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GEORGE ELIOT AND THEATRE

The Toast to the Immortal Memory - Sunday,
November 23rd, 1986

by Kathleen Adams

In 1838, at the age of 18, Mary Ann Evans was deep in her evangelical period, taking everything very, very seriously. On a visit to London with her brother Isaac she refused to accompany him to the theatre, preferring instead to stay home and read History of the Jews. Not quite theatre, but she went to St. Michael's Church in Coventry with Miss Rebecca Franklin, her teacher at the Coventry school, to hear Haydn's Creation, Handel's Jephtha and a new oratorio by Mendelssohn entitled Paul (all in one concert) and she wrote to her old school-friend, Martha Jackson, "nothing can justify the using of an intensely interesting and solemn passage of Scripture as a rope dancer uses her rope". (Letters 1.9) How very solemn the young Mary Ann was!

Her next recorded visit to the theatre was around 1851. Her life and her lifestyle had changed completely. She was now pursuing a literary career in London. Far from the solemn and, we must say it, the priggish Mary Anne of the youthful deeply moral opinions, she has gone through the traumatic time of her strange relationship with the publisher, John Chapman, when it appears that moral considerations had been sacrificed to her need for love, even from a man who had two other 'loves' under the same roof. That unhappy period over, she has launched herself into another friendship which was to cause her deep distress, as we now know from the recently discovered letters to her new friend, Herbert Spencer. But apart from the emotional crisis, there are now visits with him to the theatre. Part of Spencer's work as a sub-editor for the Economist was to review the theatre and opera, and she frequently accompanied him. They saw Chain of Events, adapted by G.H. Lewes, but this was before Lewes began to play a much more important role in her life than ever Spencer or Chapman could have done.

It is a very long chain and drags rather heavily

(she told Charles Bray). No sparkle, but a sort of Dickens-like sentimentality all through - in short, I think it might please you. As a series of tableaux I never saw anything to equal it. But to my mind it is execrable moral taste to have a storm and shipwreck with all its horrors on the stage. I could only scream and cover my eyes. It was revolting to hear the cheers and clapping of the audience. But perhaps all that was pure philosophy, and they were so thoroughly imbued with your beloved optimism that they felt more than ever reconciled to the scheme of things.

(Letters II 18)

In 1853 she saw the great Rachel twice - once in Phedre and on the other occasion in Adrienne Lecouvreur. Of the latter she said, in a letter to Caroline Bray (Letters II 104) that she had sat on the stage between scenes. "When the dropscene fell" she wrote, "we walked about and saw the green room and all the dingy dusty paraphernalia that make up theatrical splendour."

That she saw beyond the theatrical splendour is clear from another letter, later in the same year, and this time to Charles Bray. "I confess" she wrote, "the theatre is generally a very dreary amusement to me. The wit is generally threadbare as well as vulgar - the actors and actresses are neither men and women nor gentlemen and ladies. I mentally resolved last night that it should be a long while before I wasted another evening there." (Letters II 131)

But, six months later, she is writing that "I went to the Lyceum last night to see 'Sunshine Through the Clouds' (another G. H. Lewes adaptation) a wonderfully original and beautiful piece... which makes one cry rather too much for pleasure. Vestis (she was the wife of the great Victorian actor/manager Charles J. Matthews) acts finely the bereaved mother passing through all the gradations of doubt and hope to the actual recovery of her son." (Letters II 162)

Clearly, the magic of the theatre is still able to reach through to her, although the pathos of which she writes sounds typical of a Victorian melodrama to our twentieth century ears.

Her life with Lewes began fully in 1854 and while they were travelling in Europe on their 'honeymoon', the theatre was still very much a part of their lives. In Berlin they met Ludwig Dessoir, the leading actor at Berlin's Court Theatre. Lewes had reviewed his London appearance in the Leader (30th July 1853) and though praising his intelligence said that he lacked the physique for a tragic hero (something of which Lewes was aware in himself). Dessoir gave them free seats for the theatre and among other performances, they saw, but did not much admire, the actor's Othello.

