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Finger-posts, Limelight, Staircases, and Other Delights: Oscar Wilde's *Salomé* as Popular Drama

The article raises the question of what the term "popular drama" really means. Taking Oscar Wilde's play Salomé as an extended test case, it argues that, despite its apparent identity as an esoteric, Symbolist-oriented work, the play possesses features common to the structure and ethos of popular plays on West End stages. Examining two prominent features of current staging, limelight and staircases, he intentionally muddies the waters, hoping to provoke further, productive thought about an elusive term. Joseph Donohue, a theatre historian and textual scholar, is Professor Emeritus of English at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. He is currently editing a group of Oscar Wilde's plays, including Salomé and The Importance of Being Earnest, for the Oxford University Press collected works of Wilde.

I

I have recently been reading Martin Meisel's absorbing book *How Plays Work*, one of the broadest yet most succinct analyses of how dramatic structure and the ethos that informs it create meaning by working in effective rhetorical ways on an audience.¹ Sometimes I think that, in the case of plays, audience expectation, its fulfillment or its bafflement, constitutes almost everything there is to talk about. At least, nothing one says about a play seems, finally, very meaningful apart from the response it produces in the people who have come to see it. It is all, of course, more complicated than that. All the same, would-be authors of plays who ignore this basic point do so at their peril, whether writing esoterica in dramatic form or the most "accessible" kind of melodrama once seen on the popular Victorian stage and still to be found, thinly disguised, on numerous TV networks (not excluding news broadcasts).

Reading Meisel's book has reaffirmed my opinion that the most sophisticated and also the least sophisticated examples of plays are not so very different from one other, after all. And this in turn has moved me, at the debut of a promising new journal, to question the distinction routinely made between something called "popular drama" and . . . what? "Unpopular drama"? If we speak of "popular drama," presumably we have some opposite or alternative in mind. But substitute the term "élite drama" as the alternative and we instantly find ourselves in a political sphere where pejoratives hang heavy on the tongue and where I, for one, fear to tread. But what term for the opposite of or alternative to "popular" will be of use? Even as we embark on the journey, we find ourselves searching for definitions, practical distinctions that will help us live more comfortably with a genre (if that's what it is) whose various attributes can sometimes prove mutually contradictory.

A much earlier book takes essentially the same point of view as Meisel's. Something I read in *How Plays Work* sent me back to William Archer's handbook *Play-making*, first published in 1912 and, like Meisel's, retrospective in orientation but with an eye toward some general truths.² Archer's purview is, however, much narrower. A harsh view of this once serviceable work might dismiss it as an ossified relic. After all, we don't much read and seldom see performed most of the plays he writes about. Yet I believe Archer still has much to teach us that impinges in surprising ways on the distinction between "popular" drama and . . . that other kind.

What took me back to *Play-making* was a vague memory of an important and once much-used dramaturgical technique that Archer calls a "finger-post." Occupied as I am these days with editing certain plays by Oscar Wilde³ and developing a detailed commentary on the text of Wilde's *Salomé* (originally written in French), I thought I could better explain a particular phenomenon that occurs at one point in the action by invoking Archer's term. The pointing of a dramaturgical "finger" by effectively calling the audience's attention to something that will occur—is, in fact, bound to occur, because the dramatist intends to have it so—later in the play is what I was trying to get at. Archer gives numerous examples of the technique, drawn from a goodly range of contemporary and recent plays produced over the previous thirty years before he was writing.

A bit of context is in order. Wilde's *Salomé*, based on biblical accounts of the violent death of John the Baptist in Matthew and Mark, is set on a terrace outside Herod the Tetrarch's banqueting hall, where a large party is in progress. The two main features of the stage are an old cistern upstage left, where John is imprisoned, and a gigantic staircase at stage right. Various soldiers and others idly stand by. Salomé, the rapidly maturing daughter of Herod's wife Hérodias, enters, in flight from the banquet, where Herod, her step-father, has been making eyes at her. She hears John, whom Wilde calls Iokanaan, crying out from the cistern, making dire predictions, and insists on seeing him. Despite the

objections of the Young Syrian, captain of the guard, he is brought out, and she has a conversation with him in which he roundly condemns her; but she nevertheless falls in love with him. Iokanaan retreats in disgust back into the cistern. The Young Syrian, captain of the guard, himself perhaps in love with Salome and unable to tolerate her wanton behaviour, has become increasingly desperate, and now suddenly kills himself. The dead body is lying on the stage, ignored by Salome but an object of concern for the soldiers. Now, the finger-post in question occurs at this point, just after the moment of the captain's death. Wilde has one of his soldiers say (I paraphrase loosely), "We don't have to bother about carrying off this cadaver right away. Herod never comes out here onto the terrace. He's too uncomfortable in the presence of the prisoner in the cistern." The next line is a stage direction, which reads, exactly: "(Enter Herod, Herodias, and all their court)."

That is, Wilde blithely undermines the veteran soldier's confident prediction by bringing the Judaeian ruler immediately on stage, and does so in such a way as to attract particular attention to the entrance. Exploiting the soldier's seemingly false lead, instead of simply bringing on the Tetrarch and his retinue and guests at this point Wilde arranges for the audience to have to engage in a kind of mental double-take, forcing them to pause and readjust their expectations. In doing so he thus calls for the audience to make a more material connection between the dead man lying in the middle of the stage and a ruler who has previously been described as squeamish and much put off by the sight of a cadaver (except for that of someone he has done away with himself).

Why does Herod come on stage at this particular point? Because he is looking for Salome, who, as the audience is aware, has left the banquet hall in order to distance herself from Herod's lascivious gaze and has defied his orders to return. She has fled to the comparative safety of the night and the moon—only to encounter Iokanaan, this strange, gaunt creature clad in camel skin and a leather belt who languishes imprisoned in the cistern upstage, who spontaneously shouts out dreadful imprecations aimed most especially at Herodias but also at unnamed other persons, and who, when brought out at Salome's insistence, responds to her naïve declarations of love with lofty, undisguised contempt. By the time Herod enters and finds her, she has already changed in fateful ways, and someone is already dead—a harbinger, as it turns out, of two more deaths yet to come.

