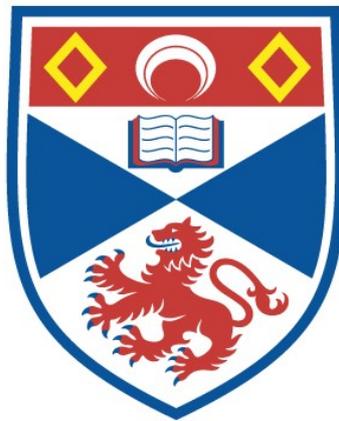


WALTER RICHARD SICKERT AND THE THEATRE, c.1880-c.1940

William W. Rough

A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD
at the
University of St Andrews



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Walter Richard Sickert and the Theatre c.1880-c.1940

William W. Rough

Submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

School of Art History

University of St Andrews

5 July 2010

Declarations

I, William W. Rough, hereby certify that this thesis, which is approximately 83,935 words in length, has been written by me, that it is the record of work carried out by me and that it has not been submitted in any previous application for a higher degree.

I was admitted as a research student in [July, 2003] and as a candidate for the degree of PhD Art History in [July, 2003]; the higher study for which this is a record was carried out in the University of St Andrews between [2003] and [2010].

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Abstract

Prior to his career as a painter, Walter Richard Sickert (1860-1940) was employed for a number of years as an actor. Indeed the muse of the theatre was a constant influence throughout Sickert's life and work yet this relationship is curiously neglected in studies of his career. The following thesis, therefore, is an attempt to address this vital aspect of Sickert's *œuvre*.

Chapter one (Act I: The Duality of Performance and the Art of the Music-Hall) explores Sickert's acting career and its influence on his music-hall paintings from the 1880s and 1890s, particularly how this experience helps to differentiate his work from Whistler and Degas. Chapter two (Act II: Restaging Camden Town: Walter Sickert and the theatre c.1905-c.1915) examines the influence of the developing New Drama on Sickert's works from his Fitzroy Street/Camden Town period. Chapter three (Act III: Sickert and Shakespeare: Interpreting the Theatre c.1920-1940) details Sickert's interest in the rediscovery of Shakespeare as a metaphor for his solution to the crisis in modern art. Finally, chapter four (Act IV: Sickert's Simulacrum: Representations and Characterisations of the Artist in Texts, Portraits and Self-Portraits c.1880-c.1940) discusses his interest in the concept of theatrical identity, both in terms of an interest in acting and the "character" of artist and self-publicity.

Each chapter analyses the influence of the theatre on Sickert's work, both in terms of his interest in theatrical subject matter but also in a more general sense of the theatrical *milieu* of his interpretations. Consequently Sickert's paintings tell us much about changing fashions, traditions and interests in the British theatre during his period. The history of the British stage is therefore the backdrop for the study of a single artist's obsession with theatricality and visual modernity.

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First I would like to thank my supervisor, Robin Spencer, for his mentorship, consistent advice and encouragement throughout this project. His generous guidance, assistance and support have been invaluable.

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Fig. 2.65: *The Objection* by Walter Sickert, dated 1917. Oil on canvas, 82.5 x 49.5 cms. Private Collection. Wendy Baron, *Sickert: Paintings and Drawings* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2006), 384 (fig. 375.2).

Act III: Sickert and the Stage: Interpreting the Theatre c.1920-1940

Fig. 3.01: *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Savoy Theatre, February-May 1914. Daily Mirror Studios. V&A Theatre Museum Archives, London. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 1914, Savoy Theatre Production File.

Fig. 3.02: *The Winter's Tale*, Savoy Theatre, September-November 1912. V&A Theatre Museum Archives, London. *The Winter's Tale*, 1912, Savoy Theatre Production File.

Fig. 3.03: *Twelfth Night*, Savoy Theatre, November 1912-March 1913. Daily Mirror Studios/Daily Mail Studios. V&A Theatre Museum Archives, London. *Twelfth Night*, 1912-1913, Savoy Theatre Production File.

Fig. 3.04: Walter Sickert and Lilian Baylis at Sadler's Well's Theatre, London. 21 October 1932. Mander & Mitchenson Collection. Wendy Baron & Richard Shone, *Sickert Paintings and Drawings* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1992), 25 (fig. 22).

Fig. 3.05: John Gielgud and Peggy Ashcroft in *Romeo and Juliet*. New Theatre (Old Vic Production) by Howard Coster (?) (1885-1959), 1935. National Portrait Gallery, London. V&A Theatre Museum Archives, London. *Romeo and Juliet*, 1935, New Theatre Production File.

Fig. 3.06: *Juliet and her Nurse* by Walter Sickert, c.1935-36. Oil on canvas, 76.2 x 60.9 cms. Leeds City Art Gallery. Wendy Baron & Richard Shone, *Sickert Paintings and Drawings* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1992), 327 (cat. 122).

Fig. 3.07: Edith Evans and Peggy Ashcroft in *Romeo and Juliet*. New Theatre (Old Vic Production) by Howard Coster (?), 1935. V&A Theatre Museum Archives, London. *Romeo and Juliet*, 1935, New Theatre Production File.

Fig. 3.08: *Jessica Tandy and John Gielgud in 'Hamlet'* by Walter Sickert, dated 1935. Size and present whereabouts unknown. Rebecca Daniels, "Newly discovered photographic sources for Walter Sickert's theatre paintings of the 1930s", *The Burlington Magazine*, Vol. CXLVIII, No. 1237, April 2006, 272-276 (273).

Fig. 3.09: Jessica Tandy and John Gielgud in *Hamlet* by Bertram Park (1883-1972). New Theatre (Old Vic Production), 1934-35. V&A Theatre Museum Archives, London. *Hamlet*, 1935, New Theatre Production File.

Fig. 3.10: *Sweet Prince. Johnstone Forbes-Robertson as Hamlet* by Walter Sickert, by 1932. Oil on canvas, 71 x 60.5 cms. Private Collection. Wendy Baron, *Sickert: Paintings and Drawings* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2006), 531 (fig. 705).

Fig. 3.11: *Johnstone Forbes-Robertson as Hamlet*. Drury Lane, 1913. *The Illustrated London News*, 29 March 1913, No. 1, 398.

Fig. 3.12: *Sir Nigel Playfair as Tony Lumpkin* by Walter Sickert, 1928. Oil on canvas, 178 x 124.5 cms. Private Collection. Wendy Baron, *Sickert: Paintings and Drawings* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2006), 545 (fig. 743).

Fig. 3.13: Photo of Playfair in *She Stoops to Conquer, or, Mistakes of a Night*, Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith between August and October 1928. V&A Theatre Museum Archives, London. *She Stoops to Conquer, or, Mistakes of a Night*, 1928, Lyric Theatre Production File.

Fig. 3.14: *Variation on 'Othello'* by Walter Sickert, c.1933-34. Oil on canvas, 112 x 73.5 cms. Bristol Museum and Art Gallery. Arts Council of Great Britain, *Late Sickert: Paintings 1927 to 1942* (London: ACGB, 1982), 43 (Plate 44).

Fig. 3.15: *Miss Gwen Ffrangcon-Davies as Isabella of France in Marlowe's 'Edward II': La Louvre* by Walter Sickert, 1932. Oil on canvas, 244.5 x 91.5 cms. Tate Gallery, London. Wendy Baron, *Sickert: Paintings and Drawings* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2006), 545 (fig. 744).

Fig. 3.16: Gwen Ffrangcon-Davies as Isabella of France in Marlowe's *Edward II* by Bertram Park. Regent Theatre, 1923. Gwen Ffrangcon-Davies Archive, Martial Rose Library, University of Winchester.

Fig. 3.17: *Gwen Ffrangcon-Davies as Elizabeth Herbert in 'The Lady with a Lamp'* by Walter Sickert, c.1932-34. Oil on canvas, 122 x 68.5 cms. Pallant House, Chichester. Wendy Baron, *Sickert: Paintings and Drawings* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2006), 546 (fig. 745).

Fig. 3.18: *Gwen Ffrangcon-Davies as Elizabeth Herbert in 'The Lady with a Lamp'* photograph by Yvonne Gregory (1889-1970), c.1932. Gwen Ffrangcon-Davies Archive, Martial Rose Library, University of Winchester.

Fig. 3.19: *Peggy Ashcroft and Paul Robeson in 'Othello'* by Walter Sickert, 1935-36. Oil on canvas, 96.5 x 51 cms. Private Collection. Wendy Baron & Richard Shone, *Sickert Paintings and Drawings* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1992), 329 (cat. 123).

Fig. 3.20: *'As You Like It' Peggy Ashcroft as Rosalind: 'Wear this for me'* by Walter Sickert, 1933. Oil on canvas, 75 x 30 cms. Government Art Collection, London. Wendy Baron, *Sickert: Paintings and Drawings* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2006), 547 (fig. 747).

Fig. 3.21: *'As You Like It' Peggy Ashcroft as Rosalind: 'Wear this for me'*, c.1932. Photograph. V&A Theatre Museum Archives, London. *As You Like It*, 1932, Old Vic Production File.

Fig. 3.22: *'The Taming of the Shrew'* by Walter Sickert, c.1937. Oil on canvas, 100.5x61 cms. Cartwright Hall Art Gallery, Bradford. Alistair Smith, Alistair (ed), *Walter Sickert 'drawing is the thing'* (Manchester: Whitworth Art Gallery, 2005), 153 (fig. 8.07).

Fig. 3.23: *Taming of the Shrew*, c.1937. New Theatre/Old Vic between March and May 1937. V&A Theatre Museum Archives, London, *Taming of the Shrew*, 1937, New Theatre/Old Vic Production File.

Fig. 3.24: *'The Taming of the Shrew'* by Walter Sickert, c.1937. Oil on canvas, 51 x 78 cms. Private Collection. Wendy Baron, *Sickert: Paintings and Drawings* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2006), 553 (fig. 761).

Fig. 3.25: *Taming of the Shrew*, c.1937. Photograph. New Theatre/Old Vic between March and May 1937. V&A Theatre Museum Archives, London, *Taming of the Shrew*, 1937, New Theatre/Old Vic Production File.

Fig. 3.26: *Peggy Ashcroft as Nina in 'The Seagull'* by Walter Sickert, 1936-37. Oil on canvas, 99 x 44.5 cms. Private Collection. Wendy Baron, *Sickert: Paintings and Drawings* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2006), 552 (fig. 759).

Act IV: Sickert's Simulacrum: Representations and Characterisations of the Artist in Texts, Portraits and Self-Portraits c.1880 - c.1940

Fig. 4.01: *Self-Portrait* by Walter Sickert, 1882. Pen and ink on paper, 17.1 x 10.8 cms. Walter Sickert Collection, London Borough of Islington, Libraries Department. Wendy Baron, *Sickert: Paintings and Drawings* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2006), 146 (fig. 2).

Fig. 4.02: *Portrait of Walter Sickert* by Louise Jopling, c.1883. Sketch, unknown size/location. Louise Jopling, *Twenty Years of My Life* (London: John Lane/Bodley Head, 1925), 226.

Fig. 4.03: *Sickert and Degas*, c.1885. Photograph. Walter Sickert Collection, London Borough of Islington, Libraries Department. Wendy Baron & Richard Shone, *Sickert Paintings and Drawings* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1992), 56 (fig. 69).

Fig. 4.04: *Walter Sickert* by Philip Wilson Steer, c.1894. Oil on canvas, 59.7 x 29.8cms. National Portrait Gallery, London.

Fig. 4.05: *L'Homme à la Palette* by Walter Sickert, c.1894. Oil on canvas, 76 x 31 cms. Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney. Wendy Baron & Richard Shone, *Sickert Paintings and Drawings* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1992), 60 (cat. 1).

Fig. 4.06: *Self-Portrait* by Walter Sickert, c.1896. Oil on canvas, 45.7 x 35.6 cms. Leeds City Art Gallery. Wendy Baron & Richard Shone, *Sickert Paintings and Drawings* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1992), 102 (cat. 19).

Fig. 4.07: *Walter Sickert* by James Abbott McNeill Whistler, 1895. Lithograph, 22.5 x 18.2 cms. British Museum, London. Andrew Dempsey, *James McNeill Whistler & Walter Richard Sickert* (Madrid: la Fundación, 1998), 146 (cat. 60).

Fig. 4.08: *Walter Sickert* by Jacques-Emile Blanche, 1898. Oil on canvas, 80.9 x 64.8 cms. National Portrait Gallery, London. Wendy Baron & Richard Shone, *Sickert Paintings and Drawings* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1992), 40 (fig. 43).

Fig. 4.09: *The Old and Young Self*, “Old Self: “No, you didn’t think you were going to become a Master, and an Oracle, did you? You thought Jimmy Whistler was the last of the Oracles and Masters, didn’t you? hmm, *p’tit imbecile?*” by Max Beerbohm (1872-1956), 1924. Drawing, 29.8 x 22.56 cms. Lord Cottesloe Collection. Denys Sutton, *Walter Sickert: A Biography*. (London: Michael Joseph, 1976), figure 36.

Fig. 4.10: *Jack the Ripper’s Bedroom* by Walter Sickert, c.1908. Oil on canvas, 50.8 x 40.6 cms. Manchester City Art Gallery.

Fig. 4.11: *Sickert in his studio at 1 Highbury Place* by unknown photographer (Thérèse Lessore?), c.1930 Walter Sickert Collection, London Borough of Islington, Libraries Department, X59 X210 SIC (WR) ACC X1706.

Fig. 4.12: *Walter Sickert* by unknown photographer, undated (c.1910?). Walter Sickert Collection, London Borough of Islington, Libraries Department, X59 X210 SIC (WR) ACC X1715.

Fig. 4.13: *Walter Sickert* by unknown photographer, undated (c.1920?). Walter Sickert Collection, London Borough of Islington, Libraries Department, X59 X210 SIC (WR)

Fig. 4.14: *Sickert and his boots* by unknown photographer (Thérèse Lessore?), c.1935. Walter Sickert Collection, London Borough of Islington, Libraries Department, X59 X210 SIC (WR)

Fig. 4.15: *Sickert and Beard and Bowler* by unknown photographer, c.1938. London: Tate Gallery Archive, TGA 8120.

Fig. 4.16: *Sickert on his stage in his studio at St Peter’s, Thanet* by unknown photographer (Thérèse Lessore?). Walter Sickert Collection, London Borough of Islington, Libraries Department, X59 X210 SIC (WR) ACC X1706.

Fig. 4.17: *Self-Portrait: the Bust of Tom Sayers* by Walter Sickert, c.1913. Oil on canvas, 59 x 49.5 cms. Ashmolean Museum, Oxford. Wendy Baron & Richard Shone, *Sickert Paintings and Drawings* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1992), 247 (cat. 85).

Fig. 4.18: *Mr. Walter Sickert (After his own manner)* by Jan Junosza de Rosciszewski (Tom Titt). Sketch, unknown size/location. *The New Age*, 15 May 1913.

Fig. 4.19: *Lazarus Breaks his Fast* by Richard [Walter] Sickert, c.1927. Oil on canvas, 76.2 x 63.5 cms. Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh. Wendy Baron, *Sickert: Paintings and Drawings* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2006), 519 (fig. 681).

Fig. 4.20: *The Servant of Abraham* by Richard [Walter] Sickert, c.1929. Oil on canvas, 61 x 51.8 cms. Tate Gallery, London. Wendy Baron, *Sickert: Paintings and Drawings* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2006), 526 (fig. 696).

Fig. 4.21: *The Raising of Lazarus* by Richard [Walter] Sickert, c.1929-32. Oil on wallpaper on canvas 243.9 x 91.5 cms. National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. Wendy Baron & Richard Shone, *Sickert Paintings and Drawings* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1992), 292 (cat. 200).

Fig. 4.22: *The Juvenile Lead* by Walter Sickert, 1907. Oil on canvas, 51 x 45.8 cms. Southampton City Art Gallery. Wendy Baron & Richard Shone, *Sickert Paintings and Drawings* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1992), 195 (cat. 62).

Fig. 4.23: *Self-Portrait (with glasses)* by Walter Sickert, c.1903-04. Charcoal, pen and ink, 39.7 x 28.7 cms. Ashmolean Museum, Oxford. Wendy Baron, *Sickert: Paintings and Drawings* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2006), 289 (fig. 204).

Fig. 4.24: *Self-Portrait with La Giuseppina* by Walter Sickert, 1903-04. Oil on canvas, 25.4 x 20.32 cms. Harvard Art Museum, Fogg Art Museum. Robert Upstone, *Sickert in Venice* (London: Scala, 2009), 30 (fig. 12).

Fig. 4.25: *The Front at Hove. Turpe Senex Miles, Turpe Senilis Amor* by Walter Sickert, dated 1930. Oil on canvas, 64 x 76 cms. London: Tate Gallery.

Fig. 4.26: *Summer Lightning* by Richard [Walter] Sickert, c.1931-32. Oil on canvas, 65.5 x 72.5. Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool. Wendy Baron & Richard Shone, *Sickert Paintings and Drawings* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1992), 308 (cat. 113).

Fig. 4.27: *Idyll* by Walter [Richard] Sickert, c.1931-32. Oil on canvas, 68.5 x 72.5 cms) Ferens Art Gallery, Hull. Arts Council of Great Britain, *Late Sickert: Paintings 1927 to 1942* (London: ACGB, 1982), 45 (plate 74).

Fig. 4.28: *Romeo and Juliet at Reculver* by Walter Sickert, c.1935-37. Oil on canvas, 51 x 71 cms. Royal Museum and Art Gallery, Canterbury. Wendy Baron, *Sickert: Paintings and Drawings* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2006), 558.

Fig. 4.29: *Home Life* by Walter Sickert, dated 1937. Oil on canvas, 74 x 56 cms. Private Collection. Wendy Baron & Richard Shone, *Sickert Paintings and Drawings* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1992), 338 (cat. 128).

Fig. 4.30: *The Domestic Bully* by Walter Sickert, c.1935-38. Oil on canvas, 82 x 74.5 cms. Private Collection. Arts Council of Great Britain, *Late Sickert: Paintings 1927 to 1942* (London: ACGB, 1982), 58 (plate 5).

Fig. 4.31: *Photograph of Sickert and Thérèse*, originally published in *The Daily Telegraph* on 24 February 1938. Tate Gallery Archive, London. TGA 8120. Wendy Baron & Richard Shone, *Sickert Paintings and Drawings* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1992), 348 (fig. 234).

Fig. 4.32: *He knew Degas* by William Roberts (1895-1980), 1938. Oil on canvas, unknown size. Private Collection. Wendy Baron & Richard Shone, *Sickert Paintings and Drawings* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1992), 348 (fig. 236).

Fig. 4.33: *Mr. Richard Sickert A.R.A.* by Powys Evans (1899-1981), 1926. Pen and ink drawing, unknown size/location. Powys Evans, *88 Cartoons by Powys Evans with a Preface by Richard Sickert ARA* (Kensington: Cayme Press, 1926), Plate 67.

Fig. 4.34: *Home Sweet Home* by Walter Sickert, 1935-1939. Oil on canvas, 87.5 x 72.5 cms. Worthing Museum and Art Gallery. Wendy Baron, *Sickert: Paintings and Drawings* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2006), 542 (fig. 733).

Fig. 4.35: *The Invalid* by Walter Sickert, 1939-1940. Oil on canvas, 63.5 x 76 cms. Private Collection. Wendy Baron & Richard Shone, *Sickert Paintings and Drawings* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1992), 342 (cat. 130).

Fig. 4.36: *Reading in the Cabin* by Walter Sickert, 1940. Oil on canvas, 43 x 78.5 cms. Corsham Court Collection. Richard Shone (Phaidon: Oxford. 1988), 95.

Fig. 4.37: *Photograph of Thérèse Lessore and Walter Sickert* by Cecil Beaton (1904-1980), 1940. Walter Sickert Collection, London Borough of Islington, Libraries Department, X59 X210 SIC (WR) X1700.

“All the greater draughtsmen tell a story”¹

What is the secret of great painting? A great painting happens when a master of the craft is talking to you about something that interests him.

Walter Sickert, 1922²

There was a sense in which, for Sickert, the world was always a stage, and he the player of many parts...

John Rothenstein, 1952³

In 1961 nineteen years after Walter Sickert's death Sir John Rothenstein, the writer and Director of the Tate Gallery in London, stated that the 'story' on Sickert's canvas was of no real interest to the artist himself: "Like Degas, Sickert was interested in his models only as shapes and colours; but whereas in a Degas affection or compassion are felt through the painting or pastel, in a Sickert the feeling ... is almost abstractly indicated only in the appended and melodramatic titles. In these interiors the titles are better ignored"⁴. This statement, not uncommon in an analysis of Sickert's work during this period, demonstrates the unease of commentators on his art regarding the role of narrative and, in particular, the theatrical nature of his work.⁵

¹ Walter Sickert, "A Critical Calendar," *English Review* (March 1912). Reprinted in Anna Gruetzner Robins (ed). *Walter Sickert: The Complete Writings on Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, first published 2000), 300.

² Sickert, "French art of the Nineteenth Century," *Burlington Magazine* (June 1922). Gruetzner Robins, *ibid.*, 440.

³ John Rothenstein, *Modern English Painters. Volume One. Sickert to Grant* (London: Arrow Books, 1962, originally published 1952), 45.

⁴ John Rothenstein, *Sickert* (London: Beaverbrook Newspapers, 1961), 5.

⁵ On Sickert's interest in narrative see Rebecca Daniels, "Walter Sickert and urban realism", *The British Art Journal*, Vol. III, No. 2, Spring 2002, 58-69; Nicola Moorby "A long chapter from the ugly tale of

Although intended as a criticism, Rothenstein's use of the word "melodramatic" as a description of the artist's titles is telling and reveals much about Sickert's treatment and interpretation of his subject matter. For contemporary reviewers the dramatic, or rather narrative, tradition belonged to the Victorians and, as a result, was anathema to the modernist ideals of the twentieth century. As R. H. Wilenski noted in his essay, "Sickert's Art", in 1943: "...Sickert was what painters call 'a painter' i.e. a man delighting in his medium and gifted with sensibility in respect of form, texture, and the mysteries of 'good' colour"⁶. For Wilenski, Sickert was uninterested in the drama inherent in his figures, he'd talk to his "cronies" about his low life figures and the value of Hogarth and Keene, but in reality his mind was "in North Paris, not North London"⁷. Similarly Robert Emmons, Sickert's first biographer, and Wendy Baron, the author of the most comprehensive catalogue of his work to date, tended to avoid the theatrical influence on his art. Sickert, they suggest, painted the human figure because he was interested in the formal problems posed by the human figure more than the subject matter, and that his interest in the material qualities of paint on canvas was of more importance than the dramatic quality of his subjects. With regards to Sickert's nudes, particularly those in his Camden Town Murder series, Baron states they were: "primarily dictated by his aesthetic principles"⁸. Emmons discussing the same series noted: "... a good deal of blood was spilt by critics showing that Sickert's style was not adapted to bloody murder. Only a few appeared to realise that this

commonplace living': the Evolution of Sickert's *Ennui*", Smith, Alistair (ed). *Walter Sickert 'drawing is the thing'*. Manchester: Whitworth Art Gallery, 2005, 11-14 and Stella Tillyard, "W.R. Sickert and the Defence of Illustrative Painting." Brian Allen (ed.). *Studies in British Art 1: Towards a Modern Art World* (London: Yale University Press, 1995), 189-205.

⁶ Reginald Howard Wilenski, "Sickert's Art". Lillian Browse (ed), *Sickert* (London: Faber & Faber Ltd, 1943), 21.

⁷ Wilenski, *ibid.*, 26.

⁸ Wendy Baron, *Sickert* (London: Phaidon Press, 1973), 184. In contrast, Susan Sidlauskas has argued that: "A figure had virtually no interest for Sickert as a subject for painting until he could situate it properly". S. Sidlauskas, "Walter Sickert's *Ennui*", *Body, Place, and Self in Nineteenth Century Painting* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2000), 130.

title, like so many of his, was no more than a peg to hang the study of two related figures under a given form of light”⁹.

Wilenski expressed a similar opinion when in 1951 he claimed that the Camden Town images were just “a technical experiment”¹⁰. A year later Rothenstein was to reinforce the unimportance of Sickert’s titles and figures in relation to the importance of his technique when he stated: “Sickert lacked the emotional power that would have given reality to his figures. As it is, they are inert puppets, though marvellously, sometimes touchingly, resembling human beings, but they feel neither hunger nor thirst, neither love nor hate, only, perhaps indifference, which at bottom was his own attitude towards his fellow men”¹¹.

More recently, David Peters Corbett, Rebecca Daniels and Matthew Sturgis have both highlighted Sickert’s value as a technician over his value as raconteur. Corbett has argued that Sickert’s paintings should not be regarded purely for their visual narrative, but should, in fact, be read through the quality of their materiality. Corbett claims that Sickert’s work sees the advent of a new type of self-consciousness afforded to the painter. For Corbett, Sickert’s music-hall paintings amount to a meditation on the capacity of paint itself to act as a means of investigating and diagnosing modernity and its importance over Sickert’s subjects should be enforced.¹² A similar argument had previously been explored by Corbett in 1998 when, in examining Sickert’s Camden Town series, he discussed them as interpretative of the “threatening and random aspects of the modern metropolis”. As Corbett stated Sickert’s technique revealed “the ascription of meaning in paint becomes the

⁹ Robert Emmons, *The Life and Opinions of Walter Richard Sickert* (London: Faber & Faber Ltd, 1941), 146.

¹⁰ Wilenski quoted in Anthony Bertram, *Sickert* (London: Studio Publications, 1951), 4.

¹¹ Rothenstein, *Modern English Painters, Vol. 1*, 63.

¹² David Peters Corbett, “Walter Sickert: Surface and Modernity”, *The World in Paint: Modern Art and Visuality in England, 1848 – 1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 169-213. Tickner (2000) agrees, 32.

means through which the urban can, he hopes, be analysed and controlled”¹³. Rebecca Daniels voices an analogous interpretation when she suggests that Sickert’s nudes are representative of the “flux and resultant anxiety that typified the Edwardian Era” and that his “inexplicably violent brushstrokes are used as a metaphor for the fragmented lives of the sitters who represent the anonymous urban mass”¹⁴. Sturgis, on the other hand, whilst recognising the initial value of Sickert’s dramatic narrative, suggests they are subordinate to his real focus: “The ceaseless search for the pictorial ideal – the ideal method, the ideal subject, the ideal composition: these were the great motive forces, the dominating passions, of his life. His enduring love of performance was always at the service of his art”¹⁵.

This Sickertian paradox; of form versus subject, narrative versus technique, echoes the dilemma of art criticism of the early to mid-twentieth century. As Baron later notes: “Do we first engage with the work through the back door to analyse the artist’s expression of the plastic facts; or do we accept the invitation to enter the front door of its title?”¹⁶ Whilst not denying the fact that Sickert was interested in the materiality of paint, the actual dramatic/narrative influence and content of his paintings should not be ignored. Sickert’s paintings revel in theatricality, topicality, celebrity, artificiality, duality, ambiguity and the figurative. As a result to concentrate purely on his technical qualities as symbolic of his modernity is to seriously limit the significance of his subject matter. Sickert’s refusal to accept the avant-garde visions of the Post-Impressionists, Cubists, Vorticists and Futurists, for example, was so great that his works, especially those completed after the 1920s, were often viewed with vehement distaste: “For a painter to lose so completely his capacity of

¹³ David Peters Corbett “‘Gross Material Facts’: Sexuality, identity and the city in Walter Sickert, 1905-1910”, *Art History*. Vol. 21. No. 1, March 1998, 46. In the same article, however, Corbett admits to Sickert being fascinated by identity, particularly through his interest in the Tichborne Claimant case and the Jack the Ripper murders and Corbett rightly, although briefly, links Sickert’s interest in his frequent changes of name and appearance to his experiences in the theatre.

¹⁴ Daniels, *op. cit.*, 59 & 60.

¹⁵ Matthew Sturgis, “Sickert: The Juvenile Lead”, Alistair Smith (ed), *Walter Sickert ‘drawing is the thing’* (Manchester: Whitworth Art Gallery, 2005), 2.

¹⁶ Wendy Baron, “The Domestic Theatre”, *Walter Sickert ‘drawing is the thing’*, 6.

judgement is a rare occurrence and it has been conjectured that a ‘series of minor cerebral incidents would seem to be the only explanation’¹⁷. In the attempt to place Sickert within the concept of modernism in English art, his use of specifically figurative and dramatic subject matter (particularly in his later works) is frequently ignored or consistently only superficially discussed.¹⁸

This constant refusal to consider the dramatic merit of Sickert’s subjects and treatments reflects more often than not the nature of that contemporary art world than the artist’s own interests. Gradually however this aspect has been defended. Richard Morphet in his 1975 essay “The Modernity of Late Sickert” notes that Sickert was “obsessed” with his subject matter, and in 1980 Simon Watney argued that Sickert’s titles held keys to the pictures’ meanings and that the painter had a “tragic vision”¹⁹. Stella Tillyard in her 1995 essay attempts to address the value of illustration and narrative in Sickert’s work (“[their]

¹⁷ Rothenstein, *Sickert*, 5.

¹⁸ In his essay, Wilenski’s attempts to compare (indeed almost apologizing on behalf of the artist) Sickert’s work to the major European artists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century’s. According to Wilenski, Sickert “lets out” these influences at key points in his life; *La Giuseppina* (c. 1903) was compared favourably to the developments of the Nabis and the influences of Japonisme and Lautrec, while *Mamma mia Poveretta* and *The Beribboned Washstand*, (also both from 1903) are explained as experiments in the techniques of Cézanne. Other technical comparisons follow with such artists as Manet, Whistler, Degas, Cézanne, Gauguin, Van Gogh, Maurice Denis, Roger de la Fresnaye, Matisse, and the Futurists. In all cases the subjects of Sickert’s paintings are ignored while the interest focuses on his technique. Wilenski, “Sickert’s Art”. Anna Gruetzner Robins suggests a further tantalising link between Matisse and Sickert. Discussing Sickert’s *Reclining Nude: Mornington Crescent* (1905-06) she states: “Those painted patches of colour on the bedcover could be Sickert looking at Cézanne or they could be Sickert looking at Matisse’s memory of Cézanne. My point is that it is an example of the way touch wins an independence from the thing represented”. A. Gruetzner Robins “Walter Sickert and the Language of Art”, in G. Brockington, *Internationalism and the Arts in Britain and Europe at the Fin de Siècle. Cultural Interactions: Studies in the Relationship between the Arts, Vol. 4.* (Germany: Peter Lang, 2009), 44.

¹⁹ Richard Morphet, “The Modernity of Late Sickert”, *Studio International*, Vol. 140, August 1975, 35-38. Simon Watney, *English Post-Impressionism* (London: Studio Vista, 1980), 32.

use and defence of narrative devices and their contexts”²⁰) in contrast to the modernist’s theories of aesthetics. Tillyard however, although suggesting the (unnamed) literary similarities to Sickert’s work fails to identify and acknowledge the theatrical influence.²¹ In addition, Lisa Tickner has argued for a deeper consideration of Sickert’s use of titles: “Titles do more than designate works ... They frame them”²².

Latterly, Baron has admitted the problems of reading Sickert’s work only in terms of its form and colour:

The debate about whether Sickert was a sensationalist reporter or a scrupulous documentor of modern life, a dramatist or a storyteller of the realist school, a technician (to whom subject-matter was but a convenient peg for a picture), or a painter to whom subject and treatment were indivisible, has long been at the heart of Sickert studies.²³

In a sense, Baron’s statement reflects the crisis of identification which characterises our own readings of Sickert’s work. For example, Rothenstein discussing *Ennui* of c.1914 adds, almost as an aside, that the image is probably Sickert’s most famous for one reason only: “The reason for this lies not at all I am inclined to think in its excellence and its splendid organisation, nor even in its being so readily understandable and easy to read, but rather in its being almost the only painting of Sickert’s in which strong human emotion is powerfully

²⁰ Tillyard, *op. cit.*, 205.

²¹ Tillyard goes so far as to suggest the *Camden Town Murder* series are a definite series, “telling a story” through at least four pictures. *Ibid.*, 196.

²² Lisa Tickner, “Walter Sickert: The Camden Town Murder and Tabloid Crime”, *Modern Life and Modern Subjects: British Art in the Early Twentieth Century* (London: Yale University Press, 2000), 13. Tickner later admits, however, that Sickert was “cavalier about titles”. Tickner, “Walter Sickert and the Camden Town Murder”, Barnaby Wright (ed), *Walter Sickert: The Camden Town Nudes* (London: Courtauld Gallery, Paul Holberton, 2007), 45.

²³ Baron, “The Domestic Theatre”, 6.

and plastically expressed, the feeling, namely, designated by its title”²⁴. That Rothenstein separates his own ideas on why this painting achieves greatness from the more “popular” reason is telling. Grudgingly he adds: “That a picture of his should be known and admired for this sort of reason would greatly have appealed to Sickert; it was his own professed way of thinking”²⁵. This is the key to a deeper understanding of the artist’s work. Undoubtedly, Sickert was interested in the formal definition and techniques of paint. He was a modern artist in his use and application of paint, in his analysis of textures and exploration of the relationship of forms in space, but he was also interested in the dramatic and emotional tensions generated by the figures in his images. Sickert was an objective voyeur of modern life, yet it was modern life as seen through the arch of the proscenium.

More recently, attempts to link Sickert’s work to the theatre have been considered, albeit superficially. For example, Baron suggests Sickert approached his figure studies “as if he were directing a theatre production: the sets were arranged, the props and models artfully disposed to evoke the atmosphere and the tensions of the story he wished to tell” adding that: “His studios became theatrical sets, his models actors.”²⁶ Susan Sidlauskas has fleetingly suggested that Sickert “invoked the practices and assumptions of the theatre [*sic*]...” even going as far to suggest that: “Once he found them Sickert arranged his interiors as if he were a theatrical director”²⁷. Barnaby Wright considers a similar reading, observing that Sickert’s nudes can be linked to the *tableau vivant* performances in the

²⁴ Rothenstein, *Sickert*, 24. In contrast, Tickner further campaigns for the role of subject matter in Sickert’s work with the simple but effective: “A title sets a process of interpretation inexorably in train, and Sickert plays with the gap between what we see and what we are told. ...their subject *matters*”. Tickner, “Walter Sickert: The Camden Town Murder and Tabloid Crime”, 19.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 24.

²⁶ Wendy Baron, “The Process of Invention. Interrelated or Interdependent: Sickert’s Drawings and Paintings of Intimate Figure Subjects”, Barnaby Wright (ed), *Walter Sickert: The Camden Town Nudes* (London: Courtauld Gallery, Paul Holberton, 2007), 35 & 38. Although admitting that Sickert’s work has “emotional authenticity” Baron still considers Sickert’s interest to lie with “design, colour and drawing”. *Ibid.*, 20 & 35.

²⁷ Sidlauskas, *op. cit.*, 126 & 131. In the same essay Sidlauskas discusses Sickert’s interest in identity and his constant changing physical appearances.

music-hall and that his Camden Town series are “new dramas of mundane working class life”²⁸. Nicola Moorby has discussed the relationship between Sickert’s *Brighton Pierrots* (1915) and European traditions of pantomime and the Italian commedia dell’arte.²⁹ Lisa Tickner has tentatively suggested a connection between the Camden Town Murder series and the theatre, noting that during the trial of Robert Wood the public gallery was packed with such theatrical luminaries as Hall Caine, Arthur Wing Pinero, Henry Irving and George Sims: “This is gothick, melodramatic representation in broadsheet style. It is drawn for an audience, as it would be acted on stage”.³⁰ Ultimately, however, Tickner suggests Sickert’s series owes more to the popular press than the proscenium, deriving its source from the “aesthetic of the newspaper” rather than the theatre.³¹

What many of the previous authors seem to overlook however is the influence of the theatre as direct source and inspiration for Sickert’s works, particularly during his Camden Town period. It is important to stress that Sickert did not embark on a professional career as an artist until the relatively late age of twenty-one. His first career was that of an actor and, as a result, it is natural that he would seek inspiration from the theatre. At the beginning of his career, he depicted the popular environments of the music halls. When the influence of Shaw and Ibsen was felt in the British theatre his attention turned to realistic domestic

²⁸ Barnaby Wright, “Naked Realism: An Introduction to Walter Sickert’s Camden Town Nudes”, Barnaby Wright (ed), *Walter Sickert: The Camden Town Nudes* (London: Courtauld Gallery, Paul Holberton, 2007), 17 & 26.

²⁹ Nicola Moorby, “‘Poor abraded butterflies of the stage’: Sickert and the Brighton Pierrots”, Tate Papers (online research journal), Issue 5, Spring 2006, <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch/tatepapers/06spring/moorby.htm>

³⁰ Tickner, *op. cit.*, 21 & 25. Indeed, quoting David Napley’s record of the case Tickner recalls: “Each succeeding day of the murder trial unfolded to the public a story as enthralling as any novel, as dramatic as any play and as intriguing and mystifying as any detective story”. Napley, *The Camden Town Murder* (London: Weidenfield & Nicolson, 1987), viii. As cited in Tickner, *ibid.*, 22.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 46. In the same essay Tickner further links Sickert’s work to literature rather than the theatre experience, suggesting that contemporary critics saw in the series “a new pictorial equivalent to such literary precedents as Flaubert or Maupassant”, 19.

interiors; by the 1920s when nostalgia for the Victorian era was common in the theatre, he returned to the music-hall and his *English Echoes*. When Shakespeare went through a resurgence in the early 1930s Sickert was there. Cinema, too, was not outwith his remit, with a late portrait of Edward G. Robinson and Joan Blondell in *Jack and Jill* from 1936. Sickert however was not just limited to straight theatrical depictions. His work, which utilizes and incorporates a wide range of theatrical sources and influences from photographs, reviews and personal experience of productions, to exploring theatrical themes, subjects and treatments, was steeped in the language and atmosphere of the stage.

The following thesis, therefore, is an attempt to address this vital but neglected aspect of Sickert's work. Each chapter analyses the influence of the theatre on Sickert's *œuvre*, both in terms of his interest in theatrical subject matter but also in a more general sense of the theatrical *milieu* of his interpretations. In turn, each chapter also addresses a particular theme relevant to the British theatre of that particular period; Chapter one (Act I: The Duality of Performance and the Art of the Music-Hall) explores Sickert's beginnings as an actor and how this experience differentiated his work from Whistler and Degas as seen through his music-hall paintings. Chapter two (Act II: Restaging Camden Town: Walter Sickert and the theatre c.1905-c.1915) provides a new reading of his Fitzroy Street/Camden Town works in relation to the growing interest in naturalism in the British theatre whilst chapter three (Act III: Sickert and Shakespeare: Interpreting the Theatre c.1920-1940) examines his interest in the "legitimate" theatre of the period and his interest in the rediscovery of Shakespeare as a metaphor for his solution to the crisis in modern art. Finally, chapter four (Act IV: Sickert's Simulacrum: Representations and Characterisations of the Artist in Texts, Portraits and Self-Portraits c.1880-c.1940) discusses his interest in the concept of theatrical identity, both in terms of an interest in acting and the "character" of artist and self-publicist.

Fundamentally, there is a clear distinction between Sickert's interpretation of theatre subjects (i.e. music-hall scenes and depictions of Shakespeare) and his theatrical

subjects (his New Drama paintings from Camden Town). Chapter one provides a study of Sickert's acting career and an exploration of Sickert's music-hall paintings in terms of their debt and ultimate difference to the work of his two mentors; James Abbott McNeill Whistler and Edgar Degas. The chapter exposes Sickert's interest in the theatrical experience and illustrates him to be more concerned with capturing the ephemeral power of the performer than has formerly been considered.

Chapter two is a re-evaluation of Sickert's Fitzroy Street/Camden Town paintings in light of the theatrical concerns of the British theatre during the period c.1905-c.1915. The chapter reveals Sickert's work from this period to be more fundamentally indebted to the New Drama than has previously been considered. This re-examination is based on a survey of a variety of theatrical productions from the period and their subsequent thematic similarity with Sickert's work. This analysis is supported by a variety of physical sources, including contemporary discussions, reviews and photographic records of the productions.

Chapter three provides an analysis of Sickert's later depictions of predominantly Shakespearean productions and his developing role as a critic, of both painting and the theatre. In terms of this role, the chapter explores Sickert's selection of subject matter and reveals his interest not only in particular subjects but also dramatic treatments. This analysis is based on an array of sources, including photographs of the key productions as well as reviews and theatrical criticism. In addition, this chapter also acts as an historical survey of the changing importance of Shakespeare on the English stage during this period.

Chapter four is a study of the interpretation of Sickert the "character"; the self-created role. It is derived from an analysis of the changing visual depictions of Sickert throughout his life (as seen in self-portraits, portraits and photographs) as well as the various discussions on his personality and character in print (as seen in biographies, reviews, letters and novels). Its intention is to reveal how the theatricality that existed so predominantly in his work permeated his life and ultimately infused interpretations of the artist by others.

In all cases Sickert's inspiration comes from a wide range of theatrical sources. His music-hall paintings are based principally on on-the-spot sketches whilst his Shakespearean paintings are predominately based on photographs of the productions. His Camden Town sources are more elusive. New Drama plays, due to their limited runs were seldom photographed and therefore correlating Sickert's works with actual photographs of these productions is difficult. However, the plays (and their themes) were well reviewed and discussed in the press and Sickert was undoubtedly aware of their importance.

Theatre photography during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century progressed through a number of transitions. Whilst Victorian photographers tended to focus on the spectacle of a production, theatre photographers in the 1900s and 1910s preferred to focus their attention on small scale sets and intimate depictions of characters and settings. Although photographic records of the New Drama are rare, photographs of the large West End productions are plentiful. Through a brief study of these examples, similarities with Sickert's paintings can be shown. However, photographic records of productions can be problematic. It was rare for a production to be photographed mid-performance. Contemporary photographs were usually staged to benefit the lighting and set arrangement of the photographer rather than reflecting an authentic record of the production. The theatrical experience is a spontaneous one and difficult to capture visually in a photograph or on canvas. Sickert, however, provides the viewer with a sense of the visual and emotional experience of the theatre.

In each chapter the importance and value of the theatre is paramount to a deeper understanding of Sickert's art. In essence, each chapter also explores a specific element of the theatrical experience relevant to Sickert's life and work. For example, Chapter one is concerned with Sickert as Actor and Audience, chapter two sees Sickert as Playwright and Director, chapter three finds Sickert as Critic (both in terms of theatre and painting) and finally, chapter four discusses Sickert as Character (both in interpretations of him by others and within self-portraits). Sickert's paintings consequently tell us much about changing

fashions, traditions and interests in British theatre during his period. The history of the British stage is therefore the backdrop for the study of a single artist's obsession with theatricality and visual modernity.

Act I: The Duality of Performance and the Art of the Music-Hall

A refined and educated people will seek amusements of a refining character. If the people, on the contrary, rejoice in the slang and filthy innuendoes, and low dancing and sensational gymnastics of the music-hall, what are we to think? The music-hall is quite an invention of modern days.

J. Ewing Ritchie, 1880³²

[For] those who live in the most wonderful and complex city in the world, the most fruitful course of study lies in a persistent effort to render the magic and poetry which they daily see around them.

Walter Sickert, 1889³³

The interest in the music-hall as subject and source for his paintings has always been at the forefront of Sickert studies and much has been written about his work from this period, especially in terms of his artistic debt to Whistler and Degas.³⁴ What has been

³² J.E. Ritchie, "Our Music-Halls", *Days and Nights in London; or, Studies in Black and Gray* (London: Tinsley Brothers, 1880), 39.

³³ Walter Sickert, "Impressionism", preface to "A Collection of Paintings by the London Impressionists at the Goupil Gallery, London", December 1889. Reprinted in Anna Gruetzner Robins (ed), *Walter Sickert: The Complete Writings on Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 60.

³⁴ For example, Wendy Baron, *Sickert: Paintings and Drawings* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2006); David Peters Corbett, "Seeing into modernity: Walter Sickert's music-hall scenes, c. 1887-1907", D.P. Corbett & L. Perry (ed), *English Art 1860-1914: Modern artists and identity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 150-167; Paula Dredge and Richard Beresford "Walter Sickert at Gatti's: New technical evidence", *The Burlington Magazine*, Vol. CXLVIII, No. 1237, April 2006, 264-269; Ronald Pickvance, "The Magic of the Halls and Sickert", *Apollo*. No. 76, April 1962; Anna Gruetzner Robins, *A Fragile Modernism: Whistler and his Impressionist Followers* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press), 2007; Anna Gruetzner Robins, "Some newly discovered sketches by Walter Sickert of Gatti's Hungerford Palace of Varieties" *The Burlington Magazine*, Vol. CXLVIII, No. 1237, April 2006, 269-272; Anna Gruetzner Robins, "Sickert 'Painter-in-Ordinary' to the Music-Hall", Wendy Baron & Richard Shone (ed), *Sickert Paintings* (Newhaven & London: Yale University Press, 1992); Anna Gruetzner Robins, *Walter*

consistently overlooked, however, is how Sickert's interest in theatricality affected his relationship with the subject. For example, in terms of his music-hall paintings, through his concentration on specific performers and their effect on the audience, Sickert reveals a fascination for the transformative power of performance which is much more palpable than in the work of his masters. Indeed, it is Sickert's treatment of performance that differentiates his work from Whistler and Degas.

It is interesting to note that one of Sickert's earliest recollections of Whistler's work was related to the theatre. At the Grosvenor Gallery in Bond Street, in 1877 when he was seventeen, Sickert first saw Whistler's *Arrangement in Black, No. 3: Sir Henry Irving as Philip II of Spain* [Fig. 1.01]:

Go and look at the Irving now, splendid in its gaunt, shabby frame. Was ever a man's quintessential being flung on to canvas before like that? ... Whistler's portrait gives exactly what enchanted us, and what we want to remember - the embodied spirit of the role. The canvas says, 'Behold the great actor!'³⁵

Clearly, the attraction of the piece, with its combinations of painter and actor was too tempting to resist: "Whistler came as a revelation, a thing of absolute conviction, admitting of no doubt or hesitation. Here was the finger of God. The rest became mere paint. Excellent, meritorious, worthy, some of it was, but it was mere paint and canvas. ... No one who was not there can imagine the revelation which these canvases were at that time"³⁶. By the mid 1880s, Sickert's interest has started to shift from Whistler to Degas and similarly this too would affect the character of his work: "It was Walter Sickert who first saw Digars's work [*sic*]. He brought enthusiastic descriptions of the ballet girls Digars was

Sickert: Drawings: Theory and Practice: Word and Image. Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1996 and Anna Gruetzner Robins & Richard Thomson, *Degas, Sickert and Toulouse-Lautrec: London and Paris 1870-1910* (London: Tate, 2005).

³⁵ Sickert, "Pictures of Actors", *The Speaker*, 29 May 1897. Gruetzner Robins, *op. cit.*, 173.

³⁶ Sickert, "Pictures of Actors", *The Speaker*, 29 May 1897. Gruetzner Robins, *ibid.*, 172.

painting in Paris. We tried to combine the methods of Whistler and Degas, and the result was low-toned ballet girls”³⁷.

The period between the late 1870s and early 1890s witnessed, not only a shift in Sickert’s career from actor to painter, but also a transition from Whistler to Degas as mentor. In a sense the period is characterised by three opposing, yet interrelating, influences; the theatre, Whistler and Degas. By the mid to late 1880s these divergent influences would come to epitomize the conflict in Sickert’s own life and work; Actor vs. Painter, Narrative vs. Technique, Performer vs. Audience, etc. Indeed Sickert often compared the career of painter to that of actor:

The man on the street is no fool. He knows as much as you or I. ... it [is] fatal for an artist to underrate his audience. It leads, on the stage, to over-emphasis, and making points, and ‘taking the corner’. Actors think that unless there is a noise they are not appreciated. It leads painters to preach at their patrons, instead of ‘waiting’ on them...³⁸

The issue of identity was naturally exaggerated by Sickert’s own experiences as an actor and, ultimately, it is only through a deeper understanding of his interest in the theatre that we can fully understand his individuality and artistic choices. As a result, the following chapter is an examination not only on the interrelationship of Whistler and Degas on

³⁷ Mortimer Menpes, *Whistler As I Knew Him* (London: Macmillan, 1904), 19. For more on Sickert’s relationship with Whistler and Degas see Anna Gruetzner Robins’s *A Fragile Modernism: Whistler and his Impressionist Followers* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2007), “Degas and Sickert: Notes on their friendship”, *The Burlington Magazine*, Vol. CXXX, No. 1020, March 1988, 210-211 & 225-229, “The greatest artist the world has ever seen”, in Anna Gruetzner Robins & Richard Thomson (ed), *Degas, Sickert and Toulouse-Lautrec: London and Paris 1870-1910*, (London: Tate, 2005), 51-93 and “Suddenly last summer: Walter Sickert and Degas’s *Six Friends at Dieppe*” in Maureen O’Brien, *Edgar Degas: Six friends at Dieppe*, (Providence: Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Art, 2005), 49-64.

