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## THE WORKING-CLASS AVANT-GARDE

# John Rodker on Theatre: Rethinking the Modernist Stage from London's Jewish East End

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This article explores the Jewish working-class poet John Rodker's writing for and about the stage as an overlooked, alternative theorisation of modernist theatre and its artistic and institutional function. It retraces the origins of his 1914 theatre manifesto, published in the magazine *The Egoist*, to his earlier theatre criticism to show that Rodker initially took an interest in the stage, above all, as a tool for the political engagement and artistic education of the masses. I discuss three theatre critiques, published in *The Freewoman* and *Poetry and Drama* between 1912–1913, in which Rodker considers three different types of contemporary theatre with a view to their effectiveness in engaging popular audiences in contemporary social and aesthetic debates. While he criticises the commercial West End theatre and regional repertory companies for their failure to promote social and cultural reform, he lauds the local Yiddish theatre in London's East End as a true community theatre and the home of a revolutionary modern drama. By highlighting the role played by the popular Yiddish theatre in Whitechapel in shaping Rodker's ideas for an institutionally and artistically reformed modernist stage, this article aims to restore a forgotten piece of working-class history to our critical conception of modernist drama.

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## Introduction

The relationship between modernist drama and popular audiences has historically been considered problematic, not least by the modernists themselves. As a salient example, we may cite W. B. Yeats, whose play *At the Hawk's Well* premiered in the exclusive setting of Lady Cunard's London salon in 1916, and who prided himself on having 'invented a form of drama, distinguished, indirect and symbolic, and having no need of mob or press to pay its way—an aristocratic form' (Yeats, 1916: 2). The same distaste for the mass or 'mob' audience and the theatre as a popular art form can be found in Ezra Pound's famous indictment of the contemporary stage in a letter to James Joyce:

My whole habit of thinking of the stage is: that it is a gross, coarse form of art. That a play speaks to a thousand fools huddled together, whereas a novel or a poem can lie about in a book and find the stray person worth finding, one by one seriatim. (Pound qtd. in Read, 1968: 46)

Statements such as these represent the high modernist critique of the theatre as a medium which can only adequately serve as a means of artistic expression if it addresses itself to a 'worthy' elite audience and if its modes of reception tend as much as possible towards the solemn and solitary contemplation of literary art. This modernist 'anti-theatricalism', as Martin Puchner described it in his seminal study of modernist drama *Stage Fright* (2002), is an attitude characterised not by a rejection of theatre *per se* but rather by a heightened suspicion of the function of theatre as a public art form. Some of the main aesthetic tenets of modernist drama, including its 'critique of realism, mimesis, and literalism and its fixation on silent and solitary absorption,' can thus be read more broadly as 'barriers erected against the possibility of the public role of art as suggested by the theatre' (Puchner, 11). Yet, not all modernist dramatists fitted the anti-theatrical mould. John Rodker, a self-taught working-class writer hailing from London's Jewish East End, positioned himself explicitly against literary drama in favour of a 'play of pure emotion' (Rodker, 1914: 414). In his manifesto on 'The Theatre,' published in *The Egoist* in 1914, Rodker outlined his vision for the modernist stage as a theatre without words:

The theatre is the staging for emotion; has been, must be. ...  
Emotion invariably translates itself into action, immediate or deferred;  
Never in words.  
Words are a waste product of emotion and do not concern it. (Rodker,  
1914: 414)

Ian Patterson has linked this notion of a silent modernist theatre to Imagism's 'attacks on verbose poetic practices' and the more general suspicion of the 'upsurge of emotive rhetoric that accompanied the outbreak of war' (Patterson, 2003: 92). This apparent continuity between the aesthetic programme of Rodker's theatre manifesto and the poetic values of concision and clarity promulgated by the Imagists is unsurprising considering Rodker's status at the time as one of Pound's poetic protégés. However, I want to suggest that Rodker's writing for and about the stage presented a targeted critique not only of theatricality as a poetic mode but of the theatre itself as an artistic medium and as a public cultural institution. As his early theatre criticism shows, even before Rodker had fully developed his conception of a pared-down modernist drama without words, he already viewed the theatre above all as a medium of 'action,' understood in this context as a practical tool for the political and aesthetic education of the masses. This article traces the development of Rodker's theatre critique from his early writing about the need for an institutionally and artistically reformed stage in *The Freewoman* and *Poetry and Drama* to his modernist theatre manifesto in *The Egoist*. By examining the significant degree to which Rodker's dramatic ideas were shaped by the types of theatre he encountered as an aspiring young writer growing up in the Jewish working-class community of Whitechapel, I show that behind his minimalist modernist dramaturgy lies a continued interest in the theatre as an experiential and inherently communal art form.

This tendency crucially sets Rodker's approach to dramatic art apart from the 'anti-theatricalism' of his more famous modernist contemporaries and aligns him more closely with the 'pro-theatricalism' of such avant-garde movements as Futurism or Dada, which embraced theatricality precisely because it 'promised to lead art back to the public sphere from which modernism had so eagerly distanced itself' (Puchner, 12).

However, my intention in this article is not to make a claim for Rodker as *either* a modernist *or* an avant-gardist dramatist. Instead, I want to investigate how a certain mode of institutional critique, now more commonly associated with the historical avant-garde, played out in Rodker's critical engagement with modernist drama. This engagement, I argue, was furthermore crucially informed by Rodker's class and social origins, highlighting the importance of recovering the neglected contributions of Jewish working-class writers to the development of modernist theatre in Britain.