Marian Lewes, as she now called herself, was very critical of Fechter's Othello in 1861. "It is lamentably bad" she wrote to Sara Hennell. "He has not weight and passion enough for deep tragedy and, to my feeling, the play is so degraded by his representation that it is positively demoralising - as indeed all tragedy must be when it fails to move pity and terror. In this case, it seems to move only titters among the smart and vulgar people who always make the bulk of a theatre audience." At this time, she had been busy on The Mill on the Floss for two years, and she already knew about the pity moved by tragedy, for this was the culmination of her story. (Letters III 467)

In 1863 Lewes attended Thackeray's funeral in Kensal Green Cemetery. Theodore Martin drove him home and came in to be introduced to George Eliot. He returned later with his wife, Helen Faucit, whom Lewes described as 'the finest tragic actress on the stage'. Lewes thought of writing a play for her and sketched out a plot hoping that George Eliot would take over and work it through. A sketch of a play called 'Savello' survives, but nothing further came of it.

Marian and Lewes saw the great Henry Irving (who, to most of us, surely epitomises the great days of Victorian Theatre) on at least three occasions but did not seem to admire him greatly. They saw him in 'The Bells' in 1871 and in 'Louis XI' in 1878. They also saw him with Kate Bateman in Tennyson's 'Queen Mary' in 1876. "All the interest and excitement of a First Night", Lewes wrote. "Play horribly acted throughout - not one of them able to speak."

They went to the theatre on all their foreign travels, which were many, to Germany, Italy, France, Spain, seeing the plays in the language of the country. During a ten day visit to Paris, they were at the theatre on six of the ten nights! How many of today's vast number of tourists abroad do anything similar? Not many, I suspect.

I was surprised to find that she and Lewes also went to pantomime. Early in 1878 they took an unnamed youth to see 'Puss in Boots' but found it a melancholy business: "... every incident" she wrote to a friend, "as well as pretence of a character turned into a motive for the most vulgar kind of dancing. I came away with a sick headache... It is too cruel that one can't get anything innocent as a spectacle for the children." (Letters VII 6) That is a recurring problem as the parents of twentieth century children must have frequently been only too aware.

On her honeymoon in 1880 with John Cross they saw Ernesto Rossi as Hamlet in Milan, and she was less than enchanted. In a letter to Charles Lewes, GHL's eldest and only surviving son, she wrote, "I had seen him in the part in London and thought him sufficiently bad then, but he is certainly far worse when he is intending to enrapture his own countrymen. Anything so unintelligent, so - drunken as the performance last night I never saw on any stage, English or foreign. In the scene with his mother he roared (hoarsely) and stamped, and pulled the poor woman's arms as if he meant to put them out of joint." (Letters VII 288)

From all of this, then, it is clear that George Eliot had a strong interest in theatre once she had overcome her youthful prejudice. Music, of course, and opera, too, was a great love but there is no time now to discuss the latter, and music has been well covered by others better equipped than I.

She knew the other side of the footlights, too, for G. H. Lewes, as well as being a playwright, was also a highly regarded theatre critic and author of a book on actors and the art of acting, a book still much admired although now long out of print. But he had his place in our limelight eight years ago, the centenary of his death.

Let us not forget that the small and large screen have used George Eliot's novels as screenplays, some more successful than others and probably the most successful being the recent BBC TV film of Silas Marner. Radio has broadcast dramatisations of most of the novels although, strangely, Adam Bede has been untouched in any medium for at least 20 years. None of these are theatre in the sense that George Eliot knew the word, but had they existed in her day, she must have had a similar interest in them all - probably, even, a professional one for it has often been said that she would surely have written for television and radio if she were here today.

Daniel Deronda was envisaged as a play by both of them, although with more enthusiasm by Lewes than by her. Was this why the idea was eventually abandoned? But this last great novel did emerge as a stage play a few years ago in Manchester with Vanessa Redgrave as Gwendolen Harleth. And a Fellowship member in Israel, the late Lily Tobias, also wrote a powerful dramatised version which I saw presented in London by the Women's International Zionist Organisation.

As well as watching plays, George Eliot frequently read them. In 1855 she ploughed through the Greek Drama, in Greek, reading twelve plays in as many months. The Agamemnon was, indeed, the last play she ever saw, performed by Oxford undergraduates at the St. George's Hall.

Strangely, she rejected an invitation from Mrs. Lionel Tennyson to Private Theatricals on December 16th 1880 as, she wrote, "We have taken a box for the Agamemnon on 17th and we dare not venture to accept an engagement which would take us into a crowded room on the evening of 16th for Mr. Cross, robust as he looks, is obliged to be very careful as to temperature, and is at the moment in bed with a feverish cold." (Letters VII 345)

I say strangely because, in the weekend of the visit to the Agamemnon, she caught cold. Four days later, she died.