³⁸ Sickert, “Ford Madox Brown”, *The Speaker*, 13 February 1897. Gruetzner Robins, *ibid.*, 138.

Sickert's work, but also an exploration on the duality inherent in Sickert's own psyche; that of Actor and Painter.³⁹

³⁹ Whilst in a number of ways Degas and Whistler provided the polar opposites of Sickert's development as a painter. It is important to note that the two were friends and greatly respected each other's achievements although as George Moore noted: "when Degas is present, Mr Whistler's conversation is distinguished by 'brilliant flashes of silence'". George Moore, *Impressions and Opinions* (London: David Nutt, 1891), 309. The similarities between these artists did not go unnoticed. A satire, *La Cigale*, written by Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Halévy, produced in Paris in October 1877, saw its lead character (Marignan, evidently based on Degas) take on the personality and ideas of Whistler when it was staged in London a few months later. As Theodore Reff notes it is even possible that Degas partly designed the set for the Paris production (T. Reff, "Degas and the Literature of his Time: II", *The Burlington Magazine*, Vol. 112, No. 811, October 1970, 674-688). In the English adaptation (John Hollingshead's *The Grasshopper* staged at the Gaiety Theatre in December 1877) Marignan's counterpart Pygmalion Flippit declares: "We now call ourselves harmonists, and work our harmonies or symphonies, according to colour". J. Hollingshead, *The Grasshopper: A Drama in Three Acts* (London: Private Circulation, 1877), 27. Like Degas, it would appear that Whistler supported the production. J. Hollingshead, *My Lifetime: Vol. II* (London: Sampson Low, 1895), 120-121. See also T. Reff, "Le Papillon et le Vieux Boeuf", *From Realism to Symbolism: Whistler and His World* (New York: Columbia University, 1971), 23-29 and L. Tannenbaum, "La Cigale, by Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Halevy - and Edgar Degas", *Art News*, Vol. LXV, No. 9, January 1967, 55-71. Whistler had also acted briefly at the Royal Albert Hall, West Theatre, in a charity performance of A.W. Duborg, Esq.'s *Twenty Minutes under the Umbrella* on 26 February 1876. Whistler played 'Cousin Frank' with Miss Isabella Langdale Fowke as 'Cousin Kate' in a short act set in 'Aunt Margaret's Garden'. London, Victorian & Albert Theatre Museum Archive, Royal Albert Hall: *Twenty Minutes under the Umbrella*, Production File.

The Birth of Mr. Nemo

I do hope you'll stress the importance of the actor in Sickert. So far no-one seems to me to have realised the importance of this. He constantly changed his whole appearance, and in his time played many parts. He was one of the great *impersonating* actors, like Beerbohm Tree.

Rupert Hart-Davies, 1968⁴⁰

Walter's mistake... is that he began life as an actor.

James Abbot McNeill Whistler, 1896⁴¹

Sickert's interest in the theatre was evident from an early age. His twin passions; painting and performance, were in his blood. The family background was a blend of artists and entertainers. Walter Richard Sickert was born in Munich on 31 May 1860, the first son of Oswald Adalbert Sickert (1828-85) and Eleanor Louisa Moravia Sickert, née Henry, (1830-1922).⁴² Oswald was a relatively successful painter and illustrator, as was his grandfather, Johann Jürgen Sickert (1803-64). Eleanor was the illegitimate daughter of an Irish dancer and Richard Sheepshanks, the secretary of the Royal Astronomical Society and a fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge.

Sickert's early years were evidently happy. His sister, Helena, in her autobiography *I Have Been Young*, describes an idyllic childhood in Germany. Their mother enjoyed singing and their father was a keen pianist. Visits to the Opera were common.⁴³ The family were relatively wealthy and surrounded by a number of influential artists and writers. In fact, Sickert's first 'theatrical' appearance came at an early age:

⁴⁰ Hart-Davies to Denys Sutton, 4 July 1968, Glasgow University Library, MS Sutton, Accession, Box 70.

⁴¹ As quoted in Laurence Housman, *The Unexpected Years* (London: Jonathon Cape, 1937), 126-127.

⁴² His other siblings were Robert, Bernard, Helena, Oswald and Leonard.

⁴³ H.M. Swanwick, *I Have Been Young* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1935), 19-37.

There was the painter Füssli (related to our “nightmare Fuseli”) who painted a charming portrait of my mother ... One day when he was in the flat, Walter, aged two or three, ran into the parlour to say good night, clad in a very short shirt which left most of his body bare. A huge mop of flaxen curls surrounded his rosy face and solemn blue eyes ... “You glorious boy!” cried the artist, “I must paint you!” and he did. Till my mother died, this life-size portrait hung in her sitting-room ... “First appearance on any stage as Hamlet,” said Walter later.⁴⁴

Sickert first visited London, aged five, when he was taken by his father to be operated on for an anal fistula at St. Mark’s Hospital. An abnormal hole between one organ and another or leading to an open wound, a fistula was not often surgically treated unless it was regarded as serious. Sickert’s fistula was considered serious enough for him to have previously had two (unsuccessful) operations in Munich. His early experience of London and the operation evidently had a dramatic effect on him: “Islington has always been kind to me. My life was saved at the age of five ... [at] St Mark’s Hospital in the City Road”⁴⁵. Three years later, in 1868, his father decided to relocate the entire family to England. The experience was not a happy one. London was dirty and dull: “The experiment was a failure. Coming from a centre of Bohemianism, music and art, to a chilly, provincial, Anglican atmosphere, my parents were woefully depressed. The German servant they brought with them wept bitterly over the dirty coal grates and ranges, accustomed as she was to sweet wood ash”⁴⁶.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 32-33.

⁴⁵ Robert Emmons, *The Life and Opinions of Walter Richard Sickert* (London: Faber & Faber Ltd, 1941), 214.

⁴⁶ Swanwick, *op. cit.*, 41-42. The children, however, were happy; one of their favourite pastimes was to act “specially” exciting scenes from *Macbeth*: “...When the day came for the first full performance, Walter dashing down the scree side of the quarry with a shout of ‘how now, you secret black, and midnight hags!’ lost his footing and came down the rest of the way on his seat. The witches giggled irreverently, and the actor-manager stalked off with lofty scorn, turning at the end of the path for a parting shot: ‘You’ve got no respect for Art!’” Emmons, *op. cit.* 24.

In 1875, at the age of fifteen, Sickert was enrolled at King's College School, the Strand, where he remained until 1878. As a student, Walter was diligent and "so fond of study"⁴⁷. It was here that his love of Shakespeare was encouraged:

Like many young people at that time, Walter was Irving-mad and played the tent-scene from Richard III one King's day speech-day [*sic*], when he gave a remarkable imitation of Irving in the part. However, he was not satisfied with that, and next year he actually persuaded the authorities to let him act the same scene according to his own ideas.⁴⁸

As a schoolboy, Sickert also formed a group of amateur actors; the Hysps (Hypocrites⁴⁹) who were devotees of all things theatrical:

As a schoolgirl who hardly ever was taken to the theatre, I used to be thrilled by the accounts of the "Rabbles" organised by Walter and his associates. These were companies of young people of both sexes, mostly artists or art-students, who stormed the Lyceum pit, in order to rise in a body and cheer Henry Irving

⁴⁷ Denys Sutton, *Walter Sickert* (London: Michael Joseph, 1976), 22. As his sister expanded: "Walter was always prodigiously energetic; busy with something outside the school curriculum, acting, drawing, or learning Japanese". Swanwick, *op. cit.*, 60.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 60. Swanwick also recalled that whilst at King's Sickert delivered a highly successful recitation from David-Augustin de Brueys's *L'Avocat Patelin*. Curiously, King's College seemed to produce a number of promising actors: "The new actors were almost all of solidly middle-class origin, and a few were conspicuously upper-class. Their families represented a broad cross-section of the Victorian professional world both old and new ... After 1860 a growing proportion of actors had been to public school or to the more expensive day schools, such as King's College, London. Some indeed had gone on to higher education at universities..." Michael Baker, *The Rise of the Victorian Actor* (London: Croom Helm, 1978), 86-87.

⁴⁹ Sickert to Alfred Pollard, 19 May 1879. In the same letter Sickert notes that the Hysps were planning: "a series of performances of *Love's Labour's Lost* in costume in Gower Street". The letters from Sickert to Pollard are currently held by Pollard's granddaughter Ms Alice Woudhuysen. Unfortunately Ms Woudhuysen is reluctant to allow researchers to view the letters, Matthew Sturgis kindly passed on transcripts of the letters to the present writer.

for as long a breath would hold. After the play they formed a guard of honour at the stage-door and disputed the privilege of opening his cab-door.⁵⁰

Perhaps due to his limited success as a painter in England, Sickert's father was adamant that Walter should not follow this vocation when he graduated in 1878: "My father was determined that none of his sons should pursue his 'chien de metier,' painting. So Walter's first appearance in the world was as an actor. He walked on at the Lyceum toured with George Rignold in several plays and acted in the Kendals' company"⁵¹. Significantly, although talented, it was also not entirely clear if Sickert would be good enough to make a living from his painting.⁵²

Surprisingly, Sickert's earliest appearances on the stage have not been well documented. Robert Emmons alleges that he acted the part of "Jaspar" [*sic*] in an unidentified production at the Connaught Theatre in Holborn. Apparently he had only one line and never bothered to read the rest of the play.⁵³ Whilst Sickert's friend Jacques-Emile

⁵⁰ Swanwick, *op. cit.*, 92.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁵² Neither Oswald nor Eleanor felt that Walter's talents were "specialised in painting". Swanwick, 'Notes on Walter Richard Sickert', c.1940, Number 4. London, Victoria & Albert, National Art Library Special Collections, 86 DD Box V. His sister, however, disagreed and was: "in no doubt that his vocation lay in painting". Swanwick, *I Have Been Young*, 60.

⁵³ The Connaught Theatre (more commonly known as the Holborn Theatre, 85 High Street, Holborn) was known, for one year (1879) as the Royal Connaught Theatre therefore Sickert must have debuted in 1879. According to H.S. Sharp & M.Z. Sharp's *Index to Characters in the Performing Arts: Non-Musical Plays - An Alphabetical Listing of 30,000 characters* (New York: Scarecrow Press, 1966) there are only three relevant Jaspers, or Jaspars, which Sickert may have played. Sir Jasper Combe (A Royalist Soldier) appeared in W.S. Gilbert's *Dan'l Druce, Blacksmith* (written in 1876) however this is quite a large part. The second is Sir Jasper Fidget in William Wycherley's *The Country Life* (occasionally known as *The Country Girl*, written 1672), again though, this part has a number of lines. The most likely role was that of "Jasper, an apprentice" in Frances Beaumont's *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* (written 1607). I have been unable to confirm if either of these three plays were performed at the Royal Connaught in 1879.

Blanche states that Sir Henry Irving saw him perform whilst at school and subsequently offered him a place in his company as a ‘super’ – a non-speaking extra.⁵⁴

In the 1870s Irving was, arguably, the greatest living British actor. Indeed, his influence was so important that in 1895 he received a knighthood, the first actor ever to gain the honour.⁵⁵ The knighthood was awarded not just for Irving’s talents as an actor but his influence in redeveloping and refining British theatre in general. The award marked a turning point in the public’s attitude to the theatrical arts. No longer regarded as the sordid, morally degrading profession of old, the theatre was now respectable, honoured by Royalty itself. The provincial theatre of Sickert’s training, however, was a much less refined experience.⁵⁶

The provincial theatres of the 1870s and 1880s were often low class affairs. Production values, and performances, were poor. For example, simple characterisation was rife; an aristocratic would always be presented in topper and frock coat, or if the heroine was dressed in rags this was a symbol of moral degradation. Villains were always dressed in black. Titles also provided the audience with an idea of what to expect: *The Lancashire Lass; or, Tempted, Tried and True, Pure as Driven Snow; or, Tempted in Vain* and *Faith under Peril; or, A Father’s Dishonour and A Daughter’s Shame* all spelled out to the

⁵⁴ Irving apparently told Sickert: “there’s room for only one leading actor in this company, and that’s me”. L. Gillard, “The Artist Who Painted Jack the Ripper”, *Readers’ Digest*, Vol. 122, April 1983, 55. Bram Stoker, Irving’s theatre manager, knew Sickert quite well. In 1881, for instance, Sickert wrote to him to ask for a ticket to James Albery’s *Two Roses* at the Lyceum, mentioning his engagement as understudy at St James’s Theatre: “I know you will be glad to hear that I have an engagement at St James’s for two understudies – Mr T.W. Robertson’s & Mr Brandon’s parts”. Sickert to Stoker, 1 February 1881, Leeds University Library, Special Collections. As quoted in Matthew Sturgis, *Walter Sickert: A Life* (London: Harper Collins, 2005), 670.

⁵⁵ Other figures followed most notably Sir Squire Bancroft in 1897 and Sir Charles Wyndham in 1902.

⁵⁶ In the early 1890s Sickert requested Irving to sit for a portrait. However the project never materialised. Sickert to Irving, undated (1891). London, Victoria & Albert Theatre Collections. Document holder: 37/7/38. Ref. Number 3761.

audience the play's main attraction - usually a mixture of sex and occasional violence.⁵⁷ Published articles and guidebooks educating promising actors were also extremely popular. *The Way to the Stage, or How to Become an Actor and Get an Engagement* (1852) listed standard postures as guidelines for the budding actor, for example: "Dotage, Infirm or Old Age shows itself by hollowness of eyes and cheeks, dimness of sight, deafness and tremor of voice, hams meek, knees tottering, hands or head paroytic, hollow coughing, frequent expectoration, breathless wheezing, occasional groaning, and the body stooping under an insupportable load of years"⁵⁸. Settings and backdrops also educated the audience in the morality of the play; city streets were scenes of villainy and crime, a tavern was a place of drunkenness, while a country cottage symbolised a haven of virtue and domestic bliss.

The late 1870s and 1880s also witnessed a plethora of published memoirs of actors and actresses. Often from educated middle-class backgrounds, not unlike Sickert's own, the authors were frequently disappointed by stage-life: "In the company there is no one of whom I could make a companion, even for an afternoon ... It is not their social standing I care about, but their utter absences [*sic*] of refinement or culture, their vulgarity, their way of looking at things"⁵⁹. The provincial theatres provided an informal training ground but were also frequently the last resort for the less talented: "The profession I do like immensely, but the professionals I do not like. Really I never in all my life saw such dissipation. All last week and this there has been somebody drunk"⁶⁰. Unlike other arts, such as painting, sculpture, music or literature, the stage did not require any formal training

⁵⁷ Henry Wotton, in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, noted the poor quality and high melodrama of the theatre of the 1860s and 70s: "... 'Idiot Boy, or Dumb but Innocent.' Our fathers used to like that sort of piece, I believe". O. Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth, 2001, first published 1891), 42.

⁵⁸ J.L. Stynan, *The English Stage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 315.

⁵⁹ H.C. Shuttleworth (ed), *The Diary of an Actress, or, Realities of Stage Life* (London: Griffith, Farran & Co., 1885), 32.

⁶⁰ Louis Bradfield c.1885. As quoted in Baker, *op. cit.*, 40.

(“Almost every person imagines he could act, if he tried”⁶¹) and theatres would regularly employ casual labourers and illiterates to fill out their numbers. As a result, the quality of these performances were poor, and the arrangements were frequently nepotistic. An actor, in general, had no greater social standing than a manual worker, yet the romantic idea of a career as an “actor” was often enough of a reward. This was the theatre that welcomed Sickert.

Sickert’s acting career took him on a tour of the provinces (six one-night stands in different towns). He acted with the Kendals’ company and he toured with Rignold’s theatrical company, where he took the stage name “Mr. Nemo”.⁶² By his own account although not entirely successful, his time with the theatre was enjoyable. In a letter to his childhood friend Alfred Pollard, Sickert discussed his typical day as an actor: “I am leading a very jolly life reading ... Goethe’s and Jean-Paul Fr. Richter’s books”⁶³. He also notes how he has been attempting to write a dramatic version of a Richter novel: “Justin McCarthy & I are going to act it. You shall see it if you are in town ...”⁶⁴ Although he fails

⁶¹ G.H. Lewis, *On Actors and the Art of Acting* (London: Smith Elder, 1875), ix. As quoted in Baker, *op. cit.*, 27.

⁶² Sickert to Pollard, 15 April 1880. Prop. Woudhuysen. In the same letter Sickert notes his itinerary for the next few weeks: “Here till 24 Ap, 20 Ap Wolverhampton 6 nights, 3 May Bristol 6 nights, 10 May Leicester 6 nights, 17 May Manchester 6 nights”. A curious link between Sickert’s future career as painter and his links to the Kendal’s is provided by Gwen Ffrangcon-Davies relating a story told to her by Sickert: “He told me a good story of Mr Kendal, who years ago in discussing Whistler’s work said (shooting his cuffs & arranging his necktie) there are certain canons in art my dear Sickert. When a man out-stages those canons he forfeits all title to the appellation of artist”. Leather bound notebook, 7 April 1932. Martial Rose Library, Gwen Ffrangcon-Davies Archive, File 19 Scrapbook 19. *Nemo* (loosely translated from the Latin for “no-one”) was a simple variation on signing “anonymous” which was in vogue in the late nineteenth century. The name was likely inspired by Sickert’s favourite Charles Dickens’ novel *Bleak House*. As Mr Tulinkghorn notes: “Nemo is Latin for no one.” C. Dickens, *Bleak House* (London: Penguin, 2003, first published 1853), 161.

⁶³ Sickert to Pollard, 21 January 1879. Prop. Woudhuysen. Sickert rarely progressed past minor roles. Sickert to Pollard, 27 January 1880. A typical example from Sickert notes that he was playing: “first servant at Osborn’s Theatre on Monday ... other characters by Messrs Geo Rignold, Milton and co”. Woudhuysen.

⁶⁴ Sickert to Pollard, 19 May 1879. Woudhuysen.

to state which novel it is tempting to assume, for various reasons, *Flower, Fruit, and Thorn Pieces; or, The Wedded Life, Death, and Marriage of Firmian Stanislaus Siebenkæs* was the novel in question.

Richter's novel narrates the story of two friends; Siebenkæs and Leibgeber (to be played by Sickert and McCarthy), who are so alike, both physically and mentally, that: "Partly from friendship ... they wished to carry the algebraic equation which existed between them yet a step further, by adopting the same Christian and surname. But on this point they had a friendly contest, as each wanted to be the other's namesake, till at length they settled the difference by exchanging names"⁶⁵. The novel follows Siebenkæs's unhappy marriage and Leibgeber's solution of faking his friend's death and the re-exchanging of names and identities to enable his friend to escape his predicament. Richter's development of the *doppelgänger*, Siebenkæs's comic self-exploration as he prepares to come to terms with his own 'death' and the constant confusion of identities (from Leibgeber to Siebenkæs and back again) would lend itself well to dramatic interpretation.

The Pollard letters provide illuminating insights into Sickert's experiences as an actor. He discusses how he has taken up fencing (to "prevent my stooping") and notes his own particular type of acting: "my line in acting is low comedy; in writing high sentiment and tears"⁶⁶. In the same letter he discusses a number of performances he has recently witnessed. After seeing two comedies by Lecoq, he states they were: "most excellently acted ... we screamed with laughter. And merely to see such good workmanship as this acting was a pleasure. I don't care what people do if only they do it well"⁶⁷.

By the later part of 1879 Sickert was fully involved in the world of the theatre. He arranged an evening of amateur theatricals which included a scene from Shakespeare's

⁶⁵ J.P.F. Richter, *Flower, Fruit, and Thorn Pieces; or, The Wedded Life, Death, and Marriage of Firmian Stanislaus Siebenkæs*, translated by A. Ewing (London: George Bell and Sons, 1897), 27.

⁶⁶ Sickert to Pollard, 4 March 1879. Woudhuysen.

⁶⁷ Sickert to Pollard, 27 August 1879. Woudhuysen.

Love's Labour's Lost in which he would play Sir Nathaniel Jeremy Diddler and he revisited *L'Avocat Patelin*. To Pollard, he wrote that he felt he had done better as Sir Nathaniel: "when he had acted it at the McCarthys" and with regards to his performance in *L'Avocat Patelin*: "I got a lost a little at the end but muddled through somehow ... best thing I did that evening". The evening was a relative success; approximately twenty people attended and Sickert planned to be photographed in costume as Sir Nathaniel.⁶⁸ In other letters, Sickert notes that he often went shopping in Regent Street with Ellen Terry and was promised parts at the Gaiety.⁶⁹ He also states that he visited the theatre every night to prepare for parts: "After the acting at night I like to read in the day, & walk and feed and be quiet"⁷⁰. At the Lyceum, he became one of the "Lyceum young men" and performed in Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *The Lady of Lyons* with Terry and Irving.⁷¹ His real success however came whilst he was with Rignold's company. On one occasion he simultaneously took on five roles in Shakespeare's *Henry V*, including the part of the French Soldier who is captured by Pistol. This was apparently one of his favourite roles, perhaps more so for its favourable reception than for his own preference for the part [Fig.'s 1.02 & 1.03]:

On waking on Tuesday morning I found myself a public character. I had an excellent notice in the Post, the leading Liverpool paper, happily Liberal too, for my French soldier. There is no bearing me at all now. Pistol is furious. I bought up an edition of the paper and a gross of ½ d wrappers & spent the day kicking and directing to the various managers of the kingdom. ... [quoting the review] 'Admirable bit of acting was that of Mr Nemo as the Captive Frenchman. The spasmodic fright with which he sharply jerked his head to this side then that between his persecutor and persecutor's interpreter was a notable touch of nature'.⁷²

⁶⁸ Sickert to Pollard, 26 October 1879. Woudhuysen.

⁶⁹ Sickert to Pollard, 19 May 1879 (Woudhuysen) and letter from Maggie Cobden to Ellen Cobden, c.1881. West Sussex Record Office, Chichester, Cobden Archives (Trustees of Dunford House). Cobden Papers 978.

⁷⁰ Sickert to Pollard, 26 October 1879, 27 January 1880, 28/29 March 1879 and 15 April 1880. Woudhuysen.

⁷¹ Sickert to Pollard, 28 & 29 March 1879. Woudhuysen.

⁷² Sickert to Pollard, 15 April 1880. Woudhuysen.

However, even for Sickert, the company he worked for was not always the most salubrious, it was: “very in the Music Hall line & so has done circus and tight rope bizness [sic] which many of them are of the style which they find a difficulty in getting sober by the evening’”⁷³.

Although Sickert’s talent with costume and disguise was well noted (“He was particularly brilliant at making-up, challenging my mother to discover him as a toothless old man in the crowd in *The Squire*”⁷⁴) *The Liverpool Post* was perhaps over generous in its review. Max Beerbohm who saw him perform in a charity production in 1898 noted: “W.S. has acted in Dream Faces with Lady Eden for a charity. He was not at all word-perfect – she was quite so”⁷⁵.

⁷³ Sickert to Pollard, 15 April 1880. Woudhuysen. Some details of Sickert’s acting career can be gleaned from Maggie Cobden, who recalled that in September 1880 the Rignold Company performed a short run at the Standard Theatre, Shoreditch. Reviewing Sickert’s acting she decided it was: “so much better” than at the start of the tour. His interpretation of the French Soldier particularly impressed her: “with his eyes rolling & stiff black hair standing upright on his head”. M. Cobden to D. Richmond, 2 October 1880. WSRO, Cobden Archives 979. Some days later, after the performance, Sickert also treated the girls to his own version of *Hamlet*, where he acted out the majority of the play on his own, taking on the various parts in turn. M. Cobden to D. Richmond, 2 October 1880. WSRO, Cobden Archives 979. This party-piece was something Sickert would return to throughout his life. C.J. Holmes recalled a similar performance at the Café Royal on 21 December 1901 where Sickert, the: “whimsical genius” gave a performance of *Hamlet*, Act I, Scene II: “he rendered them with a satire ... His Queen a pathetic creature, slightly uncertain about her aspirates, made a perfect foil to the ranting King, who marched her off with ludicrous pomp when, with ‘the cannon to the clouds,’ he reached his exit and his top-note”. Holmes, *Self and Partners* (London: Constable, 1936), 236.

⁷⁴ Swanwick, *op. cit.*, 60-61. According to Maggie Cobden, Sickert appeared as a ‘super’ in Pinero’s *The Squire* between December 1881 and March 1882. The play was staged at the St James’s Theatre under the management of the Kendals’. M. Cobden to D. Richmond, 21 December 1881. WSRO, Cobden Archives 979.

⁷⁵ *Dream Faces* was a one-act play by Wynn Miller originally produced in 1888. Beerbohm to Reggie Turner, 12 January 1898. As quoted in R. Hart-Davis (ed), *Max Beerbohm: Letters to Reggie Turner* (London: Hart Davies, 1964), 127. Beerbohm later expanded his review (although he identified a different performance): “I wish you had been at Windlestone one night many years ago when in a neighbouring Town Hall Lady Eden and Walter Sickert played in aid of some local charity, W.S. Gilbert’s little two-act play *Engaged*. ... neither

Sickert's final major acting role was in 1880 with a production of *A Midsummer-Night's Dream* for Edward Saker at the Sadler's Wells Theatre in which he played the part of Demetrius.⁷⁶ He did, however, consider briefly a career as a theatre critic:

In April 1881 the late E.W. Godwin took me to see William Poel's production of *Hamlet* at the St George's Hall. Godwin had to leave early, and asked me to write a paragraph or two on the production for his paper, *The British Architect*. I remember with regret that the paragraphs were not well written but I retain the satisfaction that I urged that it would be a great loss to the professional stage if Miss Helen Maude did not become at once a member of it. I remember her exquisite appearance and her rare and scholarly elocution.⁷⁷

By 1880, Sickert's interest in a life on the stage was waning, perhaps due to his lacklustre success as an actor but probably more so to his growing association with Whistler. Through the theatre Sickert had developed his talents for taking on a role and of adopting different personalities which he would constantly utilise throughout his life.

Lady Eden nor Walter Sickert showed any histrionic ability". Beerbohm to Katie Lewis, 6 October 1954. Hart-Davis, *Letters of Max Beerbohm 1892-1956* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 225. Patricia Cornwell notes a further example of Sickert's love of acting in a letter from Sickert to T.E. Pemberton describing playing an "old man" in *Henry V* in Birmingham: "it is the part I like best of all". P. Cornwell, *Portrait of a Killer: Jack the Ripper: Case Closed* (London: Little Brown, 2002), 163.

⁷⁶ In the production programme Sickert's surname is spelt "Sigurd". Victoria & Albert Museum, Theatre Collection Department: *A Midsummer-Night's Dream*, Sadler's Wells Theatre 1880, Production File. A curious coincidence exists in the misspelling of Sickert's name and the character of Sigurd the Strong in Ibsen's *The Vikings at Helgeland* (1857).

⁷⁷ W. Sickert, "Mr William Poel". *The Times*, 18 December 1934. Gruetzner Robins, *op. cit.*, 672. Also E.G. Craig, *Index to the Story of My Days* (Cambridge: Hulton Press, 1981), 50. Godwin and Sickert often went to the theatre together. On 10 December 1881 Godwin's diary reads: "evening to Club. Sigurd [Sickert] came, dined at Criterion & on with him to St George's Hall amateur performance – *Still Waters [Run Deep]*. Home directly it was over". As quoted in Sturgis, *op. cit.*, 86.

Although he continued to enjoy the theatre his attention now turned to another “role” – that of professional painter.

The Actor, the Butterfly and the Ox

As far as painting is concerned, there is only Degas and myself.

Whistler, 1898⁷⁸

Playing the butterfly must be very exhausting! I prefer the part of the old ox,
what?

Degas, c.1885⁷⁹

For Sickert, the influences of Whistler (the painter master) and Degas (the drawing master) would come to symbolise the two major artistic strands of his work. Indeed, Whistler's support for Degas saw him encourage a number of early collectors to buy his work, including Sickert who in 1886 bought the theatrical pastels *Le Danseuse Verte* (*The Green Dancer*, 1880) and *Mlle. Bécat au Café des Ambassadeurs* (c.1877-85) [Fig.'s 1.04 & 1.05].⁸⁰ In 1889 Sickert added to his collection with *Répétition d'un Ballet sur la Scène* (*The Rehearsal of the Ballet on Stage*, c.1874) [Fig. 1.06].⁸¹ Overshadowing the influence of both artists, however, was the residual stimulus of Sickert's experiences as an actor. These three influences would come to a natural synthesis in his paintings of the music-hall.

Always preferring the halls which retained the flavour of the old "song and supper" rooms, the music-hall offered Sickert an anglicised equivalent of the French *café-concert*.⁸²

⁷⁸ As quoted in T. Reff, "Le Papillon et le Vieux Boeuf", *op. cit.*, 23-29 (23).

⁷⁹ "Le rôle papillon doit être bien fatigant, allez! J'aime mieux, moi, être le vieux bœuf, quoi?" As quoted by Sickert, "Degas", *Burlington Magazine*, November 1917. Gruetzner Robins, *op. cit.*, 415.

⁸⁰ In a letter to J-E. Blanche, Sickert described *Mlle. Bécat au Café des Ambassadeurs* as a portrait of: "A singer with two white gloves & many globes of light & a green wooden thing behind & fireworks in the sky & two women's heads in the audience". As quoted in Sturgis, *op. cit.*, 142.

⁸¹ As noted in letters from Sickert to Blanche and William Eden. *Ibid.*, 170.

⁸² Sickert may have also have been inspired by Whistler's depiction of Cremorne Gardens in the 1870s. For a while Cremorne was one of the only English equivalents of the *café-concert*.

Favouring the older, more intimate and ultimately more boisterous halls such as the Camden Town's Old Bedford and Islington's Collin's Music Hall, Sickert came to know the performers well.⁸³ For Sickert, the magic of the halls was all empowering:

... the pictorial beauty of the scene, created by the coincidence of a number of fortuitous elements of form and colour, a graceful girl leaning forward from the stage, to accentuate the refrain of one of the sentimental ballads so dear to the frequenters of the halls evoked a spontaneous movement of sympathy and attention in an audience whose sombre tones threw into more brilliant relief the animated movement of the singer, bathed as she was in a ray of green limelight from the centre of the roof, and from below in the yellow radiance of the footlights ... The fact that the painter sees in any scene the elements of pictorial beauty is the obvious and sufficient explanation of his motive for painting it.⁸⁴

The statement, with its curious merging of the artistic language of Whistler and Degas, symbolises the confusion of identity then preoccupying Sickert.⁸⁵ This is witnessed further in his interest in highlighting the duality of the music-hall experience; in particular through a visual discussion on the complex relationship between beauty and the ordinary; between performer and audience. The complicating of his compositions by the introduction of

⁸³ The Bedford was one of Sickert's favourite halls. In 1910 he recalled fondly: "the old Bedford Music Hall, the dear old oblong Bedford, with the sliding roof, in the 'days beyond recall,' before the music-halls had become two-house-a-night wells, like theatres to look at". Sickert, "The Allied Artists' Association", *The New Age*, 14 July 1910. Gruetzner Robins, *op. cit.*, 258. He often walked Bessie Bellwood home and painted portraits of Queenie and Katie Lawrence. Emmons, *op. cit.*, 49.

⁸⁴ Sickert, "The New English Art Club Exhibition", *The Scotsman*, 24 April 1889. Gruetzner Robins, *op. cit.*, 41-42.

⁸⁵ Indeed, Sickert's definition of Impressionism was a combination of the ideals of both Whistler and Degas: "Essentially and firstly it is not realism. It has no wish to record anything merely because it exists. It is not occupied in a struggle to make intensely real and solid the sordid or superficial details of the subjects it selects. It accepts, as the aim of the picture, what Edgar Allen Poe asserts to be the sole legitimate province of the poem, beauty". Sickert, "Impressionism", preface to "A Collection of Paintings by the London Impressionists at the Goupil Gallery, London", December 1889. Gruetzner Robins, *op. cit.*, 60.

mirrors, which he would use to reflect audience and performer concurrently, and the increasing use of more complicated visual tricks and *trompe l'œil*, would further the artifice of his subject whilst simultaneously drawing attention to the materiality of his technique. In addition, they also display a determined effort to depict a subject for which there had been few Whistler models (Whistler had painted portraits of the dancer Connie Gilchrist in the 1870s but these were studio based). Thus they represented a marked strike for artistic independence.⁸⁶

Sickert was one of the few British artists to depict music-halls during the late 1880s and 1890s, and the subject matter naturally led him to being compared to the Impressionists. Although Sickert was aware of the debt owed, he was keen to distinguish his work:

Your critic, while allowing my picture of Collin's Music Hall to possess certain qualities, confesses himself at a loss to discover my motive for painting it, and further suggests that I had none, and finally, that I was induced thereto by the fact that certain painters in Paris have painted music-halls ... It is surely unnecessary to go so far afield as Paris to find an explanation of the fact that a Londoner should seek to render on canvas a familiar and striking scene in the midst of town in which he lives.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ For further information on Whistler's depictions of performance subjects see Arabella Tenniswood-Harvey, "Music and Movement: A survey of Whistler's lesser-known images of music, theatre and dance", *The British Art Journal*, Volume X, No. 3, Winter/Spring 2009/10, 131-137.

⁸⁷ Sickert, "The New English Art Club Exhibition", *The Scotsman*, 24 April 1889. Gruetzner Robins, *op. cit.*, 41. In a further article Sickert criticised: "... the universal mania of the advanced writer on art for tracing all things British to some French original. Everything and everybody must be affiliated to something. If a man does a smudgy sketch of a ballet-girl with high heels, and in a studio light, he is imitating Degas". Sickert, "Art", *The Whirlwind*, 5 July 1890. Gruetzner Robins, *op. cit.*, 70. The criticism and subsequent identification of Sickert as a Whistlerian or follower of Degas may have inspired him to seek out a more personal interpretation of his subject matter.

In *The Lion Comique* (1887) [Fig. 1.07] Sickert depicts a typical “stage swell” in full voice in a typical London music-hall. The image illustrates Sickert’s developing interest in the visual ambiguities and artifice inherent in performance as well as an interest in recognition and gesture. Common tradition suggests that the figure depicted was Fred Albert, a topical vocalist and comic singer of songs such as *The Mad Butcher*, *I Knew I Was Dreaming* and *Perverted Proverbs*, who died at the age of 42 on 12 October 1886. Sickert’s image would therefore have had to have been completed from previous sketches. Another possibility is that the figure is Arthur Lloyd who had performed at Gatti’s between January and April 1886 or, perhaps, even Gilbert Hastings Macdermott. A *Lion Comique* however was a regular music-hall character; a stereotypical hard-drinking playboy characterised by his waxed moustache, cane and silk hat, therefore either performer could be depicted here, as physically all three were very similar.

This recognition inherent in the performance was an element that Sickert was keen to exploit. It is interesting to note that a further element of recognition was also at the centre of a review of the painting by *The Daily Telegraph* which described the image as:

... an open mouthed music-hall singer, against a garish ‘back-cloth’. It is clever, but the effect of the canvas at the back is not quite intelligible. It is meant to be a crudely-painted landscape, and ... we at first took it as the artist’s idea of real nature. The slope of the balustrades is a happy and quaint notion, but there is a lack of distance between the figure of the singer and the somewhat ‘tricky’ background.⁸⁸

The initial inability of *The Daily Telegraph* reviewer to realise that the landscape in the background is not “the artist’s idea of real nature” is telling. Clearly this was an unusual viewpoint and subject for an English painting.

⁸⁸ *The Daily Telegraph*, No. 9940. 2 April 1887, 3.

The Lion Comique is unusual for Sickert, in that it is one of his few music-hall images to illustrate a male performer. Its composition is certainly derived from Degas, which is perhaps why Sickert's work was initially held to be considered an imitator of his mentor, probably the portrait of Alice Desgranges; *Café Concert Singer* (1878) or even *La Chanson Du Chien* (*The Song Of The Dog*, 1876-77) [Fig.'s 1.08 & 1.09].⁸⁹ Sickert was certainly aware of *La Chanson Du Chien*'s performer; "Thérésa" (Emma Valadon), and recalled Degas talking of her in 1885. It is likely he saw the above works then.⁹⁰

Degas clearly influenced Sickert's follow up; *Bonnet et Claque. Ada Lundberg at the Marylebone Music Hall: "It all comes from sticking to a soldier"* (1887) [Fig. 1.10]. The illuminated faces of the wide-eyed men in the audience reinforce the gender difference between performer and audience and create an aura of sexuality that *The Lion Comique* lacks. It is important to note that the dynamic relationship between performer and audience was a vital part of the halls' appeal. Audiences were expected, indeed encouraged, to involve themselves fully in the entertainment – either through singing, conversing with performers or heckling. Acts' popularity depended on their ability to reflect their audiences' own experiences and opinions. T.S. Eliot claimed that, for example, the secret of Marie Lloyd's success was due to her: "capacity for expressing the soul of the people" while Max Beerbohm noted there were three memorable women of the Victorian Age; Queen Victoria, Florence Nightingale and Marie Lloyd.⁹¹ Popular performers were often 'adopted' by their audience; acts were introduced as 'our own' or 'our friend' furthering the sense of shared experience and belonging.

⁸⁹ It also bears some compositional similarities to Degas's *Ballet Scene* (c.1874-75) owned during the 1880s by the art critic Jules Claretie.

⁹⁰ Sickert, "Degas", *The Burlington Magazine*, November 1917. Gruetzner Robins, *op. cit.*, 415. Sickert also used Thornley's lithographs (*Quinze Lithographies d'après Degas*, published in 1889) as part of the N.E.A.C. Spring exhibition in 1889. Sickert, "A Portfolio of Lithographs" (4 March 1889) & "The New English Art Club" (16 April 1889), both *The New York Herald, London*. Gruetzner Robins, *op. cit.*, 12-13 & 35-37. The lithographs included *La Chanson Du Chien*.

⁹¹ T.S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (London: Faber & Faber Ltd, 1951), 45 & C. Macinnes, *Sweet Saturday Night* (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1967), 27.

Familiarity, however, could prove problematic. Frequently a performer's real identity and stage character became merged (often deliberately so on the part of the performer) in the public's consciousness. Generally, audiences were entirely knowing but there was often an element of doubt, especially regarding the morality of female performers. Song titles laden with innuendo, such as *Who Were You With Last Night*, *Hold Your Hand Out - Naughty Boy*, and *With My Little Wigger-Wagger In My Hand*, all performed with a knowing wink, encouraged the fantasy of a sexual relationship between audience and performer: "It was not what she said but the way in which she said it"⁹². For female performers, in particular, sex was an essential selling point: "Man has compelled women to conceal her legs; she has retaliated by exposing her breasts ... Please recall that I am not reproaching her for this..."⁹³ A typical example was Lottie Collins who, whilst singing her signature song *Ta-ra-ra-boom-der-ay*, would kick her legs high in the air revealing her red stockings and suspenders:

Lottie Collins has no sense,
She shows her arse for eighteenpence.
Sixpence more the people pay,
She turns it round the other way.⁹⁴

⁹² Charles Cory Reed, discussing the Oxford Music-Hall 1896. LCC, "Proceedings before the Licensing Committee", Oxford Music Hall, October 1896, 17. As quoted in S.D. Pennybacker, *A Vision for London 1889-1914: labour, everyday life and the LCC experiment* (London & New York: Routledge, 1995), 162.

⁹³ Quoted in G. F. Scotson-Clark, *The "Halls"* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1899), 10.

⁹⁴ Apparently quoted by Sickert to Clive Bell and his two sons over dinner in 1925 as noted by Quentin Bell. London, Tate Gallery Archive (TGA), fol. 881.15. The less crude version of the limerick, which was a common one of the 1890s ran: "Lottie Collins, she had no sense, She bought a piano for eighteen pence, And all she played on it all day, Was Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay". I. Opie & P. Opie, *The Lore and Language of School Children* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), 107 & Andrew Horrall, *Popular Culture in London c.1890 – 1918* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), 20.

Sickert's verse perfectly illustrates the (knowing) confusion of identity, between public and private perception of a performer. Female characters on stage were often depicted as either sexually naive or extremely self aware. The idea, however, that the 'real' Lottie would reveal herself for money was clearly ridiculous, but Lottie Collins the 'character' promised this teasing possibility.⁹⁵ Indeed the culture of "knowingness", which manifested itself into a form of "metalanguage" consisting of spoken and unspoken language which the audience could easily read, was vital to the success of the halls.⁹⁶

Lundberg's typical performance, as a drunken, run-down Irish woman, was popular: "Well applauded for her hearty and characteristic essays ... her red hair knotted with rags, can never be effaced from the memories of those who saw Ada Lundberg in this wonderful impersonation – one in which oddity and eeriness were at time streaked with pathos"⁹⁷. Sickert's painting, *Bonnet et Claque. Ada Lundberg at the Marylebone Music Hall: "It all comes from sticking to a soldier"*, certainly captures the "oddity and eeriness" of Lundberg's character. The "claque" of the title refers to the group of men avidly watching her, hired to applaud the performer. The claque ("who provide fame for actresses and dramatists"⁹⁸) was a particularly French tradition, in fact it was rarely found outside of Paris.⁹⁹ In contrast to Degas's raucous audiences however, Sickert's are strangely quiet.

⁹⁵ For one of Marie Lloyd's songs, *I Asked Johnny Jones, So I Know Now!*, Lloyd would perform the act as a schoolgirl who nags her parents for explanations of a number of events of a sexual nature: "What's that for, eh?" After asking the opportunist Johnny Jones her curiosity was satisfied: "...so I know now!"

⁹⁶ Peter Bailey describes 'knowingness' as what everybody knows, but some know better than others. P. Bailey, *Popular Culture and Performance in the Victorian City* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 128.

⁹⁷ Lundberg's obituary. *The Era*, 7 October 1899, 14.

⁹⁸ H. de Balzac (translated and edited by H.J. Hunt), *Illusions perdues (Lost Illusions)* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1971, originally published 1837-1843), 387.

⁹⁹ The use of the song title, "*It all comes from sticking to a soldier*", can also be argued is a link to Whistler's use of music terminology in the titles of his paintings. The topicality of Sickert's title however refers to a particular environment and people rather than aesthetics.

Deferring to the entrancement of the performance in Sickert's interpretation even the claque has been silenced.

By including the audience Sickert simultaneously presents them as valid entertainment for the discernable music-hall visitor. The close proximity of audience and performer indicates that both activities are intricately linked. The painting is undoubtedly one of Sickert's most curious images. Combining the subject matter of Degas with the low toned palette of Whistler and the closeness of audience and performer to the viewer, enlivened by Lundberg's painted lips and the mask like faces of the claque, produces an unsettling sensation. Whilst Degas typically heightened the sexual tension between a female performer and predominantly male audience (as seen in *Le café-concert des Ambassadeurs*, 1876-77) **[Fig. 1.11]** Sickert prefers to highlight the dramatic tension inherent in the theatrical experience.

Whilst the music-hall for many: "may have been a kind of brothel for the man who did not want exactly that, and a place to catch life's sordidness in humorous, unpretentious form" the truth of the matter, however, was that large numbers of families and friends frequented the halls with no ill-effects whatsoever.¹⁰⁰ The halls were a community space; where the: "middle classes and working classes got drunk like brothers and sisters"¹⁰¹:

At every music hall from twenty to thirty songs, or even more, will be sung in the course of the evening, and of all of these, perhaps two or three in a year will catch the popular favour, be played on barrel-organs, whistled by street boys,

¹⁰⁰ John Felstiner, *The Lies of Art: Max Beerbohm's Parody and Caricature* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1973), 127.

¹⁰¹ William Richard Titterton, *From Theatre to Music Hall* (London: Stephen Swift & Co, 1913), 119-120. As cited in A. Gruetzner Robins, "Sickert 'Painter-in-Ordinary' to the Music-Hall." Wendy Baron & Richard Shone (ed). *Sickert Paintings* (Newhaven & London: Yale University Press, 1992), 13-24 (14).

adapted for burlesques and pantomimes, and overrun the entire country in a marvellously short time.¹⁰²

A part of the appeal, for many men, was the possibility of a sexual relationship between performer and the audience which Sickert undoubtedly recognised. The authority of the male audience over the ‘property’ of the female performer was a theme already well explored by Degas. However, whereas Degas would emphasise the sexuality and potential commodity of the performer, Sickert’s interpretation concentrated on capturing the transient, yet potent, power of performance. It is the theatrical experience itself, rather than the girl, that is the commodity; audiences watch in awe rather than sexual hunger. Consequently, all of the social classes in the audience are, for one moment, alike; they are all sharing the same intimate, yet public, experience.

Sickert’s awareness of this aspect of the music-hall experience reveals an interest in the viewer’s authority of vision and experience. The authority of the viewer over the scene was a common theme in the music-hall poems of the late nineteenth century and can ultimately be related to Baudelaire’s concept of the *flâneur* but for Sickert a sense of “magic” about the performance was retained. More reminiscent of Whistler’s symbolism than Degas’s realism, as D.S. MacColl noted, Sickert had:

... a private sentiment for the stage and footlights, such as other men feel for the fields and sunlight; but this does not further him much with a public that resents the stage in pictures almost as much as a play in a church. It is touching, this British feeling that canvas is consecrated ground, but it is not rational. It is rational that a man should paint beauty where he feels it, and most men, when painting is not in question, are aware of both the beauty and sentiment of stage effect.¹⁰³

¹⁰² F. Anstey (Thomas Anstey Guthrie), “London’s Music Halls”, *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, January 1891, Vol. LXXXII, No. CCCCLXXXVIII, 198.

¹⁰³ D.S. MacColl, “Art: Recent Exhibitions”, *The Spectator*, No. 3479, 2 March 1895, 295.

Sickert's "London Impressionists" exhibition, held at the Goupil Gallery in December 1889 contained two of the artist's most visually complex works; *Little Dot Hetherington at the Bedford Music Hall* (occasionally titled *Joe Haynes and Little Dot Hetherington at the Old Bedford Music Hall: 'The Boy I Love Is Up In The Gallery'*) and *The P.S. Wings in an O.P. Mirror* [Fig.'s 1.12 & 1.13]. Following on from his performance portraits, Sickert's portrait of the singer 'Little' Dot Hetherington was an attempt to capture the essence of her performance and its captivating quality over the hall. The scene depicts the Bedford Music Hall, located in Camden Town. The Bedford, a cramped and unpreposing building, was an old fashioned music-hall dating from the early 1860s which, in order to increase its space, was decorated with large mirrors.¹⁰⁴

Visually the composition is deceptive. The space depicted is arbitrary. What we actually see is not a direct view of the performer, but the reflection of the performer in one of the large wall mirrors.¹⁰⁵ In the background of the painting, a second performer watches from the wings whilst on the far right, in a stage-box, sits a male figure. This figure is also reflected in another mirror, again repeated in the first, on the far left of the composition. This inclusion balances the overall physical symmetry of the painting, yet it also 'unbalances' the truthfulness of the scene we witness; our reliability in the first reading is compromised by the inclusion of this second reflection.

Many music halls were decorated by large wall mirrors for the obvious reason that it helped to create a greater illusion of space and light. However, the mirrors enabled audiences to view themselves in the same spatial planes as the performers whilst also

¹⁰⁴ Originally known as the Bedford Music Hall from 1861, until its destruction by fire in 1896, the hall reopened later the same year as the New Bedford Palace of Varieties. Diana Howard, *London theatres and Music Halls 1850-1950* (London: Library Association, 1970), 21.