### **'The Time Is Ripe for the Actionist'**

John Rodker was born in 1894 as the son of Jewish immigrants from Poland, and grew up in London's East End where his father owned a corset shop. He attended school until the age of 14 and, as his father was a naturalised citizen, was later able to find employment as a civil service clerk. This job, though dull, was a step up from many of his peers who, like Rodker's friend Joseph Leftwich, had to toil 'from eight to eight every day except Saturday' (Leftwich, 1911: 22 March) in one of the many sweatshops around Whitechapel. Besides Leftwich, who later became a notable critic and translator of Yiddish, Rodker's close friendship group also included the poet and painter Isaac Rosenberg and the writer Stephen Winsten. Together, they belonged to a loose configuration known as the 'Whitechapel Boys', a circle of young working-class artists and writers who emerged out of London's Jewish East in the 1910s. Rodker himself aspired to be a poet and his breakthrough came in the spring of 1914 when Ezra Pound accepted one of his poems for publication in the magazine *Poetry*. Through Pound, Rodker then became associated with the Imagist circle around the magazine *The Egoist* and, in 1919, he took over Pound's post as foreign editor of *The Little Review*. Throughout the 1920s, Rodker began to build a wider reputation as a modernist poet and prose writer of note whose best-known work today, the experimental novella *Adolphe 1920*, was serialised simultaneously in Pound's *Exile* (Rodker, 1927a, 1927b, 1928) and, translated into French, in *La Revue européenne* (Rodker, 1927c, 1927d, 1927e). He also wrote several short poetic dramas, play scripts and an opera libretto. Although much of his dramatic work would remain unperformed and unpublished, it is testament to a strong fascination

with the theatre which went back to the very beginning of Rodker's literary career as an aspiring young writer in Whitechapel.

Growing up in London's Jewish East End, Rodker had access to a range of diverse forms of theatrical entertainment. He attended theatre productions across London but could not always afford the high West End ticket prices. In January 1911, he found himself 'penniless' (Leftwich, 1911: 21 January) and had to borrow money from his friend Joseph Leftwich to see the musical *Alice in Wonderland* at the Savoy Theatre. With the cheapest advance ticket for the matinee costing 4s. for an upper circle seat, West End prices were noticeably higher than the local East End alternatives.<sup>1</sup> A comparable show at the Pavilion Theatre in Whitechapel cost 2s.6d. for an advance ticket, while seats in the gallery could be bought on the door for as little as 4d.<sup>2</sup> Gallery tickets at the Savoy were three times more expensive, costing around 1s. Toynbee Hall, where Rodker went to see a production of Maeterlinck's *Sister Beatrice*, and Rudolf Rucker's anarchist club on Jubilee Street were two further East End venues that showed theatrical performances at affordable prices or even for free.

In Whitechapel, theatre was not only cheaper but also much more closely interwoven with the social and political life of the local community. The Whitechapel Pavilion Theatre presented its programme in the community's lingua franca Yiddish, and hosted cinema nights in aid of local charities every Sunday. At multi-purpose venues such as Rucker's *Arbeiter Frint* club and Toynbee Hall, theatrical performances shared a space with art exhibitions, evening classes, lectures, talks and political meetings. The informality and small scale of these events meant that they could be classified as 'subscription' performances which did not require the formal approval of the Lord Chamberlain. Ibsen's *Ghosts*, for instance, was not granted a public license until 1915 but Rodker and Leftwich were able to see the play performed in Yiddish at the Jewish Working Men's Club in November 1911. According to

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<sup>1</sup> Ticket prices for *Alice in Wonderland* at the Savoy Theatre were advertised as 'Stalls, 10s. 6d. and 6s.; Dress Circle, 7s. 6d.; Upper Circle, 5s. and 4s' (Anon, 1910).

<sup>2</sup> Based on prices for the Christmas pantomime at the Pavilion Theatre in December 1911. See Anon (1911).

Rodker even the Pavilion Theatre, comparable in size to Drury Lane, was 'practically unhampered by the Censor' (Rodker, 1913: 43). With a programme including plays by Zola, Strindberg, Tolstoy and Andreyev—all performed in Yiddish—the Pavilion could rival London's better-known avant-garde stages, such as the Court Theatre. Sharing a common, radical discourse and a common space, it is not surprising, then, that for the young Rodker theatre and politics were closely linked.

We know from a diary kept by Joseph Leftwich that Rodker, known to his friends as 'Jimmy', tried his hand at writing political drama as early as 1911. In March, he was reportedly working on a play dealing with 'a man about to be married and filled with an intense affection for all women, taking pity on a prostitute' (Leftwich, 1911: 22 March). According to Leftwich the play contained 'a lot of propagandist stuff' about the 'evil conditions in workshops which compel girls to go on the streets to earn a livelihood' (Leftwich, 1911: 24 July). He noted the unabashed treatment of sexuality in Rodker's play with some consternation, adding:

Jimmy is developing very curious ideas lately on sex morality—He argues in favour of laxity [...] And he talks much about the New Art in the Theatre and in painting. I wonder where he has got all this from. It seems all so erotic, so hectic, so unbalanced. (Leftwich, 1911: 24 July)

Rodker's interest in sexual morality and in the policing of female sexuality in particular may also have led to his association with Dora Marsden's feminist magazine *The Freewoman*, which published two theatre reviews written by him in August and October 1912. It seems plausible that Rodker was initially a reader of the magazine and that the publication of his two reviews was the result of contacts he made when attending the *Freewoman* Discussion Circle together with his partner Sonia Cohen.<sup>3</sup> The Discussion Circle was a formal group established by Marsden in

