

THE BELLS - EDUCATION PACK

MELODRAMA

There is often a misconception that the genre of melodrama should consist of “over-acting”, declamatory gestures and “ham” performances. The expression “ham” itself comes from the period when melodrama was most popular. It derives from “ham fatter” an American raw country actor that would use ham fat to remove make-up.

Dictionary definitions: MELODRAMA: (1) “A film or play making a crude appeal to the emotions in which plot and action are more important than character or motive;” (2) “Sensational event or behaviour.” MELODRAMATIC: “Over emotional behaviour designed to impress or influence others.” The aim of the workshop is to disprove any derogatory misreading of the genre and to make the Northern Broadsides’ production of “The Bells” accessible and interesting.

The definition our production prefers is: “Sensational play, interspersed with song,” which is the truer meaning of the word Melodrama: “Melody and Drama”.

The workshop will show that although the acting does not call for "naturalism" it does require honesty and emotional experience. Performance must be heightened and up front. The workshop will also demonstrate how music and other devices are used to heighten the performance and most importantly, to tell the story.

HISTORY

Tired of being ridiculed and moreover, accused of corruption by certain writers of the day, in 1731 Robert Walpole engineered the Licensing Act, which would have a significant influence over the theatre world. The Act meant that only the Patent Theatres, i.e. Drury Lane, Covent Garden and The Haymarket could produce legitimate five-act plays. Minor theatres were limited to pantomime and musical shows comprising of not more than three acts. Spoken words were not permitted, (from this we got the musical); however dialogue crept in, piloting the way to the writing of the first melodramas.

Supported by the popularity of both opera and pantomime, by the time the monopoly of the patent theatres had been abolished in 1843, three-act melodrama thrived in England, France, Germany and America. The legitimate playhouses competed by putting on large spectacular shows, exploding ships, horse racing, flooded stages and burning buildings etc. Eventually the melodrama would find its way into these large theatres. The new genre brought the best in machinists and carpenters and was ideal entertainment for the enormous audiences. Drury Lane, for example held over three and a half thousand people. This led to bad sight lines and billowing actors with declamatory gesture. Of course there were many exceptions at this time, Charles Kemble, his daughter Fanny, Lucia Vestris and most notably Edmund Kean. Kean revolutionized acting by sudden transitions in his delivery from “low” to high”. Due to the popularity of the melodrama among the lower

classes, audiences became rougher, which in turn led to the middle classes deserting the theatre. One of the more prominent actors of the day, William Macready decided to return to the texts of Shakespeare and abandon melodrama altogether.

In Europe and America, the nineteenth century was the age of the actor-manager, taking charge of large theatres and turning them into viable financial concerns. The fiery William Macready managed Covent Garden, prior to Lucia Vestris taking it over. Samuel Phelps took on Sadlers Wells and managed to turn the fortunes of this “home of melodrama” after it had fallen into disrepair by putting on only the best writers of the genre i.e. the Irish born Dion Boucicault. (He also produced thirty-four of the Shakespearian canon.) Naturally our interests perch on Henry Irving who ran the Lyceum from 1878 until his failed production of “Macbeth” 1888.

Nothing happens in isolation; outside England, Melodrama thrived in France and Germany. A group of Strasburg University bucks, including the young Johann Wolfgang Goethe began an essentially Romantic movement. Initially it was dedicated to Shakespeare and all things folksy or primitive but evolved into an artistic revolution of anti-tradition and anti-authority. They took their name for this movement from a wild fantasy, written by Klinger in Shakespearean prose, called “Sturm und Drang” (Storm and Stress). Rebels and figures from mythology became dramatic heroes. Satan and Faust were drafted onto the stage to terrify audiences into the realization of their own fallibility. Goethe took over management of The Court Theatre at Weimar where his compatriot Friedrich Schiller, wrote Sturm und Drang plays such as “Die Rauber” (The Robbers) full of passion, patriotism and avengers of the oppressed. Much of the melodrama writing throughout the world had its roots in Germany. Led by Georg II, Duke of Saxe Meinengen, “The Young Germany” group challenged the German practice of ‘big solo’ acting with crowd scenes “played like wooden opera choruses” and taking Goethe's Sturm und Drang as a blue print, introduced an ensemble style. The Duke made sure every member of his crowd scenes was a character. Every actor had his place and nothing permitted that would not fit into the ensemble. (This approach lends itself to the Northern Broadside's school of playing). The Duke of Saxe Meinengen was the prototype to the modern director.

Although the Quaker dominated Commonwealth of Massachusetts banned theatrical performances in 1750 not all America was so hostile. However, due to the Puritanical ideals, virtually all actors of note came from England, France or Italy. It followed then that by the time America had its own acting fraternity, such as Edwin Booth (his brother was John Wilks Booth who assassinated President Lincoln), the European melodrama model was copied in America. With the twin evils of drink and slavery as its main concerns, a gloriously, moralizing and sentimental version derived which in turn, evolved into the silent movie. (Augustin Daly, in his play “Under The Gaslight”, had a man tied to the railway track, then rescued by his heroine lover.) Ironically, it was the silent movie that started the corrosion of theatre audiences. Nevertheless, in the world of theatre itself, though melodramas were often one dimensional, the “well-made plays” did not manage to kill off the more robust efforts until the twentieth century, with some lasting until

today. Apart from “The Bells” immortalized by Henry Irving, “Black-Eyed Susan” and “Sweeny Todd” have enjoyed modern interpretations.

HENRY IRVING (1838-1905)

Irving was not only important to British theatre for his magnetic power as an actor but for the influence he had on the English stage as a whole. The actor-manager dominated throughout the second half of the Victorian era.

After starting out as a clerk, and despite his puritanical mother, the Somerset-born Irving used an unexpected bequest to buy props and move to Sunderland then Edinburgh to try his luck with the theatre fraternity. After ten fruitless years, at the age of 33, he arrived in London and became an overnight success following his performance of *The Bells*. His subsequent Knighthood (he was the first actor to receive one) and the fact that Queen Victoria confessed to being “pleased” was quite an achievement for someone from such humble origins with a “gangling figure and mannered voice”.

He persuaded Hezekiah Bateman to stage *The Bells* at the Lyceum Theatre in 1871 and in 1878, with Ellen Terry as his leading lady took over the management of the theatre himself. Mrs. Irving had no interest in the theatre, and it was no surprise when he left her for the romance and comfort of Ellen Terry. Fifteen years on and his luck faded. First, a fire destroyed most of the Lyceum props. The theatre, which could not withstand the repair and expensive alterations, had to close for a time. Illness and then the parting of himself and Terry followed. He returned to touring at the end of his Lyceum era and died in a provincial playhouse. The last words he uttered on stage were “Into Thy hands O Lord”.

Although he had many critics, being once described as “a ham with crude technique”, Edward Gordon Craig said of his performance in *The Bells*. “The thing Irving set out to do was to show us the sorrow which slowly and remorselessly beat him down. The sorrow, which he suffers, must appeal to our hearts. Irving set out to wring our hearts, not to give a clever exhibition of antics such as a murderer would be likely to go through. Here is a strong human being who, through a moment of weakness, falls into error and for two hours becomes a criminal - does what he knows he is doing - acts deliberately but acts automatically, as though impelled by an immense force, against which no resistance is possible.”

During his reign at the Lyceum he built up a staff of over 600. Although he lacked enthusiasm for new material the theatre thrived at the height of his office. His reason for his limited choice of plays was that there was very little in which to show off his prowess other than in Shakespeare and melodrama. He built a first-rate company, superbly training his actors and it was he who gave the “blackout” to the realm of the scene-change. He mounted elaborate productions and did more than most to entice the middle classes back to the theatre. Irving enthralled his audiences with the ability to astound and surprise, sometimes, achieving greatness. After accumulating several fortunes “The Knight from

nowhere” died in poverty. Nevertheless, humble Henry Brodribb lies in Westminster Abbey among other Kings and Queens.

THE BELLS

The Victorians were not only enamoured by Irving’s performance but also mesmerised by the themes of the play itself. Guilt, fear, greed, and ambition are as relevant today as then but the prudish society had a fascination with the idea of concealment. “What have you got to hide?” Under all the respectability of the prudish society, as Mathias says “Everyone hides something”. Sozel epitomizes the world of the play with the blood thirsty curiosity, almost wanting to be bit by the vampire. Hans and Father Walter, besides carrying the story, are part of the device to lull the audience onto the carpet of comfort zone that will later be whipped from under them. In our production, Hans enters, unwittingly carrying the axe that reminds Mathias and the audience of the murder weapon. Mathias never himself touches it (though he does consider killing Christian with it when the Quartermaster gets too close). The axe itself would have had a different resonance to the Victorians than to a modern audience. We no longer live with these tools. When the innocent forester, Hans carries the axe onto the set, it’s important for the audience to feel its weight, to later picture the axe “slicing the jaw” of the Jew, being ripped from the flap of his scalp.

Another theme, peculiar to the Victorians, would have been that of the “Infant Phenomenon”. Many traveling players would have a child act known as the “Infant Phenomenon”. (Dickens uses one in “Nickolas Nickleby” when Nick joins a theatre group with such an act.) The “Infant Phenomenon” represented innocence, another predominant theme in *The Bells*. Annette is at the forefront of this badge. In our production it is Annette or the mention of her name that snaps Mathias back into reality during his trances or from his hearing of the bells. When speaking of the Mesmerist, Annette says “I would resist”, suggesting even the innocent have something to hide. This is incredulous to the others especially her mother who asks “Why would you need to?” Other images of innocence are scattered through the play, e.g. Mathias’ description of the sounds on the night of the murder. “Our baby (Annette) is crying. A goat bleats in the stable. The Jew is walking in his room.” Each of these not only represents innocence but also sacrifice. Father Walter asks “What was the Jew doing there?” There may be a suggestion of otherwise in this question but nevertheless, the Jew is an innocent and Mathias’s description of him walking in his room presents a picture of the walking dead about to be sacrificed in order to alleviate Mathias’s financial ailments. The innocent goat is a common emblem of sacrifice and Annette herself will be sacrificed by Mathias in marrying her off to the Gendarme to save himself.

The play is set in Alsace, border country between France and Germany. Even today, many years since the last dispute over the lands, there is still a strong mixture of cultures and place names. Much of it is neither one thing nor the other; so it is within the play. You are

never sure quite where you are. When Mathias thinks he is on safe ground, he discovers he is somewhere else. The mountainous terrain is rough and the winter weather severe. At most times this would be unwelcome yet it is the snow that helps Mathias with his hideous deeds by covering his tracks and burying the evidence for weeks.

In "Jekyll and Hyde" the demon overcomes the good. In *The Bells* this is reversed. In the form of his conscience, Matthias's good side rises to defeat his bad. Fundamentally, he is a good man. Despite the pimping of his daughter and the heinous murder of the Jew, he is a good man who does wicked acts. However, a good man cannot live with such crimes and it is this, which drives him to his retribution and death. Apart from the facts that the murder victim was a Polish Jew, one of the characters is a Father Walter and another is named Christian, *The Bells* is a completely secular play. When the Mesmerist asks him "Are you not afraid Mathias?" He answers "Of what? The eternal furnace?" He then laughs and says "Hell is a cold place." Mathias judges himself in a judicial court rather than a divine one.

NORTHERN BROADSIDES

Set up by Barrie Rutter some thirteen years ago, the company specialise in performing classical or formal theatre in a northern voice. Normally Barrie leads from the front but for this production, Conrad Nelson, the Associate Director of the company is at the helm. As Musical Director since the company's conception, it is fitting that Conrad should choose a piece so reliant on music. Deborah McAndrew (Conrad's wife) has done the adaptation of Leopold Lewis's text.

The Bells is a departure from our usual fare but the full on, honest, front cloth style of the production is a natural progression for the company. We are often asked if we use a Stanislavski style method of realism in our approach to acting. It is difficult to link realism with classical work because we don't naturally speak in verse. The same applies when it comes to melodrama. It has to be honest and truthful but the style dictates that it cannot be completely naturalistic; that is not to say it is not naturalistic to be 'big'. In our every day lives, heightened emotions are always big and are usually accompanied by big gesture.

The ensemble style, pioneered by the Duke of Saxe Meinengen, and his Meinenger Troupe is the approach Conrad opted for in this piece. We could have done it Irvingesque with Barrie taking the lead but Barrie is older than Sean, the actor who does play Mathias, and Conrad wanted there to be more at stake for the character. If Mathias has achieved success and has 'done it all' by the time his crime is discovered, then he would have less to lose than a person with his life before him.

The play starts in a sort of pseudo realism with what looks like a series of naturalistic scenes. Various devices suggest otherwise such as the opening carol, which segues into a dark "Sweeney Todd" style number then back into the carol ending with a chop of a geese's head. Three musicians sit on stage throughout the first half of the play,

commenting on the action by pointing their instruments to highlight key moments. They also play the wintry outside elements. A musical saw, (part of the original melodrama orchestra) gives an eerie effect whenever we delve into Mathias' mind. One of the musicians steps out to become a character in the scene. They then all enter to become part of the wedding celebrations. The whole cast enter on the sidelines to play and sing Mathias' nightmare. Conjuring is used to show a piece of the original stolen gold. By the third act, the play has moved from pseudo realism into the surreal when we go completely into Mathias' sleeping world. In the original production, separate actors, probably dressed in wigs and gowns, would have played the members of the court. Apart from the expense of hiring extra actors, Conrad and Debbie decided it would be more exciting to have them played by the characters in Mathias' life, in the same way that when we dream we sometimes see Uncle Bob as the train driver taking us to work, who then changes and becomes a trapeze artist. It is fitting that his wife becomes Mathias' judge.

A feature of the set is its slopes and gibbet type angles; this again emphasises the fact that Mathias is never sure when he is on safe ground. Three yellow circles serve to enclose in on his mind (yellow being the colour of madness). As with the borderland of Alsace, the audience, also should be never quite sure of where they are. Just when they think they know what is happening, they too should have their comfort carpet whipped from under them.

THE WORKSHOP

There will be opportunity to discuss any of the above in the workshop, which will open with a short synopsis of the history. The main themes, ideas and concepts of the play such as “fear and terror” will be explored in the practical part of the workshop. Through Grotowski style exercises we will examine how actors delve into the reaches of the mind to display deep emotions. This is a main part of the workshop and could be continued in the classroom as stimulation for discussion and to give some ideas for further activities. Deborah McAndrew’s adaptation of Leopold Lewis’s text will be used to give an insight into the unique workings of the company. The verse is ideal for ensemble playing and students will have an opportunity to perform the third act. This will also help in the understanding of the play and performance. A question and answer session will conclude the workshop.