shakespeare – explored in this collection by Katherine Baxter – proves to be similarly Janus-faced. On many levels Shakespeare represented the past, or rather a variety of pasts, for Conrad. Shakespeare links at least three of Conrad's several lives together: his childhood, his sea career, and his life as a writer. It is Shakespeare whom Conrad recalls, in *A Personal Record*, as his first acquaintance in English letters, through the translations of his father, a childhood memory associated with 'the first year of our bereavement [following the death of Conrad's mother], the last I spent with my father in exile' (PR 73). And it is Shakespeare who accompanies Conrad during his early years in the British Merchant Navy, in a 'five-shilling one-volume edition ... read ... at odd moments of the day, to the noisy accompaniment of caulkers' mallets' (PR 72). Finally Shakespeare provides a wealth of motifs, structural, linguistic and thematic, to the author Conrad throughout his oeuvre. Moreover, Shakespeare in all these lives stands as a totemic figure of English culture. He is one of the significant West-European writers to whom his father turned as an exemplar of

national culture during his years of exile. As Conrad developed his language skills as a mariner, Shakespeare proved a useful and absorbing literary primer. And in his years of authorship Conrad turned to Shakespeare, as his father had before him, as a touchstone of cultural order and belonging.

However, what Conrad chooses to do with Shakespeare is as often modernist as it is traditionalist. Shakespeare becomes one of any number of sources, literary, performative, technological, to which Conrad alludes in the pursuit of his art. At times these allusions are unstructured, called upon as and when necessary to illuminate a point. Elsewhere Conrad manipulates his Shakespearian references to expose new visions of the world, particularly of the imperial and colonial world, through careful, and sometimes subverting, plotting. In this respect Conrad lights the way that others such as Eliot and Joyce were to follow.

The unlikely juxtapositions and subversions of genre and form that characterise so much of Conrad's use of the performing arts are particularly notable in his relationship with opera. As Laurence Davies shows, Conrad adapts opera both to characterise his own work and to stylise his prose. Opera is yet another performative mode on which Conrad draws in the patterning of his fiction. And yet it is more than this and stands as a metaphor for Conrad's allusive method as a whole. For opera's polyphonic quality is perhaps the closest we can get to describing the orchestration of multiple voices that characterises so much of Conrad's work, sending us back to our initial image of Conrad entertaining his protagonists at the breakfast table. Allowing each a voice Conrad hears them all, individually, or in duets, trios, even choruses.

Desmond MacCarthy, in a review of Joyce's *Exiles* in 1918, notes that for the dramatist and the novelist it is crucial to find characters who thoroughly embody their theme, so that in exploring the characters these themes come to the fore quite naturally: 'for nothing *happens* at all unless it happens to a particular person, and action is dependent on character' (208). In opera this takes on a further dimension in that the musical themes must also be convincingly embedded in the protagonists and their actions. As Davies shows Conrad's adapts this musical aspect by allowing his themes to percolate through the leitmotifs of his characters' speech. Returning finally to Conrad's external allusions, the ways in which he incorporates elements of the performing arts into his fiction, we might push the musical metaphor a little further and hear these as bass notes and polyvocal harmonies that enrich the melodic themes of his protagonists and their actions. Whilst they do not carry the plots they provide a framework for them, nuancing the themes through counterpoint and resolution.

Just as the voices that emerge from Conrad's fiction are polyphonic and heterogeneous so too there is no single line we can take on the influence of the performing arts on his work. What the essays that follow demonstrate however is that despite his general dislike for much that was on the British stage in his time Conrad was influenced by the performing arts and incorporated its tropes and structures into his work in imaginative ways. More importantly, these essays show that an investigation of this influence can shed new light on Conrad's oeuvre.

Recognition of this influence allows us to approach his work again from a different angle and emerge with new insight, not only into the texts themselves but also into Conrad's authorial methods as a whole. The eight essays in this collection do not offer a definitive account of Joseph Conrad and the performing arts but collectively offer an exciting and engaging forum for one of the most interesting and nascent areas of Conrad studies: one which will continue to grow and develop for years to come.