Now, why is this a "finger-post"? I must admit it is an atypical example of the technique, more complex than what Archer has in mind. Wilde's calculated undermining of expectation aims, first of all, at giving a more noticeable, striking cachet to the presence of the tetrarch. His abrupt entrance serves to highlight features of Herod's personality and behaviour that will prove crucial for the dramatic outcome. The audience doesn't yet know what that outcome may be. Yes, some will be familiar with the *New Testament* account of Herod's banquet and its aftermath, but there is no guarantee that Wilde will feel bound to follow

the main action of that account. In any case, finger-posts don't prematurely reveal endings; they only point unerringly, if mysteriously, toward them. By initializing in this unexpected entrance Herod's compulsive erotic interest in his teenage step-daughter, his pusillanimous fear of dealing with dead bodies, his self-aggrandizing behaviour in front of a large assembly of envoys and guests who now crowd onto the stage, his embarrassing lack of self-control, and, particularly, his great discomfort over the awkward presence of Iokanaan, a man whom Herod captured but is afraid to do away with because of a superstitious fear of reprisals by "an unknown God," and whom he is reluctant to free because this charismatic truth-teller could easily foment a rebellion, Wilde takes an economical giant step toward setting the stage (and all that that implies) for the dire events that are ultimately to follow. That's his use of finger-pointing, in a nutshell.

The very fact that Wilde would use this broadly serviceable technique, but use it in a somewhat unorthodox and more sophisticated way, so as to accomplish much in a little space, speaks at once of his broad assimilation of the dramaturgical lessons implicitly on view, night after night, in the theatres of London's West End and Paris and of his ambition to tread these well-known paths with more private goals in mind. Because he was such a frequent playgoer, like Henry James and Matthew Arnold, and had an extraordinarily retentive mind, Wilde could absorb the lessons so nicely codified by Archer in his latter-day book. Archer's analytical descriptions of how plays work (to borrow Meisel's pragmatic title) draw upon example after example from the last three decades or so (up to 1912) of successful comedies and dramas written by such workaday or distinguished dramatists, English, French, American, and otherwise, as James Albery, J. M. Barrie, Harley Granville Barker, Henri Becque, Dion Boucicault, R. C. Carton, Alexandre Dumas *père et fils*, Clyde Fitch, John Galsworthy, Ludovic Halévy and his frequent partner Henri Meilhac, James A. Herne, Henrik Ibsen (yes, Ibsen; Archer was his first English champion), and so on through the alphabet to Arthur Pinero, T. W. Robertson, Edmond Rostand, Victorien Sardou, Eugène Scribe, George Bernard Shaw, Edward Sheldon, Alfred Lord Tennyson (yes, Tennyson; see below)—and Oscar Wilde. (Unfortunately, Archer omits *Salomé* from his list of pertinent examples.)

In fact, it takes little time reading the plays of Scribe, Sardou, and others of the French school of the *pièce bien faite*, the so-called "well made play," so deeply scorned by Bernard Shaw (who was so much indebted to the form⁴), to appreciate how Shaw and Wilde alike were solidly grounded in the structural principles of those plays and their ethical underpinnings—and to what a great extent they knowingly, and surreptitiously, departed from or actually overturned them. Read Shaw's *Arms and the Man* against Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, two comedies produced on the West End stage within a few months of one another (in 1894-1895), and in particular compare the way each playwright leads up to what could be and no doubt has been called the "*moment à faire*,"⁵ and you will see the difficulty of distinguishing popular drama from . . . the other

kind, whatever we decide to call it.

Oh, the obligatory moments in those two plays, you may ask? In *Arms and the Man* it's that delicious moment in the library, in Act III, when Bluntschli, alone with Raïna, confesses that, enraptured though he is by her thrilling imitation of outraged innocence and high dudgeon, he can't believe a word of it. After a pause, Raïna replies: "How . . . how did you find me out?" And in *Earnest*, it's that moment in Act III when Jack, still masquerading as Ernest Worthing, having discovered that in fact he had, all along, the parents that Lady Bracknell in Act I had urged him to acquire "before the season is quite over," but still doesn't know who those parents were, asks her the most pertinent, pressing question of his life: "Lady Bracknell, I hate to seem inquisitive, but would you kindly inform me who I am?" Two equally obligatory moments in which the truth is about to be definitively told. It is almost as delicious, for the scholarly mind at any rate, to decipher how each of these dramatists has appropriated the chief features of the well-made play and, simultaneously, completely undermined the conventional nonsense of the romantic ethos on which those features are built—an ethos that leaves the world as it found it, with "no discoverable lesions."⁶

II

I've been arguing that Wilde's *Salomé*, for all its ostensible character as an esoteric, Symbolist work of dramatic art, on the face of it suitable primarily for the off-Boulevard, inner-sanctum clientèle who were invited to performances by Parisian companies like Aurélien Lugné-Poe's Théâtre de l'Oeuvre,⁷ exploits features common to the structure and ethos of plays featured on the late-century West End stages presided over by actor-managers George Alexander (the St. James's), Herbert Beerbohm-Tree (the Haymarket), and Henry Irving (the Lyceum), along with many another chief of a posh or workaday venue. These were theatres, some recently built, others generations old, where plays were often performed that dramatized the taking of transgressive risks but ended up remaining within the boundaries of predominant mores and received cultural standards. They succeeded, by and large, before audiences of various classes (Britain being then, and still, a very class-conscious society) occupying the architecturally and socially stratified spaces of traditional auditoriums, including galleries, but were aimed specifically at a more well-to-do clientèle. Even as dinner hours advanced farther into the late afternoon and evening, and even as more prosperous and decorous audiences of the late nineteenth-century returned to the theatre after a decades-long absence and set social standards to which other audience members of lesser cachét aspired, the plays they watched were perhaps more literate and superficially sophisticated but, in more primary ways, not so very different from those old, rattle-trap melodramas like Holcroft's *A Tale of Mystery*, billed as the first melodrama, so called, on an English stage, at Covent Garden in 1802—especially after more realistic dramas with urban settings like Tom Taylor's *The Ticket-of-Leave Man* (1863) came into vogue. My

first example of this remarkable continuity, captured in William Archer's retrospective survey *Play-making*, has been the pervasive use of that dramaturgical workhorse, the "finger-post," which speaks eloquently of the suspenseful coherence of the well-constructed popular play. More than one example is called for, however, to establish a more well-grounded case, as I attempt to scrutinize the term "popular drama" and question what it might be thought to mean—and to exclude.