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<sup>3</sup> Cohen, one of the few female members of the social group around the 'Whitechapel Boys', shared Rodker's interest in radical politics and art. In her memoir, she records that 'Jimmie the poet always accompanied me to the Freewoman Meetings' where the topics of discussion included 'new sex ideals and unregistered marriage' (Rodker [née Cohen], 2018: 143, 142). Their own relationship was similarly unconventional: although they were never married, the couple briefly lived together in a small flat near Brick Lane and, in May 1915, had a daughter, Joan.

response to the demand made by several readers for regular meetings that would allow for 'a more free and extensive discussion' (Anon, 1912) of the issues raised in the pages of the journal. The first meeting of the Circle in April 1912 by far exceeded expectations when 'between eighty and ninety' (Low, 1912a) people attended. At fortnightly meetings, the Circle was addressed by speakers including Guy Aldred, with a talk on 'Sex Oppression and the Way Out', and Edith Ellis, who spoke on 'Some Problems in Eugenics' (Low, 1912b). The talks were followed by an open discussion and the minutes taken by Secretary Barbara Low were subsequently published in *The Freewoman*.<sup>4</sup>

Although Marsden's magazine was mostly given over to feminist polemics, each issue also contained one or two pieces on topics in the arts, usually in relation to gender politics. Rebecca West, another regular attendee of the Discussion Circle, was only 19 when she started writing articles on literary topics for the magazine. Alongside some rather esoteric pieces by the seasoned theatre critic Huntly Carter, the aspiring young writers West and Rodker provided occasional commentaries on drama and the theatre. While Carter's criticism of contemporary theatre-makers is often encumbered with a cryptic grandiloquence ('Nothing good or lasting ever came of Gordon Hamlets at the North Pole searching for an audience of penguins' [Carter, 1912: 386]), the two young critics' commentaries impress with their political acuity and confidence. West writes on August Strindberg, whom she calls out as a misogynist, and Harley Granville Barker, whose dramatic representations of independent women she compares favourably to those by George Bernard Shaw:

Shaw never brought anything so anarchic as an unmarried mother on to his stage. Although he cultivates the flower of argument so well, he does not like the fruit of action. But Barker, glad disciple of the Joy of Thinking,

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<sup>4</sup> Low, who later co-founded the British Psycho-Analytical Society, became Rodker's analyst in the late 1920s, but it seems likely that they struck up an acquaintance much earlier at the *Freewoman* Discussion Circle.

embraces logic like a lover, and shows all the consequences of the theories he advances. (West, 1912: 307–8)

The different incarnations of the 'modern stage young woman' are also the topic of Rodker's reviews of some guest performances by Annie Horniman's Manchester Repertory theatre in London (Rodker, 1912a), and of the 'Modern Morality Play' *Everywoman* shown at Drury Lane (Rodker, 1912b). Like West, Rodker argues that a theatre which 'falls back upon the mere pulpit-device of preaching to its audience' (Rodker, 1912a) but fails to 'create living entities embodying new values' remains politically ineffective. Some time after his own first attempt at writing a political play, Rodker had modified his opinion on the efficacy of 'propagandist' drama which he now considered to be 'unbaked' and 'not drama but a vehicle of opinion, an animated debating society'. For Rodker, the focus shifted increasingly from words onto deeds, and his second review concludes with the announcement: 'The time is ripe for the actionist' (Rodker, 1912b: 390).

### **Commercial West End and Regional Repertory Theatre**

As an artistic medium which offered the opportunity of speaking directly to specific audiences, the theatre appeared to be an ideal platform from which to shake society into action. Yet, as Rodker notes in his review of *Everywoman*—a modern adaptation of the medieval morality play *Everyman* shown at the Theatre Royal on Drury Lane—the contemporary commercial stage had the opposite effect. West End theatre functioned rather as a political narcotic, a 'sop to the Cerberus of public opinion' (Rodker, 1912b: 389). Although the play emulated the allegorical mode of the medieval morality, in his introduction to the play-book the American dramatist Walter Browne emphasised that his was 'absolutely a modern play as regards characterization, action and environments' (Browne, 1912) and that it was 'intended to afford pleasure and entertainment to all classes of intelligent playgoers,' whilst also offering 'some clean and wholesome moral lessons'. The action of the play had been transposed into a contemporary high-society setting, featuring scenes set in an upper-class mansion and, in Stephen Phillips's adaption for the British stage, a

West End theatre and Piccadilly Circus. The moral message of the play had also been updated, as Browne notes:

Since the days of chivalry, when knights clashed steel for their lady-loves and went on crusades to prove their prowess, while they remained secluded in cloisters or in moated castles, womankind, of which the title rôle of this play is intended to be a type, has grown more self-assertive and more bold. To every woman who nowadays listens to flattery, goes in quest of love, and openly lays siege to the hearts of men, this play may provide a kindly warning. (Browne, 1912)

In Browne's modern morality, the protagonist's quest for spiritual salvation had been transformed into a cautionary tale about the dangers of female sexual liberation. 'Everywoman' achieves her salvation, signalled by the return of her lost friend 'Modesty', when she abandons her self-directed quest for romantic fulfilment and returns home where 'King Love' has been waiting for her all along. Whilst ostensibly teaching a moral lesson about chastity, however, Rodker notes that the production simultaneously exploited the sexuality of its female cast members by parading them as flirtatious chorus girls or, in the case of Everywoman herself, in a 'daring décolleté gown' (Rodker, 1912b: 389). With most of the action of the play set in and around a West End theatre, the Drury Lane production was extremely self-referential and yet seemed to suffer from a distinct lack of critical self-reflection:

Do not chorus girls resent the degrading farce they have to go through in such scenes as "Piccadilly Circus" or in the cozening of theatrical managers? And, too—their acting is startlingly realistic! One inquires where they acquired the necessary knowledge. (Rodker, 1912b: 389)

While the play's subtitle 'A Modern Morality Play' seemed to make a self-consciously empty gesture towards the spiritual content of the original, the play-book, from which Rodker quotes, asserted that '[*Everywoman*] is not a sermon in disguise,

neither is it a quixotic effort to elevate the stage' (Rodker, 1912b: 389). Rodker noted this open admission of the production's complete lack of intellectual or artistic ambition with alarm. Yet, what troubled him even more was the apparent indifference of the 'enraptured public' who let themselves be 'deluded [...] into believing that mere pageantry is an adequate return for that tumult of the soul which one had been led to expect from the title'. In the Drury Lane audience who accept the 'half-veiled sneer in the words "nor a quixotic attempt to elevate the stage"' without batting an eyelid, Rodker observes a microcosm of British society and its political apathy:

This is how the play ends:

"Upon your sympathies I make a claim,  
Which is that you be just and fair  
To everywoman, everywhere—  
Her faults are many. Nobody's to blame."

Modern society expresses itself in the last three words. Not nobody, but everybody, is to blame. Everybody in the shape of the society that segregated the sexes from earliest youth, that let each individual mander along and pick up all its knowledge of life how it might and from what polluted sources, and—that allowed "Everywoman" to be staged. The dignity of Everyman has changed into the frightened nerve-racked whimper of Everywoman. (Rodker, 1912b: 389–90)

Rodker calls for an active intervention into the mindlessness and complaisance of the commercial stage: 'The "bleat of the sentimentalist" and the soul-destroying inertia of the pessimist are actual things. They have both been talking to the optimist. The time is ripe for the actionist' (Rodker, 1912b: 390). For Rodker the aspect of the commercial stage most in need of reform was the way in which it engaged—or rather disengaged—its audience. Instead of functioning as mirror of the spectators' political apathy, the theatre needed to model radical new social forms which would prompt the audience to become politically active. In the metropolitan West End theatres,

where commercial considerations outweighed artistic and intellectual concerns, there was little hope of creating a space for this new type of radical drama. By contrast, the repertory companies which had emerged in several provincial centres across the British Isles in the early twentieth century explicitly aimed at a more active engagement with the social milieu of the regional audiences they primarily addressed. This new form of theatre which distinguished itself from the commercial stage both in its geographical distribution and economic structure forms the subject of Rodker's review 'Repertory and a New Morality', published in *The Freewoman* in August 1912. There, he considers the question whether Annie Horniman's Manchester Repertory had truly lived up to its mission of regional cultural reform or whether it, too, had become merely 'a platform for platitude and rhetoric' (Rodker, 1912a).

The Manchester Rep, founded in 1907 and installed permanently at the Manchester Gaiety Theatre from 1908, was only one among several regional theatre companies founded in the early twentieth century in response to the need for a more regionally focussed and artistic alternative to the theatrical fare produced on London's West End stages. The Abbey Theatre, set up in Dublin in 1904, was the first of these and it was soon followed by repertory companies in Belfast, Manchester, Glasgow, Birmingham and Liverpool. The organisational structure of these theatre companies was designed to counteract some of the most blatant flaws of the commercial stage: instead of long runs of the same production spearheaded by a star-actor the repertory offered different plays every few nights performed by a fixed ensemble of emerging talents. The focus was not on the commercial potential of the play and cast but on the artistic merit of the production. As such, the repertory offered a much-needed artistic space for new writing and formal experimentation with dramatic classics. The Birmingham Repertory under the leadership of Barry Jackson regularly performed plays by John Galsworthy, George Bernard Shaw, Gilbert Cannan and Elizabeth Baker as well as Shakespeare and Euripides. Dublin's Abbey Theatre famously provided a home for the experimental Irish drama of Yeats and Synge. In addition, the innovations of the repertory stage also had a lasting impact on the formal aesthetic of modern British theatre as is evident, for instance, in the

now standard performance of Shakespeare's dramas in modern dress, first made popular by Barry Jackson's productions of *Cymbeline* in 1923 and *Hamlet* in 1925 (Holland, 2001: 202).

Yet, the most significant feature of the repertory companies was certainly their very rootedness in the regional landscapes from which they had emerged. Their location outside the urban centre of London allowed them to interact more closely with and represent the concerns of social groups that were geographically and politically marginalised. This, as James Moran (2013) has noted, took different forms for the different companies. While the Abbey Theatre pursued a distinct Irish nationalist agenda, other repertory companies were more interested in regional cultural reform and in asserting the 'local distinctiveness' (Moran, 2013: 98) of their theatre in opposition to the 'cultural uniformity' imposed by the commercial companies that toured the provinces from London during the off-season. Annie Horniman, for instance, specifically invited new dramatic submissions from local playwrights for her Manchester Rep:

If Lancashire playwrights will send their plays to me I shall pledge myself to read them through. Let them write not as one dramatist does, about countesses and duchesses and society existing in the imagination, but about their friends and enemies—about real life. (Horniman qtd. in Pogson, 1952: 36–7)

Among the 'Manchester School' of playwrights that soon developed around Horniman's company were the writers Allan Monkhouse, Stanley Houghton and Harold Brighouse, known for their social realist dramas set in a Lancashire working and lower middleclass milieu. Rodker saw two of their plays during a series of guest performances given by the Manchester Rep at the Coronet Theatre in Notting Hill Gate and at the Playhouse Theatre in Charing Cross in the summer of 1912. In his review of these performances, Rodker commends the Manchester School for 'treat[ing] woman as an entity, distinct and apart from man, having definite needs and desires' (Rodker, 1912a) and cites Monkhouse's *Mary Broome* (1912) as an example

of a woman who 'asserts her independence by leaving her husband in order to go to Canada with the milkman'. The Manchester School's liberal treatment of social mores and sexual morality was considered too controversial for commercial theatre managers but their plays found a home at Horniman's Manchester Gaiety Theatre from where they were subsequently toured around the country and even abroad. Stanley Houghton's *Hindle Wakes* (1912), whose heroine Fanny refuses to marry her one-time lover who was 'merely a means toward her amusement' (Rodker, 1912a), was so successful during the guest season at the Coronet Theatre that it transferred to the West End and eventually to Broadway.

The success of Horniman's repertory company proved that daring and artistically ambitious theatre could also be commercially viable. Yet, in the eyes of some critics, the increasing popularity of the Manchester Rep was also its death sentence. Following the successful summer season of 1912, the editor of *The Manchester Playgoer* O. Raymond Drey published an essay on 'The Failure of Our Repertory Theatre' in which he accuses the Manchester Rep of having compromised with public taste and reproaches it for no longer being 'in advance of its time' (Drey, 1912: 19). For Rodker, by contrast, it was precisely the repertory's dependence on its status as 'culture theatre' as opposed to 'popular theatre' which constituted its fatal flaw:

It is [...] the strangest perversion that the propagandist playwright should have come to take a pride in the fact that only "advanced" people can appreciate his work. That his work should prove successful with the "crowd" is to damn it. The propagandist drama, therefore, is in the paradoxical position of being successful only when it is abortive. The "Drama of Abortion" would, indeed, describe it only too well, and its activities are settling into those of a mutual admiration society, in which advanced people write for advanced people, circle within circle, with result—nil. (Rodker, 1912a)

While the plays presented by the Manchester Rep touted a socially progressive message, the transfer of their productions to the urban theatres of the West End and to Broadway meant that this message only reached those audiences who already held

liberal views. The 'crude, hard facts' (Rodker, 1912a) of Lancashire working class life had little practical relevance to the lives of the metropolitan elite and their theatrical representation thus became a matter of purely theoretical concern, reducing the theatre to the function of 'an animated debating society' (Rodker, 1912a). Although the Manchester Rep had succeeded in promoting a genre of modern drama which engaged with the lived reality of politically and geographically marginalised groups, this success was undermined by its failure to retain its focus on the regional audiences to whom this drama was most relevant and beneficial. Rodker's review perceptively identifies this discrepancy between the Manchester Rep's theoretical commitment to social reform and its practical perpetuation of a cultural elitism, leading him to conclude that only '[w]hen the propagandist dramatists have grasped their own opinions, established their morality, when their own theories have arrived, so to speak, and feel at home, modern drama may be said to have begun' (Rodker, 1912a). The repertory theatre was still a far cry from this truly modern theatre which would enable a productive coming together of radical new drama with popular audiences. Yet, hailing from London's East End, Rodker was aware of a different kind of local theatre that seemed to offer a more promising future for the modern stage: the Yiddish theatre in Whitechapel.

### **The Yiddish Theatre in the Jewish East End**

While Rodker's *Freewoman* theatre reviews had appeared in the closing issues of Dora Marsden's magazine in 1912, his article on 'The Theatre in Whitechapel' appeared in the inaugural March 1913 issue of another: Harold Monroe's *Poetry and Drama*. The publication of Rodker's article in the more explicitly literary context of Monroe's magazine signalled a shift within his own criticism away from the overtly political tone of his earlier reviews to a more aesthetic framing. As he gradually established closer contact with London's literary and artistic scene, Rodker also began to think more seriously about the stage as a medium for avant-garde experimentation and about the question of building an audience around such artistic ventures. For a model of his ideal theatrical community he looked not to the private stage societies or the well-known Court Theatre but to the Whitechapel Pavilion Theatre, a popular

venue on the fringes of London's theatre landscape where a programme of plays performed in Yiddish catered to a local community of Jewish immigrants.

In his article on 'The Theatre in Whitechapel' Rodker describes the Pavilion Theatre, a large Victorian entertainment venue located on Whitechapel Road, as 'for the moment the perfect theatre' (Rodker, 1913: 43). Known, historically, as the 'Drury Lane of the East,' (Mazower, 1987: 16) the Pavilion later garnered a reputation as the 'home of Yiddish theatre' in London. It began to take over this role in the late 1890s, some ten years after the Hebrew Dramatic Club, London's first permanent theatre catering to a Yiddish-speaking audience, had to be shut down following a mass panic during which 17 theatre-goers were crushed to death. Despite this tragedy, the Yiddish theatre in Whitechapel soon recovered and began to play an increasingly central role in the cultural life of the East End's Jewish immigrant community. Paralleling the success of other cultural institutions established in East London during the early twentieth century, such as the Whitechapel Gallery, the Yiddish theatre also began to draw attention from outside the Jewish ghetto.<sup>5</sup> According to Rodker's friend Joseph Leftwich, it 'became fashionable' among their Bloomsbury friends 'to eat in a Jewish restaurant in Whitechapel and to visit the Pavilion Theatre' (Leftwich, 1966: 15). The fluidity between Bloomsbury modernism and the culture of the Jewish East End, depicted by Leftwich as an exchange that worked in both directions, highlights the significance of the historical context of Whitechapel in the development of certain aspects of modernist culture in the 1910s and serves to underscore the central role played by the Yiddish theatre in Whitechapel in Rodker's own move towards the modernist dramaturgy of his 1914 theatre manifesto.

The idiosyncratic character of the Pavilion Theatre which made such a strong impression on Rodker was linked to the history of the Yiddish theatre in East London and its relationship to the local Jewish immigrant community, a history which goes back to the late nineteenth century. In 1883, Jacob P. Adler brought the first professional Yiddish theatre troupe from Riga to Whitechapel where he found an

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<sup>5</sup> For an insightful discussion of the overlap between the cultural milieus of 'West End' and 'East End' modernism at the Whitechapel Gallery see MacDougall (2010).

active amateur Yiddish dramatic scene already in existence. A contemporary of Adler's, the poet Morris Winchevsky, remembers the dire conditions under which the professional actors had to work initially: 'They played in small halls on tiny uncomfortable stages. If the sweating system was terrible in the tailoring shops it was still more terrible in the Yiddish theatre' (Winchevsky qtd. in Rollin, 1962). Adler's Yiddish theatre troupe maintained a special proximity to the local Jewish immigrant community not only by suffering through similar experiences of hardship but also by actively involving members from the community in their theatrical productions. In order to facilitate this exchange between professional and amateur performers, Adler hired 'a teacher of music to give free instruction in singing to young men and women, whom he later utilised in the chorus for the operettas' and established 'a drama school with himself as director and teacher' (Rollin, 1962). David Mazower's critical survey of the *Yiddish Theatre in London* describes the 'special intimacy between the Yiddish actor and the Yiddish theatre public that was to characterise Yiddish theatre the world over,' (Mazower 1987: 14) citing as evidence the autobiography of Boaz Young, a regular patron of the Hebrew Dramatic Club who later became an actor himself. Young describes how, whenever the company led by the Yiddish actors Israel and Anette Gradner left London to tour the continent, they would first spend several nights bidding their audience farewell through the medium of song. He adds: 'Later when I used to sit at the machine in the workshop and hum the song to myself, tears would fill my eyes, so strongly did I miss them' (Young qtd. in Mazower, 1987: 14). This close, almost personal bond between the Yiddish theatre and the working-class community it served survived Adler's departure from London for New York after the tragedy of the Hebrew Dramatic Club in 1887 and was still a notable feature of the Yiddish theatre in Whitechapel into the early twentieth century.

The Whitechapel Pavilion theatre, a venue capable of seating over 2,000 spectators, was as large as any West End stage but nevertheless retained an atmosphere of intimacy and inclusivity despite its size. One visitor coming to the Pavilion from outside East London, the theatre critic Charles Landstone, reports of an accidentally very 'inclusive' experience at the Pavilion during which he inadvertently became part of the performance himself. In a piece written for the *Jewish Chronicle*,

Landstone looks back on his first visit to the East End theatre in 1909. Landstone's family belonged to the wealthier class of London Jews who had settled in North London and so it was only through the mediation of 'one of the workers in my father's factory' (Landstone, 1970: 42) that he became acquainted with the cultural life of the East End. His account presents the factory worker as a 'guide' who acts as an intermediary between the North London Jew and the East End community and barter with the box office to receive 'tickets at a reduced price'. Landstone describes a Dantean scenario in which he is led deeper and deeper into this unfamiliar environment which takes on somewhat infernal qualities when he is forced to make his involuntary stage debut and ends up being 'chased away by an indignant stage manager' (Landstone, 1970: 44). His description of the East London audience speaks of the bewilderment of the middle-class Jew with the East End ways:

[W]e pushed our way into the auditorium. I was almost knocked back by the noise and the hubbub. It was an auditorium where everybody knew everybody else, and was not ashamed to say so, in strident tones to be heard from gallery to stalls.

The noise never stopped. It was not silenced, but only subdued, by the rise of the curtain. There was continuous murmur and chatter, young people doing a running commentary of the play to their elders and to deaf friends, while every now and then came a stentorian shout from someone sitting in the front row calling 'Quiet, please.' No one seemed to mind, the actors seemed accustomed to it. (Landstone, 1970: 42)

Landstone describes a Jewish audience whose manners and language are foreign to him. He does not speak Yiddish and is indeed only able to follow the performance through his knowledge of German. During the interval, the intentions of Landstone's East London hosts become entirely lost in translation when, following an invitation to 'go on the stage', (Landstone, 1970: 42) he inadvertently finds himself a performer in the second half of the play. As part of an on-stage jury assembled from members of the audience, 'most of whom were regulars', Landstone is instructed to act along with

the trial scene that is played out before him. When the jury is told to exit off-stage Landstone tries to 'keep near the canvases so that I could listen to the play—for which I had paid my money' (Landstone, 1970: 44) but the stage manager rudely moves him out of the way. The jury is then asked back on stage to deliver their verdict: "‘Unschuldig’—Innocent'. When the jury is once again ushered off-stage Landstone is unwilling to miss more of the performance and so he 'refused to go, and stayed to watch the end of the play, only making my exit at curtain call' (Landstone, 1970: 44). Although Landstone's anecdote clearly exaggerates the idiosyncrasies of the Yiddish theatre that form the subject of his cultural tourism of the East End for comic effect, it also serves to illustrate the character of the Pavilion Theatre as a truly popular theatre in which elements of audience interaction disrupted the formalised distance between performance and spectator, the theatre and the community it served.

By 1913, when Rodker's article on 'The Theatre in Whitechapel' appeared in *Poetry and Drama*, the Pavilion had become the best-known venue for drama performed in Yiddish in the British capital. Although, unlike Landstone, Rodker had grown up among the Jewish immigrant community, he, too, approaches his subject with a certain sense of distance. Adopting the persona of a British outsider to the Jewish community, Rodker distinguishes between 'our own drama', meaning the British dramatic scene, and the Yiddish theatre whose audience he describes as 'for the most part ignorant of every other language save its own' (Rodker, 1913: 43). Nevertheless, there is also a strong sense of intellectual kinship with the Pavilion Theatre audience in his article. He states that it is only 'at first sight' that the Yiddish audience appears to be 'a typically music-hall one busy with oranges and nuts' while, if you engage with the spectators on a more personal level, 'your neighbour will discuss the play with some erudition and much enthusiasm.' The chief virtue of the Jewish audience according to Rodker, however, lies in their naïve and intuitive understanding of the material put before them. They do not love the 'refinements of Shakespeare and Goethe' but the 'crudity and strength of Zola and Strindberg' (Rodker, 1913: 44). The predisposition of the Jewish audience for the haunted atmosphere of European avant-garde drama is for Rodker linked to their history as a people 'accustomed to continuous persecution' who only see the stage as the 'mirror

of life when an atmosphere of deep melancholy broods over the play.' In addition, Rodker lauds the simple, even amateurish production values at the Pavilion Theatre which '[I]luckily, owing to a lack of funds [...] is unable to supply that elaborate staging and over-refined acting which make so largely for the emasculation of our own drama' (Rodker, 1913: 43). Though the minimalist sets on the Pavilion stage were the result of financial constraints rather than a specific design effort, Rodker nevertheless sees in the spiritedness and make-do attitude of the Yiddish theatre a model that appealed to the aesthetic preference he had by then developed for a stripped-down psychological drama.

As a cultural venue that retained its focus on the local community it served, the Pavilion Theatre also provided a model for Rodker of the institutional and economic structures within which his ideal of a popular modern drama could exist. He specifically addresses a season of plays produced by the actor-manager Maurice Moscovitch which succeeded in striking the difficult balance between accessibility and artistic ambition by staging European avant-garde drama in the community's *lingua franca* Yiddish:

Strindberg's *Fathers and Children*, Tolstoi's *Powers of Darkness*, Zola's *Thérèse Raquin*, and Andreef's *Anathema*, have been produced by Mr Moscovitch's repertory company during the last two months; surely a formidable list. Of these, *The Powers of Darkness* and *Anathema* are absolutely new to England, while *Fathers and Children* has, I think, been produced twice by the Adelphi Play Society at specially subscribed performances, and *Thérèse Raquin* in a series of "Lydia Yavorska" matinées at the Court. It should be noted—for it is an important point of difference—that these English productions were ministering wholly to the wants of some few intellectuals, whereas the appeal of the Whitechapel Pavilion Theatre is to the whole Jewish colony in London. (Rodker, 1913: 43)

The main achievement of the Yiddish theatre in Whitechapel highlighted here by Rodker is its ability to transpose avant-garde drama from the institutional structures

within which it would only be accessible to a cultural elite (due to price, location and performance time) to a space of popular entertainment. While, artistically, Moscovitch's season of European drama could rival London's better-known avant-garde stages such as the Court Theatre, cheap ticket prices and the late starting time of 8.30 pm ensured that '[e]very facility is given the Jewish worker to attend the performances' (Rodker, 1913: 43). In this respect, the Pavilion seemed to Rodker to provide a perfect combination of social inclusivity and artistic value. It presented its audience with a highly cerebral avant-garde fare for the price of a glass of mineral water. The presentation of these plays in the audience's native tongue Yiddish further helped to make the performance intellectually accessible. While, in his discussion of the repertory stage, Rodker had depicted the confrontation of popular audiences with unfamiliar dramatic material as a slow act of poisoning ('just as an organism may store up quantities of accumulative poison without feeling any ill effects for some time, public taste may be vitiated until finally it appreciates and asks for repertory' [Rodker, 1912a]), he casts the relationship between the Yiddish theatre and its audience as much less antagonistic:

[T]he Jew is the most ardent playgoer in the world and rather than not go, he will endeavour to appreciate what is being placed before him.

When the play promises to be above his head, as in the case of *Anathema*—not a very strange thing this, if it be remembered that more than two hundred treatises have appeared in Germany upon it—Mr Moscovitch makes a point of explaining the play, delivering an explanatory speech from the stage. It says much for the indulgence of the audience that it will listen patiently, though the probabilities of the play finishing before twelve grow ever remoter. (Rodker, 1913: 44)

Should a play prove to be too alien to the immigrant community's cultural frame of reference, Moscovitch's introductory exegesis ensured that understanding was guaranteed even beyond the purely linguistic barrier. By educating the East End immigrant community in modern drama and gradually 'making the Jewish public

want what he wants' (Rodker, 1913: 44), Moscovitch was simultaneously creating the conditions under which this type of drama could be performed to popular audiences and thus succeeded where, in Rodker's eyes, the British repertory stage had failed.

Rodker's focus on 'atmosphere' and simplistic staging in his article on 'The Theatre in Whitechapel' also foreshadows his later manifesto on 'The Theatre', published in *The Egoist* in November 1914. It was there that Rodker first endeavoured to express his ideas for a minimalist modernist dramaturgy as a coherent theory and it is therefore a key text for his engagement with the theatre as an artistic medium. The modern theatre which Rodker describes in his manifesto is one which addresses itself to the senses and emotions rather than the intellect. He positions himself against 'intellectual drama' which to him is 'not drama at all' but simply 'the "acting version" of a novel' (Rodker, 1914: 414). The move away from a drama of ideas to a 'play of pure emotion' takes place at the cost of the traditional dramatic conventions, particularly dialogue. 'Words,' Rodker writes 'are a waste product of emotion and do not concern it' (Rodker, 1914: 414). A dramatic piece entitled 'Fear' which was published alongside his manifesto exemplifies Rodker's idea for a purely sensory, silent drama. The stage directions describe a scene in which the stock characters Pierrot and Columbine are driven to perform a series of anguished actions in pursuit of a mysterious off-stage presence that can only be perceived as the sound of footsteps and a shadow behind a semi-transparent wall. The extremely allusive and affective nature of the play is aimed at eliciting an intuitive response from the audience through what Rodker terms 'the evocation of race memories' (Rodker, 1914: 414). By instilling a feeling of 'fear' in his spectators Rodker hopes to circumvent the audience's rationalisation of the events presented on stage and appeal directly to their emotions. To this first short mime play, Rodker later added another three pieces in a similar style, entitled 'Twilight I,' 'Twilight II' and 'The Lunatic,' which were first published together in Pound's *Catholic Anthology* (1915). These, too, describe short scenes without dialogue in which the traditional French pantomime characters Pierrot, Columbine and Harlequin can be seen in different states of agitation, trembling at the touch of a moonbeam or simply sitting in a chair and looking out of the window. In the absence of any plot or

psychological depth to the characters, these short plays were intended to affect their audience on a more immediate, emotive level. Rodker's silent modernist theatre does not deal in carefully constructed plots or differentiated characters. It rather provides direct, sensory triggers and is thus able to communicate with the audience on a pre-intellectual and, Rodker suggests in his manifesto, potentially even pre-conscious level:

A smell of musk wafted through a theatre would affect an audience more poignantly, more profoundly, than anything they had before then experienced [...] Hamlet need not affect a single member of the audience who does not wish it. This insidious smell of musk penetrates deeper into the mind through the senses, until the body is rapt into those vague splendid imaginings which are flutterings of memories of man and the earth when they were young. (Rodker, 1914: 414)

The melancholy atmosphere of the Yiddish theatre, which appealed to an intuitive rather than an intellectual understanding, constituted an aesthetic precedent on which Rodker could build his own conception of the theatre as 'the staging for emotion' (Rodker, 1914: 414). The 'evocation of race memories' as a dramaturgical aim further seems to afford a link to the haunted atmosphere of the Yiddish theatre as a reflection of the Jews' history of persecution. Yet, Rodker's theatre manifesto does not position itself within a Jewish context and the 'race memories' referred to are better understood as universal 'primitive emotions' (Rodker, 1914: 414). The parallel between the implicit audience in Rodker's theatre manifesto and the Jewish audience he discusses in 'The Theatre in Whitechapel' lies rather in their receptiveness for the type of experimental drama Rodker envisages. What he foregrounds in his portrayal of the Jewish public, above all, is the degree to which it forms a community around modern avant-garde theatre. Thus, it is with admiration and perhaps also with some envy that Rodker comments on Moscovitch's ability to attract a broad following for his modern theatrical art:

[E]verywhere the Jewish temperament remains constant. In Paris, where Mr Moscovitch purposes going after Whitechapel, in Russia, Hungary, and Roumania [*sic*], where he will be in 1913–14, and in South Africa and the United States in 1914–15, he will find the same enthusiasms, the same yearnings. Always he will be at home—always in a circle of intellectuals who appreciate truly the developments in the theatre of their foster-mother countries, and are able to translate them into the Jewish tongue. (Rodker, 1913: 44)

The Jewish audience which, at the beginning of Rodker's article, appeared to be 'a typically music-hall one', has become transformed into a 'circle of intellectuals' by the end of the piece, forming an international network of avant-garde theatre enthusiasts (Rodker, 1913: 43, 44). Their willingness to engage with unfamiliar dramatic material, to approach it intuitively and to let themselves be guided to a critical appreciation makes them, in Rodker's eyes, the perfect audience for an artistically adventurous theatre. The sense of intellectual kinship which extended beyond the immediate sphere of the Yiddish theatre in Whitechapel to encompass areas of Jewish settlement around the world further seemed to promise the possibility of building a similarly international, artistically engaged community around an experimental theatre in English. Onto the elements of Jewish culture he observed in the Yiddish theatre in Whitechapel, Rodker projected his own hopes for creating a dramatic counter-culture, a theatrical avant-garde.

## Conclusion

The creation of an avant-garde community, an audience for experimental modern drama, is an important concern that links Rodker's critique in 'The Theatre in Whitechapel' to the development of his own suggestions for a reformed modernist stage in his 1914 theatre manifesto and beyond. The crucial point of connection lies in the community-focused, popular character of the Yiddish performances at the Pavilion Theatre, which tallied with Rodker's broader theoretical conception of the

theatre as an essentially communal art form. In a later piece, published in *The Egoist* in 1919, Rodker elaborates on this point:

[T]he instinct to go to a theatre, a reading; to congregate where one can see and be seen is very primitive and strong, so strong that the production hardly matters. For this reason audiences will put up with anything, however daring, provided of course that other managers will refrain from giving them what they want. The simplest way of reforming the theatre, therefore, is to dispose of existing managers. (Rodker, 1919: 16)

Evoking its etymological root in the Ancient Greek term *theatron*, 'a place for viewing' (*OED*), Rodker describes the theatre above all as a place to 'see and be seen'. As a cultural space which enables significant forms of communal encounter and exchange, the theatre thus serves a quintessentially public purpose linked, for Rodker, to humanity's 'primitive' instincts as a social and political being. Though he acknowledged that the contemporary theatre landscape was in urgent need of reform, Rodker's propositions for what a new, truly modern theatre should look like were a far cry from Yeats's 'aristocratic' gatherings or Pound's closet drama. While Pound posited that '[t]here is no union in intellect, when we think we diverge, we explore, we go away' (Pound qtd. in Read, 1968: 46), Rodker continued to believe in the theatre as an art form which fulfilled a significant social function by enabling a shared aesthetic experience; and the Yiddish theatre in Whitechapel, a theatre grounded in its local community which blurred the lines between dramatic art and popular entertainment, served as an exemplary model for Rodker's vision of an artistically and institutionally reformed modernist stage.

### Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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