¹⁰⁵ Sickert may have been inspired by Manet's *Un Bar aux Folies-Bergère*, which he likely saw in Manet's studio in April 1883. For more on this painting see Anna Gruetzner Robins, "Sickert 'Painter-in-Ordinary' to the Music-Hall." Wendy Baron & Richard Shone (ed). *Sickert Paintings* (Newhaven & London: Yale University Press, 1992), 13-24.

providing the prospect to individually observe other members of the audience surreptitiously: “All around the hall handsome mirrors reflect the glittering lights, and offer abundant opportunities for self-admiration”¹⁰⁶. In a sense, the mirror reinforces the artificiality of the entertainment it reflects; its inclusion confuses the tradition of the ‘fourth wall’, or proscenium, between audience/performer and viewer/painting. By physically acknowledging this factor, Sickert highlights the visual superiority of the viewer over the staged performance and subsequent painted image. In simple terms, by recognising the inclusion of the mirror we recognise the artificiality of the performance and question the truthfulness of the painting in general. The mirror, of course, was a popular tool to explore duality; it highlighted the contrast between the outer and inner self; the corporeal and the cerebral.¹⁰⁷

The performer’s prefix ‘Little’ suggests Dot is a young girl or more likely a young woman pretending to be a young girl. Little is known of Dot’s life but she did perform at the Bedford on 24 November 1888 whilst Joe Haynes was the Chairman of the Hall.¹⁰⁸ Her song, *The Boy I Love Is Up In The Gallery*, concerned a young girl, just arrived from the country, singing to her tradesman lover who sits in the cheapest seats way up in the gallery. The song (typically sprinkled with sexual innuendo) was delivered as a first person narrative:

I'm a young girl, and have just come over.

Over from the country where they do things big,

¹⁰⁶ “The Middlesex Music Hall”, *The Era*, 6 June 1872, 7. As the poet Theodore Wratislaw succinctly termed them: “gilded mirrors that repeat you thrice”. T. Wratislaw, “Etchings III: At the Empire”, *Orchids* (London: Leonard Smithers, 1896), 20.

¹⁰⁷ For example, Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897) as well as Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) all made use of mirror images in their narratives to expose psychological, as well as physical, identity.

¹⁰⁸ Anna Gruetzner Robins has recently suggested (based on information provided by Ms. Hetherington’s granddaughter) that Dot was actually Florence Louise Hetherington, later Mrs William Ritchie, (1878/79-1934) and was aged nine or ten when painted by Sickert. A. Gruetzner Robins, *A Fragile Modernism: Whistler and his Impressionist Followers* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2007), 106-07.

And amongst the boys I've got a lover,
And since I've a lover, why I don't care a fig.

The choice of moment perfectly illustrates the performer/audience dynamic; the moment when the entertainment on stage directly involves the audience and they, in turn, become integral to the performance; as Dot sings to her cobbler lover (who masquerades as a tradesman), a stooge would return her song with a wave of his own handkerchief. Fantasy and reality therefore become confused as the performer initiates a dialogue, in character, between herself and her audience. In its subject matter and technique *Little Dot Hetherington at the Bedford Music Hall* can be seen as a hybrid response to the influences of Whistler and Degas. However, Sickert's adoration of performance is key to an understanding of this image. Neither Degas nor Whistler treated their subject with such reverence. Indeed, Degas concentrates on the sexual nature of the performance, as seen in *Café Concert* (1875-77) or *Le café-concert des Ambassadeurs* (1876-77) [Fig.'s 1.14 & 1.11] which is in contrast to Sickert. The profile spot hitting Dot, and the silent rapt attention of a usually raucous audience, illustrates Sickert's interest in the performer's ability to captivate their audience.¹⁰⁹

P.S. Wings in an O.P. Mirror (c.1889) [Fig. 1.13] similarly uses a mirror to illustrate the ambiguity of the scene and to contrast the audience and performer relationship.¹¹⁰ Clearly equally inspired by Degas's depictions of *café concerts*, the colouring and handling of paint is also reminiscent of Whistler. The duality of the music-hall experience is again evident through a number of visual contrasts, for example the audience in shadows whilst the performer is in spotlight; the drab browns and greys of the audiences' clothing and the vibrant red of the singer's costume; and also the audience of old woman, young man and a rather plain girl contrasted with a beautiful young woman

¹⁰⁹ For more on this painting see Anna Gruetzner Robins, *A Fragile Modernism: Whistler and his Impressionist Followers*, 106-107.

¹¹⁰ The performer is unidentified although the hall is likely to be the Old Bedford.

singer. As a result, the disparity between the glamour of the performance and the downtrodden faces and coarse outfits of the audience is plainly obvious.

Sickert's interest in the scene, however, is not merely concerned with a simple visual juxtaposition, rather, his interest is sparked by the performer/audience dynamic. For example, the old woman and man echo the singer's open mouth and are therefore clearly singing in unison with the performer. Sickert therefore attempts to depict a particularly ephemeral experience; the moment when an audience is willingly drawn into the performer's fantasy; an entirely public yet simultaneously private experience. By rooting his viewer in the scene (we are the implied observer sitting next to the older woman) Sickert also highlights our involvement in the action. We are part of this audience yet intellectually distant from it. As a result a curious mixture of intimacy and detachment emerges; a complex relationship between the observer and observed which merges the psychological with the visual. As such the viewer of the event/painting indulges in a knowingness which distances him/her from the general experience of the audience. The inclusion of the mirror further encourages the viewer to muse on the duality of this experience, in particular the contrast between reality and artificiality. For example, the audience exists in 'real space'; the viewer sits next to the woman, yet the performer is a reflection through the mirror and is a creation of the actor rather than a 'real' person.¹¹¹

An image which echoes elements of *The Lion Comique* and *Little Dot Hetherington* is Sickert's *Vesta Victoria at the Old Bedford* (1890) [Fig. 1.15]. The vertical composition and illustration of orchestra member and performer recalls Degas's *Orchestra at the Opera House* (c.1870) as well as *Ballet Scene from 'Robert le Diable'* (1876) [Fig.'s 1.16 & 1.17] which Sickert probably saw in London.¹¹² Similar to Degas, Sickert has shifted the viewer's

¹¹¹ For more on this painting see Anna Gruetzner Robins, *A Fragile Modernism: Whistler and his Impressionist Followers*, 150-151.

¹¹² *Ballet Scene from 'Robert le Diable'* was bought by Constantine Ionides in 1881. It is possible Sickert sought out a viewing personally. A. Gruetzner Robins, "The greatest artist the world has ever seen", A. Gruetzner Robins & R. Thomson, *op. cit.*, 62-64.

gaze to the left of the performer; in fact the performer is almost unseen at the far right of the painting. In this image, as in *Little Dot Hetherington*, we have a complex viewpoint, with a large gilded mirror slicing through the left hand side of the painting. At the top of the mirror we can just see the gallery audience gazing down onto the stage. Slicing the image down the left with a large mirror enabled Sickert to contrast the plain, ghostly figures of the gallery with Vesta's elaborate and exotic performance. In depicting Vesta directing her song towards them, and they in turn concentrating their full attention on her, Sickert identifies his audience as a collective entity, sharing the same experience and desire whilst simultaneously highlighting the mesmerising power of Vesta's performance.

By 1895, Sickert's interest had transferred from performers to the gallery audience, as seen in *The Gallery of the Old Bedford* (c.1895) [Fig. 1.18]. Packed with young men and with an unsavoury reputation, the gallery provided the cheapest seats in the halls.¹¹³ 'Gallery Boys' were a valuable addition to the music-hall experience, they tended to be the most raucous element of the audience and engaged whole-heartedly with the performance:

I did as my desk-fellows did;
With a pipe and a tankard of beer,
In a music-hall, rancid and hot,
I lost my soul night after night.¹¹⁴

Subsequently, the audiences were often considered as entertaining as the performance on stage, as William Titterton noted: "Above all there is a glimpse of the genuine, vivid life – the life of the working classes..."¹¹⁵ George Bernard Shaw, describing a night at the Britannia Theatre in Hoxton, stated that he could: "barely turn away [from the audience] to

¹¹³ In certain theatres, bottles were chained to waiter's trays to stop thieving and it was not unusual for management to cover the orchestra pits with netting to protect musicians from missiles thrown from the gallery.

¹¹⁴ John Davidson, *In a Music-Hall and Other Poems* (London: Ward & Downey, 1891), 1.

¹¹⁵ Titterton, *op. cit.*, 111.

look at the stage”, whilst Max Beerbohm noted that, when observing a music-hall audience: “You may be disappointed in them. But you are bound to be very much interested”¹¹⁶. Many critics, however, were more patronising with their condemnation:

[It] is not entirely an unmixed curse. It assuredly has too great an influence upon the British Brain; but after all, it serves to take the masses (and certain of the classes) temporarily out of themselves; which must be a blessing to them.¹¹⁷

The prominent theatre critic William Archer was equally suspicious of the value of the halls:

... the art of the music hall is the art of elaborate ugliness, blatant vulgarity, alcoholic humour and rancid sentiment. It does not recall, mirror or interpret any side of life whatever. It exhibits the life of the rich as one long rowdy swagger, the life of the poor as a larky beery maudlin Bank Holiday ... At the music hall we can be both vulgar and refined at the same moment. We can enjoy what is low and despicable with an added zest of condescension.¹¹⁸

Clearly, for many, the performance was only part of the attraction. The atmosphere and its habitués equally repulsed and excited the visitor. *The Gallery of the Old Bedford* provides an obvious visual contrast between the drab, grey colours of the male audience with the

¹¹⁶ G.B. Shaw, “The Drama in Hoxton”, *The Saturday Review*, Vol. 86, No. 2215, 9 April 1898, 487 & Max Beerbohm, “Idolum Aularum”, *The Saturday Review*, Vol. 101, No. 2620, 13 January 1906, 44.

¹¹⁷ As quoted by George Gamble. Reprinted in G.F. Scotson-Clark, *The “Halls”*, *op. cit.*, 6.

¹¹⁸ William Archer, *The Theatrical “World” of 1895* (London: W. Scott, 1896), 98.

elaborate ornamentation of the gilded mirrors and gallery decoration. If we consider it as companion to the portrait of Dot however, the painting equally provides an examination on the rapport between audience and performer. For Sickert this is the relationship that truly interests him; especially in its potential interpretation as a dichotomy on fantasy and reality.¹¹⁹

The value of audience participation was key for the success of the music-hall. The relationship between performers and audiences had always had been highly interactive, something absent from more refined theatres: “The old music hall was a place of freedom and ease, and I have heard a soprano, when her accompaniment was bungled, pause in her song to curse the conductor, the orchestra, the manager, the proprietor and his hall, and the audience, with a brilliance of invective never attained on the legitimate stage”¹²⁰. In a sense the participation confirmed the audience’s *existenz*. Although discussing an audience at a melodrama Bernard Hart’s analysis could easily be applied to Sickert’s ‘Gallery Boys’: “Everyone who has observed the gallery ... is aware that its inmates are living on the stage, and always of course, in the part of the hero or heroine. The illusion of reality which attaches to the play allows the day-dreaming to be conducted much more efficiently than in the case of the novel...”¹²¹

¹¹⁹ Interestingly, most of the critics failed to note the emotional aspect of this image and concentrated on its visual qualities in some cases avoiding the subject-matter entirely; George Moore discussed it entirely with regards to its tones and architectural composition. G. Moore, *The Speaker*, Vol. 308, 23 November 1895, 549.

¹²⁰ Edgar Jepson, *Memories of a Victorian* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1933), 230-33.

¹²¹ B. Hart, *The Psychology of Insanity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1957, first published 1912), 159-160. In the same piece Hart extends on the duality of the theatrical experience: “If we rise higher in the scale of art ... the reader no longer identifies himself merely with the hero, but rather with all the characters at once. He finds portrayed the complexes or partial tendencies that exist in his own mind - and in the action of the novel he reads the conflicts and struggles which he experiences in his own life. ... The reasons that such productions appeal only to a limited class is that they presuppose in their audience the possession of mental processes sufficiently complicated to enable this identification to occur”.

Minnie Cunningham (1892) [Fig. 1.19] is an interesting addition to Sickert's *œuvre*. It is one of his first theatrical portraits (rather than a portrait of an event) and, as such, it is natural that it should resonate elements of Whistler. In particular, the technique and format echoes Whistler's portrait of Henry Irving as well as Manet's *The Tragic Actor: Rouvière as Hamlet* (1866) [Fig. 1.01 & Fig. 1.20]¹²². However, whereas Whistler and Manet present their subject surrounded by nothing but air Minnie is firmly rooted to her stage.¹²³ Incorporating an ambiguous backdrop, Sickert lowers our viewpoint, forcing the viewer to look up towards his subject (recalling the adoration of Renaissance altarpieces). This veneration (of performer and subject) is highlighted by the separation of Minnie from her audience by the thin rail cutting across the bottom of the stage; the attenuated Minnie is physically close to her audience but equally, tantalisingly, just out of reach.¹²⁴

Reviewers of the painting, on the whole, were favourable. D.S. MacColl was particularly impressed:

It is one of the commonplaces of stupid criticism to suppose that a music-hall subject must be something quite ugly, chosen by a painter out of bravado. Quite apart from the fascination of stage-lighting, and the accidents of stage-colour, the fact is, of course, amusingly different. Among the various highly trained performers – dancers, singers, acrobats – beauty and grace hold the stage as well as grotesqueness and vulgarity. An artist knows how to treat all three if his range

¹²² The low lit face also recalls Degas's *Café Concert Singer* (1878). In a further reference to Whistler the portrait could also be argued to be a 'symphony' in red.

¹²³ In a letter to Cunningham, dated 31 August 1897, Sickert reveals that he built a stage-set for Minnie to pose on: "Now I have got a proper stage built ... you won't be stood upon a little stand like you were at Chelsea!" Thanks to Matthew Sturgis for this information.

¹²⁴ Sickert's choice of music-hall entertainer and performance over a respectable actor and classical performance signifies his interest in popular culture and the popularity of the music-hall during this period. For more on this painting see Anna Gruetzner Robins, "Sickert 'Painter-in-Ordinary' to the Music-Hall." Wendy Baron & Richard Shone (ed). *Sickert Paintings* (Newhaven & London: Yale University Press, 1992), 13-24 and Anna Gruetzner Robins, *A Fragile Modernism: Whistler and his Impressionist Followers*, 90-93.

be great enough, but in a case like this there is nothing in the subject that would not delight a Botticelli.¹²⁵

George Moore, on the other hand, was more interested in the figure itself: “the thinness of the hand and wrist is well insisted on and the trip of the legs, just before she turns, realises, and in a manner I have not seen elsewhere, the enigma of the artificial life on stage”¹²⁶. It was this same enigma and the *milieu* of the theatre which fascinated Sickert, and would consistently shape and inspire his life and career.

¹²⁵ D.S. MacColl, “The New English Art Club”, *The Spectator*, No. 3,361, 26 November 1892, 770. Sickert may have hoped to gain commissions through theatrical portraiture but by all accounts this proved unsuccessful; Cunningham was unimpressed commenting that the painting made her look: “too tall and thin”. Karl Beckson & John M. Munro, *Arthur Symons: Selected Letters, 1880-1935* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), 96. As cited in A. Gruetzner Robins, “Sickert ‘Painter-in-Ordinary’ to the Music-Hall.” Wendy Baron & Richard Shone (ed). *Sickert Paintings* (Newhaven & London: Yale University Press, 1992), 13-24 (22).

¹²⁶ G. Moore, *The Speaker*, Vol. 154, 10 December 1892, 707.

Actor & Painter: The Divided Self

All art is at once surface and symbol.

Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril.

Those who read the symbol do so at their peril.

It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors.

Oscar Wilde, 1890¹²⁷

The imitator is a poor kind of creature. If the man who paints only the tree, or flower, or other surface he sees before him were an artist, the king of artists would be the photographer. It is for the artist to do something beyond this.

James Abbot McNeill Whistler, 1878¹²⁸

Sickert's paintings of the music-halls enabled him to explore and build on a number of artistic, literary and theatrical interests of the day. Just as Wilde's statement noted the concern with duality in art so to did Sickert explore a similar theme in his music-hall paintings. As depictions of topical characters and locales, they can be seen as a historical record of a popular but ultimately fading way of life. Obviously, of course, the works can also be seen as a natural attempt to anglicise the *cafe-concerts* of the Impressionists, however Sickert's treatment of the subject was entirely different to his French counterparts.

Sickert's experiences as an actor undoubtedly influenced the choice and handling of his subject. It gave him an intimate understanding of his topic that his contemporaries lacked. In Sickert's paintings, the performer takes on an almost mythical presence. Their power hypnotizes their audience. Sickert's preference for female performers is telling; it is clear these figures have a strength and attraction which is greater than the male performers. Unlike Degas, Sickert does not focus on the overtly sexual subtext of these performances

¹²⁷ Wilde, *op. cit.*, 3.

¹²⁸ J.A.M. Whistler, "The Red Rag", *The World*, 22 May 1878. Reprinted in Whistler, *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies* (London: Constable, 1967), 128.

rather, he was fascinated by the power of performance; the power to excite and transport an audience beyond their everyday existences.

His handling of the subject reveals not only an actor's interest in theatre subjects but also with the concept of identity and the self, particularly through his motif of the mirror. The mirror was a well-established symbol of self-exploration and was a frequent tool of many writers and artists during the period. The mirror enabled Sickert to contrast the physical differences between audience and performer as well as symbolise their shared reliance. Equally, the mirror contrasted the reality and artificiality of the performance, as well as physically the audience and performer.

The interest in the 'divided' self, in the *doppelgänger*; the contrast between two identities, between the high and the low, permeates Sickert's paintings of the halls and simultaneously reflects the two sides of his artistic influences; Whistler and Degas. It also betrays the artist as part of the very theme he explores; Sickert is simultaneously actor and painter, performer and audience, *flâneur* and *curieux*. Ultimately, Sickert's mirror reflects not only the duality inherent in the theatrical experience but also Sickert's own theatrical identity. As Robert Emmons succinctly noted: "Seldom have painter and subject been so well matched"¹²⁹.

¹²⁹ Emmons, *op. cit.*, 52.

Act II: Restaging Camden Town: Sickert and the theatre c.1905-c.1915

Two people should be able to sit quietly in a room, without ever leaving their chairs, and to hold our attention breathless for as long as the playwright likes.

Arthur Symons, 1906¹³⁰

One of the things in which it seems to me that we have a right to speak of progress is the intensity of dramatic truth in the modern conversation-piece or *genre* picture.

Walter Sickert, 1915¹³¹

Sickert's *Ennui* (c.1914) [Fig. 2.01], featuring his regular cast of 'Hubby' and Marie Hayes, is often considered as the epitome of his work from the Camden Town period.¹³² Its concentration on a lower-class domestic setting combined with an ambiguous narrative characterises his work of the period. Equally, due to its very deliberate insistence on the

¹³⁰ Arthur Symons, *Plays, Acting and Music* (London: Constable, 1909, 171. Symons' quote recalls the writings of Anton Chekhov: "It is necessary ... that on the stage everything should be as complex and as simple as in life. People are having dinner, and while they're having it, their future happiness may be decided or their lives may be about to be shattered". Chekhov, letter to Ivan Leontyev, 18 February 1889. As quoted in David Magarshack, *Chekhov the Dramatist* (London: Hill & Wang, 1925), 118.

¹³¹ Walter Sickert, "A Monthly Chronicle: Roger Fry & Maurice Asselin." *The Burlington Magazine*, December 1915. Reprinted in Anna Gruetzner Robins (ed). *Walter Sickert: The Complete Writings on Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, first published 2000), 398.

¹³² Sickert had worked on the painting since 1913. The majority of works from the Camden Town Group tended towards subjects which could be found in everyday life, either nudes in informal settings or clothed figures in slightly shabby lodgings. For more on the Group see: Wendy Baron's "The Domestic Theatre" Alistair Smith (ed), *Walter Sickert 'drawing is the thing'* (Manchester: Whitworth Art Gallery, 2005), 6-10, *The Camden Town Group* (London: Scolar Press, 1979) and *Perfect Moderns: A History of the Camden Town Group* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000); Robert Upstone, *Modern Painters: The Camden Town Group* (London: Tate, 2008) and Valerie Webb, *The Camden Town Group: Representations of Class and Gender in Paintings of London Interiors* (London: Parker Art, 2007).

figurative rather than the abstract, it is often held up as an example of Sickert's reluctance to embrace the avant-garde. John Rothenstein's defence of its popularity: "The reason for this lies not at all I am inclined to think in its excellence and its splendid organisation, nor even in its being so readily understandable and easy to read, but rather in its being almost the only painting of Sickert's in which strong human emotion is powerfully and plastically expressed, the feeling, namely, designated by its title", is telling in that Rothenstein clearly wishes the painting to be viewed in terms of its aesthetic composition rather than its subject matter.¹³³

Sickert was entirely aware of the seeming literary nature of his work as he later proposed to Virginia Woolf: "I would suggest that you *sauter par dessus* all paint-box technical twaddle about art which has bored & bored everybody stiff. I have always been a literary painter, thank goodness, like all the decent painters. Do be the first to say so"¹³⁴. Woolf clarified her opinion in her 1934 book; *Walter Sickert: A Conversation*:

¹³³ John Rothenstein, *Sickert* (London: Beaverbrook Newspapers Ltd, 1961), 24. For more on *Ennui* see Ruth Bromberg "Ennui: Etching as Drawing" in Alistair Smith (ed), *Walter Sickert 'drawing is the thing'* (Manchester: Whitworth Art Gallery, 2005), 15-16; Ruth Bromberg, *Walter Sickert: Prints, A Catalogue Raisonné* (Singapore: New Haven and London, 2000); Nicola Moorby "'A long chapter from the ugly tale of commonplace living': the Evolution of Sickert's *Ennui*" in A. Smith (ed), *Walter Sickert 'drawing is the thing'* (Manchester: Whitworth Art Gallery, 2005), 11-14; Anna Gruetzner Robins, *Walter Sickert: Drawings: Theory and Practice: Word and Image* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1996); Susan Sidlauskas, "Walter Sickert's *Ennui*", *Body, Place, and Self in Nineteenth Century Painting* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 124-149 and Stella Tillyard, "W.R. Sickert and the Defence of Illustrative Painting." Brian Allen (ed.), *Studies in British Art I: Towards a Modern Art World* (London: Yale University Press, 1995), 189-205.

¹³⁴ As quoted in Denys Sutton, *Walter Sickert* (London: Michael Joseph, 1976), 235. As Woolf recalled to Quentin Bell: "Clive gave a party for me to meet Sickert the other night and was at his best; he primed us with wine and turkey; cigars and brandy; in consequence we all kissed each other, and I am committed to write and write and write about Sickert's books – he says they are not pictures". V. Woolf to Q. Bell, 21 December 1933. Reprinted in Nigel Nicolson (ed), *The Sickle Side of the Moon: The letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume V: 1932-1935* (London: Hogarth Press, 1979), 261-262.

To me Sickert always seems more of a novelist than a biographer... He likes to set his characters in motion, to watch them in action. As I remember, his show was full of pictures that might be stories, as indeed their names suggest.... The figures are motionless, of course, but each has been seized in a moment of crisis; it is difficult to look at them and not to invent a plot, to hear what they are saying.¹³⁵

Ennui, especially, provides an interesting piece of drama for Woolf:

You remember the picture of the old publican, with the glass on the table before him and a cigar gone cold at his lips, looking out of his shrewd little pig's eyes at the intolerable wastes of desolation in front of him? A fat woman lounges, her arm on a cheap yellow chest of drawers, behind him. It is all over with them, one feels. The accumulated weariness of innumerable days has discharged its burden on them. They are buried under an avalanche of rubbish. In the streets beneath the trams are squeaking, children are shrieking. Even now somebody is tapping his glass impatiently on the bar counter. She will have to bestir herself; to pull her heavy, indolent body together and go and serve him. The grimness of that situation lies in the fact that there is no crisis; dull minutes are mounting, old matches are accumulating and dirty glasses and dead cigars; still on they must go, up they must get.¹³⁶

Woolf's defence of the literary atmosphere of Sickert's work is important, yet it eclipses the artist's true source of inspiration. Considering Sickert's lifelong interest in the stage, it is more apt to read his works in terms of their theatrical, rather than literary, precedent; as Sickert, in a letter to the actress Gwen Ffrangcon-Davies, tellingly lamented:

¹³⁵ Virginia Woolf, *Walter Sickert: A Conversation* (London: Hogarth Press. 1934), 13. For more on a possible literary reading of Sickert's Camden Town Works see: Richard Shone, "Text and Image: Camden Town Painting and contemporary fiction", Upstone, *op. cit.*, 44-45.

¹³⁶ Woolf, *op. cit.*, 13-14.

“why o why ain’t I a producer”¹³⁷. Indeed, if we consider Sickert’s works from the period of his return to London in 1905 to the beginnings of war in 1915 (roughly categorized as his Fitzroy Street/Camden Town period) it is curious to note that, seemingly, Sickert abandoned the theatre as source and subject matter for his art despite it being the focus and source of inspiration for the majority of his earlier music-hall inspired works and later Shakespeare period. The opposite, of course, was the case.

The theatre of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was characterised by a number of particular social and artistic themes. These can be roughly classified into three categories; an interest in the emancipation of woman (in particular the role of the “New Woman” and concerns with the “marriage problem”), generational conflicts (especially in terms of contrast between youth and old age), and a growing interest in exploring class considerations (seen particularly in the relocation of dramatic focus from middle-class to the working-class environments) and it is vital to consider Sickert’s work in light of these theatrical precedents. For example, the unhappy marriage theme was at the root of John Galsworthy’s highly successful and *Ennui*-esque *The Fugitive* (The Court and Prince of Wales’s Theatre’s, 16 September to 18 October, 1913) where, Clare (a “sex-rebel”¹³⁸); trapped in a loveless marriage, decides to escape but finds she’s unable to support herself financially [Fig. 2.02]. Ultimately, Clare decides to commit suicide rather than prostitute herself. The problems of inequality in marriage were a familiar theme in the Edwardian theatre, especially the idea that a wife was a “commodity” and Clare’s lack of independent wealth is symbolically echoed by *Ennui*’s working class interior. In Sickert’s painting, the female figure, trapped as she is, emotionally and literarily as well as financially and psychologically (by the male and the claustrophobic furnishing of the room), is simply another object owned by the man.

¹³⁷ In 1932 Walter Sickert, in a letter to the actress Gwen Ffrangcon-Davies. As quoted in Rebecca Daniels, “Newly discovered photographic sources for Walter Sickert’s theatre paintings of the 1930s”, *The Burlington Magazine*, Vol. CXLVIII, No. 1237, April 2006, 276.

¹³⁸ *The Illustrated London News*, Vol. 143, 4 October 1913, 502.

The relationship in *Ennui* bears a subtle similarity with that of the unhappy and dull marriage of Polina to Shamrayev in Chekhov's *The Seagull* (produced by the Adelphi Play Society at Gertrude Kingston's Little Theatre in 1912). Chekhov described his plays as: "the result of observation and the study of life" and Sickert's description of his own works shares an empathy with the playwright: "He [the painter] has all his work cut out for him, observing and recording. His poetry is the interpretation of everyday life"¹³⁹. It is therefore not surprising to find the critic J. Middleton Murry later stating: "Sickert has points of contact with the literary art and attitude of the Russian writer Tchekhov [*sic*]. To some extent his *Ennui* is an English - a very English - counterpart of Tchekhov's *Tedious Story*"¹⁴⁰. In addition, there are certain metaphoric resonance's with Nina's self-proclaimed identification with the dead seagull in Chekhov's play and Sickert's inclusion of the trapped bird in a glass case in *Ennui*. George Bernard Shaw's *Getting Married* (first presented at the Haymarket Theatre, London on 12 May 1908) presented a similarly series of broken relationships. Collins, a tradesman, admits his wife is a born wife and mother: "You see, family life is all the life she knows: she's like a bird born in a cage, that would die if you let it loose in the woods"¹⁴¹. In contrast, his brother's wife, whom he calls Mrs George, often leaves her husband for a series of short-lived affairs:

¹³⁹ Chekhov, letter to Aleksey Suvorin, 30 December 1888. Quoted in Lillian Hellman (ed), *The Selected Letters of Anton Chekhov* (New York: Hamish Hamilton, 1955), 77. Sickert, "The New Life of Whistler", *The Fortnightly Review*, December 1908. Gruetzner Robins, *op. cit.*, 178-188 (185).

¹⁴⁰ John Middleton Murry, "The Etchings of Walter Sickert", *Print Collector's Quarterly*, Vol. X, London 1923, 54. Middleton Murry (along with Samuel Solomonovitch Koteliansky) translated Chekhov's story in 1915 for the anthology: Anton Tchekhov [*sic*], *The Bet and Others Stories* (Dublin: Maunsel & Company, 1915). Desmond MacCarthy's 1936 description of the play, which Sickert also painted (*Peggy Ashcroft as Nina in 'The Seagull'*, 1936-37) could easily apply to Sickert's earlier Camden Town works: "Tchekhov is, of course, a dramatist of hints, half-shades and suspended moments of tensions. His drama is a drama of nerve-storms which brings no relief, of climaxes which are followed by anti-climaxes". MacCarthy, *The New Statesman and Nation*, 30 May 1936, 858.

¹⁴¹ George Bernard Shaw, *Getting Married*. Reprinted in *Bernard Shaw: Collected Plays with their Prefaces. Volume III* (London: Bodley Head, 1971, first published 1905), 553.

She didn't seem to have any control over herself when she fell in love. She would mope for a couple of days, crying about nothing; and then she would up and say - no matter who was there to hear her - "I must go to him, George"; and away she would go from her home and her husband without with-your-leave or by-your-leave.¹⁴²

A similar relationship can be witnessed in Elizabeth Baker's *Chains* (Court, for one performance on 18 April 1909).¹⁴³ Baker's play highlighted the sacrifices both men and women make in marriage. Dismissing the typical middle-class drawing room in favour of the sitting room of a lower-middle class couple - Charley and Lily Wilson - Baker explores the drudgery of the life of a low-paid clerk. One of their lodgers, Fred Tennant, plans to emigrate to Australia, leaving his life as a clerk behind for the more romantic life of a farmer. Charley, inspired to do the same explains his reasons: "It's that I'm just sick of the office and the grind every week and no change! - nothing new, nothing happening. Why. I haven't seen anything of the world. I just settled down to it - why? - just because other chaps do, because it's the right thing. I only live for Saturday"¹⁴⁴. Although no photographs of the production exist, Baker's set description of the sitting room reveals similarities with Sickert's Camden Town sets:

...the principal articles of furniture are the centre table, set for dinner for three and a sideboard on the right. ... Family photographs, a wedding group and a cricket group, and a big lithography copy of a Marcus Stone picture, are on the

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 554. Shaw's preface to the play discusses the problems of unhappy marriages further: "If we adopt the common romantic assumption that the object of marriage is bliss, then the very strongest reason for dissolving a marriage is that it shall be disagreeable to one or other or both of the parties". *Ibid.*, 457.

¹⁴³ Court Theatre, 18 April 1909 and Duke of York's 15 May to 16 June 1910.

¹⁴⁴ Baker, *Chains: a Play in Four Acts* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1911), Act III, 59.

walls. There is a brass alarm clock on the mantelpiece and one or two ornaments. ... A small vase of flowers stands in the centre of the dinner table.¹⁴⁵

The play's atmosphere also shared an affinity with Sickert's domestic dramas, particularly in its depiction of suburban ennui; as *The Stage* noted: "there is hardly any action ... [it depicts the] poignant reality [of a] dull, commonplace existence in suburban West London"¹⁴⁶. Echoing Shaw's aim to make: "the audience believe that real things are happening to real people" Sickert stages his figures in authentic and recognisably lower middle-class environments.¹⁴⁷ This deliberate lack of heightened theatrical action in favour of a greater degree of psychological drama was well discussed during this period. For example, Symons's claim at the start of this chapter was clearly inspired by the writings of the Symbolist Maurice Maeterlinck: "There is a tragic element in the life of every day that is far more real, far more penetrating, far more akin to the true self that is in us than the tragedy that lies in great adventure"¹⁴⁸. For Maeterlinck, these quieter moments provided greater dramatic depth than the more typical melodrama:

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, Act I, 1. It is tempting to consider the play, and its set design, may have inspired Sickert's *Ennui*, particularly in its mention of a lithograph by Marcus Stone on the wall. Stone frequented his works with wistful and dreamy Victorian maidens not dissimilar to the portrait hanging on *Ennui*'s wall.

¹⁴⁶ *The Stage*, 22 April 1909, 9. *The Atheneum* was equally impressed: "[The play] deals faithfully and piquantly with one of the largest and - in the theatre at any rate - least discussed classes of the community, and handles a question of the hour with the nicest sense of dramatic effect", No. 4309, 28 May 1910, 651. *The Era* thought the first act, with the dialogue around the table between Charley, Lily and Fred: "the dullest and most unilluminating order [but completely] copied from life", 24 April 1909, Vol. 72, 19.

¹⁴⁷ George Bernard Shaw, *The Art of Rehearsal* (Samuel French: New York, 1928). As quoted in Toby Cole & Helen Krich Chinoy (eds), *Directors on Directing. A Source Book of Modern Theatre* (London: Owen, 1966), 192.

¹⁴⁸ Maurice Maeterlinck, "Le Tragique quotidien", *Le Trésor des humbles [The Treasure of the Humble]*. Paris. 1896. Translated by Alfred Sutro (London: Allen, 1908, first published 1896. It was also published in a later edition in 1913), 105. William Rothenstein had planned a portrait of Maeterlinck in 1896 but the project failed to materialise. Rothenstein had first seen Maeterlinck's plays in late 1894 and early 1895 (*Les Aveugles* and *l'Intuse*) at an 'avant-garde' theatre in Paris. It is tempting to consider Sickert may have accompanied his friend to the productions or had, at least, been inspired to view them himself on Rothenstein's

I have grown to believe that an old man, seated in his armchair, waiting patiently, with his lamp beside him; giving unconscious ear to all the eternal laws that reign about his house, interpreting, without comprehending, the silence of doors and windows and the quivering voice of the light, submitting with bent head to the presence of his soul and his destiny ... I have grown to believe that he, motionless as he is, does yet live in reality a deeper, more human and more universal life than the lover who strangles his mistress, the captain who conquers in battle, or 'the husband who avenges his honour.'¹⁴⁹

In addition Sickert, albeit more tentatively, toys with the then in vogue theatrical argument of Naturalism versus Symbolism.¹⁵⁰ Sickert, however, avoided the tendency towards a naturalist sociological case report and flavoured his narratives with poetry and restrained symbolism. In terms of their subject matter, as well as treatment and composition, it is clear, therefore, that Sickert's Camden Town period can be considered to be as "theatrical" as his earlier music-hall subjects or later depictions of Shakespeare. It is surprising therefore that this consideration of his work has remained overlooked. Not only do the works reflect a number of theatrical themes and subjects then in vogue in the London and Continental theatres they also explore the theatricality of composition and setting.¹⁵¹ Sickert's affinity with the theatre reveals a curiously symbiotic relationship with the New Drama of the turn of the century; his paintings are visual interpretations of New Drama themes and in turn they provide a visual document of the theatre itself.

recommendation. Robert Speaight, *William Rothenstein: The Portrait of an Artist in his time* (London: Eyre & Spottiswode, 1962), 89.

¹⁴⁹ Maeterlinck, *op. cit.*, 105.

¹⁵⁰ Although the argument had reigned in the French theatre-world since the 1860s it had only really come to head in England in the first two decades of the twentieth century.

¹⁵¹ Sickert was well versed in the popular entertainment of his day, for example, discussing a lunch [c.1927] at which Sickert was present C.J. Holmes recalled that the conversation discussed all the: "latest books, plays and films, as well as the celebrities, English or Parisian, who make Society". Holmes, *Self and Partners* (London: Constable, 1936), 360.

Crucially, whilst Sickert previously derived his subject matter from particular performances and performers for his music-hall and early theatre paintings of the 1880s and 1890s, during his Camden Town period his influence came from the theatrical *milieu* of the period. For example, Sickert's inspiration (consciously or not) came from a wide range of theatrical sources; from discussions between friends and acquaintances, reviews and photographic depictions in journals and newspapers and a general awareness of the current themes and styles inherent on the London stage. As a result, rather than simply depicting specific productions and performers Sickert utilised contemporary theatrical themes and subjects and, in essence, became a stage-manager of his work; directing and choreographing his "cast", choosing locations and suggesting situations for his narratives.

Throughout his career Sickert regularly relied on photographs as aids to his work, and it is very likely that his Camden Town images were also influenced by photographic sources. It is impossible to confirm exactly which images Sickert knew, but the theatrical journals of the day reveal a number of similar poses which echoed in Sickert's compositions. Even if not directly inspired by specific images they show Sickert thinking in terms of the visuality of his works. Sickert's awareness of the sheer theatricality of his subjects and treatments can not be underestimated. If we read Sickert's works from this period in light of the developments in European, and in particular British theatre, it is evident that these works were entirely inspired and instructed by the stage.

Sickert and the Beginnings of the “New Drama”

Pinero told me [in 1879], in the wings of the Lyceum, “The governor is going to produce my little play, ‘Daisy’s Escape.’” He had just been cast for the part of the butler in the *lever de redeau*, “High Life Below Stairs,” “The governor,” he whispered, “has been kind enough to say I may even wear my own hair.” He was one of the kindest and politest men I have ever met. That he had no use for incompetent players only shows how highly he valued competence and the standard of his duty towards efficient interpreters.

Richard Sickert, 1934¹⁵²

Ibsen had drawn the women of the future; Pinero substituted the women with a past, and, being well aware of what the public wanted, was heartily acclaimed. For a time the stage revelled in the company of ladies who, outwardly respectable, were known to have some dark secrets in their lives.

Allardyce Nicoll, 1961¹⁵³

Sickert’s awareness of the developing English theatre can be seen by a selection of works he began before his emigration to France in the late 1890s. *The Pork Pie Hat: Hilda Spong in ‘Trelawny of the Wells’* (1898) [Fig. 2.03] was based on Arthur Wing Pinero’s *Trelawny of the Wells*. Although a forgotten figure today, in the late nineteenth century Pinero (1855-1934) was one of Britain’s most popular, and successful, dramatists. Like Sickert, his background was as an unsuccessful actor in the 1870s but by the mid 1880s he had changed career to playwright. Specialising in diluted drawing-room works inspired by Ibsen, such as *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray*, 1893 and *The Notorious Mrs. Ebbsmith*, 1895,

¹⁵² Sickert, “Mr Sickert on ‘Pin’”, *The Observer*. No. 7489, 9 December, 1934, 7.

¹⁵³ Allardyce Nicoll, *British Drama: An Historical Survey* (California: Barnes & Noble, 1961), 356.

Pinero's works were important due to their willingness to address modern social concerns for the West End theatre.¹⁵⁴

Trelawny of the 'Wells' was first performed at the Royal Court Theatre (Sloane Square, Chelsea) on the 20 January 1898. It starred Irene Vanbrugh in the lead role as Rose Trelawny and Hilda Spong as Imogen Parrot [Fig. 2.04]. As associates of Pinero, Sickert and William Rothenstein were both in the audience for the first night:

Through Miss Terry, Henry Irving and the Trees, I got many tickets for first nights in those days, and saw many plays. When Pinero's *Trelawny of the Wells* was put on at the Court Theatre, I went with Sickert to see this enchanting piece. Here was a play which seemed written for our delight. What fun it all was; and how enchanting the costumes! And such a chance it provided that Sickert asked Miss Hilda Spong – a magnificent creature who acted a part – to sit for him; while I approached Irene Vanbrugh. Miss Vanbrugh took infinite trouble, and endured many sittings. Sickert had Miss Spong photographed, and from a small print and with few sittings he achieved a life-size portrait.¹⁵⁵

Written in the late 1890s the play provides an insight into theatre life of the 1860s, the very theatre of Pinero's and Sickert's adolescence. Superficially the play details the romance of Rose Trelawny and Arthur Gower. However its appeal lay in its theatrical nostalgia as well as its discussion of the then in vogue theatrical concern for Naturalism. By contrasting the

¹⁵⁴ Although important they did not, according to Shaw, stretch far enough in their modernity. On *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray* for example, he felt: "Paula Tanqueray is an astonishingly well-drawn figure as stage figures go nowadays, even allowing for the fact that there is no cheaper subject for the character draughtsman than the ill-tempered sensual woman seen from the point of view of the conventional man", Shaw, "An Old New Play and a New Old One", *The Saturday Review*, Vol. 79, No. 2052, 23 February 1895, 249. Shaw would, however, admit to agreeing with Pinero's dramatic aim, discussing *The Notorious Mrs. Ebbsmith* he noted: "Mr Pinero's new play is an attempt to reproduce that peculiar stage effect of intellectual drama, of social problem, of subtle psychological study, in short, of a great play..." Shaw, "Mr Pinero's New Play", *The Saturday Review*, Vol. 79, No. 2055, 16 March 1895, 346.

¹⁵⁵ William Rothenstein, *Men and Memories: 1872-1900* (London: Faber & Faber Ltd, 1931), 335.

two favoured acting styles and preferences of the characters of Sir William Gower and James Telfer with those of Rose and Tom Wrench, Pinero illustrated the change in performance style over the previous thirty years.¹⁵⁶ The theatre of the 1860s made no serious attempt at realism, but the character of Tom Wrench has serious aspirations for it.¹⁵⁷ As Wrench states:

I strive to make my people talk and behave like people. ... To fashion heroes out of actual, dull, everyday men – the sort of men you see smoking cheroots in the club windows in St James’s Street; and heroines from simple maidens in muslin frocks. Naturally, the managers won’t stand that.¹⁵⁸

The play was a notable success; even admired by Shaw who announced it had touched him: “more than anything else Mr. Pinero has ever written... When he plays me the tunes of 1860, I appreciate and sympathize. Every stroke touches me: I dwell on the dainty workmanship shown in the third and fourth acts: I rejoice in being old enough to know the world of his dreams”¹⁵⁹. In addition to the portrait, Sickert also produced a group scene; *The Toast: ‘Trelawny of the Wells’* [Fig. 2.05].¹⁶⁰ The painting depicts the moment the group gather to give a toast to Rose and James Telfer quotes *Hamlet* (Act III.i.): “the expectancy and rose of the fair State’?” The image, like many of his later Shakespearean works was based on a publicity photograph [Fig. 2.06].¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁶ The play also referenced various other playwrights and actors (including Edmund Kean) whilst characters frequently quote lines from *Hamlet* and *Othello*.

¹⁵⁷ Wrench is clearly based on Tom Robertson (1829-1871) the dramatist who was best known for developing realism and naturalism in his plays of the late 1860s, such as *Caste* (1867). Visually, Robertson also insisted on realistic settings and props for his productions; characters had to talk naturally and situations were ordinary rather than melodramatic.

¹⁵⁸ George Rowell, *Plays by Pinero* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 142.

¹⁵⁹ Shaw, “Mr Pinero’s Past”, *The Saturday Review*, Vol. 85, No. 2206, 5 February 1898, 172.

¹⁶⁰ Wendy Baron (*Sickert: Paintings and Drawings*, New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2006, 215) suggests a date of 1903 for this work.

¹⁶¹ Although I’ve been unable to trace the original photograph an extremely similar group shot (from 1898) is held in the V&A Theatre Museum Archive. Sickert’s painting takes the same eye-level as the photograph and,

Sickert's interest in the theatre also saw him produce a portrait of the actor William S. Penley in the title-role of *Charley's Aunt* [Fig.'s 2.07 & 2.08].¹⁶² As with *The Toast*, 'Trelawny of the Wells' the painting was likely based on a photographic original. Similarly, *Sowing the Wind* (1893) [Fig.'s 2.09 & 2.10], inspired by Sydney Grundy's play of the same name produced at the Comedy Theatre between 20 September until 31 January 1894, was also probably based on an, as yet, unidentified photograph.¹⁶³

Sickert's interest in modern drama can also be witnessed in his sketch of Mrs Theodore Wright as Mrs Alving from Ibsen's *Ghosts* [Fig.'s 2.11 & 2.12].¹⁶⁴ On the 13 March, 1891, at the Royalty Theatre, Soho, J.T. Grein's Independent Theatre's version of *Ghosts* received its first British premiere. Although Ibsen's work was well known in Britain since the late 1870s it was not generally popular with audiences or critics and only appealed to a select minority. The subject matter, although entirely modern, was morally questionable for middle-class Victorian audiences. The first noteworthy performance of Ibsen in England came with Charles Charrington and his wife Janet Achurch's *A Doll's*

although the photograph in the Theatre Museum is slightly different to Sickert's painting it may be that there was a series of photographs taken of the production, a number of the poses, etc. are too similar to be a coincidence - let along the viewpoints of both painting and photograph.

¹⁶² The play had 1469 performances, first at the Royalty Theatre (21 December 1892 to 28 January 1893) then at the Globe (30 January 1893 to 19 December 1896). Penley was the first, and most successful, of the actors to play the part. Wendy Baron (*op. cit.*, 209) mistakenly identifies the sitter as Sickert's friend Brandon Thomas, the author of the play. Thomas actually played Colonel Sir Francis Chesney whilst Penley played Lord Fancourt Babberley (who becomes "Charley's Aunt").

¹⁶³ *Sowing the Wind* was also set in the past (the 1830s). Rothenstein was in the audience, along with Max Beerbohm: "I took him last week to 'Sowing the Wind' which was rather silly of me, for his [Rothenstein's] temperature immediately went up to 1830". Beerbohm, letter to Robert Ross, 27 October 1893, BP:MC (Beerbohm Papers, Merton College, Oxford University. As quoted in Mary M. Lago & Karl Beckson, *Max and Will. Max Beerbohm and William Rothenstein: Their Friendship and Letters 1893-1945* (London: J. Murray, 1975), 23.

¹⁶⁴ Sickert's print, *Mrs Theodore Wright as Mrs Alving*, was not produced until c.1922 however it was taken from a sketch from c.1891.

House which was performed at the Novelty Theatre, Great Queen Street, Holborn, on 7 June 1889. The performance provoked widespread condemnation in the press:

Ibsen enforces his extravagant views by means of the most unpleasant set of people it has ever been the lot of playgoers to encounter, and, furthermore, discusses evils which we unfortunately know to exist, but which it can serve no good purpose to drag into the light of common day... We do not go to the theatre to study such social evils as Ibsen delights to discuss in his cynical, uncompromising manner.¹⁶⁵

The reaction was not surprising in spite of the critic William Archer's campaigning of Ibsen for the previous eleven years. Archer had been an early convert to Ibsen since first becoming aware of his works in the early 1870s and had become his chief translator into English in 1878. It was natural that by 1891 he was confident enough to state:

The theatrical world of today is far more truly alive than it was ten, or even five years ago. We are talking, and perhaps even thinking about the drama with unexampled fervour and pertinacity ...7th June, 1889, the date of the production of *a Doll's House* at the Novelty Theatre, was unquestionably the birthday of the new movement. But it was on the 13th March, 1891, when Henrik Ibsen's *Gengangere* [*Ghosts*] was produced, under artistic conditions devised in Paris by

¹⁶⁵ *The Queen*, 15 June 1889, 285. Shaw expanded on the press criticism of both play and audience: "Candid foulness ... bestial and cynical. ... Ibsen's melancholy and malodorous world ... Absolutely loathsome and fetid ... Gross, almost putrid indecorum ... literary carrion ... Crapulous stuff ... Novel and perilous nuisance ... Lovers of prurience and dabblers in impropriety ... Ninety-seven percent of the people who go to see *Ghosts* are nasty-minded people who find the discussion of nasty subjects to their taste in exact proportion to their nastiness ... The unwomanly woman, the unsexed females ... Effeminate men and male women ... Outside a silly clique, there is not the slightest interest in the Scandinavian humbug or all his works". G.B. Shaw, "The Quintessence of Ibsenism", *Major Critical Essays: The Quintessence of Ibsenism, The Perfect Wagnerite, the Sanity of Art* (London: Constable & Co, 1948, originally printed 1891), 70-72.

André Antoine, that the two forces coalesced and made their united impact on our theatrical life.¹⁶⁶

Archer's linking of the Independent Theatre to André Antoine's Théâtre-Libre (which had opened in Paris on 30 May 1887) was important so much so that when Grein circulated a leaflet around the most prominent "literary and dramatic authorities" he called for a British 'Theatre Libre'¹⁶⁷. Grein's ideal theatre would seek a new direction towards "native work"; work that would "nurture realism... of a healthy kind"¹⁶⁸. In his pamphlet he emphasised the importance for the future development of the British theatre and called for support from the leading novelists and dramatists of the day.¹⁶⁹ Support was quickly forthcoming; Pinero wrote: "that any scheme for the protection of serious drama has, and always will have, my warm sympathy", whilst Archer supported: "Any scheme for stimulating dramatic production"¹⁷⁰. George Moore, inspired by seeing *Ghosts* at the Théâtre-Libre in May of the same year further raised the issue:

Why have we not got a Théâtre Libre? ...surely there should be no difficulty in finding a thousand persons interested in art and letters willing to subscribe five pounds a year for twelve representations of twelve interesting plays. I think such a number of enthusiasts exists in London. The innumerable articles which appear in the daily, the weekly, and monthly press on the London stage prove the existence of

¹⁶⁶ W. Archer, "The Free Stage and the New Drama", *The Fortnightly Review*, Vol. 50, November 1891, 663-664.