My two remaining examples are limelight and staircases.

For the record, limelight is a brilliant light produced by "the heating of a block of compressed quicklime by a flame of combined oxygen and hydrogen."⁸ From uncertain beginnings in the theatre in the early-to-mid-nineteenth century, it became over succeeding years more sophisticated and broadly useful, both for floodlighting and spotlighting, and was even used as a follow spot.⁹

As Wilde's play opens, the moon is shining brightly. "*Clair de lune*" is the French phrase, placed at the end of the first stage direction. This is the first of many references to the moon in the play, which turns red at one point but apparently never stops shining—until the end. After Herod has persuaded Salome to dance for him, offering her anything she would like, even half of his kingdom, if she will only do it; and after Salome has danced and then named her reward, the decapitated head of Iokanaan; and after Salome has declined the rich jewels and other valuables Herod has vainly offered her instead and he reluctantly accedes to her wish; and after Iokanaan's head is severed and delivered to Salome on a silver charger—after this tense sequence of dramatic action, we arrive at almost the end of the play. Salomé kneels and addresses the severed head, in an exceedingly long speech that ends with "Love is the only thing."¹⁰ At this point Herod, feeling exceedingly fearful, rises, calls for the lights to be put out, and moves to the staircase, which he begins to mount. As this action proceeds, the moon becomes obscured by clouds. The last and surely most important reference to the moon and the light it casts now occurs in the stage direction that Wilde inserts at this point. The direction calls for a shaft of moonlight to fall on Salomé and illuminate her.

Up to this point, the technical requirements called for by the dramatist for staging the play have been quite modest. The implicit requirement of a trap-door inside the cistern where Iokanaan remains imprisoned is not in any sense special, any more than the limelight, by now a standard fixture in professional theatres—and the inevitable choice for representing moonlight, in the form of a kind of spotlight, such as never occurs in nature but ubiquitous on the mid-to-late nineteenth-century stage. The use of this technology to focus a well-circumscribed spotlight on the unmoving and obscured figure of Salomé would have been well within means for any professional theatre, as would the passing of a great cloud across the sky to hide the moon and the general darkening of the scene—effects called for in Wilde's stage directions just prior to this point. The

obscuring of the moon conveniently shields from the audience's view Salomé's kissing of the mouth of Iokanaan's head ("Je baiserais ta bouche, Iokanaan"—"I will kiss your mouth, Iokanaan"), which she promised she would do in their earlier interview and now does, in total darkness, before the limelight illuminates her once again as the cloud moves past the moon.

As a result of the phenomenal spread of this remarkable technical resource, there is more than a hint, in the sequence Wilde dramatizes, of the sort of spectacular effect called for in the climax of many a Victorian melodrama. In an especially apt instance, at the end of the third and final act of Watts Phillips's *Lost in London* (Adelphi, 1867), the heroine Nelly's elderly, devoted husband, Job Armroyd, has come from the northern mines and, having patiently tracked her down, discovers her, dying, in the suburban London cottage of her seducer, the proprietor of the mine, Gilbert Featherstone. The invocation of the limelight moon, shining through the "*great width of window*" called for in the stage directions by the dramatist, is carefully timed so as to pace the scene and mark its approaching climax little by little. The window in the upstage area is initially curtained off, but Nelly raises the curtain to reveal a vista of the "*distant city, the red light of the setting sun falling full upon her face.*" As Job and his dying wife Nelly come face to face, the stage directions call for the next special effect: "*A silvery light begins to tinge curtain and back of scene, as from the rising moon.*" Nelly, near death now, swoons. Job calls for air, rushes to the window, and, tearing the curtain aside, "*reveals the distant city, now brought out in strong relief by the rising moon.*" In an appended note, Phillips explains: "*It is required that the silvery light of the moon should fall suddenly upon the figure of Nelly, flooding it as with a glory*" (that is, a halo or a nimbus).¹¹ Wilde, a frequent playgoer, as we have seen, would have witnessed such effects at the Lyceum and elsewhere. Phillips, a seasoned veteran of thirteen performed melodramas, lights up his limelight at a key point and keeps it moving, even as it changes color and direction, until at last it is shone fully on the figure of the dying Nelly, perhaps on the actress's head itself, as Phillips's call for a halo effect implicitly suggests.¹²

Wilde's moonlight effect is both connected to this earlier one and simultaneously quite the opposite. As we have seen, the stage directions call for a sudden shaft of moonlight to fall on Salomé and illuminate her figure: "*(Un rayon de lune tombe sur SALOMÉ et l'éclaire.)*" But Wilde envisions another effect, however—in fact, a *perepeteia*, as the Greeks would have called it, that creates a wholly new and fearful meaning. In these closing moments of *Salomé* he inverts the conventional meaning of forgiveness conferred on the pitiful Nelly—as Phillips arranges it, a kind of redemption by limelight—invoking an exquisitely timed sequence for his own, subversive ends. He does so by having Herod, who has been steadily mounting the staircase, suddenly pause and turn, poised on that enormous *escalier*. In this sudden, unprepared reversal the limelight apparition seems almost fortuitous, since it captures Salomé exactly at the moment when Herod turns, sees her, and is suddenly moved to call for her instant death.

