

The Assignments Book of the Britannia Theatre, Hoxton

On 19 May 1904 the following advertisement appeared in the *Stage*:

ARTHUR WILLIAMS, having purchased the whole of the Britannia Theatre Library, consisting of over 800 Manuscript Dramas, Farces, Burlesques, etc., with all rights, written by the late C. Hazlewood, Dibdin Pitt, Fred Marchant, W. Seaman, J. B. Johnstone, E. Newbound, Thompson Townsend, Somerset, etc., etc., shall be pleased to arrange with Managers for Stock Seasons, odd weeks, Amateurs. Anyone desirous of really good sensational Drama for Tour at a small cost should not miss this opportunity. Lists can be had on application to ARTHUR WILLIAMS, Strand Theatre, W.C.¹

The material in question relates to the Britannia Theatre on Hoxton High Street in the East End of London. This establishment had begun business as a saloon theatre in the early 1840s, gained a full licence as a theatre in 1858 and had been entertaining the local population ever since.² In the years immediately following the publication of Williams's advert shorter versions were occasionally reprinted in the same paper.³ In many ways they marked the end of the Britannia Theatre's long history as a commissioning house. Where once the majority of the Hoxton institution's productions had been specially written for its stage, by the turn of the twentieth century this was no longer the case. The long managerial association with one family – first Samuel Lane, then his widow, the actress Sara Lane, and finally her nephews Samuel and Alfred Lane Crauford – had come to an end in 1903. Now owned by

entrepreneur Thomas Barrasford, the theatre was operating as a music hall presenting variety acts and sketches, not original full-length drama. Thus there was no need to retain the copyright for its old material. Williams (1844–1915), who was a comic actor, asserts he purchased the ‘Library’ from Alfred Lane Crauford in 1904.⁴ Unfortunately he does not state the agreed sum but the adverts show he was seeking to make a return on his investment.

After his death, Williams’s executors advertised the sale of much of his collection of theatrical ephemera, including the Assignments Book, in the *Stage*.⁵ At some point this came into the possession of Barry Duncan, a bookseller and theatre historian noted for his history of the St James’s Theatre.⁶ In 2004 Motley Books sold a large part of this material to the Templeman Library at the University of Kent at Canterbury. Seven years later the same dealer unearthed another of Duncan’s acquisitions, the Assignments Book of the Britannia Theatre. This unique volume records the payments made to playwrights in exchange for the assignment of performing rights to their dramatic works. As the current custodian of this documentary treasure, I am analysing it for evidence about the economics of playwriting as well as the managerial practice of a minor theatre over four decades of the nineteenth century. It is also a valuable source for establishing the authorship of many previously unattributed dramas.

The Assignments Book is a bound volume measuring approximately 200 x 245 mm. As an artefact it is in a poor condition. The outer covering of the spine has become detached and the edges of many of the leaves, particularly where there have been numerous insertions, are fragile and in danger of fragmenting. In order to further lessen damage by unnecessary handling, I have created a database to record all the information contained in the volume. This necessitated establishing a complex

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numbering system distinguishing between the printed folios and manuscript addenda appended at later dates.⁷

A handwritten label glued on the front cover announces ‘BRITTANIA [sic] THEATRE/ HOXTON/ Authors Assignment Book/ 1844–1869’, while another on the spine spells the theatre’s name correctly but expands the time period until 1879. Inside are approximately 180 pre-printed leaves headed ‘MEMORANDUM OF AGREEMENT’. Of these, 145 have been filled in by hand, including two loose half pages. Signed by a representative of the theatre’s management and playwrights whose work was purchased for performance at the Britannia, they set out the standard terms of the contracts, revealing the name of the author, the play title[s], the genre (e.g. domestic drama in two acts), the conditions and the amount paid. By signing it the author agrees that the play becomes ‘the absolute property of the said SAMUEL LANE’ and assigns to him ‘the Copyright, Acting Right, and Right of Publishing the same’. The majority of these agreements are with George Dibdin Pitt (1795–1855), best known as the author of the Sweeney Todd melodrama *The String of Pearls, or the Fiend of Fleet Street* (1847).⁸ Indeed, the original memorandum for this play is recorded in the Assignments Book, dated 25 January 1847, and reveals that Pitt was paid £3 for it (Plate 1).⁹ Other dramatists whose work is subject to the conditions set out in these printed memoranda are C. Z. Barnett, William Rogers, William Joseph Lucas, the late Mr Jay, Gordon Glynn, Abraham Alman, Edward Forrester and William Milborne.