¹⁶⁷ J.T. Grein, "A British 'Theatre Libre'", *The Weekly Comedy*, 30 November 1889. Reprinted in James Woodfield, *English Theatre in Transition: 1881-1914* (London: Croom Helm, 1984), 177

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 176.

¹⁶⁹ Curiously, although H.A. Jones supported Grein's plan he was critical of the social naturalism of Antoine and the influence of Zola: "It tried to seduce us from our smug suburban villas into all sorts of gruesome kitchen-middens. Now it really does not matter what happens in kitchen-middens. The dark places of the earth are full of cruelties and abominations. So are the dark places of the soul. We know that well enough. But the epitaph - it is already written - on all this realistic business will be - 'It does not matter what happens in kitchen-middens'". H.A. Jones. *The Renaissance of the English Drama* (London: Macmillan, 1895), vii.

¹⁷⁰ Woodfield, *op. cit.*, 175.

much vague discontent, and that this discontent will take definite shape sooner or later seems more than possible.¹⁷¹

Moore's plea finally came to fruition in the summer of 1891.¹⁷² Grein's choice of Ibsen as the theatre's first production was an inspired, if controversial, move. The problems of gaining a licence from the Lord Chamberlain could be avoided if the production was not public. If the audience was personally invited then the production counted as a private production and could be exempt from the normal licensing procedure. After a faltering search for a location Kate Stanley of the Novelty Theatre offered her premises for Friday 13 March 1891 for one performance. Over three-thousand applicants applied for the six hundred and fifty-seven seat theatre. Grein overcame demand by admitting subscribers to the dress rehearsals on the Wednesday evening. Not unexpectedly the production was criticised from the off. Augustus Moore, in his guise of 'Hawkshaw' thought it: "merely dull dirt... and if Mr Grein hopes to make for the success of his Independent Theatre, he must make it something but a Dispensary of Dirt"¹⁷³. The *Era* was equally condemning, finding the subject: "about as foul and filthy a concoction as has ever been allowed with impunity to fling defiance in the face of a Lord Chamberlain and to disgrace the boards of

¹⁷¹ G. Moore. *The Hawk*, 17 June 1890, 695-696. Moore interviewed Antoine on a visit to London ("The Patron of the Great Unacted") for the *St James's Gazette*, 5 February 1889. Moore was particularly impressed by Antoine's productions of Ibsen's *Ghosts* staged on the 30 May 1890. As he recalled, he: "lived through a year's emotion" during Oswald's confession to Regina (Act III) and he concluded: "Antoine, identifying himself with the simple truth sought by Ibsen, by voice and gesture, casts upon the scene so terrible a light, so strange an air of truth, that the drama seemed to be passing not before our eyes but deep down in our hearts in a way we had never felt before". G. Moore, *Impressions and Opinions* (London: David Nutt, 1913), 162-67. Additionally, as Jacques-Emile Blanche recalled, Moore was: "fascinated by everything connected with Symbolism, Impressionism, and the artistic movements in Paris". J.E. Blanche, *Portraits of a Lifetime: 1870-1914*. Translated and Edited by Walter Clements. Intro by Harley Granville-Barker (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1938), 139.

¹⁷² The Independent Theatre's committee included a number of Sickert's associates including Moore and Frank Harris, editor of *The Fortnightly Review* and former editor of *The Saturday Review*.

¹⁷³ 'Hawkshaw', *The Hawk*, 17 March 1891, 292.

an English theatre”¹⁷⁴. Not unsurprisingly the anti-Ibsen Clement Scott of *The Daily Telegraph* agreed: “On the Ibsen stage the nastiness is inferential, not actual. ... It is a wretched, deplorable, loathsome history ...Handled by an egotist and a bungler, it is only a deplorably dull play ... You want a Shakespeare, or a Byron, or a Browning to attack the subject-matter of *Ghosts* as it ought to be attacked. It might be a noble theme. Here it is a nasty and a vulgar one”¹⁷⁵.

As a publicity exercise, the performance could not have failed. Ibsen’s: “nasty drama [which] deals mainly with incest and hereditary insanity” was naturally shocking for a Victorian middle-class audience.¹⁷⁶ The production succeeded, however, in helping introduce Ibsen to a wider audience and also in establishing modern dramatic themes, subjects and treatment to the British theatre. As Shaw noted: “There was one crowded moment when, after the first performance of *Ghosts*, the atmosphere of London was black with vituperation, with threats, with clamour for suppression and extinction, with every thing that makes life worth living in modern society”¹⁷⁷.

As a close friend of Moore and acquaintance of Frank Harris and Shaw it is likely Sickert attended the production.¹⁷⁸ Mrs Theodore Wright (Alice Austin Wright), who Shaw

¹⁷⁴ *The Era*, 31 March 1891, Vol. 53, 10.

¹⁷⁵ *The Daily Telegraph*, 14 March 1891, 3. The Editorial Comment was equally critical: “the play performed last night is ‘simple’ enough in plan and purpose, but simple only in the sense of an open drain; of a loathsome sore unbandaged; of a dirty act done publicly; or of a lazar-house with all its doors and windows open”. *Ibid.*, 5. Both reprinted in Michael Egan, *Henrik Ibsen: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), 187-188 & 189-193.

¹⁷⁶ Shaw, “Before the Footlights”, *The Saturday Review*, Vol. 71, No. 1842, 14 February 1891, 195. Grein produced a number of other Ibsen plays although, surprisingly, he judged that Shaw’s Ibsen-esque inspired *Mrs. Warren’s Profession* not fit “for women’s ears”. Quoted in Michael Holroyd, *Bernard Shaw, I: 1856-1898: The Search for Love* (London: Random House, 1988), 296.

¹⁷⁷ Shaw, “The Independent Theatre Repents”, *The Saturday Review*, Vol. 79, No. 2056, 23 March 1895, 379.

¹⁷⁸ Wright also played Mrs Alving for the Independent Theatre in another one-off performance in 1893. A further link with Ibsen is provided by Sickert’s friend William Rothenstein, who in the 1890s, planned to travel to Norway to produce a portrait of Ibsen. Noting that Ibsen was unlikely to grant him such a sitting,

claimed in a later production: “By one step she walked over the heads of the whole profession into a niche in the history of the English stage” had been selected by Grein himself for the role of Mrs Alving and it is not surprising Sickert chose her as a subject.¹⁷⁹ Sickert’s sketch consists of two profile views of Alice in character which recall his portrait of *Minnie Cunningham* (1892) and it may have been similarly intended as a theatrical portrait.¹⁸⁰ Whatever Sickert’s aim it was never completed as a painting.

By the late 1890s however, Sickert, disillusioned with the English art scene, relocated to Dieppe. His time in France may have similarly instructed his theatrical interests as it coincided with the tail-end of the great theatrical arguments between Naturalism and Symbolism as instigated by André Antoine’s Théâtre-Libre and Aurélien Lugné-Poë’s Théâtre-de l’Œuvre, both of which would also come to affect the directions and staging of Harley Granville Barker and Shaw at the Court Theatre in London.

Archer discouraged him. Rothenstein did however produce a painting with the title *The Doll’s House* (1899-1900) with Augustus John and Alice Rothenstein as the models. Speaight, *op. cit.*, 110 & 133.

¹⁷⁹ Shaw, “*Ghosts at the Jubilee*”, *The Saturday Review*, Vol. 84, No. 2175, 3 July 1897, 12.

¹⁸⁰ In the mid-1920s (published 1926) Sickert (or more likely Sylvia Goose) produced a print of the sketch. Wright died in 1922. Sickert had already painted actresses in character (Katie Lawrence and Hilda Spong amongst others) but his financial success in this field had been fairly limited. When asked if she would like one of his portraits of her Katie replied: “No, not even to keep the wind out at the scullery door”. As quoted in Robert Emmons, *The Life and Opinions of Walter Richard Sickert* (London: Faber & Faber Ltd, 1941), 49.

Antoine, Barker and the New Drama.

... I am determined to see the naturalist movement impose itself on the theatre, and impose on the stage the power of reality, the new life of modern art. ... Naturalism is taking its first steps on the stage. Either theatre will become modern and real or it will die.

Émile Zola, 1873¹⁸¹

I am an advocate for stage illusion; stage realism is a contradiction in terms. I am only a realist in a Platonic sense. ... I have never seen a performance at the Théâtre-Libre. I should be satisfied with the Théâtre Français if I were allowed to make a clean sweep of the mass of superstitions which M. Antoine quite rightly protests against. Our stage is in great need of reform... We require much greater force, vivacity, crispness, and alert intelligence in our actors. Our school is one of chronic sentimentality and solemn feebleness.

George Bernard Shaw, 1895¹⁸²

During his extended stay in France, Sickert was a regular visitor to the French capital, partly to exhibit and occasionally teach. Towards the end of 1902 and beginning of 1903, for example, he visited Paris twice weekly to teach at Mme Stettler's studio in Montparnasse. Whilst there he wrote to Constanza Hulton expressing his love of the city: "La ville lumière. The Louvre! The Bibliothèque nationale! Conférences, the Comédie Française, the quays, the bookstalls! Life. Youth. Art. Concerts. Operas!"¹⁸³ His reputation

¹⁸¹ E. Zola, preface to *Thérèse Raquin*, dated 25 July 1873. Henri Mitterand (ed), *Œuvres Complètes: Vol. XV* (Paris: Cercle du livre précieux, 1969), 121-5. Reprinted in C. Schumacher (ed). *Naturalism and symbolism in European theatre 1850-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 70-72.

¹⁸² Shaw, "Ten Minutes with Mr Bernard Shaw", a questionnaire in *To-day*, 28 April 1894. Reprinted in *Bernard Shaw: Collected Plays with their Prefaces: Volume I* (London: Bodley Head. 1970, first published 1898), 483.

¹⁸³ Sickert to Mrs Hulton, as quoted in Matthew Sturgis, *Walter Sickert: A Life* (London: Harper Collins, 2005), 300.

in France was encouraged by a series of well-received exhibitions, including a showing at the Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts in April 1902 as well as at Durand-Ruel's in December 1900 and February 1903 with the Société Nouvelle de Peintre and the Salon des Indépendants.¹⁸⁴ Further showings at the Salon d'Automne in 1905, 1906 and 1907 bolstered his credentials. In most cases Sickert tended to stay in Paris longer than planned. For his 1906 showing at the Salon d'Automne he resided at the Hôtel Voltaire where he painted a number of intimate nudes and began a series of French music-hall images.¹⁸⁵ Similarly, in 1907 he rented a studio apartment behind the Santé.¹⁸⁶

Sickert's time in Paris was spent with friends such as Blanche, Degas and Moore, as Blanche recalled: "We [Blanche and his wife] used to invite everybody who was anybody to whatever theatre we happened to have, whether it was large or small"¹⁸⁷. Sickert visited the galleries with Henri Evenepoel and J.W. Morrice. He also frequented the Chat Blanc and came to know Roderick O'Connor. He also came to know, and admire, the works of the 'Nabis' Pierre Bonnard and Édouard Vuillard. His time in Paris therefore introduced him to the contrasting squabbles of the Naturalists and the Symbolists, both on the canvas and on the stage.

¹⁸⁴ Where he showed his portrait of Hilda Spong. Sickert also exhibited between 1 - 10 June 1904, at Bernheim-Jeune's gallery at 8 rue Lafitte, although he never visited the exhibition himself as he was in Venice at the time. As quoted in Sturgis, *op. cit.*, 316.

¹⁸⁵ Mainly the Eldorado, the Gaiete Rochechouart, the Gaité Montparnasse and the Theatre de Montmartre.

¹⁸⁶ "Here I am again, in my beautiful studio behind the Santé with a revolver under my mattress & many masterpieces on the stocks, some new, some old". Sickert, letter to Mrs Hammersley, 1 October 1907, Foundation Custodia. As quoted in Sturgis, *op. cit.*, 388.

¹⁸⁷ Blanche refereeing to the 1890s. Blanche, *Portraits of a Lifetime: 1870-1914*, 86. Blanche was also involved with *The Review Independante*, a Symbolist journal whose contributors included Mallarme, Maeterlinck, Maupassant, Zola and George Moore. *Ibid.*, 85. Sickert similarly often took friends to the theatre, for instance in 1907 he mentioned, in a letter to Mrs Hammersley, taking the painter Charles Cottet to see *Julius Caesar* at the Odeon. Sickert, letter to Mrs Hammersley, undated, Foundation Custodia. As quoted in Sturgis, *op. cit.*, 388.

The theatrical arguments which characterised British drama of the 1890s and 1900s were already well developed in France. Ultimately, the theatre of the turn of the century was, as Harold Hobson observed, concerned with: “symbolism, naturalism, and melodrama”¹⁸⁸. Antoine’s Théâtre-Libre (1887-1896), the theatre most associated with naturalism, was one of the few French theatres and certainly the most successful to produce plays which had a particular social implication.¹⁸⁹ The theatre offered Parisians the opportunity to witness avant-garde theatrical productions that were avoided by the mainstream theatres.¹⁹⁰ It also boasted a number of key literary supporters (including Léon Hennique, Jean Jullien and Oscar Métenier) who were keen to publicise and further the theatre’s aims.¹⁹¹ It was Antoine who helped introduce Ibsen to the Parisian stage with *Ghosts* (under its French title *Les Revenants*) produced during his third season (1889/90) and he would produce similarly controversial works such as Maurice Biollay’s *Monsieur Bute*, Henri Fèvre’s *L’Honneur*, and Jean Ajalbert’s adaptation of the Goncourts’ 1877 novel *La Fille Elisa* in his 1890/91 season.¹⁹²

¹⁸⁸ H. Hobson, *French Theatre since 1830* (London: Calder, 1978), 1.

¹⁸⁹ Antoine managed the theatre until 1894, for its remaining two seasons it was managed by H. J. Larochelle. According to George Moore artistic and literary Paris frequently visited the Théâtre-Libre. Moore, *op. cit.*, 172.

¹⁹⁰ The theatre was based at the Théâtre-Montparnasse for its first season where it held productions on Friday nights when the theatre was usually closed. For its second season it relocated to Théâtre des Menus-Plaisirs (which Antoine later renamed Théâtre-Antoine) on the Boulevard de Strasbourg where it still is. A precedent for theatrical realism already existed in Edmond and Jules de Goncourt’s realist *Henriette Maréchal* (1863) and *La patrie en danger* (1867). However, it was Zola’s *L’Assommoir* (1879) staged at the Ambigu Theatre which had first questioned the dominance of upper-class characters and situations, favouring working-class figures for the subject of his drama. The play, translated and retitled *Drink* by Charles Reade was a particular success in London and ran for over 500 performances between the late 1870s and early 1900s. Shaw and Archer both admired it.

¹⁹¹ Each of whom also wrote Realist plays for Antoine’s theatre, for example Metenier’s *Le Casserole* (May 1889), set in Paris’s Place Maubert, was a sordid tale of the lives of prostitutes and criminals.

¹⁹² *Les Revenants* was staged on 30 May 1890. The production was not altogether a success. Antoine’s actors found the work difficult and psychologically complex. In fact, Antoine would stage only one other Ibsen play, *Le Canard sauvage* (*The Wild Duck*) on 27 April 1891. *L’Honneur* details an affair between a young girl and

In many ways, Antoine's (and Zola's) quest for greater naturalism on the stage was an extension from the other arts: "the battle which was already won in the novel by the naturalists, in painting by the impressionists, in music by the Wagnerians, was about to move into the theatre"¹⁹³. The playwright Jean Jullien, in particular, argued for more visually realistic sets, including the removal of painted props and artificial footlights in favour of a more naturalistic set design and lighting. Indeed, it was Jullien who stated the illusionist agenda which came to characterise the Théâtre-Libre:

I believe that, as art is not simple nature, so *theatre should not be simply life*. ... Serious theatre is a living image of life - the principal aim of theatre is to interest the spectator and above all to move him, and for this reason it should remain as close as possible to life. The characters will be human beings and not creatures of fantasy; the players straightforward folk, speaking as they would speak in real life, but raising their voices slightly - not actors overdoing the grotesque or the odious, ranters delivering a lecture of developing a thesis while displaying showy qualities of diction. For theatre to achieve its aims, everything that smacks of technique or special effects must disappear, as must everything that points to the author's presence; so much the worse for the style of the former and the tricks of the latter, everything must merge in the character; *an actor may be interesting - but a man is impressive*. The spectators must temporarily cease to be aware that they are in a theatre and, to this end, I think it necessary for the audience to be in darkness as soon as the curtain is raised; the stage picture will

her older lover. *Monsieur Bute* is the tale of an executioner who has been driven mad by the loss of his position and subsequently kills his servant to drink her blood. *La Fille Elisa* details the life of a working-class prostitute who murders her lover following his attempt to rape her. Degas was well aware of the novel and produced a number of sketches illustrating scenes from it shortly after its publication. Antoine's penultimate season (1892/93) also witnessed one of the first productions of August Strindberg's *Miss Julie* (*Mademoiselle Julie* in January 1893) and Gerhart Hauptmann's *The Weavers* (*Les Tisserands* in May 1893).

¹⁹³ As quoted in John A. Henderson, *The First Avant-Garde: 1887-1894. Sources of the modern French theatre* (G.G. Harrap: London, 1971), 71. Originally stated in A. Antoine, *Mes souvenirs sur le théâtre-libre* (Paris: Fayard, 1928), 9.

stand out more forcibly, the spectator will remain attentive, will no longer dare to chat and will become almost intelligent. This is the only way to stage serious theatre. ... in place of the curtain there must be a fourth wall, transparent for the audience, opaque for the actor.¹⁹⁴

In essence, Jullien's statement recalls Sickert's own writings (both in his letters and articles), particularly his desire for "dramatic truth".¹⁹⁵ It certainly shares a resonance with his opinion on Realism as outlined to Ethel Sands:

At last I have found well said what I always felt strongly about choice of artistic subject. It is in a preface by Émile Faguet to [Alain-René Lesage's] *Gil Blas*. 'Le réalisme consiste à se tenir toujours dans la moyenne de la vie. Car il n'y a que la moyenne qui soit vraisemblable. Les types extraordinaires soit dans le bien, soit dans le mal, sont vrais puisque nous les recontrons; mais ils ne sont pas vraisemblables'. ['Realism is about staying in the centre of life. Because only that centre is plausible. Eccentrics, in a good or bad sense, are real because we come across them; but they are not plausible.']¹⁹⁶

Indeed, Sickert was well aware of the links between painting and the literature of the period as evident in his article "The Gospel of Impressionism": "Now, Mr Sickert, you are

¹⁹⁴ Jean Jullien, *Le Théâtre vivant*. Paris 1892, 8-22. Originally written as a preface to his play *L'Echéance*, 1890. As quoted in C. Schumacher (ed). *Naturalism and symbolism in European theatre 1850-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 77.

¹⁹⁵ "In dealing with subjects of human interest, there is one quality which is essential. It is sometimes found in work which is artistically deficient, but it is never absent from the finest work - I mean dramatic truth", Sickert, "Art", *The Whirlwind*, 12 July 1890. Gruetzner Robins, *op. cit.*, 72.

¹⁹⁶ Sickert, letter to Miss Ethel Sands, dated July 1914. TGA 9125.5.92 The drama critic and novelist Émile Faguet was a key supporter of Andre Antoine's Théâtre-Libre. Sickert's statement bears some sympathy with Zola's earlier criticism of Strindberg's foray into Symbolism: "You know perhaps that I am not fond of abstraction. I like it when characters have a complete social identity, when one can rub shoulders with them, when they breathe the same air as we do". Zola, letter to Strindberg. 14 December 1887. Reprinted in B.H. Baker (ed). *Emile Zola: Correspondence. Vol. VI* (Montreal: Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 1987), 220.

undoubtedly realistic; is there not a danger of a degeneration into what I might call Zolaism? ... will not a man rise up amongst Impressionists who will transgress all limits in his endeavours after realism?"¹⁹⁷

In contrast to Antoine, Aurélian Lugné-Poë's management at the Théâtre-de l'Œuvre (1893-1899) concentrated on Symbolist interpretations (usually of the same plays the Théâtre-Libre produced). Simultaneously, Sickert's acknowledgement of the potential symbolism shared between painting and the theatre is perfectly expressed in his statement from 1896: "The human body is of eternal interest, of eternal beauty, and, like the sea, remains eternally the same. Its capacity for the expression of ideas or emotions is inexhaustible, and is without date or term. It is an eternal mine of beauty"¹⁹⁸. Indeed, Sickert's writings from the period reveal a curious mix of realist and poetic symbolist language; for example, discussing Whistler's *The Rialto* (c.1879) he states: "That is imagination. That is poetry. That alone is realism worthy of the name".

Lugné-Poë's closing years at the Théâtre-de l'Œuvre were characterised by their favouritism of foreign works, partly instigated by his failure to find any new young French Symbolist dramatists who could match the works of Ibsen, Maeterlinck, Strindberg, et al. By the end of the 1897 season Lugné-Poë surprised many by his announcement that he was to break with the Symbolists and, henceforth, only present works of "life and humanity"¹⁹⁹.

Sickert's experiences of the French theatre likely influenced his ideals on his return to London. The achievements of Antoine and Lugné-Poë certainly provided the impetus for the Granville Barker and J.E. Vedrenne management of the Court Theatre between 1904 and 1907. The Court was hugely influential for introducing modern European dramatists to

¹⁹⁷ Sickert, "The Gospel of Impressionism", *The Pall Mall Gazette*, 21 July 1890. Gruetzner Robins, *op. cit.*, 77.

¹⁹⁸ Sickert, "Lord Leighton's Studies", *The Speaker*, 26 December 1896. Gruetzner Robins, *ibid.*, 120.

¹⁹⁹ Marvin Carlson, "Lugné-Poe and the Théâtre-de l'Œuvre". *The French Stage in the Nineteenth Century* (New Jersey: Scarecrow Press, 1972), 214.

the English stage as well as providing Shaw a reliable platform for his plays.²⁰⁰ As C.B. Purdom stated: “no theatrical enterprise of this century has left a deeper mark upon the theatrical history of London”²⁰¹. Ultimately, the Court’s focus on modern subjects, often with a social theme, and its revolutionary treatment of the acting process would transform British theatre.²⁰² As Geoffrey Whitworth noted, Barker was the: “chief protagonist in that revolution in the theatre which was already astir in the eighteen-nineties, and in full blast from 1900 right up to the outbreak of the First World War”²⁰³.

The impetus for the Court originated in the Stage Society which had succeeded Grein’s Independent Theatre in 1899.²⁰⁴ Barker’s initial plan for the new theatre was outlined in a letter he wrote to William Archer in the spring of 1903: “Do you think there is anything in this idea? To take the Court theatre for six months or a year and to run there a stock season of the uncommercial Drama: Hauptmann - Sudermann - Ibsen - Maeterlinck - Schnitzler - Shaw - Brioux etc.”²⁰⁵ It was not until 1904, however, that Barker was able to

²⁰⁰ Frustratingly, very few photographs were taken of the Court productions, partly due to their short runs which on average were only two weeks. Similarly there are no promptbooks or set designs.

²⁰¹ Charles Benjamin Purdom, *Harley Granville Barker* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1971), 26. Max Beerbohm was equally impressed: “What was done at the Court Theatre was a really important and vital thing”. M. Beerbohm, “At the Savoy”, *The Saturday Review*, Vol. 104, No. 2709, 28 September 1907, 389. Benjamin Ifor Evans perhaps put it more succinctly when he stated: “Of the English theatre in the twentieth century this at least can be said, that it is better than the English theatre in the nineteenth century”. B. Ifor Evans, *A Short History of English Drama* (London: Penguin, 1948), 158.

²⁰² Beerbohm, for example, had long issued a call for greater authenticity and realism in both acting and set design. M. Beerbohm, “Better Plays and Better Acting”, *The Saturday Review*, Vol. 95, No. 2525, 19 March 1904, 359-360.

²⁰³ Geoffrey Whitworth, *Harley Granville-Barker: 1877-1946: A reprint of a broadcast* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1948), 7.

²⁰⁴ The Stage Society was the first theatre group to stage works by Shaw as well as a private performance of Barker’s *Waste* in 1907. So controversial was Barker’s play it did not receive a public performance until 1936.

²⁰⁵ Original letter held in the British Library. As quoted in E. Salmon. *Granville Barker and His Correspondents* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1986), 42.

put his plan into operation with the renting of the Royal Court Theatre for matinee performances on Tuesday, Thursday and Friday's with successful ones transferring to the evening bill. Each play had an average two week run to keep the productions fresh and to enable audiences to view as many new plays as possible.

The Court provided English audiences with their first experiences not only of avant-garde European works, such as Maeterlinck (*Aglavaine and Selysette*, November 1904), Ibsen (*The Wild Duck*, October 1905 and *Hedda Gabler*, March 1907) and Gerhart Hauptmann (*The Thieves Comedy*, March 1905) but would also provide a platform for young up-and-coming British dramatists of the 'New Drama' School such as Shaw, St John Hankin (*The Return of the Prodigal*, October 1905 & April 1907 and *The Charity That Began At Home*, October 1906), John Galsworthy (*The Silver Box*, September 1906/1907 and *Joy*, September/October 1907), John Masefield (*The Campden Wonder*, January 1907), Elizabeth Robins (*Votes for Women!* April/May 1907) as well as Barker himself (*The Voysey Inheritance*, November 1905 & February/March 1906).

In terms of acting Barker, like Antoine, insisted on a deeper degree of psychological honesty to his performers. An important development of Barker's was an insistence on more "truthful" acting. As the *Era*, regarding the 1905 production of *The Voysey Inheritance* noted, it was: "a pure joy to listen to dialogue so inevitably true to the commonplaces of everyday middle-class life"²⁰⁶:

It is a first rate example of what Mr. Stanley Houghton has recently styled 'genre-plays' - 'plays, that is, presenting a picture of a group or family

²⁰⁶ *The Era*, 11 November 1905, 17. Max Beerbohm thought the action in the second act particularly truthful: "In the second act we see the Voyseys in their daily round - in all the decent pettiness and dulness [*sic*] of their ordinary selves". Beerbohm, "The Voysey Inheritance", *The Saturday Review*, Vol. 100, No. 2611, 11 November 1905, 620-21. *The Illustrated London News* was more critical: "Like so many so-called realists, he is content with photographic effects ... Ibsen could teach him the lesson of self-restraint; from Ibsen he would learn that the true artist is he who does something more than cut a chunk out of life and leave it unshaped and unrounded". Vol. 128, 18 November 1905, 748.

intimately observed, depending for their interest or variety upon subtleties or differentiations of character rather than upon the incidents of a cunningly devised plot'.²⁰⁷

As Blanche noted: "Though Shaw, I believe, stage-managed his own plays, the actors at the Court were, for the rest, under the direction of Harley Granville-Barker; and during those few years something like a revolution seemed to be taking place in English acting and staging"²⁰⁸. It was human drama not sensationalism that reigned at the Court as Lillah McCarthy (Barker's wife) recalled: "Whilst other producers were aiming at effect, truth was the effect at which the Court aimed"²⁰⁹. In particular Barker developed the idea, now common but in the theatre of Edwardian England extremely avant-garde, that actors should pay equal attention to small movements and gestures as to histrionic effectiveness. For Barker (according to Desmond MacCarthy) the actors of the New Drama had to recognise that: "to make others feel you must feel yourself, and to feel yourself you must be *natural*"²¹⁰. This inner truth of performance became the actors' focus, Barker insisted on actors considering their character's off stage lives in an attempt to create a greater depth of psychological honesty to their performances. Indeed, as Geoffrey Whitworth noted, his aim was to develop: "a kind of spiritual realism, not only in the sphere of scenic representation, but even more important in that of acting"²¹¹. However, although the modernity of acting

²⁰⁷ *The Era*, 14 September 1912, 15.

²⁰⁸ Blanche, *Portraits of a Lifetime: 1870-1914*, 229. William Rothenstein, on the other hand whilst a strong supporter of Shaw's work (he recalled that in September 1903 he received a package which contained a copy of Shaw's *Man and Superman*: "the best play Shaw had hitherto written") was uncertain about Barker's direction: "I was critical of the way in which Barker produced Shaw's plays at the Court Theatre. In the stage scenes, which represented commonplace rooms, there was none of the fun of Shaw's dialogue; they were just unintelligently dull. I told Barker what I felt: that irony should be shown in scenes as it was in dialogue; that there were plenty of young artists who could design scenes and dresses with point and meaning, even for realistic plays". William Rothenstein, *Men and Memories. Recollections: 1900-1922* (London: Faber & Faber Ltd, 1922, 68 & 202.

²⁰⁹ Lillah McCarthy, *Myself and my friends* (London: T. Butterworth, 1933), 90.

²¹⁰ Desmond MacCarthy, *The Court Theatre 1904-1907* (London: A.H. Bullen, 1907), 3.

²¹¹ Whitworth, *op. cit.*, 9.

was enough for Grien to proclaim: “Give us the plays, we have the actors” for some performers this could be problematic: “There were good and bad actors of this tradition, but they were audible, and the good ones could... give the illusion of ‘natural’ speaking”²¹². Henry James was, in particular, scathing of the trend for more naturalistic acting: “The art of acting as little as possible has – doubtless with good results in some ways – taken the place of the art of acting as much”²¹³.

Not surprisingly, the playwrights for these productions tended towards the intellectual rather than the crowd-pleaser: “The great British public, artless, coarse-minded and dull-witted – does not go to the Court ... The Court audiences are composed of persons of culture and students, with a goodly percentage of society people”²¹⁴. Blanche was a regular visitor: “Many an evening my wife and I used to walk along Sloane Street from our hotel to the Court theatre in our ordinary clothes, being sure of finding seats in the stalls, for the house was rarely full. We were, however, certain to meet people we knew, habitual lecture-goers, artists, theosophists, people who did not dress and frequent the fashionable West End theatres”²¹⁵. Similarly, Sickert was well aware of Archer’s importance for the modern drama:

²¹² J.T. Grien, *The Sunday Times*, No, 4286, 28 May 1905, 4. Not surprisingly this often caused problems. Mrs Patrick Campbell in *Hedda Gabler* in 1907 was heckled by the gallery to “speak up”. *The Stage*, 7 March 1907, 17. *The Era* agreed: “the plaintive requests to “speak up” which came occasionally from the gallery were not wholly unwarranted”. 9 March 1907, 15.

²¹³ Henry James, *The Scenic Art: Notes on acting and the drama 1872-1901* (London: Rupert Hart-Davies, 1949), 135.

²¹⁴ Mario Borsa, *The English Stage of To-day* (London: John Lane, 1908), 112-113.

²¹⁵ Blanche, *Portraits of a Lifetime: 1870-1914*, 227. In a letter from Shaw to Blanche (28 October 1911) he mentions that Antoine was planning to produce one of his old plays from 1894. *Ibid.*, 228. Along with Beerbohm and Blanche, William Rothenstein was also a regular at the Court: “Like every other intelligent playgoer, William had been drawn to Granville-Barker’s productions at the Royal Court”. Speaight, *op. cit.*, 223.

My milkman is quite happy without what you call culture. He may be unacquainted with the latest ideas of Mr Wells on the relation of the sexes. I don't know that he has followed Mr Zangwill closely in his architecture of the next religion. He may not have grasped in their entirety the theories of Mr William Archer on the drama, or bathed in the delectable romances of Mrs Elinor Glyn, but he is perhaps none the less cultured for that.²¹⁶

Undoubtedly, the most successful and theatrically important achievement of the Court was to extend Shaw's influence as a major dramatist on the British stage. Shaw had been at the forefront of New Drama in England since the 1890s and he was still the most important figure in its development in the early few years of the twentieth century. Although the majority of Shaw's plays were written (and published) between 1895 and 1900s it was only with the inauguration of the Vedrenne-Barker management that they were granted an audience. Shaw dominated the Court, out of 988 performances 701 of them were productions of Shaw.

As figures on London's art scene Sickert and Shaw were well acquainted as a brief entry in Shaw's diary (23 October 1888) testifies. Following a lecture on "Socialism and its Rivals" at 8 Effie Road, Walham Green: "Sickert, the artist, took the chair for me at Walham Green and walked me as far as Gloucester d. station"²¹⁷. Indeed, in the early 1890s Sickert held high hopes for Shaw as an art critic. Shaw served for a brief time as an art critic on the Liberal newspaper *The Star* and Sickert regarded him as: "a critic who knows an artistic hawk from the henshaw of commerce"²¹⁸. His opinion soon changed however and saw Shaw earn the nickname "George Bernard Cock-sure"²¹⁹. Sickert also saw, in the

²¹⁶ Sickert, "Mural Decoration", *English Review*, July 1912. Gruetzner Robins, *op. cit.*, 325.

²¹⁷ Entry dated Sunday 23 October 1888. Reprinted in Stanley Weinrub, *Bernard Shaw: The Diaries 1885-1897. Volume I* (Pennsylvania University Park & London: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1986), 447.

²¹⁸ As quoted in Sturgis, *op. cit.*, 165.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 165. In a letter to Ellen Terry Shaw briefly mentions a portrait of him by "a girl". The artist, Nellie Heath, had studied under Sickert and later talks of how Sickert intruded on one of Shaw's sittings; "She recalls that during one of the sittings Sickert called on her and that there was a lively argument between him

late 1890s, the opportunity to mockingly criticise Shaw's tendency towards the avant-garde: "To sacrilege, I believe, it is at present out of fashion to object. D.S.M. must be careful not to catch, by association, from G.B.S., a touch of the interminable *ego*, which stands between that writer and his gallant attempts to bring polygamy within easy reach of the middle classes"²²⁰. Although playfully mocking, Sickert did respect Shaw's rebelliousness: "And so it may be that whose editors have done well for the cause of truth, who have gone into the wilderness, and brought in such persons as Mr George Bernard Shaw and myself, whom no one can meet. Our shocking taste at least protects us from contact, and consequent corruption"²²¹.

Ultimately, it was through Shaw's own interest in the works of Henrik Ibsen that the Scandinavian flavoured the English interpretation of 'New Drama'.²²² Ibsen, undoubtedly, was the major modern European dramatist in London between 1900 and 1920. During this period two-hundred and eighteen performances of Ibsen's plays took place in the London theatres.²²³ The most popular of which, at their height in 1911, included fifty-two performances of *A Doll's House*, **[Fig. 2.13]** twenty-eight performances of *The Master Builder* **[Fig.'s 2.14 & 2.15]** and twenty-five performances of *Hedda Gabler*.²²⁴ In contrast

and Shaw about the portrait in particular and art in general of which Sickert got the better". Letter, Shaw to Terry 15 October 1896. As quoted in C. St. John (ed.), *Ellen Terry and Bernard Shaw: A Correspondence* (London: Constable, 1931), 102. The recollection from Nellie Heath is from the same source.

²²⁰ Sickert, "Ford Madox Brown", *The Speaker*, 27 February 1897. Gruetzner Robins, *op. cit.*, 144.

²²¹ Sickert, "Du Maurier's Drawings", *The Speaker*, 27 March 1897. Gruetzner Robins, *ibid.*, 152. Whilst Sickert praised Shaw's art criticism, he was self-deprecating about his own talents: "I am only what actors call an 'ammature' at your craft". Sickert. "Art and Art Critics", *Art News*, 24 February 1910. Gruetzner Robins, *ibid.*, 199.

²²² Edmund Gosse had first translated Ibsen for the English stage in the early 1870s; however it was William Archer who would become the main translator of Ibsen's work after 1878.

²²³ For further details on these productions, including dates and number of performances see Appendix I.

²²⁴ *A Doll's House*, Court & Kingsway Theatres, fifty-two performances between 6 March and 12 May 1911; *The Master Builder* (Gosse & Archer translation), Little Theatre, twenty-eight performances between 28 March and 12 May 1911; *Hedda Gabler* (Gosse & Archer translation), Kingsway, twenty-five performances between 27 May and 17 June 1911. J.P. Wearing. *The London stage 1900-1909 a calendar of plays and*

to Henry James who, in the 1870s, had sarcastically noted that European drama's only theme was adultery Shaw had long accepted that the problem lay not with the subject but with the treatment:

We look on French dramatists as bold grapplers with social problems because their heroines sometimes commit adultery. Some of our own critics and playwrights, when lauding the French drama, occasionally express themselves in a manner that indicates their conviction that a little adultery would purify and enoble [*sic*] the British stage. ... Our drama is sinking for want, not of an Augier, but of an Ibsen.²²⁵

In the 1890s English Drama, like journalism, women and politics, was characterised by its “newness”; “we of course called everything advanced ‘the New’ at that time”²²⁶. However, the New Drama still lagged somewhat behind the standards of its Continental predecessor. Whilst Antoine and Lugné-Poë had revolutionised French drama since the 1880s English drama lingered with melodrama and spectacle although some dissenting voices, such as Archer, Moore and Shaw, had expressed dissatisfaction with the English stage's refusal to depict modern situations and themes. For example, in contrast to Pinero's typical drawing-room/woman with a past subject, Shaw, in *Mrs Warren's Profession*, shifted the focus from the theme of the fallen woman to the business and economic reality of prostitution. In his preface to the second volume of *Plays Pleasant and Unpleasant* (1898) Shaw outlined a particularly Zola-esque insistence on social realism: “The tragedy and comedy of life lies in the consequences, sometimes terrible, sometimes ludicrous, of our persistent attempts to found our institutions on the ideals suggested to our imaginations

players, (London: Scarecrow Press, 1981) and Wearing, *The London stage 1910-1919 a calendar of plays and players*, (London: Scarecrow Press, 1982).

²²⁵ G.B. Shaw, letter to the Editor, *The Dramatic Review*, 27 June 1885. Reprinted in B.F. Dukore (ed.). *The Drama Observed, I: 1880-1895* (Pennsylvania Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), 33-34.

²²⁶ This label was applied to, amongst others, New Journalism (particularly in *The New Age*), New Unionism and, of course, the New Woman. Shaw, *Preface to Plays Unpleasant*, Reprinted in *Bernard Shaw: Collected Plays with their Prefaces. Vol. I* (London: Bodley Head, 1970, first published 1898, 16.

by our half-satisfied passions, instead of on a genuinely scientific natural history”²²⁷. Rather than an insistence on the verisimilitude of Zola (which Shaw felt detracted from the power of the work), however, a concentration on an unsentimental and honest treatment of contemporary social problems (particularly as seen through the influence of Ibsen) would provide him, and subsequently Sickert, with the ideal dramatic model.²²⁸

²²⁷ G.B. Shaw, *Preface to Plays Pleasant*. Reprinted in *Bernard Shaw: Collected Plays with their Prefaces*. Vol. I (London: Bodley Head, 1970 first published 1898), 121.

²²⁸ For example, Shaw’s *Quintessence of Ibsenism* (1891) delivered as a lecture to the Fabian Society as part of a series entitled ‘Socialism and Literature’ interpreted Ibsen’s plays as a severe criticism against the tyrannical social conventions which compromised the identity of the individual. Fundamentally, this was the drama that Barker and Shaw intended for the Court and would provide the model to examine the key themes of the New Drama.

New Drama and the “Woman Question”; Independent Women, Adultery and the Marriage Problem.

The stage is the sphere which women adorn equally with men, if not indeed with superior lustre, and in which women have worked - when all of scandal is said - on those terms of sexless camaraderie which the new social development demands.

Israel Zangwill, 1909²²⁹

A painter may tell his story like Balzac, or like Mr Hichens. He may tell it with relentless impartiality, he may pack it tight, until it is dense with suggestion and refreshment, or his dilute stream may trickle to its appointed crises of adultery, sown thick with deprecating and extenuating generalisations about ‘sweet women.’

Walter Sickert, 1912²³⁰

At the turn of the century, one of the major themes for a modern dramatist was the “Woman Question”. Typically, this manifested itself through concerns with the role of the New Woman as well as the inequality of marriage. The most notorious dramas to exploit these concerns were arguably Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* (1879) and *Hedda Gabler* (1890). With the pioneering translations and campaigning of Ibsen by Archer, Edmund Gosse and Shaw, it was impossible not to write a modern play without some influence of the Scandinavian.²³¹ As Shaw recognised so widespread (and well-known) was Ibsen’s influence that producers were at risk of failing their audience if they did not recognise his importance: “In short, a modern manager need not produce *The Wild Duck*; but he must be very careful not to produce a play which will seem insipid and old-fashioned to playgoers

²²⁹ Israel Zangwill, “Actress versus Suffragette”, *The Vote*, 18 November 1909, 44.

²³⁰ Sickert, “A Critical Calendar”, *English Review*, March 1912. Gruetzner Robins, *op. cit.*, 300.

²³¹ Sickert was certainly aware of Gosse and was invited by him, in 1911, to a dinner with the Prime Minister H.H. Asquith. Holmes, *op. cit.*, 288.

who have seen *The Wild Duck*, even though they may have hissed it”²³². In essence, this instilled in the modern playwright a desire to compose dramas with contemporary social situations and to treat them unromantically or unsentimentally. Shaw, especially, was extremely critical of modern playwright’s lacklustre attempts to approach the sex question:

Why are our occasional attempts to deal with the sex problem on the stage so repulsive and dreary that even those who are most determined that sex questions shall be held open and their discussion kept free, cannot pretend to relish these joyless attempts at social sanitation? Is it not because at bottom they are utterly sexless? What is the usual formula for such plays? A woman has, on some occasion, been brought into conflict with the law which regulates the relations of the sexes. A man, by falling in love with her, or marrying her, is brought into conflict with the social convention which discourages the woman.²³³

Often, the major themes of suffrage drama, particularly the inequality of marriage and the limitation of woman’s free choice, were combined in one play. Barker’s *Waste*, for example, narrates the romance of Mrs Amy O’Connell (played by Aimée de Burgh) by the aspiring politician Henry Trebell (Barker). Trebell, described in the stage directions as: “hard-bitten, brainy, forty-five and very sure of himself. He has a cold keen eye, which rather belies a sensitive mouth; hands which can grip, and a figure that is austere” is a cold and unemotional character.²³⁴ It is the adultery of Amy, and her subsequent pregnancy and death at an illegal abortionist that drives the drama of Barker’s play. However, Amy is no

²³² Shaw, “Mr Daly Fossilizes”, *The Saturday Review*, Vol. 79, No. 2070, 29 June 1895, 860.

²³³ Shaw, “Epistle Dedicatory (To Arthur Bingham Walkley)” (1903). Reprinted in *Bernard Shaw: Collected Plays with their Prefaces. Volume II* (London: Bodley Head, 1971 first published 1900), 496.

²³⁴ H. Granville-Barker, *Plays: The Marrying of Ann Leete, The Voysey Inheritance, Waste*, D. Kennedy (ed) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), Act I, Scene 2, 173.

fallen women.²³⁵ Bored in her marriage, she is willingly seduced by Trebell's "fierce pride of possession"²³⁶.

Barker's play was modern, mainly for his treatment of its subject matter and interest in the inner psychology of its character. The dialogue is natural, exposition is kept to a bare minimum and movement and gesture restrained.²³⁷ The play, although banned by the Lord Chamberlain's Office due to its references to abortion and Trebell's plan to disestablish the Church of England, received only one private performance in the 1900s, by the Stage Society (directed by Barker) on the 24 November 1907 at the Imperial Theatre.²³⁸ Its modernity, however, was well praised and well discussed in the press. Archer regarded it as: "our greatest modern tragedy" whilst *The New Age* claimed: "English drama has broken ground at last"²³⁹.

In terms of the New Woman theme Sickert's *The New Home* (1908) [Fig. 2.16] suggests a number of potential theatrical readings which echo the handling of a New Dramatist. The title implies transience, the woman is dressed for outdoors but is seated and seemingly waiting. The ambiguity of the situation therefore presents the viewer with a number of potential propositions regarding the woman's physical situation; for example it is difficult to tell if the woman has just arrived or is preparing to leave. Psychologically, Sickert also utilises a very theatrical composition. Painted in the same studio as the later *Ennui*, Sickert similarly contrasts the dowdy and down-at-heel appearance of the woman

²³⁵ Barker highlights the usual dramatic denouement of Amy's predicament: "I'd better jump into the Thames. I've thought of that". *Ibid.*, Act II, 191.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, Stage directions. Act I, Scene 2, 178.

²³⁷ Barker avoids the histrionics of melodrama. Following Amy's revealing of her pregnancy and her realisation of Trebell's indifference, the stage directions simply, but tellingly, read: "they are silent for a moment ... miles apart". *Ibid.*, Act III, 188.

²³⁸ The play was also included in the publication of Barker's *Three Plays: The Marrying of Ann Leete, The Voysey Inheritance, Waste* in 1909.

²³⁹ William Archer, *The Old Drama and the New* (London: Heinemann, 1923), 360 and *The New Age*, 30 November 1907, 99.

with the symbolic trapped bird. Sickert's adoption of these simple props informs the theatricality of his composition. By contrasting the figure with her surroundings Sickert suggests unfamiliarity for his subject. This unease, as Wendy Baron notes in her quoting of the *Pall Mall Gazette*, was evident for the painting's viewers: "Here is a young woman ill at ease, apparently her hat not yet removed - her head and bust seen large against the mantelpiece - and she taking very unkindly to the second-rate, sordid lodging, to which she is condemned by an unkindly fate"²⁴⁰. The *Pall Mall Gazette*'s reading of the work's potential narrative, in particular the unease of the woman's pose and location, reveals much about the viewer's reaction to the work and the possible dramatic intention of Sickert's interpretation.

The impenetrable gaze of the woman gives little away to the cause or denouement of Sickert's narrative. She addresses her eyes towards the viewer suggesting a dialogue between painting and audience yet the exact nature of the relationship is ambiguous. Theatrical modes of the day suggest a number of possible situations; for example, perhaps she is being propositioned by the viewer or perhaps she is alone after leaving her husband. The reasons for her isolation remain opaque. However, Sickert's awareness of Feminist/Suffrage theatre may have been instructed by his friendship with the actress Gertrude Kingston and her management of the Little Theatre which, in addition to the Court, also produced a number of New Drama pieces.²⁴¹ The Little Theatre was also the

²⁴⁰ *Pall Mall Gazette*, 3 June 1908. As quoted in Baron, *ibid.*, 369.

²⁴¹ The Little Theatre, 16 John Street (later John Adam Street) Adelphi. Kingston managed it from 11 October 1911 until 30 November 1915. Sickert painted Kingston's portrait in 1897 and the two had a playful relationship. As Kingston recalled in her memoirs: "I was the model for two or three sittings, and then off he went, leaving the picture in the air, with a 'We'll finish it when I get back from Dieppe' or elsewhere! And later I asked 'Where is my portrait? You never finished it ...' 'Finish it! It is all there, it is just right as it is!', 'Well then let me buy it', 'I don't know where it is!' The painting is still lost. Gertrude Kingston, *Curtsey while you're thinking...* (London: William & Norgate, 1937), 53.

temporary home for Edith Craig's Pioneer Players (formed in 1911), a feminist theatre with strong links to the suffrage campaign.²⁴²

The independence of woman in the late Victorian and Edwardian period also highlighted the issue of the marriage problem. For instance, Cicely Hamilton's novel *Marriage as a Trade* (1909) reiterated the dilemma that without decent opportunities for employment women were left with no option but to rely on their bodies; either through working the streets or by using their physicality to attract a husband. Hamilton's *Diana of Dobson's* (Kingsway Theatre, 12 February to 20 June 1908 and again at the Kingsway between 11 January and 6 February 1909) also treats marriage as a commercial takeover. Indeed photographs of the production reveal a number of compositional and atmospheric similarities with Sickert's painting [Fig. 2.17]. The play's narrative also recalls Sickert's painting. Lena Ashwell played Diana Massingberd, the daughter of a deceased country doctor who finds herself having to fend for herself in the unfamiliar surroundings of Dobson's Emporium.²⁴³ P.R. Bennett's *Mary Edwards (An anachronism in one act)* produced at the Gaiety Theatre, Manchester on 8 May 1911 by Miss Horniman's company, argued that women's independence was vital to their happiness and that they were equally able to manage their own property and desires, whilst Arthur H. Heathcote's *A Junction* (unperformed but published by the Actresses' Franchise League in 1913) related suffrage

²⁴² In addition to Craig's Pioneer Players the Actresses' Franchise League was also an important advocate for feminist writing. The inaugural meeting of the AFL (December 1908) at the Criterion Restaurant had a number of important supporters, including Mrs Kendal as president, Irene and Violet Vanbrugh, Edith Craig, Beatrice Forbes-Robertson and Eva Moore. Letters and telegrams of support were sent by Pinero, George Alexander and Gertrude Kingston. The AFL was formed following the precedent set by the Artists' Suffrage League (1907) and the Women Writers' Suffrage League (1908).

