

Parsi Theatre And The City

Locations, patrons, audiences

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In 1840, 455 of Bombay's leading citizens submitted a petition to the Governor, Sir James Carnac, requesting the construction of a new theatre.

"The Humble Memorial of the undersigned Inhabitants of Bombay and others – Sheweth That your Memorialists are of opinion that the General public feeling in Bombay is Favourable to the erection of a Theatre for the purpose of Dramatic entertainment. There being no place of public amusement in the Island and that such a measure would promote good humour and tend to induce a desirable tone of feeling in Society at large, Your Memorialists regret deeply that the former Bombay Theatre which was identified with so many pleasant recollections should have been destroyed, and fallen a sacrifice to debt and want of efficient patronage".

The names of Jagannath Shankarseth and Framji Cowasji, prominent merchant princes, headed the list of backers for the project. After a campaign carried out in the pages of *The Bombay Gazette* and in meetings in the Town Hall, the government agreed to underwrite the project. But the new theatre remained an unrealised dream until Shankarseth donated a building site on Grant Road. Along with a generous contribution by Jamshedji Jejeebhoy, the shortfall was met and in 1846 the Grant Road Theatre opened, the fruition of these collective energies.

Thus began a new epoch in the urban life of Bombay and its public culture. Initially it was Bombay's merchants who pressed for theatre as an enhancement of civil society, a source of "good humour" and "desirable tone of feeling". Enlarging upon their commercial interests, they sought a physical site for cultural transactions, a "place of public amusement", as befitting the rising profile of the city and their own place within it. Yet once the theatre was built, performers, audiences, and patrons from diverse groups sought to establish their claims to it as a public good. The playhouse opened under English management, and the first plays performed there were in English. Before long however, the Grant Road Theatre was recognised as an ideal locus for Indian theatrical performances. Beginning in 1853, a group of professional players from Sangli, Maharashtra, staged dramas in the new theatre based on the Hindu epics. Parsi dramatic clubs similarly chose this site for their fledgling efforts, and for the next three decades, Grant Road and its theatres were synonymous with the Parsi theatre.

Here were offered unusual possibilities for theatrical production and reception. A proscenium arch rose high above the stage, positioning the players within an expansive picture frame and separating them from the audience. Massive painted curtains, sets that shifted between scenes and lavish costumes created a sumptuous atmosphere filled with exotic images. Gaslights placed on the apron of the stage lit the players from below, accentuating their gestures in uncanny ways. Seats arranged by class and row announced times for starting and stopping, and amenities such as refreshment rooms and intervals added a sense of decorum to the proceedings in the hall. Theatricality had suddenly reached a new level.

If the playhouse with its proscenium stage defined the interior spatial set-up, it also altered the older fluid geographies of performance. The physicality of the playhouse in the urban environment allowed the theatre to assume an enlarged social value. Beginning with the Grant Road Theatre, theatrical entertainments were relocated within particular zones of the city. Theatre-goers encountered each other in new spatial configurations that spiralled outwards from the purpose-built theatre hall to the entertainment district in which the hall was situated, and the larger patterns of traffic between the district and the city. Not only in its innovative visual economy but also in the ecological relationships in which it was embedded, the Parsi theatre introduced new equations between leisure and location.

In this essay, I consider the set of spatial transformations connected to urban expansion, the development of neighbourhoods, the consolidation of the mercantile class, and shifts in public performance. As Bombay developed from a colonial port into a major industrial centre, the city's theatre houses in their specific urban locations became indices of emerging social and cultural formations. Subsequently I examine the role of the *shetias* as cultural agents in the burgeoning metropolis, a group critical to both the growth of the city and the theatre. In the final section, I assemble a picture of audience participation in the urban theatre, based on a variety of historical sources.

Urban growth and theatre houses

In the century between 1776 when the first western-styled theatre house opened on the Bombay Green and 1879 when the Gaiety Theatre was built near Victoria Terminus, Bombay passed through a period of extraordinary prosperity and expansion. The population numbered 156,987 in 1816, having risen from 16,000 a century earlier. Less than forty years later, it had grown more than fivefold. In 1864, on the threshold of the Parsi theatre era, the first official census reported that the inhabitants of the city totalled 816,562, qualifying it for the proud title *urbs prima in Indis*.

This population was notable from the outset for its racial, religious and linguistic heterogeneity. A small British community, numbering no more than 1% of the total population, comprised mostly men in colonial service. The mercantile communities from Gujarat formed approximately 25% of the city's population. Included within this were the influential Parsis (6% of the total population of Bombay). Muslims constituted 20% of the populace; Hindus made up 65%. Indian Christians and Jews, as well as Armenians, Arabs, Malays and other groups lent an unusual degree of diversity to the city's character.

Initially the town grew around a central open space, called the Bombay Green, which

lay adjacent to the East India Company's fortified Castle. When the European zone was enclosed by walls in 1716, the Green formed the node at the intersection of the main streets leading from the three city gates. Renamed, in the 19th century, Elphinstone Circle and now known as Horniman Circle, the Bombay Green formed the focus of social life in the British settlement. It was here that Bombay's first theatre was built. An observer, W. Milburn, described the vicinity in 1813:

"In the centre of the town is a large open space, called the Green...; around the Green are many large well-built and handsome houses, the Government House and the church... On the right of the church gate is the bazaar... where the native merchants principally reside; at its commencement stands the theatre, a neat handsome structure".

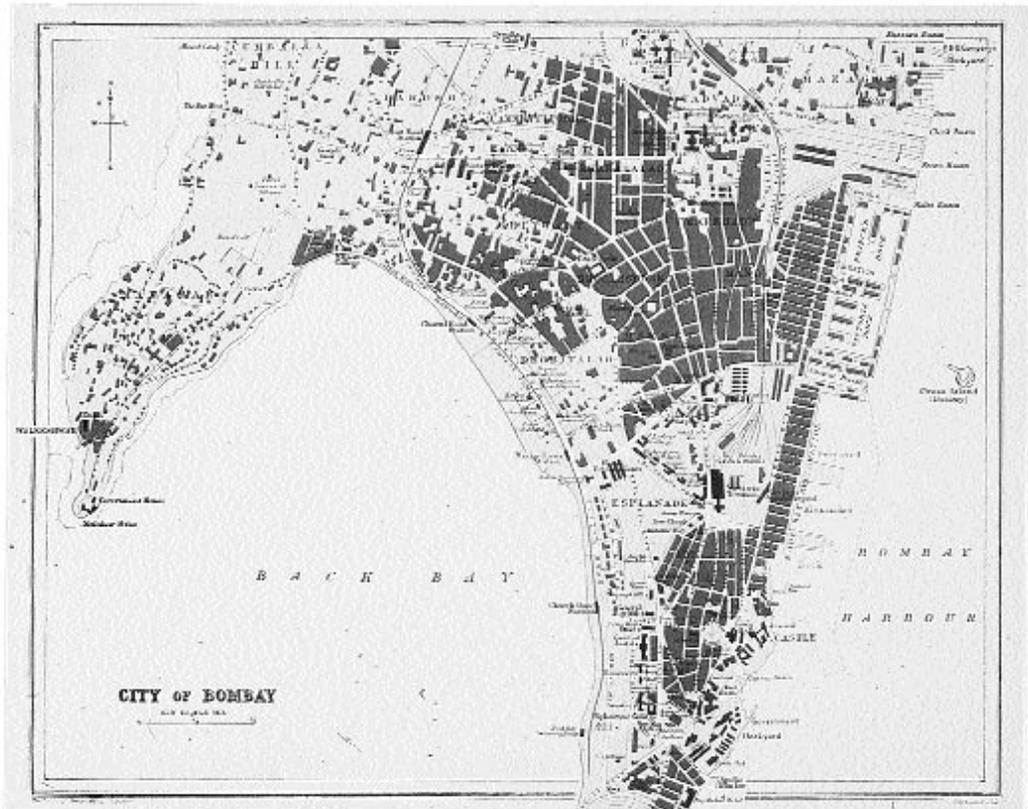
The theatre on the Green, also known as the Bombay Amateur Theatre, opened in 1776 and served as the principal stage for amateur theatricals and professional touring companies until its closure in 1835. Its location in the Green not only allowed for easy access by Europeans living close by, it signalled the place of theatrical spectatorship within the round of social and cultural activities that gave the port city its colonial character".

From the early days, geographical separation along racial lines divided the southern part of the island, the 'Fort' with its European businesses and residences, from the 'Native Town' to the north. The north-south cleavage reflected the unequal relations between the British colonisers and the people they ruled. Gradually, the northern part of the Fort became dominated by wealthy merchants, particularly Parsis, Baniyas and Bohras. These affluent residents were among the first Indians to evince an interest in theatre, and they were well situated to observe the fondness of the British for the stage, being so close to the Bombay Green.

After the great fire of 1803, which destroyed much of the northern Fort district, Indian merchants were encouraged to inhabit a separate 'Native Town', as existed in Calcutta and Madras. With the growth of banking, manufacturing and retail trade, this area expanded rapidly in the early 19th century, extending to the north. A significant reclamation project was the completion of Grant Road in 1839. (Insert map, from Maclean's *Guide to Bombay*, 1876.) It was built through a tract of open country along a parapet wall at a high elevation. The flats alongside Grant Road remained barren wastes where the town deposited its refuse. To the north of Grant Road began the New Town, including the populous neighbourhood of Kamathipura. Later synonymous with the red-light district, Kamathipura was named for the Kamathis, artisans and labourers from the Nizam's dominions around Hyderabad who immigrated to Bombay at the end of the 18th century.

It was on Grant Road, at the growing edge of the Native Town and far from the European quarter, that the first theatre was built. Known variously as the Theatre Royal, the *Badshahi Natyashala*, the *Shankarseth Natyashala*, or simply the Play House (*pila haus*), the Grant Road Theatre was the sole building on the street at the time of its opening. According to K.N. Kabra, the influential journalist, it stood "as an oasis in the desert". English society, although initially the intended audience for the theatre's shows, had to traverse a substantial distance to come from the Fort or Malabar Hill. The area rapidly developed into a thriving commercial district, but it remained distinctly downmarket.

The shift of the theatre to this part of the city suited the Indian theatre-going public,



whose numbers were on the rise. Grant Road was shortly populated by a number of other theatre houses including the Elphinstone, the Victoria Theatre, the Hindi *Natyashala*, the Grand Theatre, the Ripon and others. This district, separate from the better neighbourhoods of South Bombay, suited theatre managers intent on attracting a larger, more heterogeneous audience. Proximity to Khetwadi, Mazagaon and Girgaum ensured that the Hindu middle class would have ready access, just as the location of Market, Umarkhadi and Mandvi nearby invited Muslims. As textile mills mushroomed in Tardeo adjoining Grant Road to the west, workers availed of the chance to amuse themselves after long hours of employment.

With the employment of professional actors and actresses, the value of segregating entertainments in a separate district also increased. Theatre personnel whose reputations and nocturnal activities were considered dubious were separated from the neighbourhoods of their well-to-do patrons. The affluent public was inconvenienced by the rigours of travel

to the Grant Road entertainment district. But they also could take some satisfaction in the compartmentalisation between their everyday world and the tainted *demi monde* of the theatre district.

Although the shift to Grant Road marked a broadening of the class base of theatrical spectatorship, the Bombay theatre world did not abandon its ties to elite patronage, nor did it confine its activities to the Native Town. An impressive wave of urban development and architectural activity altered the character of the Fort section of Bombay beginning in the 1860s. The construction of large public buildings was now embraced as a visible expression of Britain's hold over its colony in the age of empire. The Secretariat building was completed in 1874, the vast Law Courts in 1878, and the University clock tower in 1878, all based on the Gothic Revival style. At the site of the old Bori Bandar railway station the massive Victoria Terminus arose between 1878 and 1887. This feat of modern engineering was the largest building constructed by the British in India. Attesting to the Victorian synthesis of science, industry and commerce, these monumental edifices were located at the heart of the administrative and commercial areas of the city. Their magnificence created the imperial aura of the city that radiated outwards, travelling along with the Parsi theatrical companies as they toured South and Southeast Asia.

Eager to plant themselves firmly in this part of the city, Parsi company owners opened two large theatres near the Victoria Terminus. The first was the Gaiety Theatre built by C.S. Nazir, a leading Parsi actor-manager, in 1879. Designed by an architect named Campbell, its stage dimensions were seventy by forty feet, with a curtain height of twenty-two feet. The Governor, Sir Richard Temple, took responsibility for supervising the crafting of the painted drop scene. The image chosen was one to reinforce civic pride: "a fine view of Back Bay with the new public buildings – of which the High Courts, the Clock Tower, and the Secretariat are the most prominent – from Malabar Point". The Novelty Theatre, constructed by the Victoria Company's owners Baliwala and Moghul in 1887, was even larger, with a stage size of ninety feet by sixty-five feet. It seated fourteen hundred people and featured a drop scene by the German painter Maurice Freyberger. The Novelty was torn down and the Excelsior Theatre erected on the same spot in 1909.

The extravagant fittings of these new theatres generated rivalry on Grant Road, where the old theatre houses were given a quick refurbishing. The foremost location of the Gaiety and Novelty renewed elite interest in the productions of the Parsi, Gujarati and Marathi theatres, as well as attracting English and European performers on their global tours. The two halls were used for early cinematic exhibitions as well. After their first shows at Watson's Hotel, the Lumière Brothers moved their Cinématographe to the Novelty in 1896.

The three areas in which theatre houses came up in Bombay mapped out distinct locations in the urban landscape. Grant Road was a busy cross-town thoroughfare, whereas the Bombay Green and Victoria Terminus areas were each hubs where commercial and civic activity converged. Each facilitated a high degree of public access, but in distinctive ways. In the days when Bombay was a small outpost, the theatre was next to the church at the heart of the colonial quarter. As the city expanded to the north, the entertainment district shifted to accommodate its growing public in the 'Native Town'. Then as Bombay acquired its metropolitan skyline and became linked to the hinterland, the city centre assumed

renewed significance as a focus for leisure and sociability.

Enclosed in the European-style playhouse, the Parsi theatre presented new solutions to the problems of boundaries and visibility. The building's design symbolised status and order; its specified timings required discipline even in the pursuit of leisure. As an enclosed physical structure, the theatre was capable of restricting access. Through its internal compartmentalisation it could separate groups by assigned seating within the pit or orchestra, galleries, and boxes. Yet its location within a densely populated area, criss-crossed by the commerce of multiple groups, also made it available and connected to the world outside. The space of theatre was inscribed at times with different, even opposed, meanings. Sometimes it tended to enclosure and separation, working in the interests of class differentiation. At others it yielded to openness and excess, merging into the liminal space of its surroundings. The use made of the theatre space depended on the desires of its patrons, performers and audiences, who themselves were extremely diverse.

Commerce, theatre, and cultural patronage

The early Indian patrons of theatre in Bombay were upper-class men whose gains had been acquired through trade and finance. A colonial city based on commerce and access to the sea, Bombay lacked both an aristocracy with strong ties to the agricultural hinterland and a priestly caste of Brahmins to legitimise their regime. The mercantile elite, or *shetia* class, consisted of families of diverse caste, regional and religious origins. These were, in the main, communities and castes that had long been involved in trade in western India.

Most numerous among the *shetias* were members of the Parsi community. As immigrants from Iran in the 8th century, Parsis had maintained their distinct faith of Zoroastrianism, while adopting the Gujarati language and other customs of the surrounding society. Before the 18th century, their economic activities were diverse, with many engaging in agriculture and artisanal occupations such as weaving. A persistent trading practice among a section of the Parsis linked India and the Islamic world in pre-modern times. Hindu and Jain Banias from Gujarat were the second important group, which included several sub-castes. The third important trading community was the Bohra community, converts from Hinduism to Islam, who also were present in Bombay from the 18th century on. Later, they were joined by the Memons and Khojas. These groups established the markedly Gujarati character of the *shetia* class; the Gujarati language became the lingua franca for business negotiations in the city. Non-Gujarati mercantile groups also were represented among the *shetias*. Jagannath Shankarseth came from the Maharastrian Sonar caste of goldsmiths and jewellers. The shipbuilding Konkani Muslims, descendants of Arab seafarers and Baghdadi Jews, 19th century immigrants from Iraq, were other important trading communities.

There were many avenues to profit for this class. In the 18th century, a number of wealthy Indian brokers financed British military expansion and territorial conquest. Middlemen staffed the Company's houses of agency and supplied servants to its private or 'country' trade. Indian merchants disposed of imported goods on local markets and obtained new goods for export. They also supplied the ships, on which the entire trade was dependent; most ships were built by one family, the Wadias, who migrated from Surat to Bombay in 1735. As a result of these new kinds of transactions, by the 1780s a commercial revolu-

tion had transformed western India. When the Company lost its monopoly over the lucrative China trade in 1833, new opportunities burgeoned for the Bombay *shetias*. They made enormous fortunes in opium and cotton and established a number of large merchant houses. Later in the century, while some families lost fortunes in the crash of the cotton shares market, others generated new wealth by investing in the manufacture of textiles.

By the beginning of the 19th century, the *shetias* had begun to crystallise into a self-conscious group. Their physical proximity symbolised the tight network of relationships that ensured mutual benefit. *Shetia* presence became inscribed in the public space of the city as the great families clustered in the Fort area. By the 1830s, they were uniting in ways that went beyond simple commercial collaboration. They founded the Bombay Chamber of Commerce, and through this body petitioned for the construction of roads and bridges. Three years later they petitioned Parliament to protect the trade in opium. A wider set of concerns were voiced in the request to the House of Commons for Indian representation on the Bench of Justices, which resulted in the appointment of 13 Indians as Justices of the Peace in 1834. By the 1850s, most of the leading *shetias* had become Justices, and this became an avenue for direct involvement in the municipal administration of the city in the sixties and seventies.

During this period of expanding civic activity, the *shetias* also participated as spectators at the English-language theatre. They were most likely drawn to the cultural capital of theatre in a context wherein sociability and mutual hospitality reinforced economic collaboration. Leading *shetias* may have been invited to the English theatre in return for hosting their colleagues at entertainments such as *nautch* parties. By 1821 they had begun attending the Bombay Theatre on the Green, and in 1830 they played a major role in its renovation. *Shetia* support for the Grant Road Theatre showed the nexus between civic leadership and theatre as an object of cultural philanthropy, marking the mercantile class for their status and taste.

Simultaneously it laid the foundation for much broader class participation in the years to come. Whereas the Parsi theatre companies were largely financed by *shetias*, who bought and sold shares in them and stood to gain or lose sizeable amounts of money, the Parsi theatre depended heavily on the emerging middle class of Bombay for its audience and corpus of dramas.

Members of the middle class were distinguished more by their educational histories and public roles than by their sources of income. Some continued to carry on commercial activities or priestly duties; others were pioneers in professions such as law, education, medicine and journalism. Although the *shetias* who flourished early in the century were informally acquainted with European knowledge and attitudes, the middle-class group were distinctly marked by formal induction into English education. Education opened pathways to entirely new sources of livelihood such as government service, making available occupations that were neither desired by the rich nor accessible to the poor.

With the founding of the Bombay Association in 1852, the middle class began to compete with the *shetias* for control of civic organisations. Voicing their views through political bodies and the press, the earliest generation of Elphinstonians, known as "Young Bombay", and later a broader section of lawyers and graduates challenged the unity and numerical strength of the upper-class coalition. Gradually they introduced a more inclusive agenda that

reflected the gamut of issues facing the middle classes. Pheroze Shah Mehta emerged in the 1870s as a leader of the educated in opposition to *shetia* predominance, a role that flowered with his participation in the Bombay Presidency Association and the Indian National Congress, both formed in 1885.

The middle class attempted to free itself from material want and the symbolic tyranny of wealth by finding respectable alternatives outside the pursuit of commerce. The early Gujarati playwrights of the Parsi theatre and many of the pioneer performers were men who made their livings in journalism, law, medicine and other professions. One of the first Parsi groups to appear on the Grant Road stage, the Elphinstone Club, was founded at Elphinstone College and comprised students and ex-students from the prestigious college. The Victoria Theatrical Company was established by K.N. Kabra, an eminent journalist who edited the Gujarati newspaper *Rast Gofar*. He was succeeded as manager by Dadabhai Sohrabji Patel, one of the first Master of Arts graduates from the University of Bombay. The growth of the middle-class audience was aided and abetted by Bombay's assorted English and Gujarati newspapers, which displayed paid advertisements, commented avidly on performances, and created a continuous furore of debate and sensation around the fledgling theatre.

As the Parsi theatre entered the phase of professionalisation in the 1870s, more of the actors were drawn from Bombay's lower classes, and class differentiation among the audience also appears to have increased. Kavasji Khatau, C.S. Nazir, Jehangir Khambatta and other actors are known to have lived in the narrow lanes of Dhobi Talao, a poor district centrally located in the city. Sixty-eight percent of its households consisted of only one room. Accounts of Parsi prosperity in the 19th century obscure the fact that Bombay's Parsi community also comprised large numbers of poor people. Many of the poor descended from Parsi artisans and farmers who arrived in the city after the decline of Surat and the famines that afflicted Gujarat between 1780 and 1840. Lower-class groups eked out a living as domestic servants, petty clerks, mechanics, waiters and carpenters. There was even a band of poor Parsi thugs active in the Bazaar Gate area of Bombay in the 1850s. A genteel brand of poverty also characterised families whose traditional occupation had been the priesthood. Offspring of some of these families, e.g. Dadabhai Naoroji, K.N. Kabra, and M.N. Dhalla, with scholarships or other support were able to work their way into the middle class.

The prices for admission to the Grant Road Theatre ranged from an upper ticket of Rs. 2.50 or Rs. 3 for a box to a place in the pit for one rupee or less. It is therefore unlikely that the indigent were able to attend shows in the Parsi theatre, at least in mid-century. The companies however depended on working-class Parsis and other communities for all the labour and services that were necessary to sustain their productions. As the base of support for the Parsi theatre broadened, ticket prices declined and audiences shifted downwards in class composition. Patrons and dignitaries, including British officials, would still fill the boxes and promenade at society events such as benefit nights. The middle-class viewers came to include more Hindus, Muslims and non-Parsi spectators, an outcome in part of the Grant Road location but also related to the companies' attempts to diversify the thematic content of their dramas and present perennials such as stories from the epics and

puranas, Muslim historicals and romances, and social dramas aimed at the middle class.

A bipartite structure of presentation, consisting of a serious drama or social comedy followed by a farce or other variety acts, also strengthened the diversified class basis among the audience. The serious play would be announced for a fixed time, usually early in the evening, e.g. 8:00 pm. However, in keeping with traditional theatrical performances which ran through the night, the main drama would be followed by farces and skits whose performance time was not fixed and which can be assumed to have catered to an audience whose daily routines were less influenced by the European temporalities of work and leisure. The farces, in other words, probably attracted a lowbrow audience, and admission rates seem to have been reduced for the late show.

Prominent among the lower-class audience were soldiers and sailors. The military forces were invested in promoting theatrical evenings as a harmless form of entertainment. Theatre could distract the soldiers from visiting the red-light districts, with the ensuing dangers of sexual contact and venereal disease. In the absence of playhouses, regimental theatre formed a regular part of cantonment life, and the garrison band was frequently pressed into service even in the Gaiety and Novelty. Acts of disrespect and rowdiness are often attributed to soldiers and sailors by the press, although such behaviour was certainly not limited to this group.

Family shows, that is special performances for women only or women properly chaperoned, were also a feature of Parsi theatre's popularity and growing respectability among the middle class. Certain companies made it a point to cater to female spectators and even their dependent children, as for example the *Natak Uttejok Mandali* which set up crèches outside the playhouse where children were tended by their *ayahs*. Although separate sections were reserved for women during mixed performances, the presence of women of easy virtue within these areas was a source of comment in the press. When actresses began to appear on stage, a furore once more erupted. Certain companies such as the New Alfred upheld a ban on women performers, whereas the Victoria led the way in employing women, a move considered a sign of progress by certain reformers and a rank concession to commercialism by others.

The kind of atmosphere generated by this mixed audience within the theatre can be judged from contemporary newspaper reports. Notices published in newspapers, as well as handbills posted about the town, were the main method of informing the public of upcoming theatre events. Journalists, who often were in the employ of one company or another, acted as opinion-makers and leaders, urging the public to greater attendance and castigating performers for their shortcomings. They also commented upon behavioural norms and acted as a tribunal in cases of dispute. Despite the spatial regulation that the proscenium theatre introduced, audiences were exuberant and fulsome in their praise or blame of theatrical performances. A favourable reception was demonstrated by loud applause, shouting, and demands that a song or dance be repeated "Once more". Multiple curtain calls and showering of artists with cash gifts or *inam* were also common. Disfavour was indicated by hurling of *chappals*, rotten fruit, empty liquor bottles and shouts of "shame, shame". Fighting and rowdiness were common, onstage and backstage among the artists, between the artists and the audience, and among different groups in the

audience. Shows could not start without the necessary display of force by a police constable. A night out at the theatre was made even more unpredictable by the frequent mechanical disasters and foul-ups that besieged the theatre companies. Fires were also a common menace, as they were in theatres in England and America. Given all the obstacles, it is no wonder that theatre managers spoke of their successful performances as "victories" and begged the audience through their prologues and prefaces to show mercy and favour them with kindness.

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