A Storm in a Teacup? Evaluating T W Robertson's Impact on Victorian Theatre

Introduction

There is a popular view held by critics such at Otten that Victorian drama was not truly born until the fin de siècle heralded the golden age of Wilde, Shaw and Ibsen. The period between the comedies of Sheridan and those of Wilde is often portrayed as a melodrama-filled hiatus which contributed little to the evolution of drama. The theatre had seen a general decline, widely recognised by the early 1830s, and the patent theatres were failing both financially and culturally. The middle classes were abandoning Drury Lane and Covent Garden in favour of the more genteel opera, and playwrights were struggling to make a living with the challenge from literary hacks who could translate continental plays cheaply and quickly. Much drama relied on spectacle rather than content and there seemed no hope of establishing "legitimate" theatre. Such was the alarm at the state of the theatre that a Select Committee was set up to enquire into its causes in 1832. Amongst the reasons cited were: incompetent management, the level of actors' salaries, excessive production costs, religious scruples, and even later dinner-hours.[1]

Over the succeeding decades, many writers, some of them already successful in other fields, attempted to transform the theatre's fortunes. Few made significant progress. Bulwer Lytton was forced to concede defeat, despite having written the perennially successful *Money*. He simply could not make a living as a playwright and decided to concentrate on his work as a novelist. This bifurcation of drama and the novel contributed to the belief that the former was in some way inferior to the latter. The names of many of his contemporaries have since disappeared into oblivion. Otten claims that no one could "rescue the theatre from senile plots, pseudo-Elizabethan techniques, melodramatic claptrap, stock characterisations, and bombastic language."[2] He goes on to say that "even after Robertson had initiated the 'new drama' at midcentury and Pinero had begun writing, the English theatre had progressed no great distance."[3]Styan allows that Tom Robertson and domestic realism made "modest progress" during the 1860s, and sees his successors as being the true pioneers.[4]

Robertson's name is synonymous with that of the Prince of Wales's Theatre, which, under the renowned management of the Bancrofts, was to stage the majority of his work. Their collective style became known as "cup-and-saucer" comedy after the realistic effects employed in domestic scenes, a

1 Stephens, John Russell. The Profession of the Playwright: British Theatre 1800-1900. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, p31
2 Otten, Terry. The Deserted Stage. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1972, p3
3 Otten, p40
4 Styan, J L. Modern Drama in Theory and Practice 1: Realism and Naturalism. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981, p52

marked departure from the blood and thunder of the popular melodrama that had preceded them. When planning their dream repertory for the proposed National Theatre, William Archer and Harley Granville-Barker were keen that the mid-Victorian period be "inevitably represented by its one masterpiece, *Caste*."[5] Archer also championed Robertson's first play for the Prince of Wales's, *Society*, as marking "an epoch in the history of English drama," one of three he had witnessed in the nineteenth century.[6] Despite these plaudits, modern critics have been quick to downplay his achievements. Rowell claims that Robertson's work "was by no means seen as the milestone in English drama it now often appears"[7] and Booth states that he "confirmed existing trends rather than created new ones."[8]

Amongst such equivocation, it is hard to determine Robertson's legacy. What was his real contribution to British drama? Was he responsible for ephemeral achievements during a difficult period, or did he impose much needed change and thus ensure the theatre's future position as the centre of British culture? This paper will consider his contribution sociologically, economically, and technically. Sociologically, in terms of Robertson's portrayal of class and how it was reflected in his audience during a time of great social change; economically, in terms of the impact his style had on both the fortunes of the theatre as a whole and also the profession and status of the playwright; and technically, in terms of how he changed the presentation and style of drama.

