

Arnold Bennett and the Theatre

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Novelist, short story writer, essayist, journalist, critic, and dramatist, Arnold Bennett (1867-1931) was one of the most widely known English writers of his time. His life was one of variety and contrast. He started slowly and obscurely but ultimately became one of the highest paid writers in the world. His work was usually hailed as first class or dismissed as negligible by his contemporaries. He went unpredictably from success to failure, from failure to success, particularly in the theatre. Though he knew many disappointments throughout his writing career, his energy and output were astounding.

Most people who are familiar with Bennett's work know him only as a novelist—author of *The Old Wives' Tale* (1908) and historian of the life of the Five Towns, around which some of his best novels were written. Yet, Bennett found it far easier to write a play than a novel. He wrote many plays—the most successful being *Polite Farces* (1899), *What the Public Wants* (1909), *Milestones* (1912), *The Great Adventure* (1913), and *Body and Soul* (1921). Bennett's connection with the theatre was not solely as a playwright. He did much work in dramatic criticism and production. He knew the stage well. Among the more than two thousand articles Bennett is said to have written, many of which have been collected, especially in the *Things That Have Interested Me* series, are many items dealing with the theatre. Most of these items revolve around a question of Bennett's: What is wrong with the English stage? Bennett saw an immediate crisis in the English theatre of his time and serious reasons for it.

This article arranges and presents Bennett's thoughts on the plight of the English stage at the turn of the century. This study makes no pretense of passing judgement, but is rather an assemblage of Bennett's views on the subject.

Enoch Arnold Bennett started life at Hanley, Staffordshire, one of the half dozen or so towns—which also included Burslem, Longston, Stoke-on-Trent, and Tunstall—in the heavily populated and small section of England called the Potteries, where some of the finest of English ceramics have been manufactured.¹ Bennett was born in 1867, the eldest of six children. His father, Enoch, was in turn a schoolmaster, pottery manufacturer, pawn broker and, finally, a solicitor.² Arnold's mother, Sarah Ann, was a quiet, patient woman to whom her eldest son was deeply devoted. He wrote to her nearly every day until her death in 1914.³ Bennett began his formal education in 1877 at the age of ten at Burslem Endowed School. He showed some aptitude for writing and won prizes in poetry and short story during his five years there. He then went to the Newcastle-under-Lyme Middle School. He remained there for only one year and then entered his father's law office. After twice failing the legal exam to become a solicitor in 1887 and 1888, Bennett began to pursue his hobby of writing by contributing to the local evening paper.⁴ He made his way to London in 1889 and there concentrated on educating himself and began to write fiction. The turning point in his career came in 1893 when he won a prize of 20 guineas from the weekly magazine *Tid-Bits* for his condensation of a serial by Grant Allen.⁵ In 1897 Bennett met the writer Eden Phillpotts (1862-1900) and adopted the latter's philosophy of writing: to put earnings first, to try every form—the novel, the short story, the play, the article of every variety—from which money could be made. With the publication of *The Old Wives' Tale* in 1908, Arnold Bennett was rich. The novel was to be his greatest literary achievement; it lifted him immediately into the highest ranks of contemporary writers. He was elected to the National Liberal Club.⁶

Like his work in fiction, Bennett's association with the English stage began on a small scale and then expanded to encompass a larger area of theatrical work. From 1899 until the time of his death, Bennett was involved in the theatre. One of his first contacts with the stage was during the period 1900 to 1906-07 when he was a dramatic critic for the *Academy*. Bennett continued to practice criticism for years afterward with most of his later criticism being recorded in his *Journal*.

The vast majority of Bennett's theatrical work was in the area of playwriting. His first plays were one-act curtain raisers, but with encouragement from the manager Cyril Maude, Bennett began to write full-length scripts. During his early years as a playwright, Bennett seemed to have felt the necessity of collaborators; and he did continue to collaborate periodically during the rest of his career. The writers with whom Bennett wrote plays at one time or another were: Arthur Hooley, Eden Phillpotts, H.G. Wells, Frederick Alcock, and Edward Knoblock. In all, Bennett wrote fourteen plays alone and four in collaboration which were published, and another eighteen, either alone or in collaboration, which were not published. Bennett's greatest success in the theatre was *The Great Adventure*, an adaptation of his 1908 novel *Buried Alive*. It was presented by Granville-Barker in London on March 25 1913. Because of the First World War the play closed on November 7 1914 after six hundred and seventy-three performances. However, it premiered as a moving picture on December 13, 1915. It was the first of Bennett's works to be filmed.

Besides writing, Bennett produced plays. His work with production began in 1918 at Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith. Bennett produced approximately five plays by himself, and several in association with Alistair Tayler and Nigel Playfair. The trio's outstanding run—three and a half years—was Bennett's own adaptation of *The Beggar's Opera*. One of the great services of these producers to the theatre was the casting of Edith Evans, later Dame Edith, as Mrs. Millament in a revival of Congreve's *Way of the World*.⁸ In addition, the young actor,

Charles Laughton, made a triumphant beginning of his career in the title role of Bennett's last success in the theatre, *Mr. Prohack*.⁹

Bennett rounded his theatrical experiences by writing one film scenario which was produced and published, two which were not published, and two libretti.

Not only did Bennett take part in the theatre, he wrote about the many different aspects of the stage, recording his observations in articles for periodicals and in his journals. In nearly all of these essays and articles, Bennett spoke of a serious crisis in the English theatre of his time, the "plight of the English stage." Though never giving a definition of what exactly he meant by plight, Bennett did find several "serious" causes for what he considered to be the bad condition of the English stage. Among the phenomena (other than the competition of the cinema and the wireless) which kept the auditoriums empty and, therefore, helped to account for the plight of the English stage, Arnold Bennett named the following: and indifferent theatre public, a deficient supply of plays and playwrights, inaudibility on stage, bad acting, deterioration of a performance during a run, weak dramatic criticism, and bad producing and management.

The Theatre Public

Bennett felt that the public's complacency, insensitivity, and general indifference was a prime contributor to the poor condition of the stage.

The British stage is now supposed to be in the bad graces of the British public, the theory being that the public has grown tired of it, or at best indifferent to it. For myself, I should say that the British public has been somewhat indifferent to the stage for close upon three centuries. The stage has never recovered from the blow given to it by that masterful ruffian Oliver Cromwell. Even today an organization such as the Church and Stage Guild is regarded as a daring business not altogether creditable to the Church, and millions of people will not go to the theatre unless they can persuade themselves that the piece they are to see is "good"—that is, preaches an uplifting lesson.¹⁰

According to Bennett, the British public was and had been typically more interested in games, politics, crimes, motoring, and cooperative associations for the improvement of society than in the theatre. Bennett wrote that British theatre attendance was usually less than that of foreign countries, such as Germany, France, Austria, Russia, and the United States. In New York, for example, sixty regular theatres could be found, nearly full each night. (Bennett sailed to America in the fall of 1911, visiting several eastern and midwest cities.)

Bennett described the theatre public as sometimes reacting sincerely to the play and sometimes not. For example, on a first night the audience seldom reacted sincerely because it was interested in the performance only by professional or other ties, or attended to be "in the swim." Bennett liked the first-night audience least of all.

The attendance at the theatrical first night usually comprises three groups: 1. The professional first-nighters—critics, agents, playwrights, and theatrical advisers. Most of them are bored by the stage, blase, weary, indifferent. They seldom or never applaud. 2. A small intermediate group, partially overlapping No. 1 and consisting of professionals who have some reason to be sympathetic toward the author, the management, or the players. This group shows its friendliness by giving applause which in other circumstances it would not give. 3. Friends of the author, the management, or the players, who are not regular first-nighters. This group is present in order to applaud, it is determined to applaud, and if there is no reason to applaud it makes occasions. Thus on a first night the applause is both less and more than it is on any ordinary night. On the whole, the friendliness easily beats the indifference—but not always.¹¹