²⁴³ The photograph was printed as a postcard by Dover Street Studios and was also published in *The Manchester Dispatch* on 22 August 1908 announcing the Liverpool opening the following Monday. Thanks to Margaret Leask for this information.

issues to the themes of sexual liberation and self-determination in both the home and marketplace.²⁴⁴

Not all playwrights were as sympathetic to the cause. Sidney Grundy's satirical *The New Woman*, first staged at the Comedy Theatre, Panton Street, London on 1 September 1894 was a typically cynical early reaction to the New Drama and the New Woman especially. In Grundy's drama, Margery marries Gerald Cazenove who is writing a study on the ethics of marriage with Mrs Sylvester. Eventually he bores of Margery and admits his love for Mrs Sylvester whilst Captain Sylvester admits his love for Margery. Margery rejects the Captain and Gerald, eventually realising the errors of his ways, returns to Margery. The play ends happily (at least for the Cazenoves) as Margery rejects the notions of New Womanhood for a return to the loving and devoted status of wife she desired.²⁴⁵ Not only was Grundy derisive about the social aspect of the New Woman the current theatrical fascination with naturalism concerned him. In particular he argued against those who: "...contend that the drama ought to be the study of human nature on the stage, the analysis of character pure and simple - no 'plot', there is none in nature - no 'situations', they are artificial - no 'pictures', they are childish - no 'points', they are theatrical. They do not want a story; an episode is sufficient"²⁴⁶.

²⁴⁴ In addition to the above, Shaw's *Getting Married* (Haymarket Theatre 12 May 1908 to 11 July 1908) also discussed the financial inequality of marriage. As Shaw noted in his preface: "To a woman without property or marketable talent a husband is more necessary than a master to a dog. There is nothing more wounding to our sense of human dignity than the husband hunting that begins in every family when the daughters become marriage-able". Shaw, *Getting Married*, 500.

²⁴⁵ Shaw's *The Philanderer* (written in 1893 but not performed publicly on stage until 1902) presented a similar critique of the New Woman. As the philanderer of the title, Charteris notes: "If Ibsen sauce is good for the goose, its good for the gander as well". Charteris equally uses the seeming independence of New Womanhood as a means to break with his fiancé Julia: "I now assert the right I reserved: the right of breaking with you when I please. Advanced views, Julia, involve advanced duties: you cannot be an advanced woman when you want to bring a man to your feet..." Shaw. *The Philanderer*. Reprinted in *Bernard Shaw: Collected Plays with their Prefaces. Volume I*. (London: Bodley Head, 1970 first published 1898), Act 1, 142 & 150.

²⁴⁶ Sydney Grundy, "The Science of the Drama: II", *New Review*, Vol. 5, No. 26, July 1891, 89.

The majority of feminist plays available during the period tended to focus on the issues of commercial sex as well as concentrating attention on relationships between male and female (husband and wives, men and mistresses, fathers and daughters). In contrast to *The New Home*, Sickert's etching *A Little Cheque* (c.1912/13) presents a much less passive relationship [Fig. 2.18]. A potential source for Sickert's inspiration was Pinero's play *Mid-Channel* (St James's Theatre, 2 September to 29 October 1909) which narrates the story of Zoe Blundell, who at thirty-seven is conscious that her life is emotionally empty and seemingly pointless [Fig.'s 2.19 & 2.20].²⁴⁷ Trapped in an unhappy marriage to Theodore who has more interest in making money than attending to his wife. Theodore has become: "stodgy, pompous and flat-footed" according to Zoe and in a vain pursuit for excitement Zoe embarks on an ill-fated love affair with a younger man. Theodore and Zoe soon part (although Theodore is unaware of Zoe's adultery) and he soon takes himself a mistress. Towards the end of the play the couple reconcile and in order to extract himself from his mistress Theodore writes her a large cheque. The play ends with a typically Pinero-esque conclusion; although Zoe forgives Theodore he cannot forgive Zoe for her affair and, rejected by both husband and lover, Zoe commits suicide; the fallen woman literally, as she leaps to her death from her lover's apartment window.²⁴⁸

²⁴⁷ The play was also published by Heinemann in 1911. The relationship of Zoe Blundell and her husband Theodore may also have subliminally inspired *Ennui*. In addition, Baron suggests a link to the comic refrain in James Albery's 1870 play *Two Roses*. Baron, *Sickert: Paintings and Drawings*, 411.

²⁴⁸ Max Beerbohm was particularly critical of the vulgarity of Pinero's characters: "... Pinero ought to abandon his cult for low life above stairs. ... For in recent years he has concentrated himself more and more closely on a study of the least pleasing elements in the various strata of the middle-class. Uneducated young women aping the manners of their superiors, and educated young women with a lurid streak of commonness in them, have a particular fascination for him; and very cleverly he has depicted them". "Mid-Channel", *The Saturday Review*, Vol. 108, No. 2811, 11 September 1909, 310. Shaw, on the other hand, chastised Pinero for attacking the very audience of his play: "They are the very people you are getting at in the play. ...The women do not want to be told that they are not wives in any real sense, but only kept women. The husbands who have brought their wives to the theatre because they are afraid of quarrelling if they stay at home, do not want to have the quarrel thrown in their face across the footlights". Shaw, letter to Pinero, 29 November 1909. Shaw. *Collected Letters 1898-1910. Vol. II* (London: Max Reinhardt, 1972), 886.

Sickert avoids the heavy melodrama of Pinero in favour of a restrained and concentrated examination of the business transaction reminiscent of Theodore and his mistress. The scene highlighted the financial nature of Theodore's transactions rather than a declaration of love. By extracting himself financially from the situation Theodore suggests that women are as much a commodity as any of business transaction. Crucially, however, the mistress is willing to accept financial remuneration and, indeed, instigates Theodore's payment. Rather than a fragile mistress (as Zoe has become) she is in fact a shrewd business woman.

Sickert's sketch suggests a similar relationship between his cast.²⁴⁹ Equally, his composition suggests a shift in power from the traditional male/female roles. The subtle selection of props also symbolises his character's psychology. Sickert's male protagonist sits at a wooden, square desk; there is an air of seriousness about his posture as he hunches, concentrating on the writing of the cheque. In contrast, the female figure lies relaxed on the exotic, curved and luxurious *chaise-longue*, her pose more relaxed and suggestive (in essence it recalls Manet's provocative *Olympia*).²⁵⁰ Like the aforementioned painting, Sickert's composition suggests a sexual relationship which is treated as a financial/business arrangement. Similarly, the balance of power is questioned as the female figure, although reclining, sits semi-raised with an air of confidence. In contrast, the male figure sits hunched, submissive as he carries out the woman's requests. As much trapped by her sex as he assumes she is by his money.

²⁴⁹ According to an inscription on the impression of the second state, Sickert's models were Charles Ginner and Dora Sly. See Bromberg, *op. cit.*, 209.

²⁵⁰ Lisa Tickner makes a further connection between *Olympia* and Sickert's Camden Town Murder series in "Walter Sickert: The Camden Town Murder and Tabloid Crime", *Modern Life and Modern Subjects: British Art in the Early Twentieth Century* (London: Yale University Press, 2000), 11-47 and "Walter Sickert and the Camden Town Murder", Barnaby Wright (ed), *Walter Sickert: The Camden Town Nudes* (London: Courtauld Gallery, Paul Holberton, 2007), 45-55.

Following the suffrage discussions on the “marriage trade” Edwardian drama followed suit with numerous examples of women breaking from the confines of an unhappy marriage to a world of greater individual freedom. The double standard of male/female sexuality became a key dramatic element.²⁵¹ Shaw’s *Getting Married* (Haymarket Theatre, May 1908), for example, explored the social inequality of marriage whilst Herman Chilton’s *Grit* (Kingsway Theatre, 24 November 1908 to 9 January 1909), Elizabeth Baker’s *Chains* and John Valentine’s *The Stronger Sex* (Apollo and Royalty Theatres, 22 January to 1 June 1907) equally narrated the tale of disintegrating marriages.

The influence of feminism, not only on the literature and theatre of the period, undoubtedly influenced Sickert’s narratives. As Edith Craig noted: “It is obviously quite impossible nowadays to produce thoughtful plays written by thoughtful people which do not bear some traces of the influence of the feminist movement - an influence which no modern writer, however much he may wish it, can entirely escape”²⁵². As a result, the themes and problems of the “women question” (the marriage market, women’s suffrage and the sexual double standard of male and female relationships) were paramount in the New Drama. Adultery, in particular, was a major focal point.²⁵³ Rather than depicting the traditional melodramatic narrative of the fallen woman however, the New Dramatists tended towards a depiction of a misunderstood (at least by her boorish husband) woman, bored and ignored in her marriage. This sense of a broken marriage can be witnessed in Sickert’s *Sunday Afternoon* (c.1912-13) [Fig. 2.21].²⁵⁴ The painting is typical of his intimate

²⁵¹ The issue of sex was a key dramatic discussion point, for example, Barker’s plays often conclude with a scene in which the male and female leads discuss the sexual implications of their lives.

²⁵² Edith Craig, “First Annual Report. 1911-12”, *The Pioneer Player Reports, 1911-1915*, Ellen Terry Memorial Museum, Smallhythe, 7. As quoted in Susan Carlson & Kerry Powell, “Reimagining the Theatre: women playwrights of the Victorian and Edwardian period” in Kerry Powell (ed). *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian and Edwardian Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 245.

²⁵³ In fact, so typical was it that J.M. Barrie’s comedy *Alice Sit-by-the-Fire* (1905) concerns a young girl who, after too much theatregoing, falsely believes her mother to have a lover.

²⁵⁴ The models for Sickert’s productions were his usual cast of the elusive ‘Hubby’ and Marie Hayes. Sickert certainly had a tendency to dramatise the story of hubby’s life: “criminal coups, confidence tricks, cheque

domestic interiors. The male figure sits hunched, staring determinedly out of the picture space, whilst the female stands straight, symbolically turned away from her partner. Although physically close there is a clear emotional distance between these two characters.

John Galsworthy's *The Fugitive* (Court and Prince of Wales's Theatre's, 16 September to 18 October, 1913), in many ways regarded as a sequel to Ibsen's *A Doll's House* in showing what may have happened to Nora when she slammed the door on her married life, presents a similarly crumbling relationship; a "triumph of realism"²⁵⁵. Clare Desmond, an unhappily married and childless woman, ("long beaten her wings ineffectually against the matrimonial cage"²⁵⁶) leaves her marriage for Kenneth Malise. Aware, and accepting, that their affair has no future and with no wish to return to her marriage Clare becomes the fugitive of the title. Clare's marriage (the "slave market" as Malise calls it²⁵⁷). Unlike the typical melodramatic depiction of a troubled marriage, was not a particularly bad one. Neither her husband nor she is at fault:

Malise: Mrs Desmond, there's a whole world outside yours. Why don't you
spread your wings?

frauds, thefts, whores, bullies, etc." TGA 9125.5.8. According to the 1911 Census there are two Marie Hayes who fit Sickert's timeline; Annie Marie Hayes and Marie D. Hayes. Annie Marie, aged 41, lived at 71 Grayshott Road, Lavender Hill, Wandsworth. and was married to Charles Alfred Hayes (also 41), a baker, and had four young children. Marie D. Hayes, aged 50, lived at 39 Foxham Road, North Islington which was a short walk from Sickert's Mornington Crescent studios. Marie was married to William L. Hayes (aged 54), who was a parcel clerk from Somerset. They had two children, both in their early twenties. According to Robert Emmons, Hubby had gone to the same school in Bedford as Sickert and after a time at sea had fallen on "bad times". Emmons, *op. cit.*, 139. According to Sickert, Hubby donned khaki at Aldershot shortly after the First World War broke out. If we follow the argument that 'hubby' was in fact Marie's husband then that identifies him as either Charles Alfred Hayes or William L. Hayes. It would seem unlikely that the then 57 year old (in 1914) William L. Hayes would have been able to enlist at Aldershot; therefore Charles Alfred Hayes seems the likelier of the two.

²⁵⁵ *The Era*, 17 September 1913, Vol. 77, 30.

²⁵⁶ *The Illustrated London News*, Vol. 143, 20 September 1913, 422.

²⁵⁷ J. Galsworthy, *The Fugitive: The Plays of John Galsworthy* (London: Duckworth, 1929), Act II, 306.

Clare: ... Then, I've no money, and I can't do anything for a living, except serve in a shop. I shouldn't be free, ether; so what's the good? Besides, I oughtn't to have married if I wasn't going to be happy. You see, I'm not a bit misunderstood or ill-treated. It's only -

Malise: Prison. Break out!²⁵⁸

Clare's husband although aware of the death of their relationship is equally adamant of his wife's duty:

George: The facts are that we're married - for better or worse, and certain things are expected of us. It's suicide for you, and folly for me, in my position to ignore that. You have all you can reasonably want; and I don't - don't wish for any change. If you could bring anything against me - if I drank, or knocked about town, or expected too much of you. I'm not unreasonable in any way, that I can see.²⁵⁹

The scene ends with George asserting his ownership, both physically and emotionally, over his wife as the stage directions make clear: “[In the gleam of light Clare is standing, unhooking a necklet. He goes in, shutting the door behind him with a thud]”²⁶⁰. Galsworthy's play could be accused of moralistic melodrama, however, in its discussion on the problem of unhappy marriage and its depiction of Clare's demise it gained a great deal of support from the Suffrage movement.

Sickert's *Two figures: What Maisie Knew* (early 1914) [Fig. 2.22] although sharing its title with Henry James's 1897 novel of the same name the painting doesn't depict any scene from the novel. In fact, Sickert was cautious to avoid any particular literary connection to his work: “Certainly nothing is less literary than the language of the plastic

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, Act I, 284.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, Act I, 289.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, Act I, 290.

arts”²⁶¹. The title and composition between male and female certainly suggests a confrontation, or rather an interrogation. In essence the situation shares some similarities (in its combination of an older male and a younger female) with the relationship of Vivie Warren and George Crofts in Shaw’s *Mrs Warren’s Profession* particularly Act III where Crofts reveals to Vivie the truth about her mother’s profession.²⁶² In terms of Sickert’s painting however, the melodramatic subtext is of no importance and he, like Shaw, preferred to offers questions rather than answers in his work. Shaw’s plays refused to provide a conclusion, deliberately avoiding the pitfalls and constraints of the “well made play”. Shaw consistently denied his audiences their expected satisfactory finale and actively avoided the well made play’s four acts of Exposition, Complication, Obligatory Scene and Dénouement. Sickert’s ambiguous narrative recalls the ambiguity of Shaw’s dramatic conclusions.

²⁶¹ Sickert, “The New Language of Art”, *The New Age*, 28 July 1910. Gruetzner Robins, *op. cit.*, 265.

²⁶² Written in 1894 and first performed privately by the Stage Society at the New Lyric Club on the 5 January, 1902 the play did not receive a public performance, in London, until 1925, however it was published widely in Shaw’s collection (*Plays Unpleasant*) from 1898.

'Awful Dads' and 'Manipulative Mothers'

Obedience! Obedience! I owe no obedience. I am of full age and can order my life as I please. Is a woman never considered old enough to manage her own affairs? Is she to go down to her grave everlastingly under tutelage? Is she always to be obeying a father when she's not obeying a husband? We'll, I for one, will not submit to such nonsense. I'm sick of this everlasting *obedience*.

'Janet De Mullin', 1908²⁶³

I believe that in these days we have a greater respect for the talent of the young than our father had. We have greater doubts of the infallibility of the middle-aged. I believe that an audience, and by that I mean an indifferent and callous audience, is as necessary to a young painter, as to a young singer, or a young actor, or a young parson.

Walter Sickert, 1910²⁶⁴

In addition to the theme of the emancipation of woman and the marriage problem, playwrights also focused on the contrast between old and new orders. This often manifested itself through an examination of generational conflict, typically pitting strong daughters against tyrannical fathers and weak sons against manipulative mothers, resulting in either a complete break of the family or an unhappy marriage. As Mrs Cassilis in Hankin's *The Cassilis Engagement* noted: "Mothers always spoil their sons, don't they? And quarrel with their daughters. Most marriages are due to girls being unhappy at home than most people imagine"²⁶⁵. Janet De Mullin's outburst, in Hankin's *The Last of the De Mullins* (original production before the Stage Society at the Haymarket Theatre on 6 and 7 December 1908),

²⁶³ St. John Hankin, *The Last of the De Mullins* (1908). Jean Chothia (ed), *The New Woman and Other Emancipate Woman Plays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). Act III, Scene 1, Lines 205-211.

²⁶⁴ Sickert, "The Allied Artists' Association", *Art News*, 24 March 1910. Gruetzner Robins, *op. cit.*, 208.

²⁶⁵ St. John Hankin, *The Cassilis Engagement: A Comedy for Mothers* (1907). George Rowell, *Late Victorian Plays: 1890-1914* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), Act I, 225.

was typical in its depiction of the independence and rebelliousness of youth. Janet has rejected her family in favour of living independently in London with her illegitimate child Johnny. When she returns to the family home on hearing her father is ill her son's unknown father is revealed as Monty Bulstead who is engaged to Bertha Aldenham. Although willing to marry Janet he is rejected and Janet is similarly resistant when her mother and father insist on it: "By the right of a father, Janet. By that right I insist on your obedience..."²⁶⁶

The New Drama was littered with dominant parents and a tyrannical *pater familias* was a regularly occurring character. The inclusion of a totalitarian parent provided the opportunity to contrast youth and age, past and future and the relationship between male and female.²⁶⁷ Frequently, the conflict between generations was viewed in moral or business terms, as seen in Barker's *The Voysey Inheritance* (Court Theatre, 7 to 24 November 1905 & 12 February to 10 March 1906 and Kingsway Theatre, 7 September to 16 November 1912). Edward Voysey discovers, from his own father, that their family's solicitor's firm has been swindling their customers for years (his grandfather was also involved). He is further shocked when he discovers the family would rather keep up the subterfuge than risk public dishonour. Only through the intervention of Alice Maitland, a typically strong New

²⁶⁶ Hankin, *op. cit.*, Act III, Scene 1, Lines 203-204.

²⁶⁷ See for example Geoffrey Stonor and his father in Elizabeth Robins's *Votes for Women!* (Court, 9 April to 3 May 1907: "If you had known my father...." In Chothia, *op. cit.* Act III, Scene 1, Line 581. Githa Sowerby's *Rutherford and Son* (Court, 31 January to 3 February 1912; Little Theatre, 18 March to 20 April 1912 and The Vaudeville Theatre, 22 April to 13 July 1912) presents a similar conflict: "the revolt of the younger against the older generation", *The Illustrated London News*, 23 March 1912, 422. The father in the play not only dominates his own children but the families of his workforce. As his sister notes: "Folk like him look for a return from their bairns". Sowerby, *Rutherford and Son*. Reprinted in *New Woman Plays*. L. Fitzsimmons & V. Gardner (ed) (London: Methuen, 1991, 144. Other examples include; Barker's *The Madras House* (Duke of York's, 9 March to 4 April 1910), and Stanley Houghton's *The Younger Generation* (Terry's Theatre, 3 February to 26 February 1906 and also Haymarket and Duke of York's Theatres, 19 November 1912 to 8 March 1913).

Woman, can Edward take on the burden of his 'inheritance' and seek to rectify its corruption.

In addition, and often as a consequence, to the theme of parental authority and the expectation of youth was the rebelliousness of the 'New Generation'. This typically manifested itself in a child driven from the family home and into the arms of unsuitable, and often older, lovers. The New Dramatist's often peopled their romances with an older woman and a younger man; as Collins, in Shaw's *Getting Married*, noted on his sister-in-law: "the older she got the younger she liked em"²⁶⁸. Shaw, in particular, was keen to exploit the dramatic possibilities of the relationship of the sexes and their ages. *How He Lied To Her Husband* (Court and St James's, 28 February to 3 April 1905; Savoy, 8 March 1906 and Court, 28 April 1911) details the effect of an affair between a thirty-seven year old married woman and her eighteen year old lover.²⁶⁹ Shaw's *Misalliance* (Duke of York's Theatre, 23 February to 31 March 1910) depicted a series of similarly complex relationships.²⁷⁰ From the suggestion by the patriarch of the house, John Tartleton, that older women may willingly want to attract younger men ("Suppose she doesn't want to repel young men! Suppose she likes them!"²⁷¹) to Lord Summerhays romancing of Tartleton's daughter (and the fiancé of his own son, Bentley) Hypatia along with Tartleton's own suggestions of a business arrangement between himself and the young Polish acrobat Lina Szczepanowska, the play explores a variety of potential marriage relationship and their value to both parties.

²⁶⁸ Shaw, *Getting Married*, 555.

²⁶⁹ As Shaw wrote in the preface to the play: "Nothing in the theatre is staler than the situation of husband, wife, and lover, or the fun of knockabout farce. I have taken both, and got an original play out of them". Shaw, *Collected Plays with their Prefaces. Volume II* (London: Bodley Head, 1971), 1031.

²⁷⁰ Shaw, *Misalliance*. Reprinted in *Bernard Shaw: Collected Plays with their Prefaces. Volume IV* (London: Bodley Head, 1972, first published 1910). "Mr Shaw turns on once more those hardworked ideas of his of women the pursuer of her quarry men", *The Illustrated London News*, Vol. 136, 5 March 1910, 352.

²⁷¹ Shaw, *Misalliance*, 165. Hypatia is also something of an independent woman, as Tartleton states: "You run after young men; and old men run after you", 241.

Sickert's *My Awful Dad* (c.1912-13) [Fig. 2.23] presents a typical depiction of a New Drama family.²⁷² The sketch, a variation on the earlier *Granby Street* (c.1912-1913) and *Vacerra* (c.1912) [Fig.'s 2.24 & 2.25], depicts a young girl perched defiantly against the familiar Sickertian prop of an iron bedstead.²⁷³ An older male reclines in a chair to the left of the girl. It is tempting to assume that the male figure is the 'Dad' of the title but, considering the bedroom location and relaxed position of the man; it is also possible that the male figure is the young girl's potential older lover and confidant. The contrast between youth and age is clearly evident in the painting. By placing the girl in the foreground Sickert highlights her role as the protagonist of the piece. She is the focus of the piece and it is her reaction to the ambiguous relationship that provides the painting's dramatic narrative.

Considered in relation to the earlier two works (*Granby Street* and *Vacerra*), the male/female relationship is presented in a series of guises. The trio of images detail three of the main characteristics of womanhood in the New Drama; the scorned and bored wife, the unrepentant mistress and the rebellious and independent daughter. In *Granby Street* the atmosphere is one of distance and tension; the female figure's straight posture is at odds with the relaxed figure of the man and her face is turned away from his gaze. The narrative suggests emotional separation; reminiscent of the marriage breakdown theme. *Vacerra* on the other hand, at least in its title, presents a much more confrontational narrative. The title, as noted by Wendy Baron, is derived from Martial, Epigrams Book XI, number 66: "Et delator es, et calumniator/Et fraudator es, et negotiator, Et Fellator es, et lanista: mirror/Quare non habeas, vacerra, nummos" (you are an informer and a slanderer, you are a cheat and a pimp, you are a cocksucker and an agitator; I am amazed, Vacerra, why you are still stony broke). In Sickert's hands suggests the title suggests a confrontation; a battle of the sexes.²⁷⁴ The value of a painting's title was one to approach with caution however and

²⁷² It can also be argued that *Ennui* rather than presenting a husband and wife relationship can be read in terms of a father and daughter.

²⁷³ Sickert would produce a painting of the sketch in 1934.

²⁷⁴ Baron, *op. cit.*, 399.

Sickert was well aware of the problematic temptation of accepting the title as an explanation of the painting's meaning. The title's value lay not in exposition but suggestion:

Since the 'night of time,' as they say in France, criticism has set in opposition in the words of 'subject' and 'treatment.' Is it not possible that this antithesis is meaningless, and that the two things are one, and that an idea does not exist apart from its exact expression? Pictures, like streets and persons, have to have names to distinguish them. But their names are not definitions of them, or, indeed, anything but the loosest kind of labels that make it possible for us to handle them, that prevent us from mislaying them, or sending them to the wrong address. If the names we give pictures were indeed their subject, there would have been need of but one picture in the world entitled 'Madonna and Child.' The subject is something much more precise and much more intimate than the loose title that is equally applicable to a thousand different canvases. The real subject of a picture or a drawing is the plastic facts it succeeds in expressing, and all the world of pathos, of poetry, of sentiment that it succeeds in conveying, is conveyed by means of the plastic facts expressed.²⁷⁵

Ultimately, it is the theatrical ambiguity of the dramatic situation which inspires Sickert and pathos, poetry and sentiment can clearly be seen in his *Mother and Daughter: Lou Lou I Love You* (1911) [Fig. 2.26]. The composition, painted from models at his Wellington House studio, presents two fully-clothed women seated on a bed. The dramatic intent of the image is palpable, even without the suggestive title. The two figures face away from each other suggesting an emotional distance if not a physical one. The girl in the foreground (likely the Lou Lou of the title) is dressed somewhat more glamorously (and suggestively) than the older female and, as such, it can be assumed she is wealthier, or at least more conscious of modern fashions.

²⁷⁵ Sickert, "The Language of Art", *The New Age*, 28 July 1910. Gruetzner Robins, *op. cit.*, 264.

By highlighting the disparity of his characters' dress and age, Sickert therefore suggests a contrast in nature and ideals. Although the cause of their emotional separation is unsaid, the placing of the figures on the bed symbolically insinuates a link to sex and intimacy. Echoing the ambiguity of *The New Home* the intention of the figures' past and future is deliberately uncertain. However, as in *My Awful Dad*, by placing the younger female in the foreground of the canvas Sickert indicates her to be the protagonist of the drama. Equally, the pleading title, implies that the younger woman's actions and intentions are disagreeable to the older female.

The conflict between mother and daughter was often at the heart of a play. Stanley Houghton's *Hindle Wakes* [Fig. 2.27] presented a similarly problematic relationship and their contrasting ideas on respectability and the expectations of marriage. The play, first produced by Miss Horniman's Repertory Company for the Gaiety Theatre Manchester in 1910 was also produced by the London Stage Society at the Aldwych and Court Theatres between 16 and 17 June 1912 and 22 September and 18 October 1913. Set in the fictional Lancashire town of Hindle the play, through its depiction and treatment of its two families (the working class Hawthorns and the upper-middle class Jeffcote's), documents the contrasting ideals and treatment of the classes and sexes.

Fanny Hawthorn, a mill girl, has spent an illicit weekend away with Alan Jeffcote, the son of the mill owner. On the discovery of their brief affair, Fanny's father Christopher and Alan's father Nat (old friends, although now on opposite ends of the social scale) both decide that the only course of action is for Alan to marry Fanny, even though he is engaged to Beatrice Farrar. However, it is the mothers of the protagonists who instigate the argument of the drama. Neither mother blames their own child for the situation. Mrs Jeffcote, realising that Alan's marriage to Fanny would be a financial disaster, criticises Fanny and her motives: "Either she's thoroughly wicked, or else she was simply trying to

make him marry her, and whichever it was it's evident she's no fit wife for Alan"²⁷⁶. Fanny's mother on the other hand, like Mrs Borridge, in *The Cassilis Engagement*, sees the marriage as an opportunity for respectability and criticises her husband for allowing their daughter too much freedom:

Mrs Hawthorn: Aren't you going to give her a talking-to?

Christopher: What's the good?

Mrs Hawthorn: What's the good? Well, I like that! My father would have got a stick to me... [to Fanny] You little fool. Have you no common sense at all? What did you do it for if you didn't make him promise to wed you?²⁷⁷

The conflict, and expected obligation, of the generations is the focus of the play. Whilst Alan, dutiful son that he is, grudgingly follows his father's advice and asks Fanny for her hand in marriage, Fanny immediately rejects him: "...I don't want to marry Alan. ... And what's more, I haven't the least intention of marrying him"²⁷⁸. It is Fanny who is the strongest character in the play and the only one capable of independence:

Alan: I gave her [Beatrice] up because my father made me.

Fanny: Made you? Good Lord, a chap of your age.

Alan: My father's a man who will have his own way.

Fanny: You can tell him to go and hang himself. He hasn't got any hold over you.²⁷⁹

²⁷⁶ Stanley Houghton, *Hindle Wakes*. Reprinted in Rowell, *op. cit.*, Act II, 477. Mrs Jeffcote is fully aware of the problem of an arranged marriage: "Marriage is a ticklish business anyhow. There's always the chance of a bust up". *Ibid.*, 478.

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, Act I, Scene 1, 456. *The Era* thought the characterisation of Fanny's mother extremely authentic, especially the: "harsh voice and dowdy appearance of the nagging wife". 22 June 1912, Vol. 75, 15.

²⁷⁸ Houghton, *Hindle Wakes*. Act III. 498.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 500.

After refusing his hand in marriage (“Don’t kid yourself, my lad! It isn’t because I’m afraid of spoiling *your* life that I’m refusing you, but because I’m afraid of spoiling *mine!*”²⁸⁰) Fanny admits that their short affair meant nothing to her: “You’re a man, and I was your little fancy. Well, I’m a woman, and *you* were *my* little fancy. You wouldn’t prevent a woman enjoying herself as well as a man, if she takes it into her head?”²⁸¹ In the final act, not only does Fanny reject Alan’s proposal she also turns her back on her mother and makes a decisive move for independence: “I’m not without a trade at my finger tips, thou knows. I’m a Lancashire lass, and so long as there’s weaving sheds in Lancashire I shall earn enough brass to keep me going. I wouldn’t live at home after this, not anyhow! I’m going to be on my own in future...”²⁸² It is Fanny, ultimately, who takes charge of her own destiny and independence.²⁸³

Sickert’s *Mother and Daughter: Lou Lou I Love You* therefore picks up on a number of New Drama precedents, including generational conflict and female independence. Equally by focusing on two figures, the work followed the dramatic confrontation of presenting two characters at intellectual and emotional odds to one another. By depicting a contrast in class between his two figures (at least in terms of their differing financial situation) Sickert illustrates a further potential debt to the traditions of the New Drama. Evident in Houghton’s *Hindle Wakes*, Hankin’s *The Last of the De Mullins* and Sowerby’s *Rutherford and Son* amongst others, was the characterisation and

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 501.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 503.

²⁸² *Ibid.*, 506.

²⁸³ A similar relationship (although their roles are reversed) can be seen in Galsworthy’s *Joy*, first performed at the Savoy Theatre between 24 September and 18 October 1907. Focusing on the relationship between Joy and her mother Molly Gwyn who has left Joy’s father and is now in a physical relationship with Maurice Lever, Galsworthy states the conflict between mother and daughter openly and their conversations provided the main thrust of his drama. The independence of Joy’s mother is dramatically highlighted by her declaration: “D’you think - because I suffered when you were born and because I’ve suffered with every ache you ever had, that that gives you the right to dictate to me now? [in a dead voice] I’ve been unhappy enough and I shall be unhappy enough in time to come”. J. Galsworthy, *Joy*. Galsworthy, *op. cit.*, Act III, 93.

discussion of working class characters and the problems affecting them. Sickert's insistence on depicting the lives of the lower-middle and working classes of Camden Town echoed the theatrical shift from the middle-class drawing room to the working class parlour.

Naturalism and the Working Class

A play is a slice of life artistically set on the stage... a synthetic version of life achieved through art.

Jean Jullien, 1890²⁸⁴

The more our art is serious, the more will it tend to avoid the drawing room and stick to the kitchen. The plastic arts are gross arts, dealing joyously with gross material facts. They call, in their servants, for a robust stomach and a great power of endurance, and while they flourish in the scullery, or on the dunghill, they fade at a breath from the drawing-room. Stay! I had forgot. We have a use for the drawing-room - to caricature it.

Walter Sickert, 1910²⁸⁵.

Sickert's *Two Coster Girls* (c.1908) [Fig. 2.28] and *Coster child: Seated woman with a straw boater* (c.1911) [Fig. 2.29] reveals, through their titles, a shared interest in the theatrical concern with the lower classes.²⁸⁶ The precedent to this, as always, existed in France where Antoine's Théâtre-Libre had embraced the influence of Zola and Naturalism. George Moore was one of the earliest English dramatists to exploit this tradition in his *The Strike at Arlingford*, as was Elizabeth Robins and Florence Bell's *Alan's Wife* both written for the Independent Theatre in 1893. Sickert was confident in his own knowledge of the developing New Drama to be able to criticise Moore on his attempts at playwriting:

Much of Mr George Moore's last book was filled with demonstrations of the futility and incapacity of his friends who were playwrights. On point after point

²⁸⁴ Jullien, preface to *L'Echéance*. Schumacher, *op. cit.*, 78.

²⁸⁵ Sickert, "Idealism", *Art News*, 12 May 1910. Gruetzner Robins, *op. cit.*, 229.

²⁸⁶ John Masefield's productions for the Court (*The Campden Wonder*, 8 January to 1 February 1907) and The Royalty and Haymarket Theatres (*The Tragedy of Nan*, 24 May to 12 June 1908) also presented the rural poor.

he sets them right *ex cathedra*. Shortly afterwards we had the production of his play 'Esther Waters,' just to show how it should be done. It is a pity that we cannot now have a painting by Mr Moore as a sequel to his criticism of painting.²⁸⁷

In the 1900s John Galsworthy was the main advocate of the working class on stage but Stanley Houghton's *Hindle Wakes* (1910) and Cicely Hamilton's *Diana of Dobson's* (1908) [Fig. 2.30] equally utilised working class characters and situations as the basis for their drama.²⁸⁸

Depictions of the working class on stage frequently tended to concentrate on social issues prevalent in the period. Naturally this included class reactions to the woman question, but equally it often explored the differing reactions to crime and inequality of justice. For playwrights, the scientific observation suggested by Zola proved attractive. Characters' destinies were suggested by their surrounding. In terms of their physicality, the plays utilised visual naturalism in terms of set decoration and typically had characters speak in colloquial language. John Galsworthy, in particular, was especially interested in depicting the working class. His plays often highlighted their predicament in contrast to the upper-middle classes. *Strife* [Fig. 2.31], for example (Duke of York's, Haymarket and the

²⁸⁷ Sickert, "Mr George Moore and the Future of Art", *Pall Mall Gazette*, 23 July 1912. Gruetzner Robins, *ibid.*, 330. In addition Moore also sought out Sickert's advice on a play he was writing in the 1890s. According to Sickert's brother Oswald, Moore's play detailed his hero's urge to kill animals, and growing fear that he will shortly murder his wife. Moore's admission that it would not "suit an English audience" suggests it followed in a similar vein to the Théâtre-Libre's production of Maurice Biollay's *Monsieur Bute* in which an executioner who, driven mad by his work, kills his servant and drinks her blood. Oswald Valentine Sickert, letter to Edwards Marsh, 27 November 1894. New York Public Library. As noted in Sturgis, *op. cit.*, 693.

²⁸⁸ *Diana of Dobson's*, which *The Era* though was "unlike Zola" in its depiction of squalor (15 February 1908, Vol. 71, 17), was praised by *The Illustrated London News* for its tragi-comedy: "it gives us the realistic qualities of the problem - drama while avoiding alike propagandism and pessimism ... [Hamilton] does not paint her picture too bleak, but allows for friendship and great nature, and even laughter... [The] play will make you think and laugh", 22 February 1908, Vol. 132, 266.

Adephi Theatres between 9 March and 3 April 1909), contrasted the lives and ideals of two families (the owners and the workers at the Trenartha Tin Plate Works) at the heart of a strike on the borders of England and Wales. Similarly, Galsworthy's *Justice: A Tragedy* (Duke of York's, 21 February to 14 April 1910 as part of Frohman's Repertory Season) was controversial in its depiction of the injustice and psychological destruction of the prison service. In particular, through the background of the character Ruth Honeywell, it documented insightfully the harsh domestic life of the working classes.²⁸⁹

The play narrates the downfall of William Falder, aged 23, a clerk at James How's solicitors' office, who is in love with the older Ruth Honeywell (aged 26) who is married with children, to an alcoholic and violent husband. In a futile attempt to gain money for their escape Falder steals £90 from his employer and is quickly caught.²⁹⁰ Galsworthy's play demonstrated the horror and futility of Ruth's domestic life well: "He's on the drink again, Will. He tried to cut my throat last night. I came out with the children before he was aware..."²⁹¹ Similarly, Falder's court case in Act II highlights the desperation he felt to aid his lover:

²⁸⁹ Galsworthy had a particularly naturalistic interpretation of character: "To deal austere and naturalistically with the life of one's day is to find the human being so involved in environment that he cannot be disassociated [My characters] are part of the warp and woof of a complicated society..." Galsworthy, *op. cit.*, xii-xiii.

²⁹⁰ Importantly, rather than treating Falder's time in prison as a *mise-en-scène*, Galsworthy chooses it as the location for Act III and presents a particularly detailed display of Falder's psychological demise in solitary confinement. The final act sees Falder return, two years after his release, to his old employer with the hope of regaining employment as he has struggled to find another position due to his criminal record. The firm are sympathetic to his plea and are considering his re-employment when he is arrested for failing to report himself in since he left prison. As Falder is escorted out of the building he leaps to his death from the stairwell, breaking his neck, rather than spend any more time in prison.

²⁹¹ Galsworthy, *Justice: A Tragedy*, Galsworthy, *op. cit.*, Act I, 221. After undertaken a period of research at Dartmoor and Pentonville Prison Galsworthy became an active campaigner for prison reform and his play should be seen in its role as a piece of propaganda. Indeed Winston Churchill, then Home Secretary, acknowledged Galsworthy's play as an active reason for his instigating a number of prison reforms including reducing the period of mandatory solitary confinement.

Frome [defence counsel]: What is your husband?

Ruth: Traveller.

Frome: And what was the nature of your married life?

Ruth [Shaking her head]: It don't bear talking about.

Frome: Did he ill-treat you, or what?

Ruth: Ever since my first was born.

Frome: In what way?

Ruth: I'd rather not say. All sorts of ways. ... My husband nearly strangled me that morning.²⁹²

In tone, Ruth's defence recalled the sordid subtext, and theatricality, of Sickert's Camden Town interiors such as *What Shall We Do About The Rent?* or *The Camden Town Murder* (c.1908), *L'Affaire de Camden Town* (1909) as well as *Home Life, Camden Town* (c.1909) [Fig.'s 2.32, 2.33 & 2.34].²⁹³

Galsworthy's *The Silver Box*, (Court, 25 September to 19 October 1906 and 8 to 27 April 1907) also highlighted the inequality of justice between the classes, in particular the

²⁹² *Ibid.*, Act II. 237.

²⁹³ For more on the Camden Town Murder Series see Wendy Baron, "The Process of Invention. Interrelated or Interdependent: Sickert's Drawings and Paintings of Intimate Figure Subjects", Barnaby Wright (ed), *Walter Sickert: The Camden Town Nudes* (London: Courtauld Gallery, Paul Holberton, 2007), 29-43; David Peters Corbett, "'Gross Material Facts': Sexuality, Identity and the City in Walter Sickert 1905-1910", *Art History*. Vol. 21. No. 1, March 1998, 45-64; Rebecca Daniels, "Walter Sickert and urban realism", *The British Art Journal*, Vol. III, No. 2, Spring 2002, 58-69; Susan Sidlauskas, "Walter Sickert's *Ennui*", *Body, Place, and Self in Nineteenth Century Painting* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2000), 124-149; Lisa Tickner, "Walter Sickert: The Camden Town Murder and Tabloid Crime." *Modern Life and Modern Subjects: British Art in the Early Twentieth Century* (London: Yale University Press, 2000), 11-47; L. Tickner, "Walter Sickert and the Camden Town Murder", Barnaby Wright (ed), *Walter Sickert: The Camden Town Nudes* (London: Courtauld Gallery, Paul Holberton, 2007), 13-27; Stella Tillyard, "W.R. Sickert and the Defence of Illustrative Painting." Brian Allen (ed.), *Studies in British Art 1: Towards a Modern Art World* (London: Yale University Press, 1995), 189-205.

aristocratic Barthwick family and the working class Jones's.²⁹⁴ Jack Barthwick, a typical young man about town, returns home drunk one evening and is helped into the family home by James Jones (the husband of the family's maid). Both are drunk and Jones takes advantage of Barthwick's request to take anything he wants in exchange for helping him in by taking a silver cigarette box and a lady's purse.²⁹⁵ The following morning the box is discovered missing and Mrs Jones is arrested for the crime. However, upon discovering that the lady's purse was originally stolen by Jack ("Serve her joll' well right - everything droppin' out. Th' cat. I've scored her off - I've got her bag"²⁹⁶) his father pays off the lady to avoid any scandal and mildly reprimands his son. In contrast, after attacking a constable and admitting his guilt Jones is given a month's hard labour.

The Jones's marriage, like that of the Honeywell's is oppressive and violent: "Of course I *would* leave him, but I'm really afraid of what he'd do to me. He's such a violent man when he's not himself" confesses Mrs Jones.²⁹⁷ The description of the Jones's lodging house also betrays Galsworthy's interest in a naturalistic set and recalls the atmosphere of Sickert's own compositions:

ACT II, Scene 1: The Jones' lodging, Merthyr Street, at half past two-o'clock. The bare room, with tattered oilcloth and damp, distempered walls, has an air of tidy wretchedness. On the bed lies Jones, half-dressed; his coat is thrown across his feet, and muddy boots are lying on the floor close by. He is asleep. The door is opened and Mrs Jones comes in, dressed in a pinched black jacket and old black sailor hat; she carries a parcel wrapped up in "The Times." She puts her parcel down, unwraps an apron, half a loaf, two onions, three potatoes, and a

²⁹⁴ *The Illustrated London News* thought the 1906 production a successful "slice of actual life": "If ever there arises a school of English dramatists at all comparable as artists and students of life with even our younger contemporary novelists, we shall have largely to thank the enterprise of the Court Theatre's managers for that happy state of affairs". 6 October 1906, Vol. 129, 467.

²⁹⁵ The lady in question was a prostitute according to *The Era*, 29 September 1906, Vol. 70, 15.

²⁹⁶ Galsworthy. *The Silver Box*, Galsworthy, *op. cit.*, Act I, Scene 1, 3.

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, Act I, Scene 2, 5.

tiny piece of bacon. Taking a teapot from the cupboard, she rinses it, shakes into it some powdered tea out of a screw of paper, puts it on the hearth, and sitting in a wooden chair quietly begins to cry.²⁹⁸

The play, particularly the 1907 production, which *The Illustrated London News* thought: “full of careful observation and most of its types are wonderfully true to life” certainly shared some affinity in its concentration on the lower classes at home with Sickert’s revealing discussion on Tilly Pullen.²⁹⁹

But now let us strip Tilly Pullen of her lendings and tell her to put her own things on again. Let her leave the studio and climb the first dirty little staircase in her shabby little house. Tilly Pullen becomes interesting at once. ... Follow her into the kitchen, or, better still ... into her bedroom, and now ... she has become a Degas or a Renoir ...³⁰⁰

The relocating from drawing room to bedroom, particularly in reference to sexual relationships, was a typical ingredient in the New Drama. Often chosen for their social questions, the politically minded dramatists of the early few decades of the twentieth-century frequently used their works to highlight corruption and political hypocrisy.³⁰¹ A typical example of propagandist theatre was Antonia Williams *The Street* (performed by the Pioneer Players at Gertrude Kingston’s Little Theatre for one performance on 30 November

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, Act II, Scene 1., 21. *The Stage* went so far as to mention the action took place in the: “Jones’s wretched furnished rooms [rent 6s a week]”, 27 September 1906, 16. Indeed the links between Galsworthy and Ibsen and the developments in Paris were not lost on the critics: “One of the grimmest, most realistic, and most powerful studies of actual life ... seems to owe something to Scandinavian influence. ... The Court Theatre [is clearly] an equivalent of the Parisian Théâtre Antoine”. *The Atheneum*, No. 4118, 29 September 1906, 375-76.

²⁹⁹ *The Illustrated London News*, 13 April 1907, Vol. 130, 546.

³⁰⁰ Sickert, “The Study of Drawing”, *The New Age*, 16 June 1910. Gruetzner Robins, *op. cit.*, 247-248.

³⁰¹ Shaw’s *Widowers’ Houses* (first produced by the Independent Theatre at the Royalty Theatre in December 1892), highlighted the disreputable practice and methods of slum landlords and the equally corrupt lack of desire of the middle and upper classes to alleviate the situation.

1913). Williams play presented a particular dark and sordid slice of city life set in an unnamed street just off the Strand. Margaret Martin, forced into a sexual relationship with her landlord in order to keep a room for her mother (a “vulgar, exceedingly selfish old lady”³⁰²) and sister eventually retaliates when she realises the landlord is preying on her younger sister Violet.³⁰³

Arguably, the most politically minded playwright of the period was Shaw, *Mrs Warren’s Profession*, for example, depicted the hypocrisy of the morality of the period. Written in 1894 and first performed privately by the Stage Society at the New Lyric Club on the 5 January 1902 the play did not receive a public performance in London until 1925, however it was published widely in Shaw’s collection (*Plays Unpleasant*) from 1898 and had received two private performances in Glasgow in 1913. It had also been produced by the Pioneer Players at Gertrude Kingston’s Little Theatre in 1912.

Shaw’s play, with its subject of prostitution, was hardly scandalous for late Victorian and Edwardian audiences but its suggestion that prostitution was profitable and tolerated as long as it was not discussed certainly was. In addition the question of Vivie Warren’s illegitimacy and her possible incestuous relationship with Frank was equally controversial.³⁰⁴ Artistically, Shaw’s play was also problematic in that he refused to provide any moralistic conclusion to his drama. Shaw’s plays, not unlike Sickert’s own narratives, often deny the audience their expected satisfactory finale. The argument between mother and daughter which dominates much of Act II, for example, peters out towards the plays conclusion. As a result *Mrs Warren’s Profession* ends ambiguously; Kitty Warren

³⁰² *The Era*, 3 December 1913, Vol. 77, 14. *The Stage* thought the play full of: “deep, if restrained, feeling”. 4 December 1913, 29.

³⁰³ The family’s salvation eventually arrives in the form of Castleton, a wealthy man who has been slumming as a rent collector.

³⁰⁴ It is Crofts who insinuates that Frank’s father, the Reverend Samuel Gardner is Vivie’s father. Shaw, *Mrs Warren’s Profession*. Reprinted in *Bernard Shaw: Collected Plays with their Prefaces. Volume I* (London: Bodley Head, 1970 first published 1898), 333.

seemingly continues with her business, Crofts (Warren's business partner) has his lust for Vivie rejected and Frank is also rejected by Vivie.

Vivie is a 'New Woman', she drinks and smokes, has an independent income and rejects any romantic or sentimental nonsense. Act II is dominated by Mrs Warren admitting her lifestyle to Vivie; although Shaw's Kitty Warren is now a lady of some wealth, her working-class background still haunts her. As she explained to Vivie, her mother and father had ran a fried-fish shop by the Mint. Of the four daughters, one died of lead poisoning from working in a whitelead factory whilst another was trapped with a drunkard for a husband. The third sister, who it was feared would "end by jumping off Waterloo Bridge" became independently wealthy through prostitution and was the inspiration for Kitty's eventual career, with some financial help from Crofts.³⁰⁵ Act IV concludes with Vivie and her mother alone as Vivie rejects anything to do with her mother after realising she is still actively involved in prostitution. In a nod to Ibsen's *A Dolls House*, Shaw has Kitty echoing Nora's defiance by depicting Mrs Warren slamming the door shut on Vivie as she leaves the office.³⁰⁶

Shaw's plays were often concerned with issues of class, gender, heritage and socialism. In *Misalliance*, for example, it is the clerk Julius Baker, who instigates the denouement of the play by forcing all of the characters to admit to their indiscretions: "I've had enough of living a dog's life and despising myself for it. I've had enough of being talked down to by hogs like you, and wearing my life out for a salary that wouldn't keep you in cigars"³⁰⁷. Shaw also highlighted the potentially violent lifestyles of the lower classes, most evident in *Major Barbara* (Court, 28 November 1905 to 23 February 1906) and particularly through the character of Bill Walker. Act Two of the play takes place in the West Ham Shelter of the Salvation Army includes a number of low class characters, including the run-down figures of Rummy Mitchens, Snobby Price, Peter Shirley and the

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 311.