Sociological

"When society changes, the theatre changes,"[9] and society had changed rapidly during the first half of the nineteenth century. The population of London had risen from 900,000 in 1800 to almost three million in 1850.[10] The introduction of the railway meant that the burgeoning middle classes who were gradually moving out to the suburbs could head back to the metropolis for an evening's entertainment. Unfortunately for the theatre industry, this often meant the opera, which was seen as being more refined and respectable. Such was the financial squeeze on the theatres, it was actually cheaper to buy in ticket in 1850 than it was in 1800.[11] Luring back the elusive middle classes was vital to future of the industry. Madame Vestris had tried to appeal to the bourgeoisie during her management of the Olympic theatre by introducing a lavish environment and shortening the play bill. However, the target audience was not tempted back in great numbers, and her experiment was to end in ignominious bankruptcy. It was during this challenging period that Marie Wilton (afterwards Bancroft) leased the

5 Barrett, Daniel. T W Robertson and the Prince of Wales's Theatre. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1995, p213
6 Barrett, p83
7 Rowell, George. Theatre in the Age of Irving. Totowa, New Jersey: Rowman and Littlefield, 1981, p54
8 Booth, Michael. Prefaces to English Nineteenth-Century Theatre. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1980, p96
9 Booth, Michael. Theatre in the Victorian Age. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, p57

10 Barrett, p70
11 Stephens, p48

Queen's Theatre, known as the Dust Hole, an unfashionable establishment off Tottenham Court Road, with the intention of succeeding where Madame Vestris had failed. As her memoirs suggest, her initial impressions were inauspicious:

> It was a well-conducted, clean little house, but oh, the audience! My heart sank! Some of the occupants of the stalls (the price of admission was, I think, a shilling) were engaged between the acts in devouring oranges (their faces being buried in them), and drinking ginger-beer. Babies were being rocked to sleep, or smacked to be quiet, which proceeding, in many cases, had an opposite effect! A woman looked up to our box, and seeing us staring aghast, with, I suppose an expression of horror upon my face, first of all 'took a sight' at us, and then shouted, 'Now, then, you three stuck-up ones, come out o' that, or I'll send this 'ere orange at your 'eds.'[12]

Undeterred, Wilton set about making the house into a home, and renamed it the Prince of Wales's. The floors were carpeted, the chairs in the boxes were upholstered and even antimacassars were introduced. The programme was also altered to suit the dining hours of the prospective audience, and, equally importantly, productions were staged which reflected their idea of respectable domesticity. This formula was successful, and Lord Leighton was moved to write: “I think your theatre is quite the dandiest thing I ever saw,”[13] and soon “the house was thronged with intellectual and cultured adherents, many of whom were by no means theatre-goers as a general rule.”[14]

Whilst the environment was certainly important, the drama itself was central. Despite Queen Victoria’s famous penchant for Boucicault's *The Corsican Brothers*, melodrama was generally not acceptable in polite society. The impact of Robertson's début play for the Prince of Wales's, *Society*, is captured by Clement Scott:

> When the curtain drew up, all fell back in their seats as usual, and seemed prepared for something good, perhaps, but still something of the old sort. But MR. ROBERTSON’S bright, sparkling dialogue, his home truths, his kindly affection of cynicism, his similies, and his keen appreciation of the little weaknesses of the world we live in, soon woke up the audience from its conventional apathy, and then all appeared to bend forward in their seats, and after one look all round to see if the impulse was general, their faces seemed to say, “We have got some good stuff here!”[15]

Another playgoer wrote:

> The audience listens to one repartee after another in a silence which literally enables one to hear a pun drop, and the round of laughter and applause which follows each successive witticism can only be compared with the tail which follows a comet.[16]

This could hardly be more different from the crying babies and flying oranges of the Dust Hole, and

12 Bancroft, Marie, and Squire Bancroft. Mr and Mrs Bancroft on and Off the Stage. London: Richard Bentley and Son, 1889, p86
13 Bancroft & Bancroft, p136
14 Barrett, p70
15 Barrett, p82
16 Barrett, p97

the ultimate success of *Society* was sealed by a visit from the Prince of Wales himself. A theatrical paper observed in 1887 that "the vast upper middle class has adopted the theatre as a rational means of recreation, and entertainments have had to be made more decent and more wholesome to suit its tastes."[17]

Rowell acknowledges the achievement of Robertson and the Bancrofts in coaxing back polite society into a formerly unfashionable playhouse, but maintains they were aided by the fact that "the evolution of the Music Hall at this time began to draw off the violent element in the audience."[18] This is, however, to suggest a simplistic polarisation of the audience. Although prices were increased at the Prince of Wales's to fund the improvements necessary to attract the moneyed class, the gallery and, initially, the pit remained, and the drama itself was inclusive. Pick argues that its "social ambience" excluded a considerable portion of the capital's potential theatregoers.[19] However, a review of *Society* in *The Times* refers to "the occupants of the gallery, who are numerous," and goes on to say that it must be "peopled by many of those working men who patronised it when it was the humble 'Queen's'."[20] Although the Prince of Wales's was not necessarily a cheap night out, it was not as exclusive as some accounts suggest.

Playing to a broad audience, Robertson had to be careful not to antagonise any particular element of it. Booth consequently charges that Robertson was "another dramatist whose comedies affirm the social order rather than challenge it,"[21] and that he "avoided resolving or even properly developing the interesting social problems raised at the outset of several of his comedies."[22] However, audiences who saw the early plays would have been mindful of the proposed Second Reform Bill, which was to extend the franchise to the manufacturing classes. This contentious issue formed a paradigm through which they would have viewed the characters' speech and actions. The audience would have had their own opinion on the matter and did not need to be told what to think, and a so-called "resolution" of the social problems was unnecessary. Robertson's detachment won him praise from *The Times*:

> While venturing on the most dangerous ground, he has steered clear of every kind of offence. Though dealing with remarkable freedom with the most vexed political topics of the day, he never appears a partisan, and has even contrived to leave his own opinions a matter of uncertainty.[23]

17 Rowell, George. The Victorian Theatre 1792-1914. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978, p3
18 *The Victorian Theatre*, p83
19 Pick, John. The West End: Mismanagement and Snobbery. Eastbourne: John Offord, 1983, p46
20 *The Times*, 11 April 1867, p11
21 *Theatre in the Victorian Age*, p182
22 *Theatre in the Victorian Age*, p183
23 *The Times*, 11 April 1867, p11

The Times also rejoices that the characters "typical of a lower 'caste'" are "entirely free from claptrap."[24] The press, then as now, influenced public opinion and could help or break a production.

Modern critics such as Booth are attempting to remove Robertson from his historical and political context, without which many of his themes lose their significance. They are also judging his work in light of modern tastes which demand drama with a more obvious message. Robertson would have found it impossible to voice a strong political message, even if he had wished to do so, as he was constrained by the conservative forces of his audience, the press, and the Examiner of Plays, who had the power to censor dramatic works. Indeed, Daniel Barrett's research has shown examples where some of the potentially political sentiments of the plays have been toned down.[25] Whether this was due to self- or external regulation is unclear, however.

Overall, it should be remembered that Robertson was writing domestic comedy, and any heaviness in tone would have altered the delicate balance that he sought to achieve, and potentially affected the audience's enjoyment of the piece. The success of his work relied on a harmonious audience who would play close attention to the detail and the dialogue. Any unrest would have been disastrous in such an enclosed environment. Robertson was content to present the issues through his characterisation of Sam Gerridge, Old Eccles and Lady Ptarmigant, but refrained from presenting a clear opinion of his own. This won him praise from the press and the audience – both elements notoriously difficult to please – but attracted the opprobrium of the next generation of playwrights. Henry Arthur Jones accused him of never attempting the "seizure and presentation...of a movement of national thought,"[26] and Yeats believed his only real achievement to be that of "substituting real loaves of bread and real cups of tea for imaginary ones."[27] Klingopulos claims that it is "only with the discovery of anti-Victorian zest by Oscar Wilde and by Shaw...does the drama recover a measure of linguistic vitality and social function.[28] However, Shaw's plays were not widely performed during the nineteenth century, and Wilde was to fall victim to the morals he mocked. It was at best unprofitable and at worst dangerous for a playwright to be ahead of his time. William Archer summed up the contemporary appetite:

> The public is beginning to demand more and more imperatively that the dramatist shall be, not indeed a moralist (that may come later on), but an observer, and shall give in his work, not yet a judgement or an ideal, but a painting.[29]

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24 *The Times*, 11 April 1867, p11
25 Barrett, p74
26 Barrett, p131
27 Styan, p52
28 Klingopulos, G D. "The Literary Scene." From Dickens to Hardy. Ed. Boris Ford. Vol. 6. The New Pelican Guide to English Literature. London: Penguin, 1982, p112
29 Jenkins, Anthony. The Making of Victorian Drama. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991. , p132

As if to demonstrate his point, the Bancrofts installed a gilt frame around the stage to further promote the idea of domestic respectability. The economically-important middle classes would return to the theatre only if the surroundings were comfortable and the themes not too challenging. Robertson's plots may have been what Barrett calls "completely conventional and unincendiary"[30], but his audience would not have tolerated it any other way.

Economic

Just as the nineteenth-century economy as a whole became subject to the vagaries of the free market, so too did the theatres. The Theatre Regulation Act of 1843 revoked the monopolies of the patent theatres and venues were now able to compete on equal terms. As Donaldson writes: "Without patron or state aid, they had to please the public if they were able to keep their theatres open."[31] During the difficult times of 1840s and 50s, hardly any dramatist made money from their work. The abandonment of the theatre by the middle classes meant that managers were forced to make economies wherever they could, and unfortunately it was often the playwright who suffered. Charles Somerset, who wrote popular melodramas for the Surrey, Adelphi and Olympic, was eventually reduced to producing two-act dramas for the miserly rate of 25 shillings. He was later found standing before the Mansion House with a label round his neck declaring: "Ladies and gentlemen, I am starving."[32] This invidious situation was recognised in the 1832 Select Committee's *Report* which concluded that dramatic authors were "subjected to indefensible hardship and injustice."[33] However, the resulting Dramatic Copyright Act merely served to worsen the problem by ensuring that it was cheaper to adapt foreign plays, as epitomised when Mr Crummles says to Nicholas Nickleby: "Just turn that into English, and put your name on the title page."[34]

His own impecunious state forced Robertson to sell his early copyrights for just £3 and then adapt successful West End adaptations of French plays for "East End and transpontine theatres."[35] There appeared to be no market for original home-grown drama, but some playwrights still managed to thrive. Money could be made from successful novel dramatisations, much to the chagrin of the novelists themselves. Charles Reade banked an impressive £20,000 from *Drink*, his adaptation of Zola's *L'Assomoir*,[36] and everyone but Dickens seemed to make money from adapting *Oliver Twist* for the stage. Boucicault also demonstrated an exceptional talent for giving the public what they wanted and being amply rewarded. He made no claim to art, however:

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30 Barrett, p131
31 Donaldson, Francis. The Actor Managers. Ed. Weidenfeld and Nicolson. London, 1970, p184
32 Stephens, p58
33 Stephens, p90
34 Dickens, Charles. The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby. London: Chapman & Hall, 1866, p309
35 Stephens, p21
36 Stephens, p57

> I can spin out these rough-and-tumble dramas as a hen lays eggs. It's a degrading occupation, but more money has been made out of guano than out of poetry.[37]

Robertson determined that it need not be a "degrading occupation" and tasked himself with making original drama economically viable – a courageous approach at the time. His efforts are not appreciated by all. Booth writes that "in comparison with the greatly varied, vigorous and inventive comedy of [Tom] Taylor, Robertson's plays lack blood and spine."[38] Yet, Taylor's major successes, such as *The Ticket-of-Leave Man*, were adaptations of foreign plays for theatres that demanded winning formulas. The Bancrofts, however, were willing to nurture a skilled and innovative playwright and model their theatre to use his creations to its best advantage. Robertson was rewarded with a fixed nightly fee, now known as a royalty. Whilst it did not bring him the huge wealth generated by Boucicault's profit-sharing arrangement, it ensured regular and fair earnings, rather than a modest flat fee in return for relinquishing a precious copyright.

The Prince of Wales's soon became know as the "Gold-dust Hole"[39] and the Bancrofts were able to retire in considerable style twenty years later. Rowell claims that the Bancrofts were "lucky in their era"[40] but this ungenerous sentiment belies the fact that there was more judgement than luck. They were prepared to take a risk with a relatively unknown dramatist and provide him with sufficient latitude to inaugurate a new style of dramatic presentation. While the Bancrofts were responsible for careful financial management – not a trait for which theatrical types were renowned – they could not have succeeded without a visionary such as Robertson who was prepared to push the boundaries. Theirs was a symbiotic relationship.

Robertson was keen to write a succession of plays for repertory, rather than gambling on producing one spectacular piece in the hope of achieving the much-coveted "long run". After Boucicault's *The Colleen Bawn* ran for a then record 231 performances, it was deemed more lucrative to stage one successful play than to establish a stable repertory. Herbert Tree encapsulated the matter in his aphorism: "When is a repertory not a repertory? When it is a success."[41] The Bancrofts, unlike many other managers, had the courage to end a successful run of a Robertson play to leave the public wanting more, and thus secure the opportunity for a future revival. Pick claims that the Bancrofts' model was achieved at a high cost, as their success relied upon "the regular attendance of a privileged audience able to pay much higher admission prices than had hitherto been charged in London." However, as discussed in the previous section, theatre prices were artificially low and had to rise in

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37 Jenkins, p25
38 Booth, Michael, ed. English Plays of the Nineteenth Century. Vol. III. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973, p43
39 Bancroft & Bancroft, p92
40 *The Victorian Theatre*, p83
41 Donaldson, p184

order to achieve a sustainable business. As Davis writes, they were "targeting a small but higher-paying audience during an economic boom time,"[42] a tactic which ensured stability for the managers, the playwright, the actors, and the stagehands. Although their practices were emulated in other new theatres, they continued to exist alongside many different types of venue, catering for a variety of audiences.

Robertson and the Bancrofts skilfully found a way of producing tasteful, innovative plays which also enjoyed both popular and critical acclaim. As Fischler writes: "Ultimately, it was financial success that made literary success possible. Before they could make an epoch, nineteenth-century dramatists had to be able to make a living."[43] Whilst Boucicault proved it was possible to make money from writing plays, Robertson showed that it need not be guano.

Technical

As Barrett writes, "One reason for Robertson's great influence through the end of the century was his ability not only to write comedies, but to conceive and design them as total theatrical events."[44] Robertson was technically proficient in all areas of the theatre. Early in his career, he worked as a prompter at the Lyceum during Madame Vestris's management and would have noted her attention to detail. He made it his business to learn everything there was to know about stage management, and subsequently sought to control all aspects of his productions, including meticulous stage directions and descriptions of the characters' speech and appearance. W S Gilbert believed that Robertson "invented stage-management."[45]

> Robertson showed how to give life and variety and nature to the scene by breaking it up with all sorts of little incidents and delicate by-play."[46]

Unlike many of his contemporaries, he was concerned as much with the performance as he was with the script. His quest for originality meant that he was able to create his own vision, rather than have to work with existing stock characters and props. In contrast, an earlier playwright, Tom Dibdin, was commissioned to write a piece:

> to suit a herd of reindeer and a diminutive family of singers, dancers, and fiddlers – the man shaped 'like an oil barrel', his wife with the dimensions of 'a half anker', and a son 'about the

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42 Davis, Tracy. The Economics of the British Stage 1800-1914. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, p283
43 Fischler, Alan. "Guano and Poetry: Payment for Playwriting in Victorian England." Modern Language Quarterly 62.1 (2001): 43-52, p52
44 Barrett, p209
45 Stephens, p102
46 *The Victorian Theatre*, p81

height of a Dutch cheese.'[47]

Whilst the Prince of Wales's featured a regular acting company, including the Bancrofts themselves, Robertson refused to allow them to become established in stock roles, thereby breaking free of a strong theatrical convention. Marie Bancroft had spent many unfulfilled years playing burlesque parts, much loved by audiences, but resented by her. Robertson, nevertheless, was prepared to take a risk and writer parts for her that would stretch her talents. For the versatile John Hare, he wrote a wide range of roles – from the old and narcoleptic Lord Ptarmigant in *Society*, to the dashing Russian Prince Perovsky in *Ours*, to the champion of the working class, Sam Gerridge in *Caste*. Other playwrights would have relied on him to play a stock role for which he would become well-known.

Although Robertson exercised a high level of control over his work, he also involved the actors in the composition, and the finished pieces reflected their input. Jenkins writes that he had a "revolutionary influence upon the actors and actresses of his day. He helped them break free of the theatre's own conventions...opened them to new ways of looking at character, and taught them how much of a play's meaning lay between the lines of dialogue."[48]

Robertson was keen to mark his departure from the conventions of melodrama. The script for *Dreams* stated: 'The Author requests that this Drama may be played after the style and manner of Comedy, and not after the manner of Melodrama.'[49] In *War*, he included the following direction for the actor playing the part of the Frenchman:

> The author requests this part may be played with a slight French accent. He is not to pronounce the words absurdly or duck his head toward his stomach like the conventional stage Frenchman.[50]

Durbach writes that "Robertson's 'cup-and-saucer' drama was clearly a reaction against melodramatic excess, an attempt to domesticate the overprotested emotional displays of the first half of the century."[51] "An actor," as Maynard Savin continues, "cannot vibrate with emotion while balancing a teacup on his knee."[52] Whilst Robertson dispensed with such "melodramatic excess", he did manage to successfully incorporate more traditional comic elements, albeit in a more subtle way. Old Eccles, the drunken father in *Caste*, for example, is neither reformed nor repentant by the end of play, and is given

47 Stephens, p1
48 Jenkins, p92
49 Jenkins, p63
50 *The Victorian Theatre*, p82
51 Durbach, Errol. "Remembering Tom Robertson (1829-1871)." Educational Theatre Journal 24.3 (1972): 284-88, p285
52 Carlson, Marvin. "Montigny, Laube, Robertson: The Early Realists." Educational Theatre Journal 24.3 (1972): 227-36, p234

money to drink himself to death in Jersey where the alcohol is cheaper. Boucicault, when his own comedy failed to shine at the Prince of Wales's, believed that it was "caviare to the public" and what they really wanted was "domestic drama, treated with broad comic character."[53] This is what Robertson achieved, although his comic characters were sufficiently individualised to stimulate renewed interest in the theatre.

Robertson, then, was able to utilise some elements of the old drama on his small stage, without the effect being overpowering. *The Times* remarked:

> Very few years ago it seemed impossible to attract people to the playhouses save by means of extraordinary excitement...Of the attempts to entertain an audience with a style of drama that depends greatly on character, wit, and humour, and never goes beyond the tone of comedy for the sake of exciting pity or terror, we have a very excellent specimen in...*Society*.[54]

This is not to say that Robertson did not take advantage of technical advances which enabled theatres to deploy impressive visual effects. The difference with Robertson was that they were integral to the plot, rather than being there for their own sake. Many of the effects were not necessarily spectacular, but they contributed to the overall atmosphere of the piece. For example, in *Society*, the stage directions indicate "the effect of the setting sun in windows of houses,"[55] and in *Ours*, Robertson has specified that: "Throughout the Act the autumn leaves fall from the trees."[56]

Such detailed effects prompted William Archer to dub Robertson "a pre-Raphaelite of the theatre."[57] *The Times* called the Prince of Wales's "an abode of ultra-realism" and wrote that Robertson's style "depends more upon a close imitation of the minutest realities of actual life."[58] For Shaw, such "commonplaces" were "inexpressibly welcome because they were such unexpected novelties,"[59] but Henry James in 1881 felt that such pieces "dealt mainly in little things" and were "among the most diminutive experiments ever attempted in the drama."[60] "Little things" they may have been, but their effects were disproportionately great. For Durbach "such strict domestic verisimilitude is converted by Ibsen into symbol and visual metaphor...there can be no doubt where the greater revolution in nineteenth-century drama is to be found."[61]

Robertson had found a theatre and an audience to suit his style of drama, rather than trying to adapt his drama to suit established popular taste. His plays were designed to be performed in

53 Bancroft & Bancroft, p118
54 *The Times,* 14 November 1865, p7
55 *Society*, Act I, Scene II
56 *Ours*, Act I, Scene I
57 *The Victorian Theatre*, p80
58 *The Times*, 19 June 1866, p10
59 Carlson, Marvin. "Montigny, Laube, Robertson: The Early Realists." Educational Theatre Journal 24.3 (1972): 227-36, p234
60 Booth, Michael. Prefaces to English Nineteenth-Century Theatre. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1980, p95
61 Durbach, p284

what Tom Taylor called "a pretty little bandbox of a house."[62] They would not have worked in a large auditorium, and Robertson would not have wanted them to do so. Just as his work should not be removed from its historical context, neither should his domestic comedies be projected outside of the Prince of Wales's theatre. With great skill, Robertson was able to employ traditional elements of theatrical presentation which the audience would recognise, but execute them in an innovative and appealing way. This approach no long appears radical because his techniques were assimilated by successive playwrights and his "commonplaces" became commonplace.

Conclusion

As Barrett writes: " …what has been lacking in Roberson studies is a sufficient context which allows the plays to be seen as both product of and challenge to the theatrical, social, and political norms of his day."[63] All too often, critics attempt to evaluate Robertson's work as literature, rather than drama, and compare him unfavourably with playwrights who were operating in a very different era. Robertson was writing at a particular time, for a particular place. His contemporary audience understood his aspirations as well as he understood theirs. His titles - such as *Progress, Society*, *Caste*, and *Birth* – reflected their preoccupations. Whilst the themes have lost some of their impact, the careful construction and attention to detail endure. His novel approach was instrumental in transforming the fortunes of British drama during the 1860s and, in particular, he helped the Bancrofts turn the Dust Hole into the Gold-Dust Hole. Ellen Terry declared: "The Prince of Wales's was the most fashionable in London, and there seemed no reason why the triumph of Robertson should not go on forever."[64]

Unfortunately, Robertson died in 1871, and his untimely demise was an influential factor in the Bancrofts' decision to retire in 1885. They had exhausted their Robertsonian repertoire and there were no other playwrights writing domestic comedy of equal calibre. There was little original drama other than Gilbert's comic opera. Although Gilbert's style was very different, he had benefited from Robertson's ideas on stage management. Perhaps had there been an immediate successor to Robertson, then his legacy would be more obvious. Many of the practitioners of domestic realism who ultimately succeeded him in the 1880s were keen to portray themselves as having created something new and criticised Robertson for his lack of intellectualism. Arthur Wing Pinero, however, paid tribute to Robertson in his affectionate portrait of Tom Wrench in his highly successful *Trelawny of the "Wells"*. Carlson writes that Robertson "provided a solid base for the experimental dramatists and directors of the next generation, even if those more turbulent spirits were not always willing to admit their debt."[65]

62 Barrett, p62
63 Barrett, p2
64 Jenkins, p92
65 Carlson, p236

Their debt was considerable, as Robertson had helped provide them with an audience, and ensured that there was a living to be made from giving them what they wanted. The conditions were favourable for him in that the Prince of Wales's opened just at the right time, but Robertson could have taken the easier route and staged spectacular drama in the style of Boucicault and insisted on the same payment terms. Instead, he dared to be different.

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