Since the terms recorded in these memoranda are standard the volume might initially appear to supply limited information to the theatre historian, but in fact the printed documents account for only a fraction of the recorded transactions. In addition to the memoranda, over five hundred other handwritten agreements and observations

are recorded on the blank verso of the printed pages or on supplementary slips of paper that are glued or sometimes sewn onto the pages or merely inserted loosely between the leaves (Plate 2). They do not appear in chronological order, seeming to have been added in a relatively random fashion. A few set out the terms under which Pitt produces material in his position as house dramatist.¹⁰ A small proportion document payments made for alterations to dramas written by other authors. The majority, however, are agreements transferring performance rights in exchange for fees. Most outline similar terms to those set out in the printed memoranda although there is more variation in the exclusivity of the rights assigned, some being for East London only. The records chart work by another 58 dramatists not referred to on the printed pages.

The last of these additional agreements is dated February 1884 and is an example of how information in the Assignments Book augments knowledge of forgotten works and authors. It is made with Kate Alice Walton of 43 Essex Road, Toxteth Park, Liverpool.¹¹ She receives £1 10s 0d. for the sole London right to play the drama *Daisy Dell, or a Sister's Love*. This is one of four transactions with Walton, who appears in Kate Newey's checklist of female dramatists as the author of just one work, *Drop by Drop: or, Old England's Curse* (Adelphi, Liverpool, 1884).¹² Newey compiled her list from the main catalogues of nineteenth-century drama (Nicoll, Ellis and Donohue, the Index to the Pettingell Collection and the catalogues of the British Library), none of which mentions the play Walton is selling to the Britannia. Two other women playwrights documented in the Assignments Book, Adelaide Ross and Sara Roberts, have not previously been recorded as authors.

Not all the agreements are made with dramatists. For example, on 16 September 1880 Eliza Marchant is paid £1 for the rights to *The Bells in the Storm or*

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The Polish Jew, a play written by her late father Frederick Marchant.¹³ (Presumably this was, like Leopold Lewis's famous Irving showcase, an adaptation of Erckmann Chatrain's novel *The Polish Jew*.) Likewise, B. O. Conquest sells the representation rights of three dramas, *Gale Breezeley*, *The Old Mint of Southwark* and *Rats of Rats Castle* for a total fee of £4 19s 6d. on 20 February 1850.¹⁴ Conquest, who had managed the Garrick Theatre in nearby Whitechapel until its destruction by fire in 1846, would build another East End venue, the Grecian Theatre, Shoreditch in 1851. At the time of the agreement he was without an establishment, hence was willing to sanction the Britannia Saloon to perform the pieces, which he attests are 'my property by virtue of Purchase from Mr J. B. Johnstone' [the author]. Conquest would later stage *The Old Mint* and *Rats Castle* at the Grecian.¹⁵ Two other transactions, this time with Nelson Lee Junior, are dated 6 April 1872 and 14 June 1872. The first is for three dramas that were subsequently licensed and performed at the Britannia with Colin Hazlewood named as the author.¹⁶ The second concerns a drama entitled *Phyllis Thorpe*.¹⁷ A play of that name (though spelt *Phyllis*) had played at the City of London in 1855 (when managed by Lee's father) and is also ascribed to Hazlewood. A pencil addition on this agreement (probably inserted by Alfred Lane Crauford) states 'by Wilkins'. John Wilkins, a playwright and actor at the City of London, had died in 1853 at the age of 26. Nelson Lee Senior had organised a fund for his widow and young family. An article in the *Era* announcing Wilkins's death discusses his successful dramas and notes 'Several other pieces, which have not yet been put upon the stage, are in the hands of Messrs. Johnston and Lee.'¹⁸ It is likely that the copyright to the deceased playwright's work passed to his son on Lee's death in January 1872. The Assignments Books also contains three earlier agreements made with Wilkins himself.¹⁹

Most of the manuscript items in the Assignments Book are in the hand of the author (or copyright owner), proved by comparison with other extant documents (such as handwritten letters by Hazlewood) and because of the idiosyncratic wording and terms of some individual authors. Items 27a–27g are a series of seven agreements with Hazlewood concerning nineteen dramas. Although made over a period of ten years, many look as if they were written at the same time on the same paper. This suggests some retrospective recording of agreements was carried out. Nevertheless, entries in the Lord Chamberlain's Day Books confirm that in most cases scripts of dramas referred to in the Assignments Book were sent for licensing shortly after the agreement was signed. A typical example is an adaptation of Mary Beecher Stowe's anti-slavery novel *Dred*. On 18 September 1856 H. G. Denvil received £1 10s 0d. for the London right of playing his version. It was licensed for the Britannia twelve days later.²⁰

Another oddity in the documentation is the fact that Hazlewood appears to have been paid twice for the entire London rights of playing *The Life Signal*, his melodrama set in seventeenth-century France in the castle of Cardinal Mazarin. On 12 February 1864 it is listed as one of four plays for which he received a payment of £17. Then on 27 March 1867 he earned £9 for the same drama and a burlesque.²¹ The reason for this double payment is not known but the play was licensed in April 1867 and first produced as part of the Britannia's Easter entertainments later that month.²²

A notable feature of many of the manuscript assignments is that the dramatist's signature is made over an adhesive stamp or, in a few cases, an embossed duty stamp. Legal documents transferring interests in property were liable to tax, paid to the revenue authorities by buying stamps. For the period covered by the Assignments Book the fee was fixed at one penny. There are 201 adhesive stamps of

various sizes and seven embossed stamps in its pages (Plate 3). In addition to this there is evidence that a further ninety-nine stamps have been deliberately removed, most frequently by pulling them from the paper or in a small number of instances by cutting them out. In some cases this means that the author's name is partially or totally missing, as is the case with 18a, 18c and 18d. This defacement must have been a deliberate policy by someone but the purpose is unclear. Since the stamps are countersigned or otherwise crossed through to prevent reuse there could be no monetary gain from removing them.²³ It is possible that the presence or absence of the stamps was used as a visual indicator of the rights status of a particular play. If so, this testifies to the volume's use as a working document.

The Assignments Book chief and vital function was to provide evidence of ownership of or entitlement to perform particular dramas. This might be necessary when, for example, successful plays were revived, sometimes decades after the staging of the original production and even after the death of the author. This was the case with Pitt's *The Love Child, or The Corporal's Daughter*, for which he had assigned all rights on 29 September 1854, and which was revived as late as October 1893.²⁴ In a diary entry for 15 November 1870 the Britannia's stage manager, Frederick Wilton, records going to see Conquest at the Grecian to prevent the rival theatre from performing another of Pitt's dramas, *The Beggar's Petition*, on the basis that it was legally Samuel Lane's property. He notes being shown the relevant agreement before he sets out.²⁵ Because of the piecemeal arrangement of the documentation it would not be a straightforward or quick job to trace individual plays within the pages of the Assignments Books so at various times efforts were made to establish the exact copyright situation. Hence there are three distinct sets of handwritten annotations, one in pencil, one in blue crayon and another in red ink.

Conveniently one of the pencil annotations reads ‘No MS 1888 ALC’, thus proving it to be the work of Alfred Lane Crauford.²⁶ I suspect he was the one who originally numbered the memoranda of agreement. The same hand also appears to have added the alternative names under which some of the plays were staged. Similarly, after Williams purchased the Library, he crosschecked the agreements in the Assignments Book against the collection of play manuscripts. On a sheet attached to the front board he writes: ‘Those assignments marked across in red ink there are no S’crips’. This is doubly underlined and signed in red ‘A. W. – July 17 – 1904’ (shortly after he purchased the volume). A large number of the agreements are thus crossed with two parallel red lines. On other pages Williams variously writes ‘No MS’, ‘Have MS’ or ‘Published Book’. The annotations written in blue are not attributed but may also be by Crauford. They generally consist of underlining of fees paid and clarification of play titles. For example, on a loose agreement dated 16 March 1881 and made with J. B. Johnstone for his adaptation of *Les Flibustiers de la Sonore*, the annotation reads ‘To be Entitled “Tiger of Mexico”’.²⁷

An important question that needs to be asked in relation to the Assignments Book is how comprehensive is its coverage of the purchasing activity of the theatre? Due to its age and the conglomerate nature of the volume it would not be surprising if at least a few items had become detached over time. This proves to be the case as two printed Memoranda of Agreement made with Pitt, with six manuscript agreements for Hazlewood written on the reverse, can be found in the records of the theatre held by Hackney Archives.²⁸ Another handwritten agreement, relating to William Seaman’s 1855 drama *Hands Masks and Ugly Faces (Shelah from Cork and the Spy in the Camp)*, was recently sold by a dealer in ephemera.²⁹

Comparison with the plays registered as submitted to the Lord Chamberlain's office for licensing shows that there are other omissions.³⁰ None of the Britannia's dramas that were refused licences (such as Pitt's *Terry Tyrone*, which the Examiner of Plays rejected in February 1847) appear in the Assignments Book. The printed memoranda specifically state that Samuel Lane has consented to produce the said drama at the Saloon 'provided that the Examiner of Plays for the time being shall duly Licence' it. Given that most of the agreements predate the licensing of the dramas, we can presume that there were originally entries for these rejected dramas but they were subsequently removed. There is no indication of if, or when, authors returned money to the theatre's treasury. On the other hand, a small number of items documented in the volume do not appear to have been sent for licensing, or at least not under the same title. Similarly, I have not been able to trace some of the Britannia's licensed dramas as listed in the Lord Chamberlain's Day Books. An example is William Travers' two-act drama *Moonlight Jack, or the King of the Road*, which was licensed on 25 June 1867 and performed at the theatre from 1 July of the same year.³¹ Although the Assignments Book documents other agreements with Travers there is no entry for this play.

Despite the fact that the Assignments Book cannot furnish a complete record of all the theatre's dealings, the volume collects together significantly more information than is available for similar establishments of the Victorian period. Even for theatres, such as Sadler's Wells, where there is much extant documentation, there is no comparable set of records for the mid-nineteenth century. Valuable as a unique working document, the Assignments Book is a testimony to the systematic record-keeping of the Britannia's management.

1 *Stage*, 19 May 1904, p. 24.

2 For more information on the Britannia see Jim Davis (ed.) *The Britannia Diaries 1863–1875: Selections from the Diaries of Frederick C. Wilton* (London: Society for Theatre Research, 1992); Janice Norwood, ‘Visual Culture and the Repertoire of a Popular East-End Theatre’ in Anselm Heinrich, Kate Newey & Jeffrey Richards (eds), *Ruskin, the Theatre and Victorian Visual Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) pp. 135–53; and Janice Norwood, ‘Harlequin Encore: 60 Years of the Britannia Pantomime’ in Jim Davis (ed.) *Victorian Pantomime: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) pp. 70–84.

3 For example, *Stage*, 20 September 1906, p. 12.

4 Arthur Williams, ‘My Reminiscences. IX’, *Stage*, 3 December 1914, p. 26.

5 *Stage*, 12 February 1942, p.5.

6 Barry Duncan, *The St. James’s Theatre: Its Strange & Complete History 1835–1957* (London: Barrie & Rockliff, 1964).

7 The original folios of printed memoranda had previously been numbered sequentially in pencil (although there are a few inconsistencies), so I have used this as the foundation of the new system. In addition, I have given alphabetical suffixes to items that are stuck or otherwise attached to these folios, e.g. 26a, 178d. Where there are multiple items on one folio they are ordered from the top working down the page and from the outer to inner layers. Loose items are recorded in sequence with the prefix L, e.g. L6. I should like to record my thanks to Luiz Abrahao for creating the software template for the database.

8 For discussion of this drama and a scholarly edition of the manuscript in the Lord Chamberlain’s Collection of Plays, see *Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film* 38:1 (Summer 2011).

9 Author's collection, Britannia Assignments Book (hereafter referred to as BAB) 63.

10 For example, BAB 30g and 36b.

11 BAB 178a.

12 Katherine Newey, *Women's Theatre Writing in Victorian Britain* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) p. 234.

13 BAB 102a.

14 BAB 130a. This agreement is sewn onto the verso of 130.

15 In 1873 and 1864 respectively; Allardyce Nicoll, *A History of English Drama 1660–1900, Vol. 5 Late Nineteenth Century Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962), p. 438.

16 The plays are *The Wife's Evidence*, *Fair Circassian* and *Imperial Guard*, BAB 56a.

17 BAB 86a.

18 *Era*, 4 September 1853, p. 10.

19 BAB 8b, 146a and 175a.

20 BAB 45b and British Library, ADD. MS 53703, Vol.2 1852–1865, Lord Chamberlain's Day Books.

21 BAB 27g and 97a.

22 The production was reviewed in the *Era* on 28 April 1867.

23 There are collectors of revenue stamps but the provenance of the Assignments Book means it unlikely to have been harvested for such purposes.

24 BAB 149a and review in *Era*, 14 October 1893, p. 8.

25 Jim Davis (ed.), *The Britannia Diaries*, p.180 and BAB 178c.

26 BAB 77a.

27 BAB L18.

28 The Memoranda are numbers 125 and 134, Hackney Archives, London, M4458.

29 It was offered for sale by Richard Ford in November 2012.

30 The process of comparison is complicated by the fact that the play titles given in the Assignments Book are sometimes different from those under which they were licensed.

31 British Library, ADD. MS 53704, Vol.3. 1866–1873, Lord Chamberlain's Day Books and Jim Davis (ed.), *The Britannia Diaries*, p. 125.

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