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CHAPTER 25

ELITE PRIVATE THEATRICALS AND THE ‘PROFESSIONAL’ AMATEUR

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David Coates

In 1978 Sybil Rosenfeld published her book *Temples of Thespis: Some Private Theatres and Theatricals in England and Wales, 1700–1820*. In it she wrote about ‘the most famous of all the private theatres’, built by the ‘eccentric’ seventh Earl of Barrymore at Wargrave in Berkshire (1978, p. 16); the private theatricals of the Margravine of Anspach, who she described as a ‘vain and egotistical creature’ for taking the leading roles in the plays that she wrote (1978, p. 53); and the performances arranged by Sir Watkin Williams Wynn, ‘a man of taste and culture’ who produced theatricals at Wynnstay House in North Wales (1978, p. 76). Rosenfeld’s book was the first to give significant scholarly attention to private theatricals of this ilk, laying the foundation for subsequent work by Gillian Russell (2007), Judith Hawley (2016, 2020) and Janine Haugen (2014), amongst others. For each of these scholars, their interest in private theatricals has been concentrated on the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries which, according to Rosenfeld, was the form’s ‘golden age’ (1978, p. 15). She believed that the rage for private theatricals grew in the 1770s, ‘reached its climax in the 1780s’ and ‘petered out’ in the first decade of the nineteenth century (1978, p. 11).

Since Rosenfeld’s study, ample evidence has come to light to account for the survival and flourishing of private theatricals for at least a hundred years beyond this point. By the mid-nineteenth century, they had been popularised by the middle classes, resulting in productions being mounted in houses of all sizes across the length and breadth of Britain. They also continued to be produced by elite society, such as at Woburn Abbey, where regular performances were arranged between 1806 and 1857 in a private theatre built within the house, on the same elaborate scale as those that had come before (Anon., 1806–1857). This was one of many private theatres to be constructed in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, including three by Sir Percy Florence Shelley – the first two at his home in Dorset, Boscombe Manor, in 1852 and 1866, and a third at his London residence, Shelley House, in 1881.

This chapter will revise our understanding of elite private theatricals by shifting our attention away from the best-known case studies from the late eighteenth century to centre on others from the early twentieth century. Using an array of examples from across England, Scotland and Wales, including Chatsworth House, West Dean Park, Plas Newydd and the Canterbury Old Stagers amateur dramatic society, this chapter will consider how the intimacy of venues used for private and amateur theatricals affected the repertoire and style of production and performance. It will also

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reveal a web of interlinked private and amateur theatrical events and upper-class amateur theatre practitioners. Their lives demonstrate how participation in theatricals could lead to celebrity status as a 'professional' amateur, or to a stage career. Revealing the existence of these individuals provides new insights into the gentrification of the British stage and documents changing attitudes towards members of elite society working in the theatre industry in this period. Finally, this chapter will locate private and amateur theatricals in the wider social, cultural, and political landscape, highlighting the importance of media exposure and considering these events as opportunities to open discussions about contemporary issues affecting Edwardian Britain.

Repertoire, Intimacy and Realism

In the first decade of the twentieth century there were no private theatricals that came close to rivalling those hosted by Louise Cavendish, Duchess of Devonshire. By the time of her marriage to the eighth Duke of Devonshire at the age of 60, Louise had already established herself as one of Britain's foremost society hostesses and a member of the Prince and Princess of Wales's closest social circles. This marriage initiated a new annual social routine that would take her and the Duke between their various properties in Britain and Ireland, including Devonshire House in London for the 'season' between May and July. Typically, the culmination of their strict social calendar was a Christmas and New Year house party at Chatsworth House, in Derbyshire. The biographer of the eighth Duke and Duchess, Henry Vane, wrote that, with the notable exception of the extravagant Devonshire House Fancy Dress Ball, to commemorate Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee in 1897, the focus of Louise's 'social dictatorship was Chatsworth' (2004, p. 209). It was at the annual festive house parties there, between traditional Edwardian country house pursuits, including shooting, golfing and motoring, that private theatricals became a much-anticipated spectacle.