The audience may very likely wonder: “Would Salomé have been killed if it had not been for that well-timed shaft of moonlight?” The point is merely hypothetical and finally irrelevant. Wilde up-ends the conventional melodramatic effect of a limelight “blessing” by causing Herod, now perhaps halfway up the staircase, to turn and, seeing Salome suddenly bathed in brilliant light, react instinctively. In this sudden, unprepared reversal the limelight apparition of Salomé, seemingly fortuitous, captures Salomé precisely at the moment when Herod turns, in the same instant sees her illuminated, and, with her last, outrageous words still ringing in his ears, calls for her instant death under the crushing shields of his soldiers.

There is a larger sense, also, in which this fortuitous clarification—ostensibly more a function of Victorian theatrical technology than of anything more integral and thematic—contributes to a much larger, more tragic and inevitable outcome. We must understand that the ending of the play occurs in an aesthetic realm beyond realism, a realm that partakes of a kind of ethereal quality associated with the Symbolist dramas of Maeterlinck, Rachilde, and other playwrights then in vogue. Yet we must remember that the endings of melodramas typically occur in a place beyond realism too, residing as they do in a fantasy land where just deserts are always served up to long-suffering heroes and heroines and where evil men and women are invariably vanquished. The ending of *Salomé* occurs in a realm that has something important in common with melodrama’s fantastic world of primary good finally triumphing over elemental evil, while at the same time it is a world, at once broader and murkier, that cannot be uniformly accounted for by the straightforward mores of conventional society. As usual, we end up talking about the audience. Despite the evident possibility of the audience’s seeing in Salomé’s demise society’s retribution for the murder of an innocent man, the ethical and moral valences of the play are more complex and less easily defined; more “modern,” and susceptible of repeated, troubled scrutiny. It’s like “M. G. Lewis and *The Castle Spectre* meet Gordon Craig and the Moscow *Hamlet*.” There’s a connection; there’s also a difference. We need to attend to both.

Let’s return to the moon. We perceive that the moon, the dominant symbol of the play early and late, is not just a verbal “icon” of sorts, but a crucial participant in the action of the play and, as a result, a prime contributor to the tragic ending. Wilde does not call his play a “tragédie”; he calls it a “drame,” as if to avoid placing it in the long tradition of classical and romantic tragedy from the ancient Greeks to Racine and Corneille and on to Hugo, classing it instead with more modern treatments of serious themes by such dramatists as Henri Becque. And yet it would seem inescapably true that the sudden death of the true protagonist of Wilde’s brief, intense drama (its brevity also signaled in its descriptive subtitle—“drame en un acte”) possesses a tragic quality of fatefulness and loss. The final stage image of Salomé, until it is blotted out by the advancing soldiers and the sudden, violent lowering of their shields to crush her body (at which point the lime would be turned off), is a familiar, classic one, as

old as Sophocles' *Antigone*: unrepentant, defiant, and summing up her actions in a final speech of farewell, Salomé defies the conventional mores of society, insists on the primacy of love over authority, and pays the ultimate price for her refusal to capitulate.¹³

I frequently encounter the question, how could a single person be the author of both *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *Salomé*? This latter play impresses its readership, and its audiences as well, as being so different from anything else Wilde wrote that it may come as a shock, the extent to which his French symbolist *drame* trades, if in almost a clandestine way, on resources of the Victorian stage that patently underlie his other plays, from *Vera; or, The Nihilists* and *The Duchess of Padua* to the three social comedy-dramas and *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Having written a play that could be effectively (though not ideally) mounted in a church hall or some other modest space (but, oh, that staircase!), Wilde nevertheless can be seen to have composed a work that would make its meanings more deeply and pervasively felt through exploiting the advantageous resources of the professional theatre of his day, the one we generally consider to be “popular.”

As it happens, Wilde left behind a graphic image showing precisely how he wished *Salomé* to be mounted, and in so doing effectively countered the view of his literary executor Robert Ross and others that *Salomé* is a closet drama, inappropriate for theatrical treatment and unintended for the stage. In the third-draft manuscript of *Salomé* (now in the Rosenbach Museum & Library, Philadelphia), included in the front matter is a sketch in Wilde's hand of the scene for the play. Representing a terrace outside the banquet hall in Herod's palace, it sets a sparsely furnished stage with just a few distinguishing features. In the first edition the opening directions read, “(SCÈNE. *Une grande terrasse dans le palais d'HÉRODE donnant sur la salle de festin. Des SOLDATS sont accoudés sur le balcon. A droite il y a un énorme escalier. A gauche, au fond, une ancienne citerne entourée d'un mur de bronze vert. Clair de lune*).”¹⁴ In Wilde's sketch, the banquet hall off stage left, the cistern upstage, and the great staircase at right are the only features represented, along with the perimeters of the space, demarcated by the terms “Balcon” (“Balcony”), “Ouverture” (“Opening”, i.e., through the balcony railing up center) and “Batiment” (“Building”—i.e., the banquet hall). The huge staircase, that “*énorme escalier*,” remains unmentioned throughout almost the entire length of the play and unused for such a long duration that the audience either forgets all about it (although it is constantly in view) or from time to time may wonder if it will have any part at all in the ensuing dramatic action. As for the banquet hall and its occupants, they are referred to often enough by the soldiers and others to define the playing area as an adjunct of that space and at the same time to describe it as a place where Herod rarely sets foot because of the ominous presence of the cistern upstage, which houses the imprisoned Iokanaan, whom Herod evidently fears. About fifty lines into the play we hear the Voice of Iokanaan rising suddenly from the depths of the cistern, requiring, it would seem, a trap door

masked along the downstage edge by the low bronze surround (low enough for Salomé to perch on late in the play), as called for in Wilde's scene description—and also requiring an actor endowed with uncommonly good vocal powers (or, these days, equipped with a microphone).

For the most part no more than a ground plan, the sketch includes the crucial presence of the moon, represented by a small circle placed above the balcony and labeled "*la lune*" ("the moon"). Evidently Wilde intended it as a constantly visible presence, like the staircase and the cistern, looming over the action of the play and repeatedly referred to by various characters, until it is shrouded by clouds at a climactic point at almost the end. The significance of the moon as a symbolic presence is thus established at the outset and continually reaffirmed through dialogue and gesture, as is its association with morbidity and death. Its connection also with the princess Salomé herself effectively links her, too, with death, through a sort of dramatic irony, since it also is said to reflect her unsullied virginity.

Let's pause to reflect on the direction in which these images and effects may be taking us. Technology has about it a certain quality of inevitability: if something can be done, rest assured it will be done. If we develop the technology sufficient to put an astronaut on Mars, it's inevitable that some astronaut sooner or later is going to enjoy a Mars-eye view of Earth. There is a larger sense in which this illumination of the figure of Salomé, ostensibly more a function of theatrical technology than of anything thematic and integral to the drama itself, becomes part of a much larger, more tragic and inevitable outcome, all the more effective for its unprepared suddenness. It is almost a signature capability of the Victorian theatre to remake tragic inevitability as apparently—but not truly—a matter of chance, not choice. Precisely because of the enormous advances in stage lighting over the course of the nineteenth century, in the theatre of this age spectacular theatrical means become ultimately inseparable from fatal dramatic ends. Wilde's literary executor and friend Robert Ross felt sure that *Salomé* was intended as a closet drama, but over against that view stands, not only the elegantly detailed ground plan in Wilde's own hand, but the precisely specified and beautifully timed stagecraft that distinguishes—and determines—the ending of the play.¹⁵ It is a stagecraft no different in structure and detail from Watts Phillips's, a dramaturgy that produces climactic effects common to plays from Boucicault's *The Corsican Brothers*, Phillips's *Lost in London*, Daly's *Under the Gaslight*, and Lewis's *The Bells* to Wilde's *Salomé*, and beyond. In Wilde's case, the ethos embraced by the scaffolding is profoundly different; but the architectonics are exactly the same.

III

But, oh, that staircase. Inanimate and inutile up until the end, it also plays a role, aesthetic and ethical, as crucial, and perhaps every bit as intrusive, as that of the moon in the dramatic economy of the play. The producer mounting *Salomé*

faced with inadequate budgetary means for production must think long and hard before deciding to eliminate the staircase or to replace it with a more modest set of steps and a low-rise platform. The very fact of its towering, looming presence from the very beginning must surely prove mysterious or even troubling to an audience, because they cannot know or understand why it is there. Staircases are for going up and coming down, just as lights are for turning on and turning off. It is almost axiomatic: if a staircase appears on stage, it is not just part of the décor; it will have some use, later if not sooner, just like Hedda Gabler's second pistol, that tragic, finger-pointing companion to the first. And yet that huge staircase is not used, or even acknowledged, as the soldiers chat, Salomé flees the banquet hall, hears Iokanaan and demands to see him, falls in love with him despite his contempt for her, the captain of the guard kills himself seemingly out of embarrassment and jealousy of Salomé, Herod and his court appear, the cadaver is hastened away, Iokanaan continues to harangue all who will listen and then is silent, Hérode has eyes only for Salomé, small-talk with his guests does not serve to distract him, he begs her to dance for him, she at first demurs but at length is persuaded to do so by his promise to give her whatever she asks, even the half of his kingdom, Salomé then dances a mysterious dance of seven veils and proceeds to claim her shocking reward. Herod offers her treasure upon treasure but fails to dissuade her, he at length capitulates and orders the decapitation of Iokanaan, and after what seems an inexplicable and nerve-racking delay, the severed head of the prophet is delivered on stage by the executioner. Perhaps an hour and thirty minutes or more of real time have passed. And now Salomé, kneeling downstage center, delivers her long, vindictive paean to the insentient head. Only then does Herod on impulse decide to leave, moving stage right toward the staircase and beginning to ascend. Now, at last, the play can begin to end. The higher the staircase and the longer the actor takes to climb it, the more effective for being almost intolerable is the duration of the moment—until Herod reaches a halfway point, pauses, and turns.

Towering along with the staircase itself over the assembly, Herod is at once magnified and diminished into nothing more or less than a rigid, soulless symbol of retributive justice, as the moonlight lights up the figure of Salomé on the stage floor below. He turns, sees her at once and clearly, and is suddenly and without reflection moved to order her instant death. "Tuez cette femme!" he cries. "Kill that woman!" Presumably he remains unmoving as the soldiers carry out their vengeful task.

The staircase that Wilde included in his setting is all the more potent, when it is at last called into play, for having remained idle, unused, and ostensibly irrelevant almost to the very end. In a way it is correlative, and serves a purpose parallel to, the reversal Wilde accomplishes much earlier in the play in the surprise appearance of Herod, his retinue and guests, just after we had been comfortably assured he would not appear. No doubt, spending production time, effort, and funds on the staircase would repay the trouble it caused in any production. I have to presume that Max Reinhardt included a sizeable staircase

in his German première of Wilde's play at the Kleines Theater in Berlin in 1903. I don't know this for a fact because the only photograph of the setting that I have been able to find of this production shows Salomé standing on the cistern, looking up into a starry night sky, but the angle of the shot precludes the possibility of showing whatever staircase may have been there.¹⁶

Staircases are difficult, time-consuming, and costly to build, and they pose special problems for scenographers and large demands on scene shops. They also create special opportunities for stage directors and, of course, actors. Somewhere in dim memory I recollect a production of Brecht's *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* that featured a giant-size central staircase (could it have been a Guthrie production in Minneapolis?) Mention the very fact of it and the experienced observer will instinctively know how the director took advantage of it, sending the central character, a knock-off for Adolph Hitler, higher and higher up the brazen staircase of success, as every opponent he encounters lacks gall or in other ways is unable to resist what ought to be the resistible rise of this determined imperialist-in-the-making.

Numerous other instances could be adduced. (See the Appendix for further examples.) The inevitability of technology is as well illustrated by the near-ubiquitousness of the staircase in theatre art as almost any other feature one might care to mention (such as limelight). The staircase in Wilde's *Salomé*, far from singling itself out as another anomalous feature of a stage setting for an avant-garde play performed for a small, select audience in a rented Parisian theatre, should be thought of as a prime feature of a play which caught on so remarkably swiftly in the first and second decades of the twentieth century in a number of European countries, translated for the purposes of production into a dozen languages, that it exceeded Shakespeare's plays in the number of productions it achieved.¹⁷ Is that popularity, or what?

IV

So what is popular drama, after all, and is there some viable opposite or alternative category? Are there some useful definitions that hold water, or are we reduced to proceeding entirely by exemplification? Is popular drama, for example, all the plays of Neil Simon? Or of Alan Ayckbourn, whose comedies, a sharp-tongued English colleague of mine once remarked, are out of date even before they've been written? (Read Ayckbourn's *A Chorus of Disapproval* and see if you agree.) Is the other category called "closet drama," populated largely by authors such as Percy Bysshe Shelley, John Keats, Alfred Lord Tennyson, and Stephen Phillips? All four of those poets aspired to stage production. Tennyson achieved it, in Henry Irving's production of *The Cup* (Lyceum, 1881), "one of the most beautiful things," Ellen Terry is said to have believed, "that Irving ever accomplished."¹⁸ Shelley had such aspirations too, though success came only well after his lifetime, in the Shelley Society's 1886 private production of that "unperformable" horror play about incest and patricide, *The Cenci*.¹⁹ Phillips hit

it big with Beerbohm Tree's sumptuous production of *Herod* (Her Majesty's, 1900). Tree, Phillips said in his dedication of the published play to him, was "The Herod of My Dreams."²⁰ Well, aren't there any authentic closet dramas, plays written by authors who thought of themselves as poets, not dramatists, and who wrote for the printed page, not for theatrical production? An example of that rare species may be found in Swinburne's *Atalanta in Calydon*—a play Wilde said was one of the two best plays of the nineteenth century, the other being *The Cenci*.²¹ But read them, before you decide to lump them with other unperformed, "unperformable" closet dramas. Oh, the Keats play? *Otho the Great*, co-authored with his friend Charles Armitage Brown (who supplied the plot, to Keats's versification).²² Unperformed in Keats's lifetime, it reached the stage in 1950, in a well-received production (St. Martin's, 26 November).²³ The more we look into the unperformable, the more we seem to find it either actually performed or capable of performance. Fully staged before an audience.

It may seem disingenuous of me to argue that a seamless continuity is to be found between the long-running Broadway or regional hit of last year and the poetic drama of Regency times supposedly aimed at the page, not the stage. And it may seem I'm ignoring the question of intentionality: if a poet tries out the dramatic form with the intention of capturing the imaginations of the readers of *Poetry* magazine, with no thought or interest in having the product of all that labor staged, produced, or even read aloud by a group of the poet's friends, doesn't that example call my argument into question? Or am I vainly insisting that the dramatic form itself (stage directions, speech headings, and speeches; that's all) presupposes at least hypothetical production, since the very form of a script implicitly calls for performance? Am I begging the question by citing the editorial policy of a journal I used to edit, which declares itself as follows: "This journal considers narrative or variety entertainments from all countries and regions. Its scope embraces not only drama but dance, opera, music hall, circus, fairground entertainment, and other forms which implicate live audiences (actual, potential, or imaginary)."²⁴ Could we just draw the discussion to a close by saying that popular drama consists of whatever is the topic of an essay acceptable to the editors of *Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film*? But is that any kind of embrace of popular drama? What's the current readership of a journal like *NCT&F*?

Despite my efforts, perhaps we are left almost exactly where we began. Certainly, *NCT&F* will accept a good essay on Robertson's *School*, on Beddoes's *Death's Jest Book*, or on Alla Nazimova's silent film of Wilde's *Salomé*, as well as on the thirty-seven different nineteenth-century English versions of *Faust* listed in Allardyce Nicoll's prodigious handlists²⁵; and these are surely not the limits of their breadth. If I have succeeded only in muddying the waters of clear definition, it has been, as every reader may by this time realize, a deliberate effort. For there seems to me no clear demarcation line between plays that we might unhesitatingly label "popular," either individually or as a class, and plays that might not be so easily labeled but, on closer inspection, may have enough

features in common with their more popular brethren that it becomes an exercise in arbitrariness to exclude them. Most plays are like most other plays, my old graduate teacher Alan Downer once said, in the most off-hand way. That's what *genre* is all about. I came eventually to think, "That's where *genre* starts. Let's ask where the audience gets factored in, since no discussion of *genre* has much meaning without a discussion of the *audience* for whom the play is intended and—or—for whom it is performed. Plays can all be thought to be popular with someone, or some group of people, large or small.

And yet, and yet . . . Doesn't it make better sense for us to go right on using that term "popular drama," and its slightly elder brother "popular theatre"? When we use either term, surely we are thinking of crowds of people—"droves" seems to be the term of preference, among publicists and academics alike, even when the negative may apply (as in "They stayed away in droves!"). And, beyond the merely numerical, we often seem to mean, by "popular," performed works that capture the imaginations and affections of audiences, year in and year out, perhaps even over generations, like Otway's protean political waters-tester *Venice Preserv'd* (1682), which after vigorous birth in the late English Restoration struggled into the twentieth century more dead than alive but still able to command an audience; or Boucicault's *The Shaughraun* (1874), still alive and kicking and waiting only for the next indomitable stage Irishman to turn up.²⁶ By the way, were those "middle-class audiences" that became the mainstay of broad, "popular" theatrical production? (I had sworn not to use the phrase "middle-class," setting out to write this essay, and here I've gone and done it two times over.) That seems a sort of merely quasi-statistical definition of "popular"—and the term raises more problems than it solves.

Alternatively, we may have in mind a more anthropologically-minded notion of the people, or the populace, and their self-identifying, self-delighting pursuits, in the contemplation of which we may take a cooler, more dispassionate attitude, proper scholars that we are. Well, if you think about the performance you've seen, afterwards, does that eliminate you as an authentic member of the popular audience? Popular audiences are not thought of as the thinking class. What, are they not the same, popular audiences and "middle-class" audiences? Popular audiences are "lower-class"? "Working class"? Wait: are we being "élitist" in calling them that? Or in calling them anything at all? Muddier and muddier, these waters.

In desperation, I reach for the call for papers from the editor of this new electronic journal, to see if the point is at all susceptible of being settled.²⁷ The call, I find, was for papers "Re-defining Popular Entertainment." The intention is to move scholars "to contribute to the ongoing debate and discussion about the nature and scope of popular entertainments." The premise of the editors is that "popular entertainments are inextricably connected to 'liveness' and the co-presence of performers and spectators." That certainly works for music hall, circus, fairground entertainments, country music, parades, funerals (at least in

New Orleans), and anything else that occurs on a stage before a live audience. A broadcast of *Jeopardy*, for instance. Would a Bingo caller be an entertainer? A case could be made. A magician sawing a woman in half? Without a doubt. But a play, a dramatized fiction, performed as a reading rather than an enactment? If the author is there, all by himself, having hired a group of students to read his play, does he constitute an audience? Does it work for film? Films by the time of projection for an audience have long been “in the can,” and the actors, technicians, best boys, and all the rest of the staff long departed before the audience crowds into the theatre to see those projected images on a large screen. With or without sound. Oh, but, then, that’s the very nature of the medium; and the actors’ presence is virtually, if not actually, “live.” And people pay to see it. So film is covered. And so Alla Nazimova’s film of Wilde’s *Salomé*, in which she changes her costume three times while never seeming to leave the stage, is covered too; because it is “live,” it has the quality of virtual if not actual simultaneity. Television encourages a similar analysis, though it gets us into troublesome distinctions between “performers” and other persons whose presence is clearly grounded in a “live” studio, sometimes but not always before a “live” audience, and who cannot necessarily be said to be “entertainers” without compromising their journalistic credentials.

Finally, what about Wilde’s *Salomé* as popular drama? Such inclusiveness, on the part of the editors of *Popular Entertainment Studies*, merits an enthusiastic response in kind. Of course, *Salomé* is popular drama. Even if I have smuggled it into the category by persuading the editors to publish an essay on it.

But, wait. We may end up with the nagging feeling that, if *everything* that is entertainment is popular entertainment, the term turns out not to mean very much. Still, it can remain open-ended, can’t it? If someone writes in to prove conclusively that Wilde’s *Salomé* is not, has never *been*, and never will *be* popular drama, I can still go on believing that it is, under the terms of my argument about it, and readers of the journal who agree or disagree can find here some intellectual fodder for their own cannons. Or if someone else writes in and excludes all of drama itself from popular entertainment, saying that, some 2,500 years after the fact, ancient Greek tragedy and all succeeding drama is now the exclusive province of classicists, antiquarians, historians, philosophers, and sociologists, and not modern audiences, and that times change and nothing remains the same, I will show up on the doorstep again, this time quoting Samuel Johnson, who uttered words to this effect: “Nothing pleases, and pleases long, except just representations of general human nature.” (Note the two crucial terms: “pleases,” and “just.”) And I will cite the example, once more, of Seamus Heaney’s *The Burial at Thebes* and ask why the full houses, comprised of students, faculty, and townspeople, in the one-hundred-seat Curtain Theater attending the engrossing University of Massachusetts Amherst production of this adaptation of Sophocles’s *Antigone*, earlier this past autumn, must not be seen to constitute a popular audience. And we will be back, once again, delightfully and productively circling the vast terrain of this subject, meanwhile laying in supplies

to sustain us through what promises to be a very long siege.

¹Martin Meisel, *How Plays Work: Reading and Performance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

²William Archer, *Play-Making: A Manual of Craftsmanship* (1912; rpt. New York: Dover Publications, 1960).

³For a volume in the Oxford English Texts edition of Wilde's complete works, in progress.

⁴See Meisel's earlier book *Shaw and the Nineteenth-Century Theater* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963).

⁵The "obligatory moment," given all that has occurred up to that point, and more specific than the *scène à faire*, the "obligatory scene."

⁶I adapt the phrase from Shaw, who in the preface to a collection of plays by Brieux describes the death of John Gabriel Borkman, in Ibsen's play of that name, as caused by "acute stage tragedy, without discoverable lesions"—*Three Plays by Brieux Member of the French Academy* (New York: Brentano's, 1911), xv. Shaw's phrase, it must be said, does scant justice to Ibsen's play. The eponymous central character, the "Napoleon of finance" Borkman, a convicted felon and ruined man, who still lives in hope of freeing precious metals from the ground and circulating them throughout the world, after sequestering himself for years under the delusion that the world stills needs him and will call for him and that his precious metals lie ready and waiting in the ground, walks out into the snow and cold and there, accompanied by the faithful woman whose love he "murdered," somehow dies, his heart gripped by "a hand of ice" or, rather, "a hand of metal"—*John Gabriel Borkman*, in *Henrik Ibsen: The Complete Major Prose Plays*, trans. Rolf Fjelde (New York: Penguin Group, 1978), 1022. What Shaw appears to mean is that Borkman's death, rather than being marked by so definitive an event as, say, the pistol shot in the closing scene of *Hedda Gabler*, is brought on essentially by the dovetailing thematic and characterological exigencies of the tragic action rather than by some identifiable material cause. Shaw certainly does not mean that Ibsen has, as I've put it, "left the world as he found it"—a course that would be perfectly anathema to Ibsen's—and Shaw's—resolutely anti-idealistic view of the world. For Shaw's incisive analysis of *Borkman*, see the edition of the 1891 *Quintessence of Ibsenism* in *Shaw and Ibsen: Bernard Shaw's The Quintessence of Ibsenism and Related Writings*, ed. J. L. Wisenthal (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979), 183-87.

⁷*Salomé* was produced by Lugné on 11 February 1896 at the Comédie-Parisienne, the theatre he frequently hired for one or two nights, while Wilde was in prison.

⁸Frederick Penzel, *Theatre Lighting Before Electricity* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1978), 57.

⁹See Penzel, *Theatre Lighting Before Electricity*, *passim*; and Alan Hughes, "Limelight: Control and the Independent Lighting Designer," *Theatre Survey*, 26, no. 2 (November 1985), 182-85.

¹⁰"Il ne faut regarder que l'amour" (my translation).

¹¹Watts Phillips, *Lost in London*, in *Hiss the Villain: Six English and American Melodramas*, ed. Michael Booth (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1964), 259, 268, 269 & n.

¹²The actress was Adelaide Neilson, the "Miss Neilson" of the playbill, whose details are printed at the beginning of the play in Booth's edition (*Hiss the Villain*, 204). For more detailed information, see the on-line *Adelphi Theatre Calendar*, a component of *The London Stage 1800-1900: A Documentary Record and Calendar of Performances*: link to http://www.emich.edu/public/english/adelphi_calendar/, s.v. "History", for the 1866-67 season, under the opening night date, 16 February 1867, and "Seasonal Summary," where it is explained that the twenty-one-year-old actress Adelaide Neilson, still new to her craft, was especially engaged for the role of Nelly Armroyd.

¹³See the astute analysis of Sophocles's play and of a modern-day avatar, Athol Fugard's *The Island* (1983), in which a performance of the ancient Greek tragedy is embedded, in Meisel, *How Plays Work*, 149-51. See also Seamus Heaney's pitch-perfect modern version of Sophocles's *Antigone*, entitled *The Burial at Thebes* (2004).

¹⁴Oscar Wilde, *Salomé: drame en un acte* (Paris: Librairie de l'Art Indépendant; Londres: Elkin Mathews et John Lane, 1893), 9 ("SCENE. A wide terrace off the banqueting hall in HEROD's palace.

SOLDIERS are lounging against the balcony. At right, a huge staircase. Upstage left, an old cistern enclosed by a wall of green bronze. Moonlight"—author's translation).

¹⁵Multiple examples of such stagecraft, imposing what modern playgoers may cynically judge as gratuitous— but which Victorian audiences surely accepted as genuine—tragedy, the tragedy of catastrophic loss, may be found in almost any illustrated book about the Victorian theatre. See, for example, Michael Booth, *Victorian Spectacular Theatre 1850-1900* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981).

¹⁶J. L. Styan, *Max Reinhardt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 25, fig. 2.

¹⁷Over the next decade and a half after Reinhardt produced *Salomé* at the Kleines Theater in Berlin, the play would be translated into numerous foreign languages including German, Czech, Dutch, Greek, Italian, Hungarian, Polish, Russian, Spanish, Catalan, Swedish, Yiddish—and English; would be performed in startling productions in Berlin, Munich, and elsewhere; and would be made into a musically and dramatically sensational opera by Richard Strauss that would hold the stage up through the present day. For a list of translations, see Walter Ledger, "Bibliography," in Oscar Wilde, *Salome La Sainte Courtisane A Florentine Tragedy* (London: Methuen, 1909), 93-109.

¹⁸A. E. Wilson, *The Lyceum* (London: Dennis Yates, 1952), 115.

¹⁹See Stuart Curran, *Shelley's Cenci: Scorpions Ringed with Fire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970).

²⁰Stephen Phillips, *Herod: A Tragedy* (London: John Lane, 1901), dedication. Phillips adds a comment in the front matter: "This play is published in its present form to meet the demand which has arisen in connection with its production at Her Majesty's Theatre."

²¹Letter to the *Daily Telegraph*, 19 Feb. [1892], *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis (London: Fourth Estate, 2000), 519.

²²See Walter Jackson Bate, *John Keats* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 564; and also Bernice Slote, *Keats and the Dramatic Principle* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1958). That sort of collaboration reminds one of Shaw's first play, *Widowers' Houses*, for which Shaw wrote the text, using plot supplied by William Archer—up to a point.

²³See Bate, *John Keats*, 564 & n.

²⁴*Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film*, 35, no. 2 (Winter, 2008), v. I wrote those words myself at the time of the start-up of the journal under its new name, *Nineteenth Century Theatre*, when I took it over from J. P. Wearing's *Nineteenth Century Theatre Research*.

²⁵See Nicoll, *A History of English Drama 1660-1900*, Vol. 6: *A Short-Title Alphabetical Catalogue of Plays Produced or Printed in England from 1660 to 1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959), 158. This year marks the fiftieth anniversary of Nicoll's six-volume history and its prolific handlists of plays.

²⁶I saw him just recently, playing Costard in the Shakespeare's Globe touring company production of *Love's Labour's Lost*, in Holyoke, Massachusetts, as part of the annual Massachusetts International Festival of the Arts. He has the marvellous name of Fergal McElherron, and his bio indicates he trained at the Dublin School of Acting and has played in Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* with the Druid Theatre Company, as well as in other plays with the Abbey Theatre: stellar credentials. He would be Conn the Shaughraun to the life, given the chance.

²⁷"Second Call for Articles: POPULAR ENTERTAINMENT STUDIES," *Theatre History Discussion List - Amer. Soc. for Theatre Research*, on behalf of Victor Emeljanow, University of Newcastle, Australia.