³⁰⁶ The stage directions read: "Mrs Warren goes out, slamming the door behind her". *Ibid.*, 356.

³⁰⁷ Shaw, *Misalliance*, 215.

archetypal bully Bill Walker (“realistic sketches of modern types”³⁰⁸), who hits Mitchens and Jenny Hill, a young Salvation Army worker, when she refuses to fetch Bill’s girlfriend, Mog Habbijam: [To Jenny] “Nah are you gowing to fetch aht Mog Ebbijem; or em Aw to knock your fice off you and fetch her meself” to which Shirley responds with the equally violent: You take a liberty with me, and I’ll smash you over the face with the mug and cut your eye out”³⁰⁹.

Shaw’s description of an East End shelter and its habitués shares some characterisation with Sickert’s interiors. Indeed studio photographs of Oswald Yorke as Bill Walker [Fig. 2.35] recall Sickert’s photograph from around 1905-1910 [Fig. 2.36] (as well as a similarity with Lyn Harding as Bill Sykes in H. Beerbohm Tree’s 1905 production of *Oliver Twist* [Fig. 2.37]³¹⁰). It is important to remember that Sickert, unlike Shaw, was not a Fabian; he had little interest in social change. Whilst Shaw highlighted the social problems of the modern age with the aim of provoking discussion, Sickert presented his scenes as entertainment with no strong desire to change the *status quo*: “All an artist can hope for is that the rich grow richer and the poor poorer”³¹¹. His main focus was to remain objective, to capture the essence of the experience whilst remaining aloof, to the extent of banishing: “*your own person, your life ... your affections and yourself from your theatre*”³¹². Whilst Shaw used working class characters to highlight the inequality of class Sickert saw them as entertainment: “London is spiffing!” “Such evil racy little faces & such a

³⁰⁸ *The Illustrated London News*, Vol. 127, 9 December 1905, 845.

³⁰⁹ G.B. Shaw, *Major Barbara*. Reprinted in *Bernard Shaw: Collected Plays with their Prefaces. Volume III* (London: Bodley Head, 1971, first published 1905), 102.

³¹⁰ The play opened on 7 October 1905 at His Majesty’s Theatre. It also starred Constance Collier as Nancy and Tree as Fagin.

³¹¹ As quoted in Osbert Sitwell, *Noble Essences* (London: Macmillan, 1950), 176. Not only did Sickert admit to a fear of change he also wished for the status quo to remain: “when I was younger all changes were just so much more fun. Now all changes frighten me”. Sickert, letter to Ethel Sands (undated) TGA 9125.5.57.

³¹² Sickert to Nan Hudson. As quoted in Sturgis, *op. cit.*, 361.

comfortable feeling of a solid basis of beef & beer. O the whiff of leather & stout from the swing-doors of the pubs. Why aren't I *Keats* to sing them?"³¹³

... in the sumptuous poverty of their class, sham velvet &c. They always wearing for everyday dirty, old, worn clothes, but Sunday clothes. Extraordinary lives. Men, who live on them, now & again hitting them with 'ammers, putting poisonous powders on cakes, trying to cut their throats, drugging their whisky &c.³¹⁴

In Sickert's defence of his subject matter, he found an ally in August Strindberg who had been similarly criticised for depicting equally sordid situations: "There is also another accusation, [...] that the realists love dirt! The world's two greatest authors of dirt, the former coachman and the former shop-assistant, later known as William Shakespeare and Charles Dickens, two of the greatest benefactors of the human race, can stand up to such accusations"³¹⁵. Equally, like the Naturalist dramatists, Sickert took great care to present his characters as products of their environment. Often this was demonstrated

³¹³ Sickert, letter to Nan Hudson, 6 October, 1913 TGA. 9125.5.29.

³¹⁴ Sickert, letter to Nan Hudson (undated, c.1907?). TGA 9125.5.36

³¹⁵ August Strindberg, "On realism. Några synpunkter" ["On realism. Some viewpoints"], *Ur dagens krönika*, 2, 1882. Reprinted in C. Schumacher (ed). *Naturalism and symbolism in European theatre 1850-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 297. In defence of depicting lower class figures in his dramas, Sickert could also confidently quote Edouard Vuillard: "Has not Vuillard said 'On fait une belle chose avec sa cuisinière' [One can make a thing of beauty out of one's cook]?" Sickert, "A Monthly Chronicle: The Whistler Exhibition", *The Burlington Magazine*, July 1915. Gruetzner Robins, *op. cit.*, 387. In contrast to France, Strindberg only had a minimal audience between 1900 and 1920. In fact, according to J.P. Wearing, there only four notable productions took place during this period; *The Stronger Woman* (translation by E.A. Browne and Frank Schloesser of *Den Starkase*, 1890), staged for two performances at His Majesty's Theatre between 9 and 10 December 1909 (this version was revived for two matinee performances at the Royalty Theatre on the 14 and 21 February 1912); *The Creditors* (translation of *Fordringsagare*, 1888), at the Princes Theatre for two matinee performances on 10 and 11 March 1912; and *The Sirocco* (translation of *Samun*, 1890), for one performance at the Vaudeville Theatre on 28 August 1913. See Wearing's, *The London stage 1900-1909 a calendar of plays and players* and *The London stage 1910-1919 a calendar of plays and players*.

through the materiality; the tones and textures, of his paint. The darkness, both emotionally and physically of his subjects was well noted by his contemporaries. As Wyndham Lewis noted, describing Harold Gilman's reaction to Sickert's late Camden Town works:

...bitumen was anathema for him, and Sickert was bitumen. ... He would look over in the direction of Sickert's studio, and a slight shudder would convulse him as he thought of the little brown worm of paint that was possibly, even at that moment, wriggling out on to the palette that held no golden chromes, emerald greens, vermilions, *only*, as it, of course, should do. Sickert's commerce with these condemned browns was as compromising as intercourse with a proscribed vagrant.³¹⁶

In essence, Camden Town, and the social and political *milieu* of the locations in which he painted, provided Sickert with a living and breathing stage set; one that was filled with realist (or naturalist) characters and sets. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the location had attracted a particular reputation. By the turn of the century its houses, originally built as substantial middle-class residences, were in a poor condition. Town houses were divided into temporary lodgings for the working-class population which had emigrated there due to the development of the railways. Compton Mackenzie who described a cab ride through Camden High Street ["The hansom clattered through the murk beneath, past the dim people huddled upon the pavement, past a wheel barrow and the obscene skeletons and outlines of humanity"³¹⁷] recalled the area in a Sickertian manner: "[an] unknown London with all its sly and labyrinthine romance"³¹⁸.

The area was also a notorious location for trouble. The streets near Regent's Park had acquired a reputation for cheap lodging houses and prostitution. Mackenzie, describing a typical lodging house not unlike those in Mornington Crescent presents a particularly

³¹⁶ Wyndham Lewis & Louis Forbes Fergusson. *Harold Gilman, An Appreciation*. London 1919, 13.

³¹⁷ Compton Mackenzie, *Sinister Street* (London: Macdonald, 1949, first published in 1914), 668.

³¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 667.

Sickertian collection of inhabitants; his landlady informs him that a female lodger is: “in the profession... and sometimes comes in a little late” while the other male lodger is a chemist struck off the register for (it is implied) supplying abortifacients.³¹⁹ The inhabitants of Camden Town provided Sickert with a vital and vibrant selection of characters; from the prostitute who “charged 10d and was very quick”, to the buxom Dora Sly (“the fairy on top of the Christmas tree”).³²⁰

For Sickert, however, the area was not only useful for its cheap rents and bohemian atmosphere it also had a literary significance (“It is astonishing what one common little lodging-room and one little drab (‘une petite souillon’ *charming* word) contain of beauty for us, you and me, and others who understand”³²¹). Charles Dickens had lived in the area for a number of years and Sickert’s Mornington Crescent apartments were located not far from the writer’s childhood home in Bayham Street. The connection would be extended by Sickert’s renting, in 1908, of studio space in a building on the corner of Hampstead Road and Granby Street, once known as Wellington House Academy, where Dickens had once went to school. For Sickert, Camden Town was his new theatre.³²²

Off to the Pub (c.1912) [Fig. 2.38], *A Few Words: Off to the Pub* (c.1912) [Fig. 2.39] and *Off to the Pub* (1912) [Fig. 2.40] painted in Sickert’s studio at Hampstead Road both present a working class parlour. Utilising Sickert’s favourite compositional contrast of a male and female figure the paintings suggest tension in their ambiguous relationship. The female figure rests defiantly against the wall of the couple’s lodgings as a male figure

³¹⁹ “Neptune Crescent” replaces Mornington Crescent in Mackenzie’s narrative. *Ibid.*, 673.

³²⁰ Richard Shone, “Duncan Grant on a Sickert Lecture”, *Burlington Magazine*, Vol. CXXIII, No. 944, November 1981, 671 & Marjorie Lilly, *Sickert: The Painter and his Circle* (London, Elek, 1971), 95.

³²¹ Sickert, letter to Nan Hudson (undated) TGA 9125.5.22.

³²² The founding of the Camden Town Group was theatrically announced by Sickert: “We have just made history”. (As quoted by Charles Ginner, “The Camden Town Group”, *The Studio*. Vol. 130, No. 632, November 1945, 129) and its naming was decided on by Sickert’s belief that: “the district had been so watered with his tears that something important must sooner or later spring from its soil”. Walter Bayes, “The Camden Town Group”, *The Saturday Review*, Vol. 149, No. 3874, 25 January 1930, 100.

slouches to the door. The suggested drama of the scene is readable through the theatrical poses and gestures of Sickert's characters. The figures' composition and body language suggests an argument. *A Few Words: Off to the Pub*, furthers the suggested drama with the inclusion of a second female in the foreground of the image. The inclusion of the old woman, sitting at the mantelpiece suggests a possible reason for the argument. In essence the older female recalls the formidable dowager often seen in domestic drama.

The accusations of depravity directed towards Sickert's Camden Town works were perhaps not surprising. As the character Paul states in H.H. Davies play *Lady Epping's Lawsuit*: "No one seems to think a play is serious unless it's about unpleasant people"³²³. Ultimately, as Emmons' notes, Sickert's theatrical inspiration for his Camden Town works were as vital and as rich as any literary source:

The chief element in a picture should be moving, breathing, life... The subject of a painting may be any visual scene or impression which has aroused the litch of the artists. Therefore it can never be a staged scene; witness the nemesis which follows the studio artist posing models to illustrate a given title. The most productive subjects are found in ordinary people in ordinary surroundings; neither too large nor too small, neither very rich nor very poor, neither very beautiful nor very ugly. Rare phenomena or extremes of any sort are bad subjects. A grey sky is better than an impossible sunset.³²⁴

For Sickert, it was the theatre's depiction of "ordinary people in ordinary surroundings" which inspired his work. Ultimately, the influence of the theatre on Sickert's life and career was evidently a powerful and instructive source: "A painter is guided and pushed by his surroundings very much as an actor is"³²⁵.

³²³ H.H. Davies, *Lady Epping's Lawsuit* (1908). Reprinted in *The Plays of Hubert Henry Davies* (London: Heinemann, 1914), 17.

³²⁴ Emmons *op. cit.*, 173.

³²⁵ Sickert, "The New English and After", *New Age*, 2 June 1910. Gruetzner Robins, *op. cit.*, 241.

Visual Theatricality in Camden Town

The real history of the drama of the last ten years is not the history of the prosperous enterprises of Mr Hare, Mr Irving, and the established West-end theatres, but of the forlorn hopes led by Mr Vernon, Mr Charrington, Mr Grein, Messrs Henley and Stevenson, Miss Achurch, Miss Robins and Miss Lea, Miss Farr, and the rest of the Impossibilists.

George Bernard Shaw, 1895³²⁶

‘Every picture tells a story’ is by no means a bad device for a painter, and the best picture is perhaps after all a matter of no greater mystery than that it is the best-told story!

Walter Sickert, 1918³²⁷

Shaw’s statement on the “real history” of the British theatre could equally apply to the figures of Galsworthy, Barker, Kingston, the Pioneer Players, et al. of the 1900s and 1910s. The native theatre of the period was influenced both by visual naturalism and realism as well as a concern for the social questions of the day. Sickert’s Camden Town interpretations reflect and riff on these same themes. In essence, in terms of his subjects and treatment, Sickert provides a visual record of the British theatre of this period.

Interestingly, Sickert’s interest in small scale domestic drama shares parallels with August Strindberg’s one-act plays. Indeed, Strindberg’s dramas share a number of affinities with Sickert’s theatricality. Often consisting of only two or three main characters and centered round a battle of the sexes and class, Strindberg’s interest in the one-act format stemmed from his admiration of Antoine’s similar experiment at the Théâtre-Libre. For Strindberg however, Antoine’s overtly realist sets occasionally distracted from the drama

³²⁶ Shaw, “The Independent Theatre Repents”, 379.

³²⁷ Sickert, “Walter Bayes”. Preface to an “Exhibition of Paintings by Walter Bayes”, March 1918. Gruetzner Robins, *op. cit.*, 422.

itself and he favoured simplified, almost Sickertian, sets of minimal pieces of furniture, often only consisting of a table and two chairs, which were all that were needed to present: “the most powerful conflicts life had to offer”³²⁸.

As previously noted, Sickert regularly relied on photographs as aids to his composition and his Camden Town images were equally instructed by photographic sources. One of the problems of locating potential visual sources for Sickert’s Camden Town images is that few exist, at least in terms of photographs of avant-garde productions. Plays that were photographed were typically west-end comedies, romances and melodramas; usually popular productions that had a long run. However, if we compare even these small selection of examples to Sickert’s paintings a shared interest in gesture, pose, body language and the visual theatricality of the composition emerges. For example, compare Sickert’s *Ticking Him Off* (c.1913) [Fig. 2.41] and *The Tiff* (c.1912) [Fig. 2.42] with photographs from Shaw’s *You Never Can Tell* (Savoy Theatre, 16 September to 12 October 1907) [Fig.’s 2.43 & 2.44]. Both are interested in contrasting seated and standing male and female figures with the addition of a visual dialogue between the viewer and figures in the image.

In addition, a photograph of C. Aubrey Smith and Nina Boucicault in Rudyard Kipling’s *The Light That Failed* (Lyric and New Theatres, 7 February to 20 June 1903) [Fig. 2.45] which also starred Sickert’s old friend Johnstone Forbes-Robertson, or George Alexander and Irene Vanbrugh in Cosmo Gordon-Lennox’s *The Thief* (St James’s Theatre, 12 November 1907 to 5 May 1908) [Fig.’s 2.46, 2.47 & 2.48] reveals a shared interest in the visual interpretation of the conflict of relationships.³²⁹

³²⁸ As quoted by J.L. Styan, *Modern drama in theory and practice, Vol. 1: Realism and Naturalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981). 38.

³²⁹ Although these newspaper cuttings are held in the V&A Theatre Museum Archives their publication history has been difficult to trace. However, the majority of these photographs were well published in a variety of publications which illustrated the theatre during this period and it is almost certain that they were

Similar comparisons can be made between Sickert's *Sunday Afternoon* (c.1912-1913) [Fig. 2.21] and *Two Figures: What Maisie Knew* (early 1914) [Fig. 2.22] and a general series of images such as scenes from John Valentine's *The Stronger Sex* (Apollo and Royalty Theatres, 22 January to 1 June 1907) [Fig. 2.49]³³⁰; or C. Aubrey Smith and Marie Lohr in Michael Morton's adaptation of *My Wife* (Haymarket, 28 May to 28 September 1907) [Fig. 2.50]; or perhaps Charles Crock and Marion Langley [Fig. 2.51]³³¹; or Constance Collier (another of Sickert's friends since the 1890s) and Lyn Harding in Cecil Raleigh and Henry Hamilton's *The Sins of Society* (Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, 12 September to 11 December 1907) [Fig. 2.52]³³²; or George Alexander and Irene Vanbrugh in Pinero's *His House in Order* (St. James's Theatre, 1 to 27 February 1906) [Fig.'s 2.53 & 2.54]. A further compositional similarity can be witnessed in a photograph of Sydney Valentine, Gerald Du Maurier and Lillian Braithwaite in George Paston's (Emily Symonds) *Nobody's Daughter* (Wyndham's Theatre, 3 September 1910 to 11 February 1911) [Fig. 2.55] and Lillah McCarthy and Edmund Gwenn in J. M. Barrie's *The Twelve Pound Look* (York's, 1 March to 16 June 1910) [Fig. 2.56]³³³. Other examples reinforce the visual compositional similarities between Sickert's images of domestic duets and photographic records of productions [Fig.'s 2.57, 2.58 & 2.59].

In terms of images of two females together such as *Mother and Daughter: Lou Lou I Love You* (1911) [Fig. 2.26] or *Two Women seated on a Bed* (c.1911) [Fig. 2.60], similar thematic and atmospheric elements can be seen in photographs from *The Sins of Society* [Fig. 2.61], *My Wife* [Fig. 2.62]³³⁴ and Paston's *The Naked Truth* (Wyndham's and Prince

published in one, if not a number, of the following; *The Bystander*, *The Daily Mirror*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Illustrated Sports and Dramatic News*, *The Observer*, *The Times* and *The Telegraph*.

³³⁰ See footnote 311.

³³¹ *Ibid.*

³³² *Ibid.*

³³³ *Ibid.*

³³⁴ *Ibid.*

of Wales's Theatres, 14 April to 24 September 1910) [Fig.2.63]. This is particularly evident in terms of the suggested relationships of the figures in the photographs and Sickert's works. It is further shared in the confrontational gazes of both photographed and sketched figures.

Whether Sickert saw these particular productions is open to debate. Although these plays only superficially deal with modern themes and tend to stick to the drawing room, rather than the working class parlour, the visual theatricality of the images clearly influenced Sickert's compositional choices and suggests Sickert's knowledge and appreciation of similar sources.

Equally, Sickert's titles reveal a particular interest in theatricality; particularly in Shavian terms of a discussion. Consider, for example, *The Argument* (dated 1911) [Fig. 2.64], and its painted equivalent *The Objection* (dated 1917) [Fig. 2.65], or perhaps *Telling the Tale* (c.1913-1914. Oil on canvas, 51x41 cms. Private Collection) or *Reconciliation* (c.1914. Pen and ink, 24.9x21.9 cms. Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool). For a painter inspired by the theatre the challenge of depicting dialogue was naturally problematic. Whilst dramatists could rely on exposition to assist their action the painter had to rely on "the silent kingdom of paint"³³⁵. Both painter and photographer were concerned with the same problem - how to impart information silently. As dramatists strove towards more naturalistic and flexible dialogue for their theatre, they opened the opportunity for non-verbal communication. The intensity of a loaded silence or pause became as powerful as any speech. This development was in the painter's favour, Sickert, who once claimed that: "If the subject of a picture could be stated in words there had been no need to paint it" was entirely conscious of the value of non-verbal communication³³⁶.

Not only are words not the painter's medium, but the very nature of his medium, and any kind of life, and the kind of preoccupation that his

³³⁵ Woolf, *op. cit.*, 17.

³³⁶ Sickert, "The Language of Art", *The New Age*, 28 July 1910. Gruetzner Robins, *op. cit.*, 264.

medium imposes on him, renders him, of all men, the least apt at expression in words. ... Insomuch as he is a painter he tends to be the opposite of 'the observed of all observers.' He has rather to be the 'observer of all observed.' 'Don't speak,' is what he generally says or wishes to say. 'Do not disturb the spell.'³³⁷

By 1918, Sickert was able to take his argument further and to relate it to the, then unfashionable, practice of genre pictures: "The branch of painting that is commonly classified as *genre* has this advantage that it is proper to narration, in a kind of universal language, of things in which anyone may take an interest"³³⁸. In a sense, Sickert's defence of genre, and revival of the traditional formulaic "Problem Picture", shares an allegiance with Shaw's rejection, and ultimate rejuvenation, of the constraints of the "well made play"³³⁹. Both were concerned with developing a greater and more natural sense of modern drama and psychology in their works: "When peoplecriticise the anecdotic Picture of the Year, the essence of our criticism is that the story is a poor one, poor in structure or poor as drama, poor as psychology"³⁴⁰. The problem for Sickert was not in terms of melodrama, but rather the rejection of any valid "narrative" in favour of visual sensationalism: "In countless compositions ... if you ask what the people are about, it is difficult to find any other answer than to say they are *behaving aesthetically*, and we cannot long be interested in people who claim our attention on the ground that they are *behaving aesthetically*"³⁴¹. Sickert's

³³⁷ Sickert, "A Stone Ginger", *The New Age*, 19 March 1914. Gruetzner Robins, *ibid.*, 343.

³³⁸ Sickert, "Walter Bayes", Preface to an "Exhibition of Paintings by Walter Bayes", March 1918. Gruetzner Robins, *ibid.*, 422.

³³⁹ For more on Sickert and the problem picture see Lisa Tickner's "Walter Sickert: The Camden Town Murder and Tabloid Crime", *Modern Life and Modern Subjects: British Art in the Early Twentieth Century* (London: Yale University Press, 2000), 11-47 and "Walter Sickert and the Camden Town Murder", Barnaby Wright (ed), *Walter Sickert: The Camden Town Nudes* (London: Courtauld Gallery, Paul Holberton, 2007), 45-55.

³⁴⁰ Sickert, "A Critical Calendar", *English Review*, March 1912. Gruetzner Robins, *ibid.*, 300.

³⁴¹ Sickert, "The New English Art Club", *The New Age*, 4 June 1914. Gruetzner Robins, *ibid.*, 375.

awareness of the value of narrative for the painter, as a contrast to the growing dominance of composition and abstraction, is evident in his writings from 1914 and 1915:

It is in this absence of background from the preoccupation of students during many years, and these the most impressionable, that accounts for a certain retching void of ideas among the younger idealistic painters. A London square in the sunlight, a kitchen, a staircase they have not been taught to consider as subjects for poetry or poetic elation. So that there is a certain monotony in their representation of women, aesthetically garbed and yearning unutterably, even when they yearn in groups of three at a time. (Painting is concerned with the utterable and not with the unutterable.)³⁴²

The sharing of influence, between artist and writer, was evident as witnessed in Strindberg's famous statement, in his preface to *Miss Julie*: "As far as the scenery goes I have borrowed the asymmetry and economy of impressionistic painting and believe that I have succeeded better in creating illusion..."³⁴³ Strindberg's preference, of favouring the removal of the 'fourth wall', to aid the audience's involvement into his drama became an important factor in the period of the New Drama as well as in Sickert's paintings; as John Galsworthy later noted: "With plays ... It is only a question of the 'fourth wall'; if you have a subject of sufficient dramatic interest, and visualize it powerfully enough, perfectly naturally, as if you were the fourth wall, you will be able to present it to others in the form

³⁴² Sickert, "On the Conduct of a Talent", *The New Age*, 11 June 1914. Gruetzner Robins, *ibid.*, 377. Sickert further succinctly defined his argument as: "A picture generally represents *someone, somewhere*. The error of art-school teaching is that students are made to begin with the study of the *someone*, and generally *nowhere*. The process should be reversed and the students should be taught to make the *someone* emerge naturally from the already established *somewhere*", *ibid.*, 377.

³⁴³ August Strindberg, "Preface to *Miss Julie*" (1888). Reprinted in Walter Johnson (trans), *Pre-Inferno Plays by August Strindberg* (Washington: University of Washington Press, 1970). 83. *Miss Julie* concerned with a battle of the sexes and class was one of Strindberg's most famous one-act plays.

of a good play”³⁴⁴. Galsworthy’s interpretation could be equally applied to Sickert’s interiors.

Whilst Sickert’s plots echoed the New Drama. His interest in the ordinary and the everyday also ran parallel to the, then unfamiliar in England, works of Anton Chekhov.³⁴⁵ Just as Chekhov explored themes of mediocrity and boredom (for example, the disintegrating relationship between Polina and Shamrayev in *The Seagull*, 1895 or the stagnation of the sisters in *Three Sisters*, 1900). Sickert explored similarly futile and quietly destructive relationships. Just as Maurice Maeterlinck explored the: “tragic element in the life of every day that is far more real, far more penetrating, far more akin to the true self that is in us than the tragedy that lies in great adventure” Sickert equally recognised and appreciated that true drama lay not in extravagant gestures and situations but in more intimate and mundane surroundings.³⁴⁶

In a sense, both writer and painter explored the magic of the everyday. As Shaw stated, in 1911, the monotony of daily life was meaningless unless viewed in terms of significant relationships; it was the challenge of great artists to transform us: “from

³⁴⁴ H.V. Marrot, *The Life and Letters of John Galsworthy* (London: Heinemann, 1935), 565. Strindberg’s suggested stage design was to only include part of the kitchen viewing the room diagonally. Galsworthy’s statement was also echoed in Chekhov: “The Stage demands a degree of artifice ... you have no fourth wall. Besides, the stage is art, the stage reflects the quintessence of life and there is no need to introduce anything superfluous on to it”. Chekhov, as quoted in Edward Braun, *Meyerhold on Theatre* (New York: Methuen, 1968), 30.

³⁴⁵ Chekhov had a limited audience in London between 1900 and 1920. In fact, according to J.P. Wearing there were no major productions of Chekhov’s plays in London between 1900 and 1910. In 1911 a version of *The Bear* (1888) was produced for nine performances at the Kingsway Theatre between 13 and 20 May 1911. The same month saw a production of *The Cherry Orchard* (1904) at the Aldwych Theatre (two performances on the 28 and 29 May). 1912 saw a production of *The Seagull* (1896) for one performance (31 March 1912) at the Little Theatre and *Uncle Vanya* (c.1899) was staged at the Aldwych for two performances on the 10 and 11 May 1914. Wearing, *op. cit.*

³⁴⁶ Maeterlinck, *op. cit.*, 105.

bewildered spectators of a monstrous confusion to men intelligently conscious of the world and its destinies”³⁴⁷.

In terms of character, Sickert’s Camden Town interpretations also followed the growing trend towards greater physiological and psychological truth. When the New Drama insisted on new styles and methods of performance Sickert’s paintings reflected this in their concentration on intimate, psychologically laden domestic duets. Anticipating Constantin Stanislavsky’s psychological process of creating character (as had Barker) Sickert’s dramatic compositions and treatment exposed his theatrical background and interests.³⁴⁸ Sickert’s paintings, filled as they were with modern characters and suggested modern dilemmas, revealed his interest in the subtext of his “characters”; the implied hidden lives behind their situation. Strindberg’s definition of the construction of his own characters could equally apply to Sickert:

I have depicted my characters as modern characters, living in a time of transition... I have presented them as vacillating, tattered mixes of old and new. It seems to me not unlikely that modern ideas have through newspapers and talk penetrated down to levels where servants live. My souls (characters) are conglomerations of past and present cultures, bits out of books and newspapers, pieces of human beings, torn-off shreds of holiday clothes that have become rags, exactly as the human soul is put together.³⁴⁹

Ultimately, Sickert’s Camden Town images work as both Naturalist and Symbolist. Just as Ibsen was adopted by both Realist and Symbolist theatres, whilst Strindberg managed to embrace both Naturalism and Expressionism, so too should we consider Sickert

³⁴⁷ Shaw, “Preface”, Eugène Brieux, *Three Plays by Brieux* (Cambridge: A.C. Fifield, 1911), xxv.

³⁴⁸ Stanislavsky’s “system” had first been developed since the early 1900s and his own record of the process was first published in English in 1936. However, the concepts behind his teachings were already common in European theatre and his interest in naturalism and greater psychological depth to character had been widely practiced since Antoine’s Théâtre-Libre.

³⁴⁹ Strindberg “Preface to *Miss Julie*”. *Pre-Inferno Plays by August Strindberg*, 77.

in this light. Fundamentally, all were concerned with the drama of human nature and, ultimately, the human figure which, as Sickert noted: “was the proper study for mankind in the studio as in the library.”³⁵⁰ By the peak of Sickert’s Camden Town period he felt suitably confident to declare his own rally cry against the increasing demand for artistic abstraction:

In his writing Mr. Fry seems to me to drop occasionally into Double-Dutch, only to be understood [*sic*] by persons having a Super-University Education. ... It is just about a quarter of a century ago [c.1888] since I ranged myself, to my own satisfaction, definitively against the Whistlerian anti-literary theory of drawing. All the greater draughtsmen tell a story.³⁵¹

By the late 1910s, however, Sickert was out of step with modern developments in painting. Symbolism was leading into Abstraction whilst Sickert lingered in nostalgia and ill-fated technical experimentation. By the early 1930s however, he would find a new theatrical source, and muse, for his subject matter. With the rediscovery, and reinvention, of the greatest English dramatist on the modern stage - William Shakespeare - Sickert saw the opportunity to combine both modern techniques with traditional subject matter. It would be the theatre of his youth that he would return to for the last great series of his *œuvre*.

³⁵⁰ Sickert, “The Naked and the Nude”, *The New Age*, 21 July 1910. Gruetzner Robins, *op. cit.*, 262.

³⁵¹ Sickert, “A Critical Calendar”, *English Review*, March 1912. Gruetzner Robins, *ibid.*, 300.

Act III: Sickert and the Stage: Interpreting the Theatre c.1920-1940

The stage, which is perhaps the most real and effective university of literature, has every interest in drawing closer to the brush. The scene-painter may be called a teacher of painting, and at the same time the pupil of the painter and the art school.

Richard [Walter] Sickert, 1934³⁵²

Richard Sickert A.R.A. Resting. Open to engagement as juvenile lead, walking gentleman, singing footman, etc., etc. Handy. Experienced. Can do backcloths of Venice, Dieppe, Brighton, Camden Town, etc., etc., if required. General utility. Terms on application.

Max Beerbohm, 1932³⁵³

By the 1920s Sickert's interest in depicting straight visual interpretation of the theatre returned after a break of some years. Following his fall from favour in the mid to late-1910s, his financial decline and aging years it would be natural for Sickert to seek solace in a familiar subject.³⁵⁴ His choice of theatrical productions to depict, specifically Shakespeare, is telling. After the fashion for society dramas and comedies in the 1900s and 1910s the Bard was back on the bill and the re-evaluation of Shakespeare's work was of particular interest to Sickert. A further reason for Sickert's return to Shakespeare may have been his interest in modern theatre's interpretations of classical and traditional plays;

³⁵² Sickert, "Painters and the Stage", *The Times*, 12 December 1934. Reprinted in Anna Gruetzner Robins (ed), *Walter Sickert: The Complete Writings on Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 672.

³⁵³ In response to Sickert's oration at a ceremonial presentation at Sadler's Wells Theatre (21 October 1932). M. Beerbohm, letter to *The Times*, 22 October 1932. Reprinted in R. Emmons, *The Life and Opinions of Walter Richard Sickert* (London: Faber & Faber Ltd, 1941), 218.

³⁵⁴ Indeed a number of the theatrical productions he would depict in the 1920s and 1930s were productions he had acted in himself in the 1870s and 1880s.

including works by Shakespeare and Galsworthy, amongst others. This echoed Sickert's interest in the value of artistic lineage but it also highlighted his interest in the problems, as he saw it, facing modern art and his suggested solution of adapting traditional subjects for modern audiences. Finally (and perhaps most vitally for his cynicism and rejection of aesthetic abstraction) is Sickert's suggestion that the theatre, in its incorporating and adapting of traditional sources, will provide a metaphor for the future of painting.

The early 1900's theatre's reinvention of classical performances with modern design and staging was extremely successful. For Sickert, this provided a metaphorical alternative to those painters who insisted on rejecting the past. The theatre illustrated that it was possible to deliver an entirely modern experience (in terms of acting technique, set and costume design) whilst retaining respect for the past. In terms of his choice of particular theatres for example, Rebecca Daniels briefly states: "He was attracted to the Old Vic's productions by the movement towards naturalism in the theatre which was consonant with his own ideas about how art could be modern"³⁵⁵. As Daniels explains: "his choice of subject helped him to promote a new kind of modernism based on a combination of tradition and innovation"³⁵⁶. However this relationship and dialogue is more complex than Daniels briefly discusses and deserves to be quantified. In particular, Sickert's specific choices of key theatre productions has previously been surprisingly overlooked. Similarly, the general themes inherent in these productions held a specific resonance for Sickert and, again, has never been successfully examined. In addition, Sickert's interest in the acting talents of two of the most successful actresses of the 1920s and 1930s – Gwen Ffrangcon-Davies and Peggy Ashcroft – has also been largely unexplored, and it is important to consider what particular performances of these two actresses attracted Sickert and why.

³⁵⁵ Rebecca Daniels, "Newly discovered photographic sources for Walter Sickert's theatre paintings of the 1930s", *The Burlington Magazine*, Vol. CXLVIII, No. 1237, April 2006, 273. For further information on Sickert's photographic sources for some of his later paintings see the same article. In addition see also Patrick O'Connor, "The Reunion of Stage and Art: Sickert and the Theatre between the Wars." Baron, W. & Shone, R. (ed) *Sickert Paintings*. Newhaven & London: Yale University Press, 1992, 25-32.

³⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 276.

Ultimately, it was only through the medium of the theatre that Sickert could finally confront the elements of modernism then affecting art. Indeed Sickert's choice and relationship to his subject reveals as much about the changing face of the British theatre as it does Sickert's own developing modernism:

They say that there has been a great deterioration in the modern theatre. I can tell you exactly how great that deterioration is, because we have had here [Sadler's Wells], perhaps more than anywhere, the most perfect and delightful elocution, in the tradition of Phelps, who looked upon the theatre as essentially a place where the masterpieces of literature were recited, and not as a place where producers thought that they would be original by making the bushes behind the seat in a garden look like organ-pipes...³⁵⁷

Sickert's argument manifested itself through two clear strands: a rejection of abstraction and a celebration of the narrative/figurative. For Sickert, the most natural, and useful source of inspiration for a painter was the theatre. So vital was this connection that he suggested free tickets for art students:

A great change has lately been effected by the much greater distances between possible audiences and any theatre. Neither painters nor students have been generally well to do. Thousands who would go cannot pay for seats, plus fares to distant suburbs. It would not be difficult to arrange that painters and students, armed with cards of identification, should be given gratis tickets for the gallery. The heads of recognised art schools could furnish students with printed cards of application, signed by the heads of the schools. Actors know that there is no propaganda like the enthusiasm of young students. The stage would benefit by the more frequent publication and exhibition of subjects drawn from the theatre.³⁵⁸

³⁵⁷ Sickert's oration celebrated (according to Emmons) the reunion, in his person, of stage and art. Emmons, *op. cit.*, 213-218.

³⁵⁸ Sickert, "Painters and the Stage", *The Times*, 12 December 1934. Gruetzner Robins, *op. cit.*, 672.

Indeed, a brief examination of Sickert's writings on art during the 1920s and 1930s illustrates a predominance of arguments on a number of subjects. Key amongst these are an interest in the theatrical narrative, the role and value of drama as source and inspiration for painting, a nostalgic defence rather than rejection of the past and a general criticism of "modern" developments, especially the Cézanne-boom of the 1910s: ("It is propaganda, what is called in French *bouillage de crane*, a form of industrious thought-suggestion (brainbox stuffing)"³⁵⁹) whilst simultaneously composing polemics on nineteenth-century French and British painters and illustration. In particular the contemporary artistic trend for manifestos held no interest for him:

Some hold that art is a cryptic matter about which doctrines must be laid down as from the initiated to the profane. Others, of the 'school of thought' to which I belong, that drawings, statues, and paintings are themselves the doctrines which he who runs may read. The great reputations have been made by silent and unanimous acclamation. 'I want no stars in heaven to guide me,' as the song says.³⁶⁰

Equally, his criticisms of the modern obsession with abstraction, and the Post-Impressionists in particular, were humorous but scathing:

³⁵⁹ Sickert, "Paul Cézanne", *Anglo-French Review*, February 1920. Gruetzner Robins, *ibid.*, 430. In the early 1920s his venom was particularly directed at the insistence of young artists to elevate Cézanne: "It is perhaps natural that there should be a 'down' on Millet at a moment when the flag of criticism, enchained by a sort of idiot hypnotism, follows the trade in taking Cézanne very seriously". Sickert, "Within the Nineteenth Century", *Burlington Magazine*, February 1932. Gruetzner Robins, *ibid.*, 616. "...no self-respecting undergraduate is without his 'crumpler,' a 'crumpler' being, I am told, the beginning of a picture or a reproduction of the beginning of a picture by Cézanne." Sickert, "French Painters of the Nineteenth Century at the Lefèvre Galleries", *Nation and Athenaeum*, 19 May 1923. Gruetzner Robins, *ibid.*, 461. For a further list of relevant examples of Sickert's articles see Appendix II.

³⁶⁰ Sickert, "Education in Art", *The Times*, 6 June 1929. Gruetzner Robins, *ibid.*, 588.

I cannot talk about painting without tackling what the French call the *coqueluche*. It is rather an amusing colloquial expression they have in France. They call a certain theory, or theme, or habit that runs through quantities of people a whooping-cough; and I cannot very well proceed with any sort of diagnosis until I have tackled the whooping-cough of the theory of Post-Impressionism.³⁶¹

By the 1920s the achievements and glories of the past would be referred to frequently in Sickert's writings. For example, in an attempt to mock the avant-garde's insistence on rejecting 'illustration' he invokes the spirits of a number of the Great Masters:

In A.D. 1922, the terminus so far as careful and anxious inquiry can gather is (lo!) here. The great paintings of the world are got out of the way by the convenient anathema of 'illustration.' Mantegna, Michelangelo, Veronese, Canaletto, Ford Madox Brown, Hogarth, Leech, Keene, *e tutti quanti*, falling, certainly, under the heading of 'illustration' must, I am afraid, go.³⁶²

The argument against the (seemingly for Sickert) lack of subject matter in modern art was also a concern ripe for mocking: "The end of drawing must be supposed, until anything can be alleged to the contrary, to be illustration. Even Mr Wyndham Lewis's steel cylinders filled with cannon balls and fitted with a central grill are, I note with relief, entitled *Woman*"³⁶³. This criticism highlighted Sickert's concern on the seeming insistence of modern art's lack of meaning: "Such descriptions of the aims of two works of art in separate ages and different media are instructive at a moment when fashion wishes to decree that a work of art must, above all, mean nothing"³⁶⁴. Ultimately, however, it was

³⁶¹ Sickert, "Straws from Cumberland Market", *Southport Visitor*, 24 January 1924. Gruetzner Robins, *ibid.*, 472.

³⁶² Sickert, "The Derby Day", *Burlington Magazine*, December 1922. Gruetzner Robins, *ibid.*, 454.

³⁶³ Sickert, "Diez, Busch and Oberländer", *Burlington Magazine*, October 1922. Gruetzner Robins, *ibid.*, 448-449.

³⁶⁴ Sickert, "The Great Modern", *The Daily Telegraph*, 3 March 1926. Gruetzner Robins, *ibid.*, 537.

modern art's seeming rejection of narrative for "significant form", and passionate feeling replaced by "aesthetic emotion" that concerned Sickert ("Some of us like a good cry. But neither Paris nor Bloomsbury, to give the devils their due, are by way of blubbing"³⁶⁵). For Sickert, the only true source and valid inspiration was life; as distilled through drama and literature: "...Painting is a branch of literature. People who do not realise that will never be anything. You have got to be interested in everything. There are always opportunities of seeing the finest literature ever written placed before you on stage by first-rate actors and actresses..."³⁶⁶

For his sources, Sickert tended towards either sketches of productions or, increasingly, photographic documentation. Unfortunately, photographic reproduction of these particular theatrical experiences can be problematic. Contemporary photographs were rarely taken during performances and were often highly staged. This resulted in lighting and set arrangements which suited the photograph but which were not necessarily authentic to the particular production. Paintings can be regarded as more authentic, especially if based on sketches taken on the spot, however, like photographs, these can only go some way to replicate the theatrical event. The theatre is a spontaneous experience and it is extremely difficult to capture this energy on canvas or within a photograph. It is rare that an audience visits the theatre simply to "view" a play; they are drawn to the production for a number of reasons; to see a particular performer, to witness a new adaptation, to marvel at a new development in scenic design. The experience is more than simply watching a performer; it is a combination of all of these elements. As a result, beyond the staged photographs and critical reviews, it is extremely difficult to obtain a visual sense of the theatrical experience, especially the essence of performance; that most ephemeral element of theatre. Sickert, however, provides us with some sense (albeit a personal one) of the experience. Although predominantly based on staged publicity photographs (although he also employed his own photographer to take photographs during performances) Sickert provides us with some idea of the visual and emotional experiences of these theatre-goers.

³⁶⁵ Sickert, "Modern French Painting" *Burlington Magazine*, December 1924. Gruetzner Robins, *ibid.*, 500.

³⁶⁶ Sickert, "Black and White Illustration", lecture, 30 November 1934. Gruetzner Robins, *ibid.*, 669.

Sickert's images are a particular artist's views; they reveal much about Sickert's interest in the theatre and drama (particularly through his choice of productions to document and the particular moments in the plays he chooses to depict). However, vitally, they also reveal a great deal about the changing history of early twentieth century theatre and provide an illuminating record of the British theatre of the period. In this respect, Sickert's depictions of Shakespearean productions of the 1930s provide us with a significant microcosm of the development of the British theatre as a whole and those similar concerns affecting British art of the period 1920-1940. However, to understand this rediscovery of Shakespeare it is vital to look at a very brief history of the key players of this revival between c.1900 and c.1930.

Shakespeare and the Twentieth-Century Stage

The vast majority of English folk cannot and will not consider a picture as a picture, apart from any story which it may be supposed to tell.

J.A.M. Whistler, 1878³⁶⁷

The English suspect the visual delights of the theatre, ... For centuries the drama has been studied as literature ... the play not only begins with the word, but it had better end with it as well; otherwise it is inferior, appealing more to the eye than the ear. The puritan distrust of emblems, or representation by symbol and artifice, is a recurrent national neurosis.

Peter Hall, 1973³⁶⁸

The above quotes illustrate the problematic nature of British visual culture. Even though written nearly one hundred years apart they share a remarkably similar concern. Late nineteenth century audiences were educated to appreciate the visual authenticity of imagery: “This was a world saturated in pictures, and the dissemination of the pictorial image to a mass audience became and remained the most popular form of public entertainment”³⁶⁹. In these basic terms the theatre was also expected to deliver. Audiences appreciated the straight visual realism of stage sets, costumes and period settings. Hall’s comments echo those of Whistler; in the respect that performance (either on canvas or on

³⁶⁷ J.A.M. Whistler, “The Red Rag”, *The World*, 22 May 1878. Reprinted in Whistler, *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies* (London: Constable, 1967), 126.

³⁶⁸ Hall, in a review of Steven Orgel and Roy Strong’s *Inigo Jones*. As quoted in J. Goodwin (ed), *British Theatre Design: The Modern Age* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1989), 14-16.

³⁶⁹ Michael Booth in R. Foulkes (ed), *Shakespeare and the Victorian Stage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 81. It was common, for instance, that many Victorian productions highlighted particularly emotive moments or spectacles in the form of tableaux which, surrounded by the proscenium arch, recalled popular paintings.

the stage) consists of more than the simple narrative. Traditionally, in terms of painting, the subject had to be evident, the narrative clear and the images mimetic; in terms of the theatre, audiences similarly preferred productions which were visually authentic. In both cases symbolism, visual metaphor and abstraction came to be mistrusted. Atmosphere and metaphorical aesthetics were all relegated to visual reality. The works of Shakespeare, in particular, were badly affected by the fashion for visual realism.³⁷⁰ Generally the playwright's words were sacrificed for the talents of the stage designer or the set designer; as Harley Granville-Barker noted:

Nineteenth century drama developed along the lines of realistic illusion, and the staging of Shakespeare was further subdued to this, with inevitably disastrous effect on the speaking of his verse; there was less perversion of text perhaps, but actually more wrenching of the construction of the plays for the convenience of the stage carpenter. The public appetite for this sort of thing having been gorged, producers then turned to newer - and older - contrivances, leaving "realism" (so called) to the modern comedy that had fathered it.³⁷¹

By the turn of the century staged Shakespeare in Britain (in contrast to the developments from Europe) was aesthetically and literary moribund, although, as Michael Booth noted, even the New Drama struggled against melodrama which in the 1890s:

... still held out in West End citadels like the Adelphi and Drury Lane, the latter specialising, as did the Standard in the East End, in huge, ponderous and spectacular melodramas of high society, sporting life, natural catastrophes and colonial wars. In the East End the Britannia successfully maintained its policy of melodrama and pantomime... The Elephant and Castle in Southwark and the Lyric, Hammersmith were local melodrama strongholds in the 1890s... [Melodrama's] decline in the metropolis did not occur until about 1905, when

³⁷⁰ It was well known, for example, that in the mid-nineteenth century Charles Kean would send his stage designers on archaeological trips to Venice whilst happily bastardising Shakespeare's texts for his own end.

³⁷¹ H. Granville-Barker, *Prefaces to Shakespeare: Hamlet* (London: Batsford, 1977, first published 1930), 2.

the popularity of the new cinema began to drain away audiences from theatres in working-class districts.³⁷²

Ultimately, it was the “look” of the play and the authenticity of the visuals of the production that were important for critics and theatre-goers rather than the performances themselves. As Russell Jackson noted:

Between the 1830s and the First World War the British theatre was dominated by actor-managers. In the best equipped theatres the plays of Shakespeare were usually presented in elaborate scenic productions, with the texts tailored to meet the demands of the new staging techniques and to feature the leading actors as strongly as possible. By and large the ‘problem’ plays were excluded from the repertoire, and the plays performed were purged of any avoidable indecency in language and action. The distinctive theatrical quality of the most successful productions was their ability to ‘illustrate’ the plays...³⁷³

By the turn of the century, embarrassed by the progressiveness of European theatre, producers of Shakespeare badly needed a new theatre. Its initial saviour was William Poel, who in the 1890s and early 1900s established visually restrained and respectable productions which stayed loyal to the text rather than provide elaborately staged spectacles and concentrated on the authenticity of the production rather than any lead actor’s interpretation. Poel’s influence, particularly in his reforms of staging and performance, heralded a revival of Shakespeare which only reached its zenith in the mid-1930s. The reclaiming of the national bard and the re-establishment of naturalism and psychological realism over visual slavishness provides a paradigm of the development of the British theatre in the early half of the twentieth-century as a whole.

³⁷² M. Booth, *Theatre in the Victorian Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 173.

³⁷³ R. Jackson, “Actor-Managers and the Spectacular” in J. Bate & R. Jackson (eds), *Shakespeare: An Illustrated Stage History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 112.

The rejection of ‘Bardolatry’ in preference for an understanding of ‘The Man Shakespeare’ was one which symbolised the development of modernism in the British theatre generally.³⁷⁴ At the turn of the century, Shakespeare was generally regarded as poor fare for an educated West End audience. Indeed, even as late as 1914 the idea that Shakespeare could be a profitable draw was questionable: “In 1914, when a permanent Shakespeare company was founded, there was a saying that Shakespeare spelt ruin”³⁷⁵. By the mid-1930s, however, Shakespeare was the most performed playwright on the West End stage and would be universally regarded as the key dramatic figure in English culture.³⁷⁶

The development of Shakespeare on the English stage between the mid-nineteenth century and the early half of the twentieth is a history therefore, not only of the increasing interest in Shakespeare as the national bard, but also an indicator of the changing ideas in set design, the developing interest in more natural acting and psychology of character and,

³⁷⁴ Shaw coined the phrase ‘Bardolator’ in the preface to his play *The Devil’s Disciple* (1901). In this respect, the rediscovery of Shakespeare’s value as a playwright and the humanising of Shakespeare was encouraged by Frank Harris in his books *The Man Shakespeare and his Tragic Love Story* (published in 1909 but based on a series of articles first published in *The Saturday Review* in the late 1890s), *The Women of Shakespeare* (1911) and his play *Shakespeare and his Love* (1910) which was a poor companion to Shaw’s own *Dark Lady of the Sonnets* (1910).

³⁷⁵ I.E. Beaton (ed), *Old Vic Magazine*, No 2. Vol. 1, February 1931, 1.