Chatsworth's private theatricals emerged out of the vibrant cultural ecology that had developed around the estate during the second half of the nineteenth century. This included penny readings, concerts, exhibitions, lectures, conversaziones, and theatricals held in church schoolrooms, assembly rooms, other large public spaces, numerous private houses, and Chatsworth's Carriage House, which had a portable stage that was put up and taken down as required. While various members of the wider ducal family had engaged in these events, sometimes as performers, it was following successful theatricals in the Carriage House 'by desire of the Duchess' in December 1895 that Louise utilised this ecology to her social advantage and instigated plans to create a more permanent theatre inside the house. A stage was installed in the rarely used Ball Room, with assistance from Charles Skinner – the stage carpenter of Islington's Grand Theatre. This room had been multi-functional since the north wing had been built during the 1820s and early 1830s and had interchangeably been called both Banqueting Room and Theatre (Calf, 2022). Many of its existing features had been designed with theatricals in mind, including two private boxes at the back of the room and a gallery above. When used for performances, the private boxes were tiered and, together with the flat floor area, could accommodate 200 ticketholders, with the gallery holding an additional 115 (Anon., 1897, ca.1897). A proscenium arch was also added to the room, painted by one of London's leading scenic artists, William Hemsley, with a *trompe-l'œil* design that mimicked the gilt frames of the room's ceiling paintings to make it appear as though the theatre had always been a permanent feature. It was perhaps this, alongside the room's interchangeable nomenclature, that led several twentieth century commentators to suggest that Chatsworth's theatre had originated around 1830 (Rosenfeld, 1978, p. 15; *Times*, 1955).

When the Duchess's revitalised theatre opened for its first performances in January 1896, it would mark the beginning of a sensational series of private theatricals that would run into the twentieth century, coming to an end in 1908, on the death of her husband. Many aspects of Chatsworth's repertoire were not extraordinary, reflecting what was being produced at similar private and amateur theatrical events across Britain. The evening's entertainment was usually divided into two or three parts, with an accompanying band playing selections of popular music during intervals and between acts. The fare on offer comprised short, light dramatic pieces of one to three acts, including comedies, farces, fantasies, a duologue, a musical monologue, a comedietta and a miniature pantomime. These had small casts, with the stage action often taking place in domestic spaces, such as drawing rooms. These pieces were occasionally supplemented by interludes of music, song, and dance. The programme for January 1902, for example, consisted of Weedon Grossmith's one-act comedy, *A Commission*, followed by *La Ballade du Désespéré* – a piece comprising poetry and music – and concluding with *A Dream of the New Year*, written by Leo Trevor, who was a member of fashionable society, a leading amateur theatre performer and the author of several works that were staged at Chatsworth.

Repertoire choices were driven by the practicalities of the spaces where private and amateur theatricals were taking place; often the biggest rooms in private houses or multi-purpose public halls, such as literary institutes and church schoolrooms. These venues did not have the capabilities to perform the spectacular melodramas or musical comedies that were prevalent on the professional stage, as they had neither the machinery required for special effects and scene changes, nor the stage space for large sets and casts. Trevor believed that 'in the choice of plays and the method of mounting them' country house theatricals had 'made enormous strides' since the 1860s, when ambitious five-act melodramas and comedies performed on tiny stages 'must have been indescribably funny' (1898, p. 280). By the turn of the twentieth century, amateurs were frequently reminded to be 'sensible' in their choice of plays and opt for those 'suitable to the capacities of the cast' and theatre (*Derby Mercury,* 1903) and Trevor suggested that amateurs showed 'good sense' when limiting themselves 'to duologues and three-part pieces for the drawing-room' (1898, p. 280). While spectacular works and longer plays were considered unsuitable for amateur stages, short domestic plays did not necessarily befit the vast public theatres. In July 1916, for example, a reviewer for *The Fourth Act*, a one-act play premiering at the London Coliseum, wrote that the piece was 'perhaps more well suited to private theatricals [...] than to the variety stage of a large theatre' (*Times*, 1916). Clearly, the size of venues had an impact on the type of plays that could be performed and, consequently, amateurs had had to develop a repertoire that was distinct from the public theatres.

At Chatsworth House, the plays selected were not only well-suited to its miniature stage, but also its smaller auditorium and audience. With the largest public theatres accommodating several thousand people, private and amateur theatricals could create a level of intimacy between stage and audience that was impossible for theatres with commercial imperatives. This intimacy required new approaches to aspects of production. In *The Illustrated London News* in 1901, a journalist advised that amateurs employ the services of a professional dresser as their '"make-up" is never successful'. The eyes are made 'pits of blackness' and their 'cheeks bloom in lobster tints in spots or are left of a ghastly pallor' (*Illustrated London News*, 1901). The author draws attention to a mismatch between traditional stage make-up and the smaller performance venues used by amateurs. Two years later, Trevor made a similar observation in an article for the *Pall Mall Magazine* documenting his 'Recollections of the Chatsworth Theatricals'. He suggested that the make-up of amateur actresses was far better than that of professionals, as they could wear 'very little make-up of any kind and no grease-paint at all' and found that stage lighting created very different effects in smaller venues, dismissing the need for 'terrible red-cheeks, coal-black eyes, and alabaster foreheads' (1903, pp. 336–337). The smaller venues were compelling amateurs to experiment and innovate with make-up and lighting to create results that were considered to be more natural.

A similar approach had to be taken with the scenery for the Chatsworth theatricals. While nineteenth and early twentieth century scenery has rarely survived from the public theatres, private theatres have made significant contributions to our understanding of historic scene-painting practices. Largely due to available storage space, collections of scenery from this period have survived at Burton Constable Hall in Yorkshire, Normansfield Hospital in South-West London, and at Chatsworth. Two of Chatsworth's sets are of domestic interiors – a light drawing room with French windows and a half-panelled hall with luxurious wallpaper and a tiled fireback with mantelpiece. As was the case in the public theatres, these simple, painted interior sets could be supplemented with furniture and props to create realistic domestic scenes on stage. In the Cavendish family's account books, there are payments for the hire of furniture to enhance the scenes in the theatricals, including from the fashionable Oetzmann & Company in London, who regularly featured their products in professional shows (see Bessac, 2022). In February 1903 they were paid for the hire of '2 easy chairs, 2 small chairs, 1 small bookshelf, two small white tables, and 1 small cabinet' for productions of *C'était Gertrude* and *The Dancing Girl and The Idol* (Oetzmann & Co., 1903). Trevor wrote that at Chatsworth and other large houses, where there is 'scenery painted by excellent artists […] and where properties and furniture are of the best, the amateur is in clover' (1898, pp. 280–281). The result of such detailed approaches to the creation of realistic domestic settings are captured in a series of photographs held in the National Trust's collections, showing the interior of another private theatre from the early twentieth century, at Plas Newydd in Anglesey. This was home to the remarkable Henry Cyril Paget, fifth Marquis of Anglesey, who had rebranded the family chapel as the Gaiety Theatre and begun producing and performing in theatricals there (see Gardner, 2016). Taken in 1903, the photographs show the Marquis and his amateur cast performing the three-act play, *The Marriage of Kitty*, on a small, rather cluttered stage, complete with rug, curtains, furniture, a fireplace, plants, ornaments, pictures and every other detail that you might expect to see in an ordinary drawing room.

As *The Marriage of Kitty* had only premiered in London the previous year, this example also demonstrates how amateurs were often quick to adopt successful domestic plays from the professional theatres into their repertoires in the early twentieth century, just as they had done with the more naturalistic works of T. W. Robertson in the 1860s and 1870s, when amateur theatricals were taking off as a form of popular entertainment. It is not coincidental that the rise of realism accords with the development of organised amateur theatricals in Britain and around Europe. There is ample evidence to suggest that by the second half of the nineteenth century the theatrical canon was no longer being determined wholly by professional actors, playwrights, and theatre managers, but also by those involved in private and amateur theatricals. Amateurs could give plays widespread exposure and a longevity to their performance histories far beyond what was possible on the public stage. Importantly, this relationship between plays and the amateur repertoire was not one-way, as various pieces written for amateur performance were also adopted by the theatre profession. For instance, the actor-manager Arthur Bourchier would become famous for playing the title role in Leo Trevor's *Dr Johnson*, which was first performed at West Dean Park in West Sussex, the home of amateur actress Evelyn James (known as Mrs William James), before transferring to Chatsworth a few weeks later, in January 1896.

The distinct repertoire of private and amateur theatricals, paired with their more intimate venues, also affected approaches to acting. In the introduction to *Shakespeare and Amateur Performance*, Michael Dobson writes that while 'Olivier knew about Irving, and Irving about Garrick, for instance, most of the non-professional casts I will be writing about knew little if anything of their amateur predecessors' (2011, p. 8). Dobson suggests that without access to other amateur performances, non-professionals learnt their craft from the public theatres. A wide array of archival sources challenge this notion, including the contents of scrapbooks documenting the life of the Canterbury Old Stagers society held in the Canterbury Cathedral Archives. These scrapbooks highlight how, by the middle of the nineteenth century, there were already extensive interconnected amateur theatrical activities, with individuals often being members of multiple clubs and societies, as well as taking part in theatricals in country houses, universities, the military, the navy and beyond (Coates, 2020). Networks of amateur theatrical enthusiasts existed locally, regionally, and nationally long before the National Amateur Operatic and Dramatic Association was formed in 1899 to fulfil that purpose and members of these networks looked to one another for inspiration for their own endeavours. For example, in the autobiography of the Earl of Rosslyn, a performer at Chatsworth House in 1896, we hear how Count Hermann Hatzfeld and Lord Charles Montagu had visited Alloa House in Clackmannanashire, Scotland, that year, to watch the performances to see whether their programme would be suitable for Duchess Louise's theatricals (1928, p. 130).

Rather than replicating the professional stage, amateurs watched other amateurs, developing their own approaches to performance that better suited the spaces that they were working in. Of the three leading amateur actresses of the early twentieth century, Trevor writes that 'each in different ways, possess something which to an actress is beyond price – a distinct style and individuality of their own' (1898, p. 274). He praises Evelyn James as a 'painstaking rehearser' whose 'performances are always intelligent and interesting' because it 'is not enough for her to know that "they always did it like that in London!" She wants to know "why" and "wherefore"' (1898, p. 275). Similarly, an obituary for the high-society amateur actor, Ralph Alderson, recorded that 'he was no mere imitator' and 'when he had no model … his performance showed that [he] had a style of his own' *(Times*, 1968). Far from being mimics, practitioners took the 'Amateur Dramatic Art' seriously, experimenting in smaller performance spaces and helping to shift the profession away from spectacular plays, melodrama, and bombastic acting styles (Trevor, 1898, p. 278). They championed plays with domestic settings, moved towards a style of acting deemed more natural than what had come before, and fostered a more intimate relationship between actor and audience.

The 'Professional' Amateur

Amateurs have not been recognised for contributing to these significant aesthetic shifts in British theatre at the start of the twentieth century. This is likely because any such recognition would jar with entrenched stereotypes of amateurs in popular culture that had been developing since at least the sixteenth century, when Shakespeare presented audiences with the bumbling 'rude mechanicals' in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Such stereotypes, associating amateur theatre enthusiasts with vanity, forgotten lines and collapsing scenery, can be traced through the eighteenth, nineteenth, and into the twentieth and twenty-first, centuries, including in plays such as *The Pantomime Rehearsal*, performed at Chatsworth in January 1901. In his writings, Trevor contests these prevailing stereotypes, making clear that the characters in this piece bear no resemblance to his experiences of the amateur performers that he had worked with. He expresses his belief that he and his fellow 'amateur artistes are a maligned lot' (1898, p. 279) and that *The Pantomime Rehearsal*'s action could not be 'anything more unlike' what took place at Chatsworth or anywhere else during his extensive amateur theatrical career (1903, p. 333). Yet, these deep-rooted prejudices against amateur theatre practitioners have resulted in them being almost completely overlooked in theatre, performance, and cultural histories.

The company of amateurs associated with Chatsworth originated in 1895, according to the embossed cover of a scrapbook documenting their activities collated by Evelyn James (James, 1895–1910). Trevor describes the 'stock company' as consisting of himself, James, Muriel Wilson, the Princess of Pless, Captain Philip Jeffcock and Frank Mildmay MP, explaining how it was often supplemented by other high-society amateurs as required (pp. 333–334). This requirement was partly down to cast availability, as the company did not live near to one another and had to plan ahead. In an interview about her amateur theatrical pursuits, James said that it was always 'easy to find people who will take part, but so hard to get them together, for they are generally so busy' (in James, 1895–1910). Although Trevor had highlighted James's dedication to the rehearsal process, she noted how time allocated for this purpose would often be reduced due to the lack of availability of cast members – much to the frustration of those involved. On 10 January 1903, Daisy, Princess of Pless, recorded in her diary that the company 'acted last night after only three days rehearsing, while we ought to have had a week' (Chapman-Huston, 1950, p. 78).

James's scrapbook and personal diaries provide an insight into how upper-class private and amateur theatricals worked in the early twentieth century (James, 1895–1910, 1882–1927). In January 1908 she had been to see *The Mollusc*, a comedy about social and sexual manners by Hubert Henry Davies, which had started its run in October 1907 at London's Criterion Theatre. Only a year later James was adopting the play into the amateur repertoire, rehearsing for several days ahead of its first performance on 19 January at the Chichester Corn Exchange. The company then took the piece on tour, performing the following day at the Midhurst Sanatorium, 12 miles north of Chichester, before going to the Alhambra Theatre in Brighton and Cordes Hall in the village of Sunninghill, near Ascot, on 22 and 26 January. On 13 February the performance was mounted again, this time at the Opera House in Tunbridge Wells, before being performed as part of a special matinee at the Kingsway Theatre in London in May and at Ealing Hippodrome in June. Such tours were common practice for elite amateur performers and similar examples can be found in a series of scrapbooks documenting the most highly regarded amateur theatre society of the period, the Canterbury Old Stagers. For instance, there is a tour of *A Fool's Paradise* in January 1900, a year after the play was performed at Chatsworth, which included the Theatre Royal Windsor, Stamford's Assembly Rooms, Maidenhead Town Hall and Brompton Hospital in London (Anon., 1842–2015). In four albums recording the amateur theatrical endeavours of the Clarke-Jervoise family, another example documents a run of Hubert Henry Davies's four-act play *Mrs Gorringe's Necklace* in 1909 that includes performances at the Court Theatre and the Royal Albert Hall in London, the Theatre Royal Barnstaple and Cobham Hall in Kent (Clarke-Jervoise, ca.1909).

Filled with playbills, programmes, newspaper cuttings, tickets and other ephemera, these albums and scrapbooks evidence the existence of a group of high-society amateurs who dedicated several weeks, or even months, of each year to their amateur theatrical pursuits and gained a reputation for their competence as practitioners. One newspaper described how 'aristocratic Thespians' found themselves in the public eye and became 'social celebrities' through their activities (Brighton Visitors List, 1904), with Alderson's obituary explaining how he had received regular invitations to join amateur theatrical troupes since being an undergraduate at Cambridge and moved across Britain 'from country house to private theatre, [and] from the Old Stagers to the Windsor Strollers, often to appear with the same people'. Acting 'became his way of life' *(Times,* 1968). It is not insignificant that Alderson had an obituary in *The Times* in 1968 that was entirely focused on his amateur theatrical career. Nor is it insignificant that other elite amateur performers received substantial press interest. The amateur actress, Muriel Wilson, was the cover star for *The Bystander* magazine in November 1906 and Marjorie Clarke-Jervoise had ample column-space dedicated to performances in newspapers and fashionable magazines (*Bystander*, 1906). An article in 1928 states that Clarke-Jervoise held 'the very highest rank among the amateurs' alongside a photograph captioned 'a professional amateur' (*Eve*, 1928).

'Professional' amateurs have, until now, managed to escape our attention in theatre histories. Yet their services were in high demand throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This group of performers were described in the 1920s as only differing from professionals:

> in not figuring upon a salary list. They have remarkable talent and great experience; their principal interest is evidently the theatre; the performances they give are so frequent that it is rare for them not to have rehearsals on hand; and nothing but their circumstances prevents them from being successful professional actors.
>
> (Anon., ca.1923)

Despite dedicating their lives to theatre and seemingly being adept performers, many of these individuals opted to retain amateur status to preserve their social standing. Even at the start of the new century, it was not deemed appropriate for members of the highest social classes to make a career on the stage. By working as elite amateur performers, it was possible to climb up the social ladder, rather than risk their positions on it. At Chatsworth, for instance, most of the amateur performers were the lowest ranking members of the house parties and had their amateur theatrical abilities to thank for receiving coveted invitations to Britain's uppermost social circle.

While this arrangement worked for some elite amateurs, others decided to risk their position in society by entering the theatrical profession. In 1897, a year after appearing in Chatsworth's theatricals, the fifth Earl of Rosslyn signed his first contract to begin a professional acting career that would last until 1904, citing financial difficulty as the main reason for making this move. He was rumored to have been offered a salary of £200 per week to act in starring roles, providing that he did not hide his identity. It was understood that having a peer on the professional stage would be an instant draw for a manager (in James, 1895–1910). This generous offer was likely declined, as he began to work under the *nom de théâtre* of James Erskine; a choice that unfortunately did not prevent him from being identified and becoming 'a person of considerable interest to the general public' (*Pall Mall*, 1898). In an interview, Rosslyn explained how many of his 'relations objected very strongly' to his decision to become a professional actor (*Pall Mall*, 1898), and he would later describe in his autobiography how the Prince of Wales, who was a member of his social circle, 'had been none too pleased at my taking up an actor's career, and if we ever met was quite cold to me' (1928, p. 179). Although Rosslyn was snubbed by his social circle and family, he showed no regrets about becoming a professional actor, looking back 'with pleasure and happiness to the seven years I had the honour to be on the stage' (1928, p. 233).

While Rosslyn was reportedly the first British peer to take up a career on the professional stage, there were many other members of upper-class society who had already made, or would go on to make, a similar move. These included several from the very top of the aristocratic hierarchy who drew equal attention, including the ninth Duke of Manchester and George Seymour, Earl of Yarmouth. By the start of the twentieth century, it was accepted that the rising popularity of amateur theatricals had created a new pipeline into the theatre profession. Leopold Wagner's 1899 guidebook for theatrical aspirants advised them to join amateur clubs and societies and to take part in private theatricals (1899), with numerous actors confirming that this had been their gateway into the industry. Amongst them were Allan Aynesworth, Cosmo Gordon-Lennox, Charles Brookfield and Arthur Bourchier. Yet, unlike newcomers from previous generations, these figures shared privileged upbringings and were well-educated. For example, Bourchier and Brookfield honed their theatrical craft at the universities, as members of the Oxford University Dramatic Society (OUDS) and Cambridge Amateur Dramatic Club (ADC) respectively, before becoming professional actors. Arguably, the growing availability of opportunities to take part in private and amateur theatricals in a range of settings is the single most important factor in the gentrification of the British stage at the turn of the twentieth century. One newspaper declared that ‘assuredly barriers are being broken down!’, as the social class of those involved in the theatre industry was dramatically changing (in James, 1895–1910), and another reported that ‘there are such a quantity of good amateurs now that we shall have the stage adopted as a profession for the upper classes soon!’ (*Weston-super-Mare Gazette* 1898). A third joked that by the end of the twentieth century ‘blue blood may draw full houses’ and the stage might be filled with ‘dukes and duchesses, peers of the realm, and Ladies of the Court’ (*The Outlook,* 1901). These observations, emerging at the *fin de siècle*, forestall what would become a major concern later in the century around the levels of access to – and privilege operating within – the theatre industry.

Audience, Publicity and Politics

Press coverage was a significant factor in the creation of ‘professional’ amateurs and the gentrification of the stage in the early twentieth century, as members of the upper echelons with theatrical leanings proved to be a fascination to the public. The press optimised opportunities to cover elite amateur theatricals and circulate images of their leading performers, but Chatsworth’s theatricals received unprecedented levels of attention that surpassed all others from this period. The reason for this was glumly captured by Trevor as he explained how an artist for one of the large weekly illustrated papers approached him for a seat for the theatricals from which he would sketch. He requested a seat in the corner of the room, near to the orchestra, which Trevor pointed out would not be suitable for seeing the stage. The artist responded: ‘“I don’t want to,” […] “I want to see the audience”’ (1903, p. 341). Trevor feared that this exchange reflected wider attitudes towards the Chatsworth theatricals, believing that the attention that they received was not due to the performers or performances, but to the important audience assembled to witness them. His concerns were well placed as senior members of the aristocracy, politicians, European royalty and diplomats flanked the Duchess of Devonshire’s chief guests – King Edward VII and Queen Alexandra – who had first attended the theatricals in 1896 as Prince and Princess of Wales (Figure 25.1).

Although such assemblages would always pique the interests of the press, reporters flocked to rural Derbyshire for Duchess Louise’s house parties, filling all available hotel rooms and local apartments (*Derbyshire Times*, 1907). On these occasions they were not attending in the hope of catching fleeting glimpses of important guests during their daily activities. They had been invited and given exclusive access to aspects of the programme, leading to mass media coverage and ‘every movement of the guests being chronicled in every paper throughout the land’. Resultantly, the house party was said to be of a ‘more public’ nature than a ‘private’ one (in James, 1895–1910). Similar observations were made by Gillian Russell about eighteenth-century private theatricals, who suggested that although they were not open to a paying public, large, fashionable audiences were invited, and the press reported on them, meaning that they could therefore ‘be very public indeed’ (2007, p. 192). Chatsworth’s theatricals were not ‘private’ at all but were described as ‘semi-public’ – a category of entertainments that had emerged in the mid-nineteenth century to define events that were public facing but retained aspects of exclusivity. This categorisation suited the Chatsworth theatricals because ticket sales at local newsagents and post offices veiled an otherwise closely monitored distribution of seats. In January 1901, Edward Mason Wrench, the medical doctor to the Cavendish family, wrote in his diary that there was ‘much jealousy’ over ticket allocation, describing their sale as ‘almost a farce’, because most seats went to invited guests and estate staff (Wrench, 1901). With over half of the tickets being allocated to such guests for the first night of the theatricals in January 1901, it is not surprising that it was annually reported that ‘every

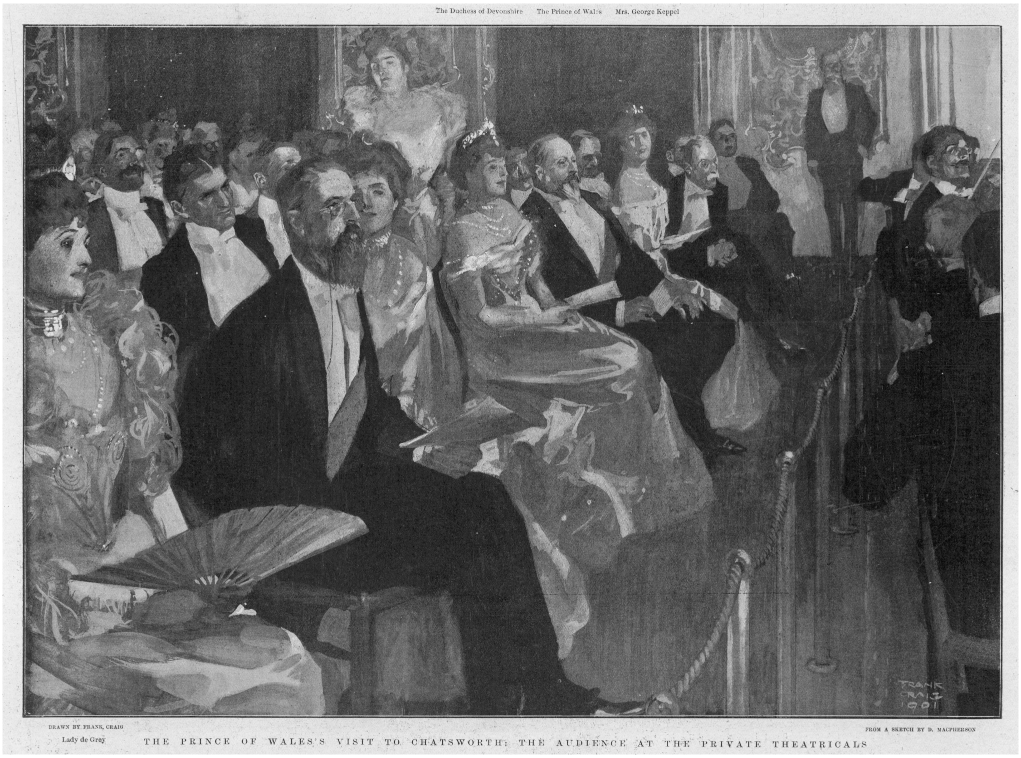
The Duchess of Devonshire
The Prince of Wales
Mrs. George Keppel
FRANK CRAIG 1901
DRAWN BY FRANK CRAIG
Lady de Grey
THE PRINCE OF WALES'S VISIT TO CHATSWORTH: THE AUDIENCE AT THE PRIVATE THEATRICALS
FROM A SKETCH BY D. MACPHERSON

Figure 25.1 A sketch of the audience at the Chatsworth theatricals from *The Graphic* on 19 January 1901 (Credit: Mary Evans Picture Library).

seat was booked for both performances within a few hours of tickets being offered' (*Derbyshire Times,* 1901).

The reservation of tickets specifically for journalists indicates a shifting relationship between Britain's elite and the public. Chatsworth's early twentieth-century theatricals demonstrate how members of high society sought to strike a new balance between a growing requirement for public visibility and increasingly threatened levels of privacy. Achieving this balance was arguably key to upholding class hierarchies. Just as Russell identified the burgeoning of eighteenth-century private theatricals as 'closely linked with the expansion of the print media' (2007, p. 192), Duchess Louise recognised the value in embracing the media's latest innovations to enable wider public access to the Chatsworth house parties and facilitate controlled exposure to her guests. Although column space remained important, the popular pictorial press presented new opportunities for readers to see and own visual images of events and their participants. Duchess Louise ensured that there was coverage from the well-established illustrated newspapers, providing space for artists to sketch activities and making time for photography shoots. In February 1903, an even more significant step was taken when a team of cinematograph operators were invited to capture the house party in motion during the first visit of Edward VII as King. While the King was unable to visit due to ill health, this filming went ahead, and the theatricals culminated with a screening of the footage in the theatre.

Such shifting attitudes towards the press and new technologies reflect changes that were being adopted by Chatsworth's chief guests to transform the face of the British monarchy at the start of the twentieth century. King Edward saw it as a necessity to modernise the monarchy and make it more visible to the nation, after Queen Victoria's lengthy period of mourning and gradual decline in health. As one of the King's closest confidantes, Duchess Louise understood these strategies and considered them in planning the house parties at Chatsworth. Even in 1896, what was offered to the guests was markedly Edwardian, with the inclusion of theatricals reflecting the future King's interests, as he had positioned himself as a patron of drama (a role that his mother had been unable to fulfil after refusing to attend public performances since the death of Prince Albert in 1861). The inclusion of motoring in the programme was also an Edwardian feature. While Queen Victoria had loathed this new mode of transport, Edward made it part of his image, becoming the first member of the British royal family to purchase a motor vehicle in 1900. As well as travelling from Chatsworth to nearby locations by car, they also appeared in the theatricals, with a miniature motor travelling across the stage in the pantomime of January 1904, written specifically for Chatsworth by Trevor. This vehicle was then transmitted to the nation's readership through sketches and photographs in the illustrated press (*Sketch*, 1904). In 1907, cars would appear in the Chatsworth theatre again, this time in a cinematograph display of a short film titled *The Mad Motor Car*. While earlier in this chapter aspects of the theatrical repertoire were identified as reflecting a move towards stage realism, here they are also shown to be reflecting the tastes, fashions, and innovations of Edwardian Britain.

Additionally, Chatsworth's theatrical repertoire appears to have been selected to capture some of the period's most pressing political issues. Performed in 1903, the one-act fantasy, *Shades of Night*, referenced the so-called 'woman question' through the character of the ghost of Lady Mildred. Speaking from 1770, the spectre queried what bicycles were and how women manage to ride them with their cumbersome clothing. A second phantom, Sir Ludovic Trivett, replied: 'they haven't quite settled that one yet. The proper skirt is a point on which ladies are divided' (Marshall, 1895). The joke referred to the invention of the divided skirt: an item of clothing worn by women when cycling, which had become a symbol of the new woman. In January 1904, only a matter of months after the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) was formed to develop militant tactics in the fight for women's suffrage, the 'woman question' was even more visible in Chatsworth's theatricals. In Trevor's pantomime, *Cinderella and the Magic Slipper*, the title character goes to a public hall and takes part in a Cowslip League meeting, instead of attending a ball. This fictional organisation is an obvious allusion to the Primrose League: the first political organisation to give women the same status and responsibilities as men in Britain. At the meeting, the chairman fell asleep, caricaturing the Duke of Devonshire, who had reportedly dozed off during an important political speech earlier that year. The pantomime also joked about the serious economic challenges that the government were facing, with the *Derby Mercury* reporting that 'it was not difficult to read a light-hearted skit of things fiscal' (*Derby Mercury*, 1904).

Topical and local references are part and parcel of both the genre of pantomime and of amateur theatricals. Examples abound, with settings of amateur plays changed to places closer to home and jokes made that would only be understood by a particular audience in a particular place. During the Chatsworth theatricals though, such references worked on multiple levels, as their audiences were far from typical. With royalty, politicians, and leading members of society in the room, including some from a wider and increasingly volatile Europe, allusions and jokes could have national or even international implications and could perform a diplomatic function. Edward VII and Arthur Balfour, the sitting Prime Minister, were in the audience for Trevor's pantomime, and while newspaper reports suggested that the latter was 'convulsed with laughter at the witty fiscal oration', the Duke was filled with anxiety about the issue (*Derbyshire Courier*, 1904). On 22 December 1903, Wrench noted in his diary that he 'saw the Duke before dinner' and found him 'quite upset by this fiscal question' which had 'made him quite nervous' (Wrench, 1903).

Wrench's note indicates the dual-purpose of country house parties in the early twentieth century. From the outside, these gatherings were perceived as frivolous fun for high society, with pleasure and leisure becoming synonymous with a new, prosperous Edwardian age. On the inside, behind the enjoyment of theatricals, shooting and golf, politics was often on the agenda. Until the end of the previous century, Britain's two main political parties had entertained separately and under this system Duchess Louise was viewed as the leading society hostess of the Whigs, and Lady Londonderry of the Tories. The two would rival one another to provide the most elaborate entertainments and, unsurprisingly, Lady Londonderry was hosting theatricals at Wynard Park, in County Durham, to vie with those at Chatsworth. However, Duchess Louise was breaking down this system. Margot Asquith, wife of Prime Minister Herbert Henry Asquith, noted in her memoirs that 'you met everyone at her house, […] she told me that before 1886–87 political opponents hardly saw one another and society was much duller' (1920, p. 141). Chatsworth's house parties became a place for informal, cross-party political discussion, with a journalist recording in 1899 that, following the Duke into the theatre were 'his guests, Mr Balfour and Mr Asquith, apparently oblivious of the existence of such a thing as political rivalry' (*Derby Mercury*, 1899).

Chatsworth's annual Christmas gatherings took place during the British government's winter recess and – as the author of the book *Society and the Country House* wrote, in 1907 – were part of a series of events that 'proved the necessary and the eventful supplements to the agencies of parliament and platform' (Escott, 1907, p. 18). When German diplomat Baron Hermann von Eckardstein was invited to be a guest in 1901, Duchess Louise had told him that 'the Duke has several urgent political questions to discuss' with him and 'makes a great point of your coming as he is again much worried about the Eastern Question and it is so good for him to have someone to talk to about it' (cited in Vane, 2004, p. 222). On a different occasion, the German Princess of Pless, who was taking a lead role in the theatricals, confesses that at Chatsworth she was 'worried and unhappy about politics' and was hoping to find a suitable opportunity to talk with Lord Rosebery who 'was commonly supposed to be in favour of a sympathetic understanding with Germany' and under whose 'Foreign Secretaryship and Premiership relations between Germany and England had seemed to improve' (Chapman-Huston, 1950, p. 57). These examples demonstrate how the German-born Duchess Louise was working to strengthen relationships between Germany in her choice of guests and to get them to consider foreign affairs – something she would also do in her choice of play. This was the case in January 1903 when *Our Bitterest Foe* was staged: a one-act drama about a romance between a French nurse and a Prussian army commander in her care, set during the Franco-Prussian war (Herbert, ca.1874). More broadly, Duchess Louise was using her house parties and theatricals to extend political discussions beyond the formal institutions of power in Britain and Europe, providing space for these to continue during a shoot, a rehearsal, or in a quiet corner of a Chatsworth drawing room. While some of this took place behind closed doors, the nation could read about the house parties, their activities, and the theatricals in print. Through such reporting they could get a sense of the zeitgeist and infer what issues were under debate. Indeed, simply reading details of who was invited and who was not could be revealing.

Duchess Louise's house parties and theatricals are a reminder of the significant role that women had within political systems, although formal structures excluded them. In January 1909, *The Tatler* published an open letter to the now Dowager Duchess after her 'retirement'. It addressed how the Duke's passing had put an end to her 'notable career' as a 'first-class social leader' and to the spectacular recreations she had organised at Chatsworth – 'especially the theatricals' (1909, p. 18). While these private and amateur theatricals were contributing towards changing theatre aesthetics and the gentrification of the theatre profession in the early years of the twentieth century, they were also provoking discussion of contemporary politics in communities across the country, including amongst key social and political figures, and were enhancing the position of women in society.

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