Bennett seemed particularly disturbed that the majority of the audience left the theatre without giving a sign of their state of mind. This prompted the critic to write: "No! You are not demonstrative. That is one reason why you are so puzzling," and "And you are too easily satisfied with the mediocre and your appreciation of beauty is not very sensitive."¹² Finally, Bennett felt that the public had a terrible defect; it was not a fault: "You lack artistic keenness. You don't care very much either way. No play, no opera, no picture, and seldom a book, is an 'event' in Britain."¹³

Plays and Playwrights

Although he acknowledged the most important element of the theatre to be the play, Bennett found the number of really good plays hopelessly awaiting performance on the English stage to be "infinitesimal." He wrote: "To my mind the chief answer to the question, 'What is wrong with the theatre?' is plain enough. . . . It is in the extreme and notorious paucity of interesting plays."¹⁴ Moreover, Bennett wrote that many adherents of the stage were concerned by what was called the "American invasion"—that is, that the London theatres were occupied by American plays. Bennett contended that only a minority of the theatres were occupied by American plays. Anyway, he was not in the least disturbed by this "invasion" because he found American plays to be even more sentimental than English plays, and the explanation of the success of American plays probably lay in this:

That the sentimentality is done in a more workmanlike and thorough manner than English playwrights have yet achieved. . . . Further, American dramatists seem to me to take more trouble than British dramatists in the fabrication of an attractive, outwardly novel and easily graspable theme. You know where you are in an American play.¹⁵

About playwriting Bennett said that it was easy to write a play—at least easier than writing a novel. He said

that drama did not belong exclusively to literature; its effect depended on something more than the composition of the words.

Consider the affair as a pyramidal structure, and the dramatist is the base—but he is not the apex. The egotism of the dramatist resents this uncomfortable fact, but the fact exists. And further, the creative faculties are not only those of the author, the stage-director ("producer") and the actors—the audience itself is unconsciously part of the collaboration.¹⁶

Inaudibility, or Imperfect Audibility, of Performers

Like many former and present-day theatrical critics and artists, Bennett emphatically pronounced the first requirement for the stage to be, "to get oneself heard clearly by the audience without putting a strain on the average ear." He observed, however, that this rule was nearly always ignored on the West End stage, since most of the actors and actresses were nearly always inaudible. Bennett complained about this problem in public and in private for a decade or more. He heard with his own ears ("which were in excellent order") hundreds of complaints about it from friends, acquaintances, and complete strangers. Moreover, he personally knew people who would not go to a play unless they were seated in the first three rows of seats. At nearly every play, Bennett was "well placed," but he missed words, "often whole phrases" which were apt to be "important words."¹⁷ Bennett attributed this annoyance to the fact that actors and actresses simply did not know their jobs. Most performers seemed not to have simple knowledge of the elements of elocution. In addition to the typical dropping of important syllables and important words in sentences there were grave errors of pronunciation in the West End. For example, the interpolated "r" between two vowels was usually a problem for the performers. Instead of "soda-and-milk," it was nearly always "soda-rand-milk."¹⁸ Worse than this, English was often spoken with a bad accent, usually cockney. Women were typically worse than men in this respect. Bennett was thoroughly convinced, however, that perfect audibility could have been achieved in any theatre. This point was proven by the fact that in every performance one or two players were perfectly heard, for the reason that they had learned their job. Performers such as Gladys Cooper, Mary Rorke, Frederick Kerr, Dennis Eadie, and Allan Aynesworth were nearly always understood on stage. Bennett thought that generally the older players were better than the young. Moreover, if the British public were not so complacent, the inaudibility scandal could have been "done away in six months."¹⁹

Actors and Actresses

For Bennett, acting was a "unique" profession which attracted individuals who loved self-exhibition. These performers worked while the rest of mankind slept, and slept while others worked. Bennett wrote that no profession worked harder while it worked, nor more enthusiastically; that was why the acting profession "stands by itself."²⁰ With reference to the West End stage, however, he said:

The present is not an age of supreme acting. Supreme acting involves supreme individualities—individualities powerful enough to impose themselves universally on the public. None such is apparent. We have some actors, distinguished actors, clever actors; but not one with native force tremendous enough to become a public legend.²¹

Bennett noted that too often celebrated actors only exploited their individualities at the expense of the part which they were playing. They wanted to be recognized instantly as themselves. This was true especially among actresses. A few actresses imposed themselves considerably by "beauty, charm, grace, industry, and sincerity; but none of them stood supreme by sheer acting." It was a common saying in managerial offices, after the male roles had been assigned: "Yes, but where shall we find the leading actress?"²² Bennett explained that one of the reasons Shakespeare had been handicapped in Britain (and in America) was because of "stars."

By the time a star has finished producing Shakespeare, Shakespeare might as well have been thrown into the middle of the Strand and run over by thirteen K motorbuses. Stars cut all the parts but their own; they alter and minimize all the "business" but their own; and they most disastrously affect the casting. Stars are, to say the least, mature beings. As surely as a star plays, for example, Viola so surely you will see a perfect hag put into the part of Olivia—to save Viola's face. And so on.²³

Bennett wrote that the legend that crowds of talented and trained players were eagerly waiting for a chance on stage was fantastic. The number of players who could act really well in minor parts was "small" and the number of players who could sustain a leading part was "pitiably small."²⁴

Deterioration of Performances During a Run

Bennett observed that, generally speaking, performances were not consistently watched by producers. He noted that the first fifteen or twenty performances of a play improved in quality, then the performances began to deteriorate. Performances grew worse night by night until in some cases they reached the point of being insulting to the audience. To remedy the problem, Bennett proposed continuous scrutiny by producers throughout the entire run with rehearsals being called for the slightest lapse. "Nothing like a rehearsal call to bring the slackers up with a jerk."²⁵

Dramatic Criticism

All dramatic criticism in morning papers was thoroughly unsatisfactory to Bennett. He thought that no critic could do justice to either himself or to a play when he had to rush to meet early morning deadlines. Bennett proposed sending the critics to dress-rehearsals to overcome the difficulty of time. The situation of the critics of the evening papers he found bad, but not so bad as those of the morning papers. The articles of the evening critics were better; those of critics of weekly papers he found better still. ²⁶ On a broader spectrum, Bennett felt that a critic needed more than time to write good reviews.

He needs taste, knowledge, and experience. Very few critics, and especially very few daily critics, possess these three. Many possess the third, some possess the second (usually combining it with an infallible partiality for the tenth-rate), and scarcely any possess the first.²⁷

"Mealy-mouthed" was the term Bennett applied to most dramatic criticism.²⁸ He said that there seemed to be a journalistic tradition that critics had to handle the stage with great delicacy, with the truth almost never being told about players—popular or unpopular.²⁹

There are players in the West End, mainly women, who never could act and never will act, who make a mess of every part they undertake, whom the entire theatrical and journalistic world knows to be perfect duds—and yet year after year critics will either laud their efforts to heaven or will keep falsifying silence about them.³⁰

Bennett felt that it was this silence and unwillingness of critics to be frank and candid that accounted for poor acting and poor producing in general.

If anyone would like to learn what candid theatrical criticism can be, let him read the wonderful volume of Maurice Boissard's collected articles recently published by the Librairie Gallimard. This book ought to open British eyes, and be an exemplar to British critics. Maurice Boissard is capable of being very rude. He is as rude as Alan Dale, of New York, and far more deadly. I do not declare British critics to imitate the rudeness, but only the frankness, of the afore-mentioned foreign critics. At present their good natured or their sentimental tolerance must count among the influences which hamper the progress of the London stage.³¹

Producers and Producing

Of London producing, Bennett wrote that it compared with that of other countries, it was generally bad—and when it was good, it was old-fashioned.

Continental managers and American managers laugh at our native producing, so ingenious and so slack. Most rehearsals are slack. A thousand details which cry out for attention are passed over. The producer goes in fear of stars, and often of the second rankers. Rehearsals begin late. They end when someone has to run off to an engagement for afternoon tea. When American plays succeed in London they succeed as much by their American producing as anything else. And when they fail, English producing is chiefly to blame.³²

Though he termed American rehearsal methods brutal, Bennett favored brutality which resulted in good performances to "drawing-room manners" which resulted in poor performances. He noted that American producing was favored in London for its smartness and energy, and wrote that much more "brutality and much more autocracy, and much more vitality and more finish" were required in English producing.³³ According to Bennett, the person chiefly responsible for a play—after the author—was the producer. He noted that producing did not, as many seemed to suppose, consist only of the arranging of scenery, lighting, "effects," and incidental music of a play. The producer had, among his other responsibilities, the responsibility of acting. Consequently, many of the criticisms directed against individual players should more properly have been directed against the producer. Although he hardly objected to criticism of players, Bennett thought that much of the reviewer's criticisms of an actor's or actress's slowness, clumsiness of business, restlessness, or inability should have been attributed to the producer as well, because he (the producer) had failed to correct it.

Dramatic critics ought to take a new approach to a play. They ought to remember first, that the extremely important business of casting is the main function of the producer; and second, that all points of speed, style, mood, tone, and business are regulated by the producer. They ought to look upon the entire spectacle as primarily the artistic creation of the producer. They ought to award both far more praise and far more blame to the producer than they in fact do.³⁴

Managers and Managements

Bennett defined managements as individuals or small groups who directed the policies of theatres—that is, those who chose the plays for production. Most of these managements were impermanent, meaning that management passed from hand to hand and was therefore, not identifiable with any consistent policies and regular patrons. Bennett acknowledged, however, that not all managements were impermanent; there were still a few

permanent ones. These permanent managements produced either musical comedies, or any plays by authors with fixed reputations of success, or comedies.³⁵ Bennett concluded that most managers had an enormous and contented ignorance of dramatic literature and of the arts in general. In addition, most managers had a lack of curiosity, had a natural tendency to refuse plays, and had a tendency to ask for a new piece while insisting that it be precisely like every successful piece that ever was.³⁶

But managers are very naughty. Most of them always want something that is exactly like something else. How often have Edward Knoblock and I listened to the impassioned and silly appeal, "Give us another Milestone!" And how often have I been begged, yea, with tears of yearning, to sit down and write another Great Adventure!

Again, managers have such funny rules governing acceptance or rejection. . . .

True, few interesting plays are being written, but a few **are** being written, and it is precisely those few that, as a rule, managers unanimously reject. A famine exists; managers are dying of hunger. Offer them a new loaf, and they turn away from it in fear. "No," they say, "you mustn't ask me to eat that; it's not stale," and go on bravely dying.³⁷

The commercial manager's worst defect was said to be his lack of imagination. Although a manager would read a play, he did not have sufficient imagination to picture what the script would be like on the stage.

In reference to impermanent managements, Bennett observed that the majority of them were destined to fail from the start because of either over zealous intentions or "highbrow gentlemen" who took it upon themselves to "regenerate the theatre by presenting a play or player to the public for personal reasons."³⁸ In either case, the play produced was generally bad from every point of view. In general, the manager was usually one of the chief causes of the poor financial situation in most theatres.

The financial situation of theatres is difficult, but not more difficult than that of other industries. Theatre rents have enormously risen, but so have business rents. Theatrical accomodation is far too limited, but so is business accomodation. . . . In other industries, faced with a rise of 100 or 200 percent in manufacturing costs, no manufacturer would dream of parting with his goods to the public at old prices. At present the stage represents a bargain sale to which the public is invited—not for one week in January, but all the year round. Theatrical managers are manufacturers. When it occurs to them that, like other manufacturers, they are subject to economic laws, and not living under a regime of heavenly miracles, then the financial situation will begin to look up.³⁹

In his autobiography Bennett wrote that the chief characteristic of all bad criticism was the absence of genuine conviction, of a message, of a clear doctrine. If this philosophy is applied to Bennett's writing on the theatre, it may be fair to say he was a good critic. **He did have something to say.** Bennett was convinced that there was a serious and immediate problem on the English stage during the first decades of the twentieth century. He believed that the English theatre was falling behind most other national theatres. This crisis was a result of negligence on the part of all persons connected with the theatre. Bennett persistently exposed this negligence.

One inference that can be made is that Arnold Bennett knew well the world of the stage and its problems; he understood the nature of the theatre. This is somewhat unusual of a man thought of primarily as a "literary" figure. Arnold Bennett, however, showed an arresting understanding of the stage—its nature and its technique.

NOTES

¹John D. Gordon, *Arnold Bennett: The Centenary of His Birth; An Exhibition in the Berg Collection* (New York: The New York Public Library; Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations, 1968), p.9.

²Walter Allen, *Arnold Bennett* (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1949), p.11.

³Allen, *Arnold Bennett*, pp.12-13.

⁴Allen, *Arnold Bennett*, p.11.

⁵Allen, *Arnold Bennett*, p.15.

⁶Allen, *Arnold Bennett*, pp.27-28.

⁷Gordon, *Arnold Bennett*, pp.40-41.

⁸Gordon, *Arnold Bennett*, p.52.

⁹Arnold Bennett, *The Journal of Arnold Bennett* (Garden City, New York: The Garden City Publishing Co., Inc., 1932), pp. 981-86.

- ¹⁰Arnold Bennett, *Things That Have Interested Me, Third Series* (New York: G.H. Doran, 1926), pp.35-36.
- ¹¹Arnold Bennett, *Things That Have Interested Me*, (New York: G.H. Doran, 1921), p.183.
- ¹²Arnold Bennett, *Things That Have Interested Me, Second Series* (New York: G.H. Doran, 1923), pp.50-52.
- ¹³Bennett, *Things*, p.125.
- ¹⁴Bennett, *Things*, p.125.
- ¹⁵Bennett, *Things*, pp.123-124.
- ¹⁶Arnold Bennett, *The Author's Craft* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1914), p.90.
- ¹⁷Arnold Bennett, "Introduction," *Contemporary Theatre, 1926*, by James Agate (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1927), pp.v-vii
- ¹⁸Bennett, *Things, Third Series*, pp.30-31.
- ¹⁹Bennett, "Introduction," pp.viii-ix.
- ²⁰Bennett, *Things, Second Series*, p.34.
- ²¹Bennett, *Things, Second Series*, p.35.
- ²²Bennett, *Things, Second Series*, pp.35-36.
- ²³Bennett, *Things, Third Series*, p.19.
- ²⁴Bennett, "Introduction," p.ix.
- ²⁵Bennett, "Introduction," p.x.
- ²⁶Bennett, *Things, Second Series*, pp.40-41.
- ²⁷Bennett, *Things, Second Series*, p.41.
- ²⁸Bennett, "Introduction," p.x.
- ²⁹Bennett, "Introduction," pp.x-xi.
- ³⁰Bennett, "Introduction," pp.xi-xii.
- ³¹Bennett, "Introduction," pp.xi-xiii.
- ³²Bennett, "Introduction," pp.ix-x.
- ³³Bennett, "Introduction," p.x.
- ³⁴Bennett, *Things, Third Series*, pp.21-23.
- ³⁵Bennett, "Introduction," pp.xiii-xiv.
- ³⁶Bennett, *Things, Second Series*, p.29.
- ³⁷Bennett, *Things, Third Series*, pp.26-27.
- ³⁸Bennett, "Introduction," p.xv.
- ³⁹Bennett, *Things, Second Series*, pp.31-32.