³⁷⁶ For example, in the London theatres between 1900 and 1909 there were five separate productions of *Othello*, totalling eighty-six performances. Between 1910 and 1919 there were seven separate productions totalling ninety-eight productions. By 1920-29 productions had increased (nine) as had performances (one hundred and thirty-six). Between 1930 and 1939 *Othello* was the choice of seven separate productions totalling one hundred and sixty-seven performances. This pattern could be witnessed in a number of separate Shakespeare productions, including; *Hamlet*: 1900-1909 (fourteen productions and one hundred and eighty-nine performances), 1910-1919 (fifteen productions and one hundred and thirty-nine performances), 1920-1929 (twenty-two productions and two hundred and eighty-three performances), 1930-1939 (twenty productions and four hundred and forty-two performances); and, *Romeo and Juliet*: 1900-1909 (eight productions and one hundred and sixty-five performances), 1910-1919 (seven productions and two hundred and eight performances), 1920-1929 (ten productions and one hundred and thirty-three performances), 1930-1939 (four productions and two hundred and sixteen performances). For further details on other key productions of Shakespeare see Appendix III.

increasingly, the growing interest in the influence of modern artistic ideas on theatre production.

William Poel and Harley Granville-Barker: The Rediscovery of Shakespeare c.1900-c.1914

William Poel has been our saviour, and we owe him thanks.

Harley Granville-Barker, 1914³⁷⁷

The honour of replying in humblest confirmation to William Poel is one I hardly hoped to have. Hans Christian Andersen was never mistaken. 'One forgot the poet in the wonderful decorations.'

Richard Sickert, 1932³⁷⁸

By the late 1890s William Poel's Elizabethan Stage Society (founded in 1894) had started to address the aesthetically questionable extravagances of Victorian illusionism and restore naturalism to Shakespeare. Poel's ideals were in marked contrast to contemporary productions and he was certainly no follower of the insistence of producers who focused their energies on visual realism:

The extravagance of realism, so often thought healthy and natural, is with scarcely any exception only perverse sentimentality, only the expression, inartistic at best, of an enervated and distorted feeling, an extravagant and debased sentiment in comparison with which the sentiment of Shakespeare is truly refreshing and inspiring. Realism is exhausting and enervating in its effect, while idealism frequently avails to stimulate and fertilize.³⁷⁹

Pictorial realism was the epitome of Victorian Shakespeare yet its obstinate insistence on accurate historical costumes, scenery and set design tended to eclipse the

³⁷⁷ H. Granville-Barker, *Preface to A Midsummer Night's Dream: An Acting Edition*, London 1914, iii-x. Reprinted in Granville-Barker, *Prefaces to Shakespeare: Volume VI* (London: Batsford, 1974), 36.

³⁷⁸ Sickert, "Sadler's Wells", *The Times*, 26 October 1932. Gruetzner Robins, *op. cit.*, 622.

³⁷⁹ W. Poel, "The Functions of a National Theatre", *The Theatre*, 1 September 1893, Volume 22, 162-166.

production themselves. In contrast, the Elizabethan Stage Society's aims were simple - to produce the plays as they were in Shakespeare's own time, uncluttered by slavish visuals and using the full unadulterated texts: "Shakespeare should be accorded the build of stage for which he designed his plays ... the principle that Shakespeare's plays should be accorded the conditions of playing for which they were designed"³⁸⁰. In terms of staging this meant freeing it from the lavishness of extravagant scenery, which although visually and historically authentic to the specific play's settings was laborious and costly. Poel also favoured the open, or thrust stage, a novelty in the Victorian theatre with its restrictive proscenium arch. This in turn helped audiences' engage with the actors, who delivered their performances directly towards them. With the removal of excessive scenery, the productions avoided lengthy scene changes (which in some productions could take as long as fifteen minutes) and enabled the actors to utilize the full texts. By adhering to the full text, the acting tended towards swiftness and a more natural (and ultimately modern) manner of speech.

In all Poel produced seventeen Shakespeare productions following this manner. However, although his productions were celebrated for their modernity they were often criticised for the quality of their actors, the majority of whom were amateurs. As William Archer noted, Poel's productions were: "staged (more or less) after the manner of the sixteenth century and acted after the manner of the Nineteenth Century Amateur"³⁸¹. The success of the Elizabethan Stage Society, however, was felt more in the followers of Poel rather than in any direct influence of the Society. Undoubtedly Poel changed the look and atmosphere of staged Shakespeare but it was ultimately through his influence on others such as Tyrone Guthrie and particularly Harley Granville-Barker that his real success lay. Granville-Barker in particular, furthered Poel's initial ideas but rejected his manager's strict Elizabethanism. Between 1912 and 1914 Granville-Barker turned his attention away from the 'New Drama' he had previously staged at the Court towards a revitalization of

³⁸⁰ G. B. Shaw, "Criticism on the Hustings", *The Saturday Review*, Vol. 80, No. 2073, 20 July 1895, 77.

³⁸¹ Archer, as quoted in Robert Speaight, *William Poel and the Elizabethan Revival* (London: Heinemann, 1954), 103.

Shakespeare at the Savoy Theatre. The three productions he staged there (*The Winter's Tale*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Twelfth Night*) were groundbreaking for the British stage in terms of their treatment of Shakespeare, design and production.³⁸² As Granville-Barker noted: "Mr. Poel's achievement remains; he cleared for us from Shakespeare's stagecraft the scenic rubbish by which it had been so long encumbered and disguised"³⁸³.

Like Poel's, each of the productions was a reaction against the historic pictorialism of the Victorians. However, Granville-Barker also rejected the austere simplicity of Poel in favour of stylised modernity.³⁸⁴ The set design was deliberately non-naturalistic and abstract; for *A Midsummer Night's Dream* [Fig. 3.01] for instance the wood was represented by a large green mound and gauze canopy decorated with glow-worms and fireflies. Granville-Barker's designs also included backdrop curtains which changed colour according to the mood of the scene. The text was presented virtually uncut without pauses for set changes and only a short interval of fifteen minutes. The play was performed briskly with a greater interest in subtlety and psychology. Actors were directed to speak the text rapidly and naturally: "Daily, as we rehearse together, I learn more what it is and should be; the working together of the theatre is a fine thing. ... it's serious mood is passionate, its verse is lyrical, the speaking of it needs swiftness and fine tone; not rush, but rhythm, constant and compelling. And now I wait contentedly to be told that less rhythmic speaking of Shakespeare has never been heard"³⁸⁵. For Sickert, who was probably in the audience,

³⁸² In his aims, he was partly inspired by continental productions of Shakespeare which were much more aesthetically avant-garde.

³⁸³ Granville-Barker, *Prefaces to Shakespeare: Hamlet*, 3.

³⁸⁴ In deliberate contrast to the more traditional illusionist productions, such as Herbert Beerbohm Tree's 1900 production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* which included live rabbits running through the wood.

³⁸⁵ H. Granville-Barker, *Preface to Twelfth Night: An Acting Edition*, London, 1912. Granville-Barker, *Prefaces to Shakespeare: Volume VI* (London: Batsford, 1974), 32. Granville-Barker's insistence on more natural speech patterns was highly criticised: "I think that all Elizabethan dramatic verse must be spoken swiftly, and nothing can make me think otherwise. My fellow workers acting in *The Winter's Tale* were accused by some people (only by some) of gabbling, I readily take that accusation on myself, and I deny it".

the influence in vocal naturalism did not go unnoticed: “On the English stage of the present day, only under Mr Granville Barker’s management have I seen these considerations understood”³⁸⁶. In the same article, Sickert furthered the link between actor and artist: “As I read over these verses [Shakespeare, *Henry V*, IV.i. 247-68] I find in their sustained subordination, and in their speed without haste, in their calm without rest, the most precise analogy that I can think of, and the closest, to the kind of furnished sequence there is in the higher exercises of the draughtsman’s act”³⁸⁷.

The first Granville-Barker production of Shakespeare at the Savoy, *The Winter’s Tale* (21 September 1912 until 2 November 1912) [Fig. 3.02] utilized the full text of what was known as a complicated and rarely performed play. The Post-Impressionist set, in particular, attracted a great deal of attention.³⁸⁸ P.G. Konody, art critic for *The Observer*, was particularly impressed by the “most vivid hues of magenta, lemon yellow, emerald green, [and] scarlet”³⁸⁹. This “epoch making production” was clearly seen as a move towards a “new” form of staging; as G.M. of *The Daily Mail* noted it would be: “hailed by a well intentioned, if somewhat noisy, minority as the longed-for advent of the New Art of

Granville-Barker, *Preface to Twelfth Night: An Acting Edition*, iii-xi. Reprinted in Granville-Barker, *Prefaces to Shakespeare: Volume VI*, 31.

³⁸⁶ Sickert, “On Swiftness”, *The New Age*, 26 March 1914. Gruetzner Robins, *op. cit.*, 349.

³⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 349.

³⁸⁸ “Post-Impressionism run wild” as the critic for *The Weekly Dispatch* saw it, 22 September 1912. Newspaper clipping held in the Victorian & Albert Theatre Museum Archive, Savoy, *The Winter’s Tale* Production File. The link between Granville-Barker’s production and the various Post-Impressionist exhibitions was not lost on the critics. As A.B. Walkely termed *The Winter’s Tale*: “Post-Impressionist Shakespeare”, *The Times*, 23 September 1912, No. 40111, 7.

³⁸⁹ P.G. Konody, *The Observer*, 29 September 1912, No. 6332, 9. In a lecture delivered in 1915, the costume designer Albert Rothenstein (the younger brother of William, who would change his surname to Rutherston in 1914) explained the artistic choices of the production: “There curtains were meant to be suggestive only of the time, place, and mood of the action that took place in front of them. There was no attempt at scenic illusion, only such colour and form being employed as were sufficient and appropriate both to the material being used, and the suggestion which had to be implied”. As cited in Dennis Kennedy, *Granville Barker and the Dream of Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 126.

the Theatre”³⁹⁰. *Twelfth Night* (15 November 1912 to 15 March 1913) [Fig. 3.03] was equally controversial. Undoubtedly influenced by the artistic developments of the day (possibly inspired by the “Exhibition of Works by the Italian Futurist Artists” held in March 1912 at the Sackville Gallery, and the “Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition”, held between 5 October and 31 December 1912, which included works by Cézanne, Matisse, Picasso and Braque) the production included a Cubist/Futurist landscape and stark, abstracted costumes.

Granville-Barker was aware that his interpretations were unconventional (at least in terms of British theatre tradition) but was adamant that Shakespeare need not be stuck in the past:

All we ask in return of the critics and the public is to be allowed to make that trial upon their open minds and natural taste, not upon their artificially stimulated prejudices. There is no Shakespearean tradition. At most we can deduce from a few scraps of knowledge what Elizabethan methods were... We have the text to guide us, half a dozen stage directions, and that is all. I abide by the text and the demands of the text and beyond that I claim freedom.³⁹¹

His production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at the Savoy (6 February 1914 to 9 May 1914) was a particularly controversial experiment, or “Shakespeare nightmare” as the critic of *The Daily Mail* termed it.³⁹² Granville-Barker stripped his set design down to only a few key pieces; the apron which projected over the space usually occupied by the orchestra was

³⁹⁰ R.L.J. Gordon, *The Pall Mall Gazette*, 23 September 1912, 4, G.M. “Barkerised Shakespeare”, *The Daily Mail*, No. 5137, 23 September 1912, 5. In actual fact, Granville-Barker was aware that his stage designs were taken, in part, from the developments of Poel and the avant-garde director E.G. Craig. In an interview for *The Daily Mail* Granville-Barker admitted he was: “proud to be stealing from Mr. Craig and Mr. Poel”, “Mr Barker in his intentions”, No. 5140, 26 September 1912, 4.

³⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 4

³⁹² *The Daily Mail*, “A Shakespeare nightmare”, undated clipping, V&A TMA, Savoy, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* Production File.

covered with a grey canvas whilst the main stage was decorated with a gold one; the woods were painted curtains with trees painted in blue and silver against a purple background. Granville-Barker's intention was clear; a distance had to be made between the extravagancies of past productions and a return to the seriousness and truthfulness of the original source material; a return to Shakespeare's texts: "To avoid discordancy while satisfying still that hungry eye, modern producers have devised scenery which is not scenery, forests that are not like forests, and light that never was on sea or land"³⁹³. For Granville-Barker, Shakespeare's words were much more important than visual mimesis; as he noted, Shakespeare wrote for an undecorated stage so he describes the scenes with speech. This could be problematic for set designers, but shouldn't be: "He wrote it for a theatre in which no visual illusion, as we interpret the term, was possible"³⁹⁴. Sickert (who had played the part of Demetrius at Sadler's Wells in 1880), too, was aware of the visual impact of Granville-Barker's production and linked it to his criticism of Roger Fry: "Now what had Mr Roger Fry to bring us in the way of a Decalogue when he descended from the mountains of Montmartre and Montparnasse, his face transfigured, like Mr Barker's fairies, by the sight of Cézanne?"³⁹⁵

³⁹³ H. Granville-Barker, *Preface to A Midsummer Night's Dream*, London 1924, ix-lii (the fourth volume of *The Player's Shakespeare*). Reprinted in Granville-Barker, *Prefaces to Shakespeare: Volume VI*, 96.

³⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 94.

³⁹⁵ Sickert, "Mr Ginner's Preface", *The New Age*, 30 April 1914. Gruetzner Robins, *op. cit.*, 361. For more on Sickert and Fry's relationship see Anna Gruetzner Robins, "Fathers and Sons: Walter Sickert and Roger Fry" in Christopher Green (ed), *Art Made Modern: Roger Fry's Vision of Art* (London: Merrell Holberton, 1999), 45-56 and Stella Tillyard, "W.R. Sickert and the Defence of Illustrative Painting." Brian Allen (ed.), *Studies in British Art 1: Towards a Modern Art World* (London: Yale University Press, 1995), 189-205.

Lilian Baylis, John Gielgud and the Old Vic: Shakespeare c.1914-c.1936

[To Lilian Baylis] I hope you will let me thank you ... for all that you have done for Shakespeare which has been left *undone* by those who manage our theatre on the other side of the water.

William Poel, 1924³⁹⁶

I said that I hoped I was audible as I was “an old Sadler’s Wells man.”

Sickert, 1932³⁹⁷

In the mid-1910s and 1920s Shakespeare found a new, and semi-permanent, home at Lilian Baylis’s Old Vic Theatre (Royal Victoria Hall) in Lambeth. Baylis, who was appointed acting-manager of the theatre in 1898 and became full manager in 1913, was an unlikely champion of Shakespeare, a “dumpy, homely, rather comic aging woman with [a] peculiar cockney-colonial accent”³⁹⁸. Her success lay in recognising the potential for revitalising the plays of classic authors and providing the intelligent theatre audience with something rare.³⁹⁹ Initially, the Old Vic had a particular social agenda. As Cicely Hamilton noted: “it stands for Shakespeare and opera made interesting to the man in the street; for poetry and music offered at a price that the man in the street can afford”⁴⁰⁰. For Baylis, the

³⁹⁶ W. Poel to L. Baylis, 9 May 1924. Bristol, Old Vic: Lilian Baylis Collection, Bristol Theatre Collection, Bristol University, OVLB/000284.

³⁹⁷ Discussing a lecture he had recently delivered at University College, Oxford. Winchester. Sickert to Ffrangcon-Davies, 15 June 1932. Winchester, Gwen Ffrangcon-Davies Archive, Martial Rose Library, University of Winchester, letter P1.

³⁹⁸ As described by Margaret Webster. Quoted in Elizabeth Schafer, *Lilian Baylis: A Biography* (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2006), 241.

³⁹⁹ Baylis was also entirely aware that the plays of Shakespeare, Goldsmith and Sheridan could be extremely cheap to produce.

⁴⁰⁰ Cicely Hamilton & Lilian Baylis, *The Old Vic* (London: J. Cape Ltd, 1926), 9.

Old Vic (and its sister theatre Sadler's Wells) had a clear agenda in providing intelligent and decent productions which echoed Poel's rather patronising austerity in the late nineteenth-century:

Great music and great drama at cheap prices are very real necessities in the life of the people. Fifty years ago it was the specious attraction of the music-halls (where, as William Poel has pointed out, admission tickets plus a pint of inflammatory beer could be had on the purchase of a pound of apples at a green-grocer's, on the distinct understanding that the recipient should drink a lot more beer inside the hall) which my aunt had to fight at the Vic.⁴⁰¹

In 1914 productions of Shakespeare were staged for the first time at the Old Vic under the director Ben Greet. Between 1914 and 1917 Greet produced twenty-eight plays at the Old Vic, seventeen of which were by Shakespeare and eleven by other authors such as Richard Brinsley Sheridan and Oliver Goldsmith. Shakespeare, however, was the staple of the drama schedule and, by the late 1910s, the Old Vic could confidently claim to be the home of Shakespeare in London.⁴⁰²

The Old Vic was popular with young actors who saw its value as a repertory company: "the advantage to the young and ambitious actor of a stock, a permanent company"⁴⁰³. Similarly, actors became familiar with their audiences at the Old Vic and, in a

⁴⁰¹ L. Baylis, "Why we need Sadler's Wells". *Sadler's Wells Book: A Souvenir of Sadler Well's Theatre – Past, Present and Future* (London: Sadler's Wells Society, 1931), 9.

⁴⁰² Cicely Hamilton would also argue the Old Vic to be natural successor to the Bancrofts' Old Prince of Wales, in Tottenham Court Road and Irving's Lyceum, where: "the Londoner would take his friend from the country or abroad when he wanted to show him the London stage at its best and most characteristic". Hamilton & Baylis, *op. cit.*, 225.

⁴⁰³ It was for these reasons that the Old Vic was successful in attracting a number of leading West End stars such as Edith Evans (in 1925), John Gielgud (1929), Ralph Richardson (1930), Peggy Ashcroft (1932) and Charles Laughton (1933). Hamilton & Baylis. *The Old Vic*, 240. Advertising, too, was minimal. The theatre relied heavily on word of mouth and advertising its productions through its own magazine; *The Old Vic Magazine*.

sense, the audiences were not unlike those of the music-hall. It was well known that the Old Vic patrons were extremely informal. Geoffrey Whitworth noted that: “An Old Vic audience really ‘assists’ as the French say, and this sense of active co-operation reacts most strongly both on the audience itself and on the actors. For together they become a single “group”, and group-consciousness is one of the most important actors in dramatic representation”⁴⁰⁴. Baylis herself commented on the enthusiasm of the Old Vic’s audience:

Our audience have been praised all over the world as perfect. I believe this is in a great measure due to the fact than many members feel actual rights of possession in the building; it is their theatre, built brick by brick by them with their love and self-sacrifice. It has actually cost them something to have an Old Vic at all; and therefore it has grown very dear to them.⁴⁰⁵

Importantly, the Old Vic also provided the actor with the experience of performing the classics, which were seriously overlooked in the London theatres and in many cases of playing roles which they had little hope of elsewhere. As a result, it provided the ambitious actor with the rare opportunity of following in the footsteps: “of Garrick, of Kean and the Kembles” where they could establish their talent in light of the great actors of the past: “The test of the actor is his success in certain of the classic characters, which he plays to an audience that judges and places him by its memory of other performances”⁴⁰⁶.

Sickert’s involvement with the Old Vic came as a result of his interest in the campaign to open Baylis’s second theatre, Sadler’s Wells, Islington, in 1932.⁴⁰⁷ Like the

⁴⁰⁴ G. Whitworth, *John O’London’s Weekly*, 18 February 1922. Schafer, *op. cit.*, 180.

⁴⁰⁵ Baylis, “‘The Old Vic’ and ‘The Wells’”, 1933. Schafer, *ibid.*, 180. The Old Vic Magazine also claimed the audience was as much an attraction as the plays themselves: “the Vic audience is perhaps more famous than the Vic productions; it has come to be reckoned as one of the “sights” of London”. Beaton (ed), *Old Vic Magazine*, No 2. Vol. 1, February 1931, 1.

⁴⁰⁶ Hamilton & Baylis, *op. cit.*, 240.

⁴⁰⁷ During the 1930s Sickert lived close to the theatre and it is clear from inscriptions on his drawings that Sickert favoured the Sadler’s Wells theatre over the Old Vic at least until 1935. Until 1935 Sadler’s Wells and

Old Vic, the Wells has a long theatrical history and the possibility of the reopening and conservation of Sadler's Wells had been in discussion since the 1920s. In 1925 Baylis personally had been approached, by the Duke of Devonshire, to make a public appeal for funds with the intention of buying the theatre for the nation.⁴⁰⁸ Sickert became personally involved shortly after the theatre's reopening.⁴⁰⁹ Undoubtedly this was due on part of the influence of Peggy Ashcroft, Gwen Ffrangcon-Davies and John Gielgud but it was also natural considering his own youthful experiences whilst a member of Mrs Isabel Bateman's company as well as his long standing admiration of Samuel Phelps.⁴¹⁰ His contribution to the campaign was the donation of his self-portrait *The Raising of Lazarus* for public auction to be sold by Christie's.⁴¹¹

Prior to the auction there was a ceremonial presentation of the portrait from Sickert to Baylis which, in itself, was entirely theatrical [Fig. 3.04]. The ceremony took place in the theatre where the portrait was hung on stage against a black back-drop curtain. Sickert and Baylis both appeared on stage at the same time and advanced towards the portrait from

the Old Vic alternated ballet, drama and opera. After 1935 the Old Vic concentrated on drama and Sadler's Wells on ballet and opera.

⁴⁰⁸ The Committee included Stanley Baldwin, G.K. Chesterton, Winston Churchill and John Galsworthy. One of Baylis's moves to encourage funds and to set the theatre in public conscious was to stage a revival of Pinero's 1898 play "Trelawny of the Wells" in 1925.

⁴⁰⁹ The restored Sadler's Wells was finally opened on the 6 January 1931. The opening ceremony included a who's who of theatrical talent. Sir Johnston Forbes-Robertson delivered a speech and amongst the audience was the elderly Madge Kendal (who had previously worked with Samuel Phelps), Arthur Wing Pinero, Sir Philip Ben Greet, Harcourt Williams and John Gielgud (who spoke briefly to the audience). Dennis Arundell, *The Story of Sadler's Wells 1683-1964* (London: Theatre Arts Books, 1965), 188-189.

⁴¹⁰ Phelps had been the theatre's actor-manager between 1844 and 1862. Sickert would later attribute his loud voice to his training at Sadler's Wells: "Perhaps I have got a loud voice - it comes from activity at Sadler's Wells when I was young, and that is why I can look out from my window at Margate and call a taxi from the pier - it is a great advantage". Sickert, "Underpainting", lecture, 9 November 1934. Gruetzner Robins, *op. cit.*, 641.

⁴¹¹ 2 December 1932. It was bought by the Beaux Arts Gallery. Sickert also painted a moment from *As You Like It* for the Wells fund. Arundell, *op. cit.*, 197.

opposite sides of the stage. As they came together Baylis bent to kiss Sickert's hand. Sickert (dressed in his recently acquired scarlet doctoral robes from Reading University) drew Baylis up and kissed her on the cheek.⁴¹² The actor Tony Butts then read a passage from St Luke's Gospel describing the miracle of Lazarus's resurrection before Sickert delivered a speech celebrating the link between: "Drama and the art of painting"⁴¹³.

Sickert's speech reveals a great deal regarding his interest in the theatre. He began by announcing his involvement was due: "in memory of my perpetual adoration of Sam Phelps and my gratitude to Isabel Bateman, of whose Sadler's Wells company I was myself a utility member"⁴¹⁴. His debt to the stage was further emphasised:

When you speak about "Drama" you cannot possibly draw any distinction between the so-called legitimate drama and the drama which is supposed to be not legitimate. The music-hall and the theatre are only two slightly differing branches of the same art. ... (I retired forty or fifty years ago, but I still remain a member of the theatrical profession...)⁴¹⁵

⁴¹² Adrian Daintrey, *I Must Say* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1963), 71.

⁴¹³ Sickert, letter to Gwen Ffrangcon-Davies, 29 September 1932. London, Tate Gallery Archive 888/1. See also Emmons, *op. cit.*, 213. John Gielgud was originally supposed to deliver the reading.

⁴¹⁴ Reprinted in Emmons, *op. cit.*, 213. In an earlier article for *The Times* ("Sadler's Wells" 26 October 1932), Sickert claims his parents had visited Sadler's Wells to see the play *King o' Scots* in 1859 (the play was actually not produced until 1868 and only in Sadler's Wells in October 1869 - Sickert corrected himself later ("Sadler's Wells", *The Times*, 5 November 1932. Gruetzner Robins, *op. cit.*, 623). In the article he discusses the need of spectacle for the audience of the mid-nineteenth century: "A portion of the New River was diverted so as to flow across a tank under the stage with the spotlight on the dummy - not an understudy - of Trapboys, the miser, slowly floating and turning, at the pace of the river, across the field of vision". Sickert, "Sadler's Wells", *The Times*, 26 October 1932. Gruetzner Robins, *op. cit.*, 621-622.

⁴¹⁵ Reprinted in Emmons, *op. cit.*, 214-215. In the same speech he recalled that his grandmother had been a dancer at The Princess in Shoreditch and that Phelps had been important in modernising performance and rejecting the typical melodramatic productions of the period. He also expanded on what he thought drama was: "I heard a singer whose notes were absolute shrieks of agony, beautiful shrieks, but shrieks. The audience wept. That is what I call Drama". *Ibid.*, 218.

It is clear that Sickert had two motives with his speech. On one hand he wanted to celebrate the debt of the theatre to his life and work (and inspire others to look to the theatre for artistic inspiration): “I said I would speak about the art of the theatre and the art of painting. They are closely connected. One of the reasons for the unfortunate state of the modern theatre is the gap between the actors and the scene-painters”⁴¹⁶. On the other hand he used the speech for a veiled attack on the obsession (as he saw it) with abstraction and rejection of the past in modern culture and art in particular:

Do not listen to the people who say, “what people want nowadays is so-and-so.” How the devil do they know? If you sit down and do something no one has ever done before, they can’t want it, because they’ve never seen it. ... Anything popular in art is said to be bad because it is not “high”. A great many of the men you are taught to gibe at are very considerable artists, and will be remembered long after some of us are snuffed out.⁴¹⁷

Interestingly, Sickert’s statement found a sympathetic echo in Baylis’s own: “I know, as Samuel Phelps knew, that those who have been nourished on great music and great drama, or have discovered the true recreation that they provide, will never again accept jejune and trashy entertainments whose claim on the mind is absolutely transitory”⁴¹⁸.

By the early 1920s even after the valiant achievements of Poel’s Elizabethan Stage Society, Granville-Barker’s success at the Savoy and the continuing success of the Old Vic,

⁴¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 216.

⁴¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 217. Sickert expanded this with his view on elaborate stage make-up: “This shows itself in several ways. They seek for fantastic and irrelevant make-ups. It all arises from this, which is very interesting and important, that actors have now a tendency to say, ‘I must show how good I am in this art by disguising myself so that nobody shall know who I am.’ Phelps never attempted not to look like Phelps”. *Ibid.*, 216

⁴¹⁸ L. Baylis, “Why we need Sadler’s Wells”, 9. Baylis’s comments echo Sickert’s later statement: “The modern nonsense about pictures is to make them represent nothing”. “Black and White Illustration”, lecture, 30 November 1934. Gruetzner Robins, *op. cit.*, 669.

Shakespeare was still relatively unfashionable and rarely performed in the West End. Post war audiences favoured either light domestic comedies or revues which the West End was happy to deliver. Once again, Shakespeare was badly in need of renewal and the director who oversaw this transition was the young John Gielgud along with his design team of Motley (Elizabeth Montgomery, her sister Audrey and Margaret Harris). Gielgud wanted a theatre that was elegant but unobtrusive, one which complemented the acting but did not overshadow it and the performance which established both his and Motley's reputation was *Romeo and Juliet* (1935) [Fig. 3.05] which was an Old Vic production staged at the New Theatre, between 17 October 1935 and 28 March 1936.⁴¹⁹

Gielgud had originally played the role, at the Old Vic, in 1929 under Harcourt Williams, who was one of the Vic's most successful directors. Williams, like Granville-Barker, aimed for a more natural and psychological interpretation of character for Shakespeare. His productions were fast paced and modern (at least in atmosphere if not setting).⁴²⁰ The 1935 production, starring Peggy Ashcroft as Juliet, Edith Evans as the nurse and Gielgud and Laurence Olivier who alternated between the roles of Romeo and Mercutio, was a huge success, staged by: "the flower of Shakespeare's young genius and the best of young English acting talent"⁴²¹. Praise was particularly lavished on the fast pace of the production; "Speedy Shakespeare" as A.E. Wilson termed it.⁴²² James Agate, in particular, admired the decision to enable the "fiery-footed steed which is this tragedy to

⁴¹⁹ Gielgud had first directed the production in 1932 as guest director of the Oxford University Dramatic Society. The 1932 production also starred Ashcroft and Evans who would play the same roles in 1935.

⁴²⁰ Williams had trained as an actor under Frank Benson and had once been coached by Ellen Terry. In his productions he often used Granville-Barker's *Prefaces to Shakespeare* as inspiration. J. Croall, *Gielgud: A Theatrical Life* (London: Methuen, 2000), 115.

⁴²¹ J. Agate, "Two Gentlemen in Verona - Mr Olivier and Mr Gielgud - Romeo and Juliet - Revival of Shakespeare's Tragedy", *The Sunday Times*, No. 5871, 20 October 1935, 6. According to John Gielgud, Edith Evans had been 'discovered', by William Poel and had met George Moore who was: "Greatly struck by her talents, and spoke about her everywhere". J. Gielgud, *Early Stages* (London: Macmillan, 1939), 150.

⁴²² A.E. Wilson, "Speedy Shakespeare", *The Evening Star*, 18 October 1935. Unconfirmed clipping held in the V&A TMA, New Theatre, *Romeo and Juliet*, Production File.

gallop sufficiently apace”⁴²³. Indeed, according to J.C. Trewin, Gielgud’s production was: “the key Shakespearean revival of its period”⁴²⁴.

The modernist set design however was more problematic. Agate criticized Juliet’s bedroom and balcony which were a permanent part of the set: “That people might walk beneath it, the thing was supported on posts, so that it looked rather like a hotel lift which has got stuck halfway up to the mezzanine floor”⁴²⁵. Even the costumes, designed by Motley to suggest mood in addition to period, were criticized: “the football jerseys of the rival factions reminded us less of Montague and Capulet than of Wanderers and Wolves”⁴²⁶.

Inspired by Granville-Barker, Gielgud attempted to interpret Shakespeare as a modern and fresh author, both in terms for the audience as well as the actors.⁴²⁷ As Gielgud noted: “I believe one must try to create the pace and general spirit of a Shakespeare play anew at rehearsal, and treat it as if it were a modern work which has never been produced before”⁴²⁸. Shakespeare, for Gielgud, was ripe for experimentation:

If we are content to resign Shakespeare to our bookshelves and only play him traditionally, the interest in him will die out among audiences more and more. We cannot hope that among all the experiments there will be more than an occasional success, but that is so with all experiments. And we must remember that the isolated success among these experiments will probably establish the tradition which the next

⁴²³ Agate, *op. cit.*, 6.

⁴²⁴ A. Davies, “From the Old Vic to Gielgud and Olivier” in Bate & Jackson, *op. cit.*, 144. Trewin quoted in A. Holden, *Olivier* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1988), 84.

⁴²⁵ Agate, *op. cit.*, 6.

⁴²⁶ *Ibid.*, 6. Motley’s designs, inspired by Botticelli and Carpaccio, used colour to symbolise the turmoil of the play; sober greys and blues for melancholy and blood-red for desperation. The set design was a necessity of economy. Davies, *op. cit.*, 148.

⁴²⁷ The Old Vic had also attempted to revitalise Shakespeare through the director Tyrone Guthrie who, between 1933 and 1939, directed sixteen Shakespeare productions. Guthrie, like Gielgud, was also inspired by Poel and Granville-Barker.

⁴²⁸ As quoted in Croall, *op. cit.*, 206.

generation of actors will have to break... Judge fairly of our creations apart from the preconceived ideas you have of the characters, either in your imaginations or from pictures, or from other productions you have seen. You go to any other kind of play with open minds, so why not to Shakespeare too?⁴²⁹

In a series of articles for *The Old Vic Magazine*, Gielgud made it clear that the future success for staged Shakespeare depended on reinvigoration of the text and a greater understanding of the psychology of acting:

If we have no Irving today, it is because the public taste has changed. It no longer demands a melodramatic vehicle for a star actor, but expects a well-balanced cast headed by actors who can create within the limits of their parts, and can be trusted not to throw the play out of proportion, nor yet under-act selfishly to gain their effects. And so we have artists such as Cedric Hardwicke, Gwen Ffrangcon-Davies, Edith Evans, Diana Wynyard, and men like Dean and Komisarjevsky. To see these men and women at rehearsal is to watch a six-week miracle of concentration, a slow, painstaking building up, an infinite patience that will surely bear comparison with the physical efforts of the most acrobatic chorus.⁴³⁰

Sickert was certainly aware of Gielgud's importance since the early 1930s, as evidenced in his letters to Ffrangcon-Davies: "Your common success thrills me. My cordial happiness in Gielgud's success enchants me"⁴³¹. For his painting Sickert chose to depict his muse Peggy

⁴²⁹ *Old Vic Magazine*. Reprinted in Croall, *ibid.*, 118.

⁴³⁰ J. Gielgud. "Yes - Actors Do Work". Croall, *ibid.*, 140. Komisarjevsky's insistence on viewing the production as a "whole" rather than a series of separate parts was also a clear inspiration: "*all* the elements of a theatrical performance [costume, props, scenery, lighting, sound, music] must together form a synthetic composition, idealistically and emotionally united with the acting, and expressive of the interpretation of the play". T. Komisarjevsky, *The theatre, and a changing civilisation* (London: Bodley Head, 1935), 22.

⁴³¹ Sickert, letter to Ffrangcon-Davies, undated (c.1932). As Sickert expanded: "I knew his father's first wife and his first father-in-law and his grandmother for praising whose talent Tom Taylor was sacked from the post of art critic of the Times". MRL, GFD Archive, letter P9.

Ashcroft and Edith Evans in their respective roles in *Juliet and her Nurse* (c.1935-36) [Fig.'s 3.06 & 3.07]. The scene likely depicts the moment (Act III, Scene 2) when the Nurse informs Juliet that Romeo has been banished for the murder of Tybalt.

Gielgud's naturalism and avant-garde staging would also provide Sickert with an interesting link to the past through his 1934/35 acclaimed New Theatre production of *Hamlet*.⁴³² Starring Gielgud in the title role and Jessica Tandy as Ophelia, the production attracted great critical praise. Gielgud's production and performance was widely acclaimed as the finest Hamlet for a number of years and attracted favourable comparisons with Forbes-Robertson's performance: "If Sir Johnston Forbes-Robertson was the ideal poetic Hamlet, Mr. John Gielgud is the exquisitely juvenile young Dane with a mentality that searches all around him with relentless insight and psychoanalytical profoundness"⁴³³. *The Illustrated London News* also considered Gielgud: "the finest Hamlet of this generation"⁴³⁴. The naturalism and psychological depth of his performance attracted particular praise: "it is essentially a realistic, hard thinking, controlled, one might almost say a naturalistic portrait"⁴³⁵. In particular, praise was directed at Gielgud's ability to suggest an internal struggle with the character rather than speaking directly to the audience: "He is never conscious of and rarely faces an audience; he is quite alone"⁴³⁶. The critic for *The Stage* was especially impressed:

There was great enthusiasm at the New Theatre last week over John Gielgud's fine performance in and beautiful production of "Hamlet" and it should be a pretty safe prediction - in this case at any rate - that Shakespeare in the West

⁴³² *Hamlet* ran at The New Theatre between 14 November 1934 and 30 March 1935.

⁴³³ J.T. Grein, *The Illustrated London News*, 8 December 1934, 979. The critic for *The Stage* also provided a favourable comparison: "It approached Forbes-Robertson here and there in a certain ascetic demeanour and style". *The Stage*, 22 November 1934, 10.

⁴³⁴ *The Illustrated London News*, 24 November 1934, 36.

⁴³⁵ *The Era*, 21 November 1934, 10.

⁴³⁶ *The Stage*, *op. cit.*, 10.

End will not spell another ruin. ... It is both refreshing and inspiring to be able to write that English theatre history was made at the New last week.⁴³⁷

For *The Stage* its modern stage design was almost cubist in its structure:

We have already called the production (which is in fourteen scenes, with one interval) a beautiful one. There is no other word. People who like to talk of progress, and forget that progress does not necessarily spell improvement will perhaps call it “modern”. The production is modern certainly in its adoption of a mechanical device - a big black rhomboid-shaped super-imposed structure consisting of staircases, flat circular turrets, and platforms which can be moved, to different angles, presumably on rollers, in the shortest of time. ... Shakespeare himself would surely have welcomed this production, rhomboid and all, and rejoiced in its quickness of action and general getting-along-with-the-business atmosphere which precludes too much mouthing over his philosophy.⁴³⁸

Sickert’s subsequent painting, *Jessica Tandy and John Gielgud in ‘Hamlet’* (dated 1935) [Fig. 3.08], based on a Bertram Park photograph originally published in *Theatre World Souvenir* in 1934 [Fig. 3.09], was clearly intended as a visual contrast to supplement critics’ comparisons between Gielgud’s performance and that of his predecessors - in particular his old friend Johnstone Forbes-Robertson who had been the subject of a recent portrait; *Sweet Prince. Johnstone Forbes-Robertson as Hamlet* (by 1932) [Fig.’s 3.10 & 3.11].⁴³⁹ Interestingly, Sickert discussed *Hamlet* briefly in a lecture to the Margate School

⁴³⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁴³⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁴³⁹ *Theatre World Souvenir*, London 1934, 10. For more on Sickert’s treatment of *Jessica Tandy and John Gielgud in ‘Hamlet’* see Daniels, *op. cit.*, 272-276. Forbes-Robertson (1853-1937) was an early influence on Sickert’s acting career and, acknowledging their friendship, Sickert signed a dedication along the lower edge of the painting: “In grateful and precious memory of a friendship of half a century - Sickert”. Sickert, “Squaring up a Drawing”, November 1934, lecture delivered at the Thanet School of Art, Margate Kent between October and November 1934. Gruetzner Robins, *op. cit.*, 634-640. The image was evidently based on his 1897 production of *Hamlet* as, in 1932, Forbes-Robertson was approaching seventy-nine. Sickert

of Art delivered on 2 November 1934. The date of his lecture (delivered only a couple of weeks before the production's opening night) suggests he was aware of the potential impact of Gielgud's interpretation and possibly had anticipated it:

A drawing is not exact information about a certain thing. A drawing is like the emotional cry of an actor on the stage. If you analyse all the things that Hamlet said you will find some of them extraordinarily foolish. Hamlet did not talk like 'Who's Who' or like a directory. He said the most extraordinary things. He said things it is impossible to recognise as information from head-quarters or anything of that kind. It is the same with drawing. It is a form of poetry.⁴⁴⁰

By the early 1930s Shakespeare was once again firmly established on the London stage after an irregular history of nearly forty years. The albeit brief, but vital, successes of Poel, Granville-Barker and Baylis had succeeded in making Shakespeare a viable and profitable playwright for the twentieth-century stage, one who could be adapted for modernist aesthetic concerns as well as intellectual and psychological performances. Just as the New Drama with its psychological insights, metaphorical and visual symbolism reinvigorated the playgoer's experience and understanding of modern theatre so too did it revitalize Shakespeare. As Ibsen observed: "We no longer live in Shakespeare's time"⁴⁴¹. Here, in the theatre, was an example of a traditional subject being rediscovered and reinvented with a modernist edge.

clearly used photographs to construct his portrait (marking a shift in source material from Victorian illustrations for the *English Echoes*). Forbes-Robertson had achieved a great success playing Hamlet at the Lyceum in 1897 (aged forty-four). His farewell performance came in 1913 at Drury Lane where he replayed Hamlet (aged sixty).

⁴⁴⁰ Sickert, "Squaring up a Drawing", Gruetzner Robins, *op. cit.*, 635.

⁴⁴¹ Ibsen, letter to Edmund Gosse (undated). Gosse had expressed regret that his first important prose play, *Emperor and Galilean* was not written in verse. Ibsen replied: "It was the illusion of reality I wanted to produce....We no longer live in Shakespeare's time...." J.W. McFarlane (trans & ed), *The Oxford Ibsen: Vol. 4* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), 3.

Interpreting the Theatre c.1920-1940: I

What a task, then, for the producer! To take down the book from the shelf, dust it carefully, read it carefully, consider it, and interpret it clearly and fully in his mind. Now he must cast it, arrange the scenery, costumes, cuts, music, exits, entrances, groupings - and then come to rehearsal and put all these things into practice, as well as observe how an actor fits his scheme here, and falls short of it there... The task is really one of herculean labour, and the actor must ever be aware, when he answers the applause at the curtain night by night, how much he owes to the man on whom the whole responsibility really rests.

John Gielgud, c.1930⁴⁴²

The mirror upheld to nature is a long-accepted image for the art of the theater [*sic*]. As the art matures the mirror is brought to reflecting from beneath the surface.

Harley Granville-Barker, 1930⁴⁴³

Sickert's return to the stage as source, in the early 1920s, saw him experiment with a series of images which echoed earlier works, in particular a series of music-hall inspired images; such as *The Shoreditch Empire or the London, Shoreditch* (dated 1920), *That Old Fashioned Mother of Mine* (c.1920), *Percy Honri at the Oxford* (c.1920) and *Hilda Glyder in 'You'd Be Surprised'* (c.1923). These works were characterised by their nostalgic (and figurative) subject matter but also by Sickert's attempt to utilize modernist painting techniques. Similarly, the late 1920s and early 1930s saw him experiment with Victorian illustrations (in which he incorporated modern techniques with very traditional and theatrical narrative subjects) and this could also be seen in light of the nostalgia for

⁴⁴² Croall, *op. cit.*, 148.

⁴⁴³ H. Granville-Barker, *Prefaces to Shakespeare: Othello* (London: Batsford, 1982, first published 1930), 111.

Victoriana during this period.⁴⁴⁴ The 1920s and 1930s generally witnessed a nostalgia for the nineteenth century, socially and culturally, and Sickert, well aware of this, produced a number of images celebrating, or linking back, to particular interests on the nineteenth century, such as *Portrait of Degas in 1885* (c.1928), *The Tichborne Claimant* (c.1930), *Her Majesty's Theatre* (c.1934), *The Standard Theatre, Shoreditch 1844*, (by 1936) even the late Queen makes an appearance in *Queen Victoria and her Great-grandchild* (c.1940).

An early example, which illustrates Sickert's interest in depicting a modern interpretation of an eighteenth-century production can clearly be seen in *Sir Nigel Playfair as Tony Lumpkin* (1928) [Fig's 3.12 & 3.13]. The painting depicts Playfair (1874-1934), recently knighted and in character as the comic juvenile from Oliver Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer, or, Mistakes of a Night* (first performed in London in 1773) which had been recently produced at the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith between August and October 1928.⁴⁴⁵ The plot was a fairly typical farce, concerning mistaken identities and deliberate confusion. Lumpkin is the son of Mrs Hardcastle and step-son of Mr Hardcastle and, as he is not yet 'of age' he is unable to refuse the proposed marriage of himself to his cousin, Constance Neville. As was typical for juvenile leads, Playfair (who G.W.B. of *The Era* noted: "looked surprisingly young") was fifty-four when he played the coming-of-age Tony Lumpkin in 1928.⁴⁴⁶

⁴⁴⁴ As Rebecca Daniels noted, amongst other examples of this fashion a *Vogue* article from 1931 entitled "The Victorian age returns" discussed "exquisitely Victorian" evening dresses and home furnishings. R. Daniels, "Walter Richard Sickert's 'Echoes' from the 'London Journal'", *The Burlington Magazine*, Vol. CL, No. 1261, April 2008, 259. Lytton Strachey's book *Eminent Victorians* (first published in 1918) was an early example of this trend.

⁴⁴⁵ The play also starred Marie Ney as Miss Hardcastle. The painting was commissioned to celebrate the actor-manager's tenth anniversary of management of the Lyric. Emmons, *op. cit.*, 212-213.

⁴⁴⁶ G.W.B. *The Era*, 22 August 1928, 9. Sickert donated the money from the portrait to the rebuilding of Sadler's Wells Theatre Fund. Sickert returned to the play as subject matter in its Old Vic/Sadler's Wells production in January 1933. It starred Peggy Ashcroft as Miss Hardcastle, Valerie Tudor as Miss Neville, William Fox as Hastings and Roger Livesey as Tony Lumpkin. Sickert produced a number of works based on this production: *Peggy Ashcroft as Miss Hardcastle in 'She Stoops to Conquer'* (c.1933), *Peggy Ashcroft and*

By the 1930s a slew of paintings inspired by the theatre began to appear in Sickert's *œuvre*. The majority of these depicted contemporary productions, predominantly of Shakespeare. Amongst the more straightforward representations of the stage, either based on direct photographs or sketches: such as *Fabia Drake as Lady Macbeth* (c.1933), *Marie Tempest in 'The Marriage of Kitty'* (1935), *Jessica Tandy and John Gielgud in 'Hamlet'* (dated 1935) and *'As You Like It': A Theatrical Incident* (1937-38) there are curiosities such as *Variation on 'Othello'* (c.1933-34), and *Maxton as 'Hamlet'* (c.1939-40).⁴⁴⁷ The majority of Sickert's theatre paintings of the 1930s however, focus on a number of related sources; either productions that included his two new muses - Gwen Ffrangcon-Davies and Peggy Ashcroft - or productions of Shakespeare.⁴⁴⁸

Valerie Tudor in 'She Stoops to Conquer' (c.1933), *Peggy Ashcroft as Miss Hardcastle* (c.1933), *Peggy Ashcroft as Miss Hardcastle and Valerie Tudor as Miss Neville* (c.1933) and a drawing entitled *Sickert - the Wells - 33* (inscribed on the lower left: Clare Harris as Mrs Hardcastle/Valerie Tudor as Miss Neville/Roger Livesy as Tony Lumkin/ in/ she Stoops to Conquer).

⁴⁴⁷ The portrait of Marie Tempest in Gordon-Lennox's play is now lost. Sickert's depiction of *As You Like It* was based on the New Theatre's 1937 production which starred Edith Evans and Marie Ney. *Variation on 'Othello'* [Fig. 3.14] is seemingly a fairly straightforward illustration of a scene from Shakespeare's play, however, the painting is actually a combination of a number of different performances from nineteenth and twentieth-century productions. The painting's full title, as catalogued by the Leicester Galleries in 1934, identified Ira Aldridge as Othello, Valerie Tudor as Desdemona and Gastrolle as Cassio. Aldridge (1806-1867) was a black actor of the nineteenth century, Valerie Tudor was a contemporary actress (although Desdemona is not one of the many Shakespearean roles she is known to have played) and 'Gastrolle' is the German word for an actor making a guest appearance. The 'variation' of the title therefore comes from these figures. The inspiration for the piece likely came from the production's souvenir programme (a copy of which is held in the V&A Theatre Museum Archives) which included a photograph of Aldridge and a brief biography of the actor. V&A TMA, Savoy Theatre, *Othello*, Production File.

⁴⁴⁸ Towards the end of the 1930s the cinema provided Sickert with a number of direct visual subjects, the majority of which were based on film stills. The Degas inspired *The Plaza Tiller Girls* (dated 1928) and *High Steppers* (c.1938-39) both depict dancers on stage and were inspired by the dancers of the Plaza Cinema near Piccadilly Circus in the 1920s (*High Steppers* was based on a film still from *A Little Bit of Fluff* which was released in 1928. Sickert's most accomplished cinematic image however, was one which would echo his earlier Camden Town domestic dramas, particularly in its interest in domestic tension and a concentration on

Sickert first became aware of Ffrangcon-Davies (1891-1992) when she starred as Prue Sarn in Edward Lewis's dramatisation of Mary Webb's 1924 novel *Precious Bane* at St Martin's Theatre between March and May 1932. The production also starred Robert Donat as Sarn's brother Gideon. The production was generally poorly received by critics; *The Illustrated London News* thought it a: "gloomy and depressing piece of work", and stated the actors lacked sincerity, believing it to be: "contrived to suggest they had ever felt the mud of Shropshire lanes under their boots"⁴⁴⁹. *The Era* was also under the impression that the play was a: "machine-made melodrama, of which the chief reason is to instil terror and eeriness, and a genuine tragedy of character and fate. Unfortunately, the two do not quite mix"⁴⁵⁰.

Sickert, however, was particularly impressed by Ffrangcon-Davies's attention to naturalism. In a letter to her he wrote: "I do not think sublime and poetic anguish adds to the hump. On the contrary the hump disappears from view altogether (out of sight). I think, and I am sure you do, that Mary Webb's tact is sublime. She treats the three ideas *magistralement*: 1. Love, 2. Obstacle, 3. Non-existent. Au contraire"⁴⁵¹. Shortly after their first meeting Ffrangcon-Davies recorded her thoughts on the aging artist:

the contrast between a male and female figure: *Jack and Jill* (c.1937-38). Based on a still from the film *Bullets or Ballots* with Edward G. Robinson and Joan Blondell.

⁴⁴⁹ *The Illustrated London News*, 9 April 1932, 564.

⁴⁵⁰ *The Era*, 6 April 1932, 8. In contrast, *The New Statesman and Nation* thought: "The setting and production of the piece are unusually good; and Mr Lewis' dramatisation of the novel is masterly". 9 April, 1932, 453.

⁴⁵¹ Sickert to Ffrangcon-Davies, 15 June 1932. Gwen Ffrangcon-Davies Archive, Martial Rose Library, University of Winchester. Letter P1. According to Denys Sutton, the reason why he admired her performance was that: "unlike other actresses, she really knew how to beat up an egg and make a pudding in a pudding basin and do the household chores expected of the character she was acting". G. Ffrangcon-Davies, "Sketch for a Portrait". Radio Broadcast Transcript, 10 February 1961. London, Islington Public Library Archive, Walter Sickert Collection. Box 12.

April 7th, 1932. ... One would say at once “Oh, who is that?” He spoke much & very flatteringly of my work, for which he professes an extravagant admiration, but was very disappointed, so he said, to find me so young! He talked of his early days when he was a super at the Lyceum and of his friendship with Pinero who from the heights of a small part gentleman condescended towards him in a friendship that has lasted all their lives - He is an old man 72, but full of life and sparkle tho’ I fear he drinks too much - consuming the best part of two bottles of champagne at lunch, after which he became a little vague but still very courteous, charming... He says he is the crowned head of the artistic worlds, as King George is of England.⁴⁵²

Tellingly, Sickert’s letters to Ffrangcon-Davies reveals his working practice and his interest in visiting the theatre regularly.⁴⁵³ Explaining his schedule he states: “We are fortunately situated in that my work is all done in the morning then between five and eight”⁴⁵⁴. However, a few months later he writes: “I shall from now visit the Wells or Vic at

⁴⁵² Leather bound notebook, 7 April 1932. MRL, GFD Archive, File 19 SB 19. The meeting must have made quite an impact on her, there is only one other entry in the book and it too concerns Sickert: “July 21st, dined with Sickert & his wife - very entertaining. He is working on a large canvas of me as Isabella in Marlowe’s Edward II. Came home very excited the other day and said to Mrs S. ‘Thank God Gwen’s dry and on the operating table’ At her great dismay fearing some foul disease had smitten me but he was only referring to the picture which was ready”. Sickert also impressed her with stories of his theatrical encounters, particularly the “jolly diner” at the Garrick with Pinero and Michel Salaman and the lunch with producer C.B. Cochran. Sickert, letter to Gwen Ffrangcon-Davies (c.1932). As quoted in Matthew Sturgis, *Walter Sickert: A Life* (London: Harper Collins, 2005), 583.

⁴⁵³ Amongst which he discusses a production of Shakespeare’s *A Winter’s Tale*: “You know my favourite expression re “adequate” performances. The lady who played Hermione played it with respect and seriousness so that I was able to follow you in imagination throughout her lines. ... The production of the statue scene was all wrong. The woman was right on top of, as it were, the King ... instead of 15 feet back. I said this to Johnston this afternoon and he said when he played Leontes with Mary Anderson the “statue” was at the end of a sort of avenue, let us say, of myrtles and dimly lit”. Sickert to Ffrangcon-Davies. MRL, GFD Archive, undated (c.1932), letter P10.

⁴⁵⁴ Sickert, letter to Ffrangcon-Davies, MRL, GFD Archive, 25 July 1932, letter P2.

matinees. My work at the easel is always over at luncheon. Will you take the initiative and let me know what, if any, matinees you could go to”⁴⁵⁵.

Sickert and Ffrangcon-Davies’s relationship was certainly playful. Sickert flirtatiously hoped that their correspondence might ‘read rather less vulgar’ than that of Bernard Shaw-Ellen Terry and was considerably fawning in his adoration of the young actress.⁴⁵⁶ He fondly recalled her performance in Marlowe’s *Edward II* (1923): “the sound of [her] voice in the word ‘Gaveston’”, and since then he had been left in no doubt that she was a ‘great actress’⁴⁵⁷. Indeed, Sickert’s interpretation of himself as a theatre/acting critic was evident in his mischievous statement to Ffrangcon-Davies: “A great hope - as well as a pain was engendered when you said nobody had helped you much with your work. Most producers are so illiterate and indifferent. I would give any time you wanted to giving you the criticisms which no one can quite give themselves”⁴⁵⁸. His intention was to use his “gifts of criticism and design for the stage” and his surviving letters to her illustrate the interest he had in all aspects of the theatre.⁴⁵⁹

Not long after their first meeting Sickert’s expressed an interest in painting a portrait of Ffrangcon-Davies; *Miss Gwen Ffrangcon-Davies as Isabella of France in Marlowe’s ‘Edward II’: La Louvre* (1932) [Fig. 3.15]. Typically, Sickert rejected a formal sitting from Ffrangcon-Davies and used a photograph [Fig. 3.16] as the basis for the portrait:

⁴⁵⁵ Sickert, letter to Ffrangcon-Davies, MRL, GFD Archive, 12 December 1932, letter P8.

⁴⁵⁶ Sickert, letter to Ffrangcon-Davies (c.1932). As quoted in Sturgis, *op. cit.*, 582. It is typical of Sickert to cast himself in the role of one of the key dramatists of the early twentieth century.

⁴⁵⁷ Sickert, letter to Ffrangcon-Davies (c.1932). *Ibid.*, 582.

⁴⁵⁸ Sickert, letter to Ffrangcon-Davies, MRL, GFD Archive, 25 July 1932, letter P2.

⁴⁵⁹ He also sent her notes on her performances and even suggestions on make-up: “I should have *no rouge*”. In addition, he provided elaborate outlines of new sets for what he considered would be the ‘inevitable revival’ of *Precious Bane*. Sickert, letter to Ffrangcon-Davies (c.1932). As quoted in Sturgis, *op. cit.*, 584.

I never sat once for this portrait. It was painted from a photograph which Mr. Sickert found one day as he was looking through my album. ... One of the reasons why Mr. Sickert never asked me to sit for the portrait is, as he once said: 'I know your face so well, I don't have to have you before me to paint you.' ... 'I have made it quite clear by painting "Bertram Park phot." in a corner of the canvas that the portrait was copied from a photograph. Painting a portrait is like catching a butterfly. I have painted portraits with my subject before me. But it is seldom absolutely satisfactory. Your sitter, particularly if it is a woman, dislikes keeping regular appointments. She is often late. The artist resents his time being wasted.'⁴⁶⁰

Presented by the Phoenix Society, under the auspices of the Incorporated Stage Society, the play, Marlowe's *Edward II*, was privately performed on 18 and 19 November 1923 at the Regent Theatre. The production was generally well received, and Ffrangcon-Davies's performance was particularly admired; *The Times* considered her "...coldly evil as Isabella" whilst *The Daily Telegraph* thought her "a picturesque queen"⁴⁶¹.

⁴⁶⁰ In the same article, she states that, originally, the idea was that she would pose for a painting: "When Mr. Sickert saw it [the photograph] he said, 'This is what I have been looking for. I remember seeing you in the play and I always wanted to paint you as Isabella.' I tried to find the dress I wore in that part, but failed, so Mr. Sickert decided to paint the portrait from the photograph". "The Portrait I Never Sat For - by Miss Ffrangcon-Davies - "Mr's Sickert's Masterpiece copied from a photograph", *The Evening Standard*, No. 33713, 6 September 1932, 6. Sickert would produce a similarly dramatic portrait of the actress as Queen Isabella in *Gwen Again* (1935-36).

⁴⁶¹ *The Times*, No. 43503, 20 November 1923, 12; *The Daily Telegraph*, No. 21397, 20 November 1923, 15. E.A.B. writing in *The Daily News*, thought her a "strange and gracious little figure". "Phoenix Society Production: Marlowe's 'Edward II.' at the Regent", No. 24233, 20 November 1923, 9. A curious link between painting and theatre was suggested by the critic for *The Weekly Westminster Gazette*: "...a creation so fragile and so strong that in its golden farthingale, and in its infinite suggestion of subtlety and power, it constantly suggested a portrait by Velazquez, and was even for one afternoon's production only an indestructible masterpiece". "The Phoenix" *The Weekly Westminster Gazette*. 24 November 1923, 119.

Although he had been in the audience for the original production, Sickert chose a photograph from the dress rehearsal as the basis for his portrait which he found amongst Ffrangcon-Davies's scrapbooks. Sickert's painting equally attracted a great deal of press attention. Frank Rutter considered the painting an example of: "Rembrandtesque impressionism" and that: "The psychology of the portrait is as subtle as the notion of the relative degrees of illumination in the figure..."⁴⁶² The critic for *The Morning Post* was equally complimentary:

The poise of the figure has a Tintoretto like monumentality, but the face and eyes suggest the latent powers of expression that makes her supreme on the stage. ... Technically, the picture is superb. It is constructed with uncommon skill, and the colour scheme is simple: white shimmering into tremulous pink, which deepens to red, out of which emerges a passionate passage of ruby, complemented by a brilliant note of emerald green.⁴⁶³

The Daily Mail in particular, lavished a remarkable level of praise, regarding it as: "far better aesthetically than anything achieved or likely to be achieved by any other living artist"⁴⁶⁴.

The painting is certainly an extraordinarily confident work, not only in terms of subject matter but also treatment. By using a "found" photograph Sickert was seemingly exploiting the modernist concern with chance (and also the original object's artistic value). It would be a mistake, however, to suggest that Sickert randomly chose photographs. His selection followed a particular thematic agenda. In all his work there retains a particular concern with human interest subjects. In terms of technique, Sickert exploits a number of modernist concerns whilst simultaneously retaining strong elements of traditional picture

⁴⁶² Frank Rutter, "The Galleries: Mr. Sickert's New Portrait - Sketch in the Grand Style", *The Sunday Times*, No. 5710, 18 September 1932, 6.

⁴⁶³ "Mr Sickert Again - Remarkable Combination of Art and Photography - Portrait of Gwen Ffrangcon-Davies" *The Morning Post*, 6 September 1932, 6.

⁴⁶⁴ "Mr. Sickert's Best Work - Portrait without a sitting", *The Daily Mail*, No. 11348, 7 September 1932, 5.

making - principally the narrative. The looseness of his brushwork and his squaring up technique (as well as the inclusion of lettering) cultivated a seeming distance from the original subject matter which helped break the picture down to its formal component parts; namely, colour, shade, texture and line, yet it is important to remember that the *choice* of moment depicted was vital for Sickert. In an interview for *The Daily Mail* he noted: “The picture was painted without a single sitting from Miss Ffrangcon-Davies. ... Her face in the photograph had an expression which I could not get by any amount of sittings”⁴⁶⁵. Clearly, Sickert was interested in the acting talent and transformative power of Ffrangcon-Davies as much as he was interested in experimenting with modernist aesthetics.

By extension, the expressionistic *Gwen Ffrangcon-Davies as Elizabeth Herbert in ‘The Lady with a Lamp’* (c.1932-34) (inspired by the production of Reginald Berkeley’s play which took place at the Arts and Garrick Theatre’s between 5 January and 15 June 1929) presents a much more dramatic (at least on canvas) depiction of Ffrangcon-Davies [Fig. 3.17]. The production starred Edith Evans as Florence Nightingale and Ffrangcon-Davies as Lady Herbert. Although a modern play, the subject fitted well with Sickert’s nostalgia for the nineteenth century; Berkeley’s play was loosely based on Lytton Strachey’s *Eminent Victorians*.

Sickert’s depiction encapsulates the palpable tension of the event - both in terms of the war itself and Lady Herbert’s anxiety.⁴⁶⁶ In a number of cases Sickert employed his own photographer to capture scenes mid-performance (“My box-photographer is superb. His name is Woodbine and he is one of the Herald’s best more than best instantaneous light

⁴⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 5. Sickert extended his discussion in the same interview: “When people sit to have their portrait painted it is almost impossible for them to have a lively and natural expression. They become tired and bored, and a man who has normally and animated expression will look like a stuck pig”. *Ibid.*

⁴⁶⁶ In the play *Lady Herbert* blames Nightingale for the death of her husband by insisting he went to war.

photographers.”⁴⁶⁷), in this case, he used a photograph by Yvonne Gregory (wife of Bertram Park) [Fig. 3.18].⁴⁶⁸ Sickert’s painting, however, includes a number of elements not in the original photograph. In the photograph the background is a plain curtain; for the painting Sickert adds an atmospheric and vigorously coloured depiction of the Crimean War, juxtaposing the London based Mrs Herbert with the war torn landscape of the Crimea. Ffrangcon-Davies’s facial expression has also been exaggerated; in the photograph her gaze is aloof yet passive and drifts off to the left of the image; for the painting Sickert redirects her gaze towards us with a much more accusative glare. In this sense, Sickert has adapted the composition to illustrate the tension and anxiety of the character’s situation. Ultimately, Sickert’s intention was to capture the essence of the performance as much as a physical likeness. As a result, Sickert doesn’t attempt to merely copy from a photograph but utilizes it to explore the quintessence of the performance: “It is like translation and drama. Shakespeare lifted whole scenes ... turned them into blank verse and there you are. ... any amount of poets crib. They have to have something to start from. They start from something and then develop it”⁴⁶⁹.

By the mid-1930s Sickert’s attention had shifted from Ffrangcon-Davies to her younger contemporary Peggy Ashcroft. Following the huge public interest in Paul Robeson’s performance of *Othello*, it was natural that Sickert’s adoration would follow on to Ffrangcon-Davies’s successor - Peggy Ashcroft (1907-1991) for his painting *Peggy Ashcroft and Paul Robeson in ‘Othello’* (1935-36) [Fig. 3.19].⁴⁷⁰

⁴⁶⁷ Sickert to Ffrangcon-Davies, MRL, GFD Archive, undated (c.1932), letter P9. The process was seemingly unsatisfactory for Sickert as he would later relinquish the assistance of Woodbine in favour of posed publicity stills.

⁴⁶⁸ I have been unable to confirm if this particular photograph was published however a copy of it is held amongst Ffrangcon-Davies’s personal belongings at the archive in Winchester. MRL, GFD Archive, Box 11, LP2.

⁴⁶⁹ Sickert, “Colour Study: Importance of Scale”, lecture, 16 November 1934. Gruetzner Robins, *op. cit.*, 655.

⁴⁷⁰ The play, which ran at the Savoy Theatre from 19 May 1930 until 5 July 1930 for a total of fifty-five performances, did not receive a particularly positive critical reaction: “I fear Mr. Maurice Browne’s production of this play will not live in my memory after ten years. It has little to recommend it. It is, for so

In Harley Granville-Barker's *Prefaces to Shakespeare* (first published 1930) he provides an interesting insight into why Sickert may have chosen this particular production. *Othello* is a play concerned with jealousy and: "with the degradation of love between man and woman"⁴⁷¹. Here, in theatrical terms, we have Camden Town replanted to Cyprus. In terms of the composition it shares pictorial elements which interested Sickert: the contrast between a male and a female figure (one standing, one kneeling, one black, one white) and its theme of a crumbling relationship (*Othello* details a happy marriage disintegrating because of sexual jealousy) was a common one in his early work. Indeed, in Shakespeare's limited (but loaded) stage directions there is potential for a visual link to Sickert's Camden Town Murder series: "Enter Othello, and Desdemona in her bed"⁴⁷². Indeed, *Othello*, is a: "domestic tragedy" and as such should be played simply and truthfully: "This scene is basically cast, and it must be acted, in a key of workaday domesticity"⁴⁷³. It would be remarkable if Sickert did not share Granville-Barker's ideas.

By the early 1930s Sickert was a regular at the Old Vic, where he was known as: "a tremendous Shakespearean"⁴⁷⁴. Sickert, according to Ashcroft, was: "both youthful and very old". He was always "absolutely himself" and "one felt completely at ease with him. One could feel the same except one hardly got a word in edgeways"⁴⁷⁵. Certainly their

expensive a production, poorly acted, while Mr. James Pryde's scenery, beautiful enough as a work of art, appeared to need such peculiar lighting that the actors' faces were perpetually obscured". *Illustrated London News*, 31 May 1930, 43.

⁴⁷¹ Granville-Barker, *Prefaces to Shakespeare: Othello*, 7.

⁴⁷² *Ibid.*, 16. The directions in the Oxford Shakespeare read slightly differently: "Enter Othello with a light. [he draws back a curtain, revealing] Desdemona asleep in her bed". Act 5, Scene 2. Shakespeare, "The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice", Stanley Wells & Gary Taylor (general editors), *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988, reprinted 1997), 849.

⁴⁷³ Granville-Barker, *op. cit.*, 51.

⁴⁷⁴ P. Ashcroft, "Sketch for a Portrait". IPLA WRS Coll. Box 12.

⁴⁷⁵ Garry O'Connor, *The Secret Woman: A Life of Peggy Ashcroft* (London: Orion, 1998), 45. Ashcroft, "Sketch for a Portrait". IPLA WRS Coll. Box 12. Ashcroft was also aware of Sickert's playfulness when she

relationship provided Sickert with the opportunity to paint Ashcroft in a number of informal portraits, including *Peggy Ashcroft in her bathing costume* (c.1934). However it was her acting talent that really inspired him and it was at the Old Vic that Sickert produced the majority of his staged portraits of Ashcroft.

One of his earliest depictions of Ashcroft was her performance in Shakespeare's *As You Like It* which he depicted in a number of canvases: *'As You Like It' Peggy Ashcroft, Valerie Tudor and William Fox* (dated 1933) and *'As You Like It' Peggy Ashcroft as Rosalind: 'Wear this for me'* (also dated 1933). *As You Like It*, starring Ashcroft as Rosalind, Tudor as Celia and Fox as Orlando, was produced at The Old Vic and Sadler's Wells between 31 October and 19 November 1932. The acting, especially Ashcroft's, attracted praise particularly for her: "splendid performance as Rosalind and Valerie Tudor's serene Celia"⁴⁷⁶. Sickert was particularly enamoured of Ashcroft: "No one can have spoken the poems of Shakespeare more exquisitely than Peggy Ashcroft does"⁴⁷⁷.

'As You Like It' Peggy Ashcroft as Rosalind: 'Wear this for me', based on a photograph of the original production reveals much about Sickert's selection of imagery

noted: "he rather liked playing the part of an elderly person". Ashcroft, "Sketch for a Portrait". IPLA WRS Coll. Box 12. Their relationship was also, apparently, more physical than that of Sickert and Ffrangcon-Davies's. It was well rumoured that Ashcroft had an affair with Sickert. O'Connor, *The Secret Woman: A Life of Peggy Ashcroft*, 27. Ashcroft seemingly admitted this to the author Richard Brooks. Sturgis, *op. cit.*, 588.

⁴⁷⁶ R.L.V., *The Era*, 2 November 1932, 11. *The Stage* thought Ashcroft: "spiritual and vivacious, as well as engaging [as] Rosalind". 3 November 1932, 14.

⁴⁷⁷ Sickert, "Sadler's Wells" *The Times*, 26 October 1932. Gruetzner Robins, *op. cit.*, 622. A subtle reference to Ashcroft's acting ability can be seen in Sickert's discussion on the use of over reliance on photography: "...a 'camera lucida' tracing betrays itself at once by an accuracy unattainable by eye and hand. It is the difference between the bubbling of a Rosalind recited by an actor or tickled by a metronome". "Aids to the Painter", *The Daily Telegraph*, 7 October 1932. Gruetzner Robins, *op. cit.*, 621. He returned to the play, minus Ashcroft, for his 1937-38 work *'As You Like It': A Theatrical Incident* which was based on a 1937 production at The New Theatre with Edith Evans as Rosalind and Marie Ney as Celia. His decision to return to this particular production may have been inspired by the recent release (1936) of a filmed version of the play starring Laurence Olivier and Elisabeth Bergner.

[Fig.'s 3.20 & 3.21].⁴⁷⁸ The scene (and painting) depicts the moment Rosalind proclaims her love for Orlando (Act I, Scene 2) with the gift of a chain from her neck and the statement: "Wear this for me - one out of suits with fortune, That could give more but that her hand lacks means"⁴⁷⁹. In contrast to the original photograph, Sickert has seemingly cropped Valerie Tudor from the composition, thereby highlighting the symbolic moment of the gift. Simultaneously, Sickert has rejected the modernist and semi-cubist landscape evident in the photograph for the more pastoral French duchy of Arden. In terms of aesthetic construction, therefore, Sickert has deliberately rejected certain elements of abstraction which he felt uncomfortable with.

Following the previously mentioned *Juliet and her Nurse* (c.1935-36) Sickert used another New Theatre/Old Vic production as subject matter in a series of images based on Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*. The production, which ran between 23 March and 01 May 1937, was generally well received ("Claud Gurney turns it into an extremely lively pantomime"⁴⁸⁰) and it was noted for its avant-garde staging, which included amongst other disparate elements a: "live greyhound, a stuffed hawk, [and a] pantomime horse"⁴⁸¹. Sickert painted two versions with the same title, '*The Taming of the Shrew*', both based on contemporary publicity photographs, at some point in 1937 [see for example Fig.'s 3.22 & 3.23] and another composite image; *Taming of the Shrew: Leslie Banks, Edith Evans and Peggy Ashcroft* also from 1937.⁴⁸²

The play held a natural appeal for Sickert. Its structure included a play-within-a-play and it experimented with multiple identities. It was also, at its heart, concerned with

⁴⁷⁸ A copy of the original photograph can be found in V&A TMA, *As You Like It*, Old Vic 1932, Production File.

⁴⁷⁹ Shakespeare, "As You Like It", Wells & Taylor, *op. cit.*, Act I, Scene 2: Lines 235-236, 632.

⁴⁸⁰ *The Stage*, 25 March 1937, 11.

⁴⁸¹ *The New Statesman and Nation*, 3 April 1937, 555.

⁴⁸² At no point did Ashcroft act in the play therefore Sickert's inclusion was wishful thinking. Banks played Petruchio, Evans was Katharina, perhaps he thought Ashcroft would make a good Bianca. 'The Taming of the Shrew' was based on a photograph printed in *The Times* 24 March 1937.

the relationship of the sexes. The play's introduction concerns the character of the beggar Christopher Sly who, whilst drunk, is tricked by a Lord into thinking he himself is a Lord and his present unfortunate predicament was simply a dream (shades of the tale of the Tichborne Claimant perhaps?). As entertainment the real Lord and his players decide to act out the story of the Shrew for Sly.

Of the three, the portrait of Leslie Banks as Petruchio and Edith Evans as Katharine is undoubtedly the most interesting for Sickert [Fig's 3.24 & 3.25].⁴⁸³ Sickert depicts a scene of high theatrical passion. In his version of *The Taming of the Shrew* Sickert chose to focus on the key relationship between Petruchio and Katharine, and the moment of final submission of the shrew ("renowned in Padua for her scolding tongue"⁴⁸⁴) into the arms of Petruchio: "So I to her, and so she yields to me, For I am rough, and woo not like a babe"⁴⁸⁵. For Sickert this moment lay at the heart of the play's drama. His treatment and choice of subject matter highlighted the fact that, regardless of set design, costume, etc. (and by extension regardless of any aesthetic modernism) the root of the play's (and subsequently art's) appeal was the human relationship between these two characters.

After Sickert's series of depictions of seventeenth and eighteenth-century playwright's work it is perhaps surprising to find him paint a number of images which illustrate modern playwrights. However, his choice of subject is perhaps not that unusual when analysing the plays themselves. Pirandello's melodramatic play *The Life that I Gave Him*, produced at The Little Theatre between 4 and 20 October 1934, provided Sickert the inspiration for *Peggy Ashcroft and Nancy Price in 'The Life that I Gave Him'* (c.1934-36).⁴⁸⁶ The play, concerning a mother's initial refusal, and ultimate acceptance, of the death of her son when she has to confront his pregnant mistress was regarded as: "third-rate

⁴⁸³ The painting was based on a photograph by Houston Rogers printed in *The Taming of the Shrew*, Souvenir programme, London 1937, 5.

⁴⁸⁴ Shakespeare, "The Taming of the Shrew", Wells & Taylor, *op. cit.*, Act I, Scene 2: Line 99, 33.

⁴⁸⁵ Wells & Taylor, *ibid.*, Act II, Scene 1, 136-137, 36.

⁴⁸⁶ Although likely to have been based on a publicity photograph I have been unable to trace its source.

Pirandello [and] half-hearted” by *The Era*.⁴⁸⁷ Nanny Price played the grieving mother along with Alistair Sim as the father, Ashcroft played the mistress Lucia Maubel: “as the realistically seeing girl the dead man left behind” and was generally regarded as being the best thing about the production.⁴⁸⁸ The subject may seem, initially, an unusual topic for Sickert. The play was modern (it was written in 1924) however its subject matter of troubled relationship and familial problems shares thematic concerns with his Camden Town works.⁴⁸⁹

Undoubtedly inspired by Ashcroft’s influence, Sickert followed *Peggy Ashcroft and Nancy Price in ‘The Life that I Gave Him’* with his only direct depiction of a Chekhov play: *Peggy Ashcroft as Nina in ‘The Seagull’* (1936-37) [Fig. 3.26]. Ashcroft was fascinated by the Moscow Theatre since she had read Constantin Stanislavsky’s *My Life in Art* in the mid-1920s and her understanding of performance (particularly Chekhov) was undoubtedly influenced by his advice: “All those who try to ‘act’, or ‘pretend’ when taking part in Chekhov’s plays are making a sad mistake. One should become part of his plays, one should live them, have one’s being in them, and follow the deeply buried arteries through which their emotions flow as blood flows from the heart”⁴⁹⁰. Shortly after reading Stanislavsky she came into contact with the director Theodore Komisarjevsky (her future husband) at a small theatre in Church Road, Barnes where he was producing a short series of Russian plays.⁴⁹¹ Komisarjevsky’s interest in naturalism was a particular draw for

⁴⁸⁷ *The Era*, 10 October 1934, 12.

⁴⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁴⁸⁹ The painting is held in a private collection. A photograph of Ashcroft in character was printed in the programme of the play, a copy of which can be found in V&A TMA, *The Life that I Gave Him*, The Little Theatre October 1934, Production File.

⁴⁹⁰ Stanislavsky, *My Life in Art*, as quoted in A. Chekhov, “The Seagull”. Reprinted in Elisaveta Fen (translator), *Anton Chekhov: Plays* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980), 8.

⁴⁹¹ These consisted of Chekhov’s *Uncle Vanya* (January 1926) with Jean Forbes-Robertson as Sonya and *Three Sisters* with John Gielgud as Baron Tusenbach (February 1926) as well as Leonid Andreyev’s *Katerina* (March 1926) and Gogol’s *The Government Inspector* with Charles Laughton (April 1926). Komisarjevsky was briefly married to Ashcroft between 1933 and 1934.

Ashcroft: “With the two Chekhov plays especially ... one knew one was seeing something the like of which had not been seen on the English stage before: everyday life recreated with total fidelity. Komis [*sic*] also had a wonderful eye for lighting and I can still recall the leaping shadows of the fire reflected on the bedroom wall during the third act of *Three Sisters*.....”⁴⁹²

The painting was inspired by Komisarjevsky’s production at The New Theatre between May and August 1936.⁴⁹³ The production also starred John Gielgud as Trigorin (Nina’s lover) and Edith Evans, who gave: “a fine piece of full blooded characterisation as Arkadina” (the mother of the unsuccessful Treplyov who loves Nina).⁴⁹⁴ The play was a notable success for Ashcroft, who delivered a “tender, sensitive performance”⁴⁹⁵. M.R. of *The Era* thought Ashcroft particularly successful as “a tragically lovely flower forced to a dreadful, premature full-bloom”⁴⁹⁶.

The play details the various love triangles of a collection of unhappy and frustrated characters who gather at a country house over a period of a few years. The key characters are the actress Arkadina and her lover Trigorin (a successful writer⁴⁹⁷) Trigorin, Arkadina’s son Treplyov a playwright and Nina a hopeful actress, who Treplyov loves but who idolises Trigorin. The play opens in the gardens of Arkadina’s brother Sorin’s estate, where a rough stage has been erected to present Treplyov’s play. The play, aesthetically, contrasts two forms of theatre, the more traditional and orthodox theatre (as characterised by Arkadina) and the modern, symbolist and rather dense theatre of Treplyov. The juxtaposition of these

⁴⁹² As quoted in Michael Billington, *Peggy Ashcroft 1907-91* (London: Mandarin, 1991), 21.

⁴⁹³ Sickert may have been aware of the play since as early as 1912 as *The Seagull* was also produced by the Adelphi Play Society at Gertrude Kingston’s Little Theatre in 1912.

⁴⁹⁴ M.R., *The Era*, 27 May 1936, 12.

⁴⁹⁵ *The Illustrated London News*, 30 May 1936, 988.

⁴⁹⁶ M.R., *The Era*, 27 May 1936, 12.

⁴⁹⁷ Treplyov describes Trigorin’s work as: “very clever and charming but... if you’ve been reading Tolstoy, or Zola, you don’t feel like reading Trigorin afterwards”. Chekhov, “The Seagull”, Fen, *Anton Chekhov: Plays*, Act I, 124.

two styles is clear in Arkadina's mocking of the play and Treplyov's obvious disgust at the mediocre theatre: "...when I hear them trying to squeeze a moral out of the tritest words and emptiest scenes - some petty little moral that's easy to understand and suitable for use in the house; when I'm presented with a thousand variations of the same old thing, the same thing again and again - well, I just have to escape, I run away as Maupassant ran away from the Eiffel Tower which so oppressed him with its vulgarity"⁴⁹⁸. The main character of the play; the "soul of the world" is to be played by Nina, who Treplyov loves and, as the schoolmaster Medviedenko mistakenly notes, through the play: "their souls will be merged in an attempt to create a single work of art"⁴⁹⁹. Nina, in actuality, prefers Trigorin.⁵⁰⁰ It is Treplyov's failure to finish his play and also, ultimately, his failure to win the love of Nina (and similarly the love of his mother) from Trigorin that drives the play.

The seagull of the title refers to one which the troubled Treplyov has shot and presented to Nina and which, under Trigorin's influence, she identifies herself with. As Trigorin describes it towards the end of Act II: "An idea suddenly came into my head. A subject for a short story: a young girl, like you, has lived beside a lake from childhood. She loves the lake as a seagull does, and she's happy and free as a seagull. But a man chances to come along, sees her, and having nothing better to do, destroys her, just like this seagull here"⁵⁰¹. The seagull therefore becomes a symbolist metaphor for innocence destroyed by indifference. Clearly, in Trigorin's head the 'man' is Treplyov (who also sees himself as the seagull and intends to kill himself in the same way in Act II⁵⁰²). Ironically, it is Trigorin

⁴⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 123.

⁴⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 119.

⁵⁰⁰ Nina to Trigorin (Act II): "What a wonderful world you live in! How I envy you - if only you knew! ... How different people's destinies are! Some just drag out their obscure, tedious existences, all very much like one another, and all unhappy. And there are others - like you for instance, one in a million - who are given an interesting life, a life that is radiant and full of significance. You are fortunate!" *Ibid.*, 147.

⁵⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 151.

⁵⁰² Between Act II and Act III Treplyov attempts suicide by unsuccessfully shooting himself in the head. His final successful attempt concludes the play.

himself who ultimately destroys Nina, as he later elopes, impregnates and eventually abandons her. The child later dies.

The play riffs on a number of Sickert's interests, therefore it is natural that it was a production he would choose to depict. Before Treplyov's play starts Arkadina quotes some passages from *Hamlet*. On one hand this immediately sets up a contrast between the theatre of the past and the symbolist theatre of Treplyov, it also forces the audience to connect (and contrast) the (self-misunderstood) Treplyov with Shakespeare's melancholic and sensitive Prince.⁵⁰³ At its most basic, this is seen as a contrast between the "old" and the "new". This is extended through Arkadina's later criticism of Treplyov's play: "I'm even prepared to listen to mad ravings for the sake of a joke, but here we have pretensions to new creative forms, to a new era in art. To my way of thinking, there are no new forms in this stuff at all, just a display of bad temper"⁵⁰⁴.

For the portrait, Sickert focused on Ashcroft in character as Nina and her: "soul of the world" innocence.⁵⁰⁵ As few photographs of the production exist, it is difficult to identify which point in the play is depicted - however Ashcroft's distant and pensive gaze certainly captures Nina's character. Typically, Sickert focuses the viewer's attention on the actress mid-performance and rejects any peripheral scenery which could obstruct the viewer's attention. By removing any narrative props Sickert suggests that all human experience lies in Ashcroft's pose and expression thereby highlighting her acting ability - he forces the viewer to concentrate on the acting talent of Peggy Ashcroft and her ability to convey a mood rather than, perhaps, the dilemmas of the character portrayed. In essence he is instructing the viewer to acknowledge the inner drama of the character, in a way his portrait reflects Stanislavsky's verdict of Chekhov: "His plays are full of action, not in their

⁵⁰³ A further aspect which undoubtedly interested Sickert was the inclusion of a play-within-a-play scenario.

⁵⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 131.

⁵⁰⁵ The full length composition clearly recalls his earlier portraits of music-hall performers, particularly *Minnie Cunningham* (1892).

external but in their inner development. In the very inactivity of his characters a complex inner activity is concealed”⁵⁰⁶.

In theatrical terms it is no surprise that this particular play attracted Sickert’s attention; it starred his (current) favourite actress, it recalled themes familiar to his earlier work and it acknowledged and honoured earlier dramatists. Undoubtedly, it also interested him due to its clear debate on the merits of old and new theatrical models (which, for Sickert, were also a metaphor for his perceived crisis in modern painting). With its play-within-a-play and citation of Shakespeare (both in terms of text and character) here, for Sickert, was an example of a “modern” writer not only acknowledging “traditional” references but utilizing them in a positive and progressive way. In terms of his contemporaries seeming rejection of their artistic past perhaps Sickert would have agreed with Trigorin’s opinion of Trepylov: “[He] is behaving very tactlessly. First he shoots himself, and now they say he’s going to challenge me to a duel. Whatever for? He sulks and snorts, and preaches new forms of art. ... But there’s room enough for all, for new and old alike. Why does he have to push and shove?”⁵⁰⁷

⁵⁰⁶ Stanislavsky, *My Life in Art*. As quoted in, *ibid.*, 7.

⁵⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 153.

Interpreting the Theatre c.1920-1940: II

...it seems a rather daring instance of reversing the classic experiment of putting new wine into an old bottle. Here an old wine is put into a new bottle. ... As a picture the production is remarkable... How far it is Shakespeare is another question.

The Stage, 1937⁵⁰⁸

We are offered the axiom that a picture must not be literary. We might rather say that a picture need not be tawdry literature. That the story in paint should be well, and not badly, told.

Walter Sickert, 1926⁵⁰⁹

Clearly, Sickert's late theatrical portraits expose much about his own artistic agenda yet they also reveal much about the changing face of early twentieth-century British theatre. In terms of his technique and his interest in combining traditional subject matter with a modernist process they reveal a curious, yet hesitant, fascination with modern aesthetic considerations. His defence of an, albeit ambiguous, narrative subject matter is obvious, yet he also explores modernist concerns, particularly through his physical construction of images.

As an old actor, Sickert also had an interest in the *type* of theatre productions being produced. His choice of (predominantly) sixteenth and seventeenth-century plays as staged for the twentieth-century theatre provided a metaphor for his solution to the crisis (in his eyes) of modernism. Completely aware of the "rediscovery" of Shakespeare, particularly in terms of modern production values and techniques applied to traditional plays, Sickert

⁵⁰⁸ Reviewing the New Theatre/Old Vic production of Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* (March-May 1937). *The Stage*, 25 March 1937, 11.

⁵⁰⁹ Sickert, "Manchester City Art Gallery: Holman Hunt and the Pre-Raphaelites" *Manchester Guardian*, 8 March 1926. Gruetzner Robins, *op. cit.*, 540.

undoubtedly saw a parallel with Art. It was symbolic of how an artist could combine a traditional subject with modern aesthetics. Sickert's solution would see him utilize "old subjects" (Victorian prints, productions of Shakespeare) but present them in "new ways"; or, to paraphrase the critic for *The Stage*, put old wine into a new bottle. In Sickert's case the "old wine" was the problem arising from addressing those traditional elements of painting now considered anathema to his contemporaries (drama, narrative, the figurative) and the "new bottle" those elements considered fundamental to the modernists (symbolism, formalism and abstraction).

Sickert's choices of particular productions were also manipulated to illustrate his natural interest in drama and human interest stories. His selections were never solely designed to illustrate an aesthetic concern, in most cases his choice of subject matter was decided by the value of the subject's dramatic qualities. They were selected because they had some significance for the artist in terms of their dramatic content and atmosphere. Fundamentally, Sickert's choices all shared similar universal themes (which also fascinated dramatists from Shakespeare to Chekhov); predominantly the concern with male and female relationships. However they also explore theatrical conceits which had fascinated Sickert since his own early experiences as an actor; the concept of identity (particularly in terms of role-reversal) and the theatricality and insubstantiality of the theatrical experience (especially in relation to the 'truthfulness' of photography and painting). These concerns manifested themselves through particularly loaded scenes and images.

Ultimately, Sickert's faith in the dramatic value of these subjects is solid as long as the subjects (and performers) are sincere. For Sickert, the crux of this problem lay in capturing the ephemeral and transitory nature of the theatrical experience, whilst retaining the sincerity of the subject and performance. In this sense, Sickert was trying to capture the impossible on canvas, something ephemeral and idiosyncratic. In essence it was a playwright's daydream he was trying to snare; elusive and transitory, yet it shared concerns with Granville-Barker:

...great plays will always, I think, be found to be balanced constructions of character ... Shakespeare is intent upon showing us and upon emphasising not what they [his characters] do, but what they are. ... Now if drama makes this demand only poetry can fulfil it. To consider verbal expression alone, we need some use of words of a more than rational power. Because with presentation of character involved, it is a question not merely of what a man thinks he knows about himself (or whatever part of that, rather, he may be willing to disclose; and a very partial and misleading revelation this would be!), but, added to this, and by far the more important, the things about himself he does *not* know.⁵¹⁰

As Granville-Barker and Sickert both noted, successful drama rested on an observation of human character. For Sickert, this interest would reveal itself through a study of the human figure as seen through the proscenium arch of the stage. In essence, perhaps, the late works marked Sickert's return to his past, both in terms of subject matter and also an attempt to capture the aesthetics and atmosphere of the theatre; but it also saw a marked and deliberate artistic declaration to return to the human figure as source and inspiration for all forms of drama, whether that be painting or the theatre. As Sickert succinctly declared: "The proper study of mankind is man"⁵¹¹.

⁵¹⁰ Granville-Barker, *On Poetry in Drama* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1937), 32-34.

⁵¹¹ Sickert, "A great Renoir" *Southport Visitor*, 24 May 1924. Gruetzner Robins, *op. cit.*, 497.

Act IV: Sickert's Simulacrum: Representations and Characterisations of the Artist in Texts, Portraits and Self-Portraits c.1880 - c.1940

Sickert was a chameleon... a *poseur*: he belonged to an age of *poseurs*, the age of Wilde and Huysmans and Whistler.

Clive Bell, 1944⁵¹²

...the actor must have a double personality. He has his first self, which is the player, and his second self, which is the instrument This dual personality is the characteristic of the actor.

Benoit Constant Coquelin, 1887⁵¹³

The usefulness and credibility of anecdotal information is always questionable for historians. An anecdote by its very definition is a loose and potentially false piece of information. While a successful anecdote may reveal a facet of the essential spirit of its subject, its value lies not in its truthfulness but in its suggestion of authentic character. In essence, it tends towards a fleeting, and heightened, theatrical extension of the personality of its subject. As a result, in standard textual biographical terms, an anecdote can be extremely misleading but equally insightful and valid.

There is, of course, a further form of anecdote, separate from text, but equally challenging and one which is especially pertinent for a painter. The role of portraiture, both in terms of the self and portraits of the subject by others, is one which should also be approached with caution. In many cases, portraits can tend towards idealism, or at worst sentimentalism. However, like the textual anecdote, their value lies in their suggestion of

⁵¹² C. Bell, "Sickert", *The Cornhill Magazine*, May 1944, No. 962, 22.

⁵¹³ B.C. Coquelin, "Acting and Actors", *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, Vol. LXXIV, No. CCCCXLIV, May 1887, 891.

temperament and character. A portrait's physical properties also suggests a more veracious quality; by its physical existence its reliability is seemingly substantiated.

Sickert's ambiguous and mercurial personality has previously proved awkward for biographers; his extravagant theatrical excesses excused rather than explored.⁵¹⁴ However, by peeling away the multitude of anecdotes surrounding him (both in terms of text and portraiture) an echo of Sickert's true character and personality can be grasped. Through a close reading of the interpretations and representations of the artist through particular texts, portraits and self-portraits it can be shown Sickert was not only a painter interested in the theatre as a subject for his art but had an obsessively theatrical personality. Therefore, with a consideration of these interpretations, a more fuller and substantial understanding of his artistic aims and influences can be achieved.

Throughout his career Sickert continually utilized the theatre as visual source and inspiration for his art. As an actor, the concept of identity and drama was vitally important and it is no surprise to see him utilize both in the creation of his work.⁵¹⁵ Its influence spread and filtered through every aspect of his life. The theatre was such a vital ingredient of Sickert's psychological make-up that it permeated all aspects of his character - Sickert

⁵¹⁴ As Anna Gruetzner Robins notes: "His personal biography suggests a fluid set of artistic and national identities that appears to challenge any essentialist positioning of his work". Anna Gruetzner Robins "Walter Sickert and the Language of Art", in G. Brockington, *Internationalism and the Arts in Britain and Europe at the Fin de Siècle. Cultural Interactions: Studies in the Relationship between the Arts, Vol. 4.* (Germany: Peter Lang, 2009), 28.

⁵¹⁵ For more on Sickert and identity see David Peters Corbett "'Gross Material Facts': Sexuality, identity and the city in Walter Sickert, 1905-1910", *Art History*. Vol. 21. No. 1, March 1998, 45-64; Gruetzner Robins, *ibid.*, and Susan Sidlauskas, "Walter Sickert's *Ennui*", *Body, Place, and Self in Nineteenth Century Painting* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2000) 124-149. Anna Gruetzner Robins has recently examined Sickert's identity in its European context but avoids the influence of the theatre as a source of influence: "... Sickert's national identity (or identities) should be seen as a floating signifier, a holding space for diverse and conflicting expressions of Englishness and 'un-Englishness'". Gruetzner Robins "Walter Sickert and the Language of Art", *op. cit.*, 47.

literally *thought* the theatre. This ultimately led Sickert to adopt the characteristics of an actor in public life and to adapt his persona depending on the social situation. Sickert frequently played different “roles” outside the studio and the character of “Walter Sickert” extended into public performance. His shifting character was legendary: “a dozen true and striking portraits of different persons contained in the same man. He was protean”⁵¹⁶. The public’s interpretation of “Walter Sickert - the Painter” was a combination of self-indulgent polemic, myth, anecdote and eccentricity. Consequently, this was extremely beneficial for the artist; the character of “Walter Sickert” attracted a great deal of publicity. Indeed, towards the end of his life Sickert’s celebrity often attracted more words than his artwork. Articles and biographies emphasized the fickle and eccentric aspects of his character rather than discuss his work. Whilst Sickert took on this role with great gusto, problems would arise when the performance became at odds with the reality of the labouring artist and this frequently distracted attention from Sickert’s artistic seriousness leading to a number of misinterpretations of his true character. As Clive Bell noted; “[you] could never feel sure that their Sickert was Sickert’s Sickert, or that Sickert’s Sickert corresponded with any ultimate reality”⁵¹⁷. This contrast; between truth and reality, private and public, between the ‘I’ (the self) and the social ‘me’ (the self as seen by others) would ultimately become a twentieth century obsession.⁵¹⁸

Clearly, one of the strongest sources to explore Sickert’s interpretation of his self is through his various self-portraits. A portrait is not simply a visual mimesis of a person. A successful portrait reveals the inner thoughts, personality, character and psychology of its

⁵¹⁶ O. Sitwell, *A Free House! Or, The Artist as Craftsman: Being the Writings of Walter Richard Sickert* (London: Macmillan, 1947), xxii. As C.J. Holmes similarly noted: “I am easily taken in. Before a lunch at St James’s with the ladies Cleichen [c.1927], I was introduced to a trim-bearded gentleman in plus-fours. His name I did not catch, but he looked like the typical artist of the ’eighties in a Du Maurier drawing. At table he sat just opposite, and suddenly made such a jest as only one man known to me could make:- it was the protean Walter Sickert”. Holmes. *Self and Partners* (London: Constable, 1936), 359.

⁵¹⁷ Bell, “Sickert”. *The Cornhill Magazine*, 22.

⁵¹⁸ A useful discussion on the concept of the private ‘I’ and the public ‘me’ can be found in G.H. Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1934).

subject. Similarly it exposes the painter's moods, fears, hopes, and ultimately discloses the painter's interpretation of the self (whether real or imagined). Sickert was entirely aware of this value of a portrait and the requirement of an artist to extend beyond mere visual imitation:

...the usual complaint of a painter who paints a portrait is that the sitter will not consent to accept the painter's version of his subject, and the painter is very indignant because the sitter will not accept his version. On the other hand, the painter will be found to be extremely indignant if the critic does not accept the painter's own version, the painter's own estimate of the quality of his work⁵¹⁹.

Ultimately, the inner character is the essence of the subject: "We should be perfect fools if we thought that all we had to do to learn as to draw nearly as well as a photograph. We have to do with the subject something similar to what is done by an actor with a role in the theatre..."⁵²⁰

This interest in the authentic character of Sickert was not limited to the artist's self-portraits. Intriguingly, characters based on Sickert made fairly regular appearances in print both during his lifetime and after his death. Sometimes his identity was only loosely described, and his appearance would occasionally warrant nothing more than a cameo. At others, writers highlighted characteristics and habits which they had witnessed directly and exaggerated them for the purposes of their narratives. In particular there tends towards a fascination with the identification and character of his studios, his constant "costume" changes (including his dramatic appearances and unusual behaviour) and also, to a

⁵¹⁹ Sickert, "Straws from Cumberland Market." *Southport Visitor*, 24 January 1924. Reprinted in Anna Gruetzner Robins (ed), *Walter Sickert: The Complete Writings on Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 471.

⁵²⁰ Sickert, "Squaring up a drawing", lecture at the Margate School of Art, delivered on the 2 November 1934. Gruetzner Robins, *ibid.*, 637.

peculiarly detailed extent, an obsession with his facial hair.⁵²¹ This development is not unexpected when we consider Sickert's own confession, to Virginia Woolf, that his works were more than mere paintings: "Clive gave a party for me to meet Sickert the other night and was at his best ... I am committed to write and write and write about Sickert's books – he says they are not pictures"⁵²².

Whilst precariously avoiding the traditional pitfall of biographical dualism particularly associated with theatrical biography (what Thomas Postlewait identifies as: "face and mask, presence and absence, private and public personality, life and art"⁵²³) it is possible, through an examination of both portraits and self-portraits of Sickert, as well as written descriptions of his character, to develop a more detailed analysis of Sickert's personality and his interest in, and debt to, the theatre.

⁵²¹ A typical example is provided by Eric Newton who recalled meeting Sickert in his later years: "He wasn't a retired old sea-dog, he wasn't an inspired Bohemian. He was just Sickert playing the part of himself as a very old man indeed. ...He was actually 76 at the time, but he behaved as though he were ninety". E. Newton, "As I knew him: A Personal Portrait". Radio Broadcast Transcript, Monday 1 October 1951. London, Islington Public Library Archive. Walter Richard Sickert Collection. Box 12.

⁵²² V. Woolf to Q. Bell, 21 December 1933. Reprinted in Nigel Nicolson (ed), *The Sickle Side of the Moon: The letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume V: 1932-1935* (London: Hogarth Press, 1979), 261-262.

⁵²³ T. Postlewait, "Autobiography and Theatre History" in T. Postlewait & A. McConachie (eds), *Interpreting the Theatrical Past: Essays in the Historiography of Performance* (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 1989), 259.

Walter Richard Sickert in Portraits and Novels c.1880 - c.1940

“The sitter is merely the accident, the occasion. It is not he who is revealed by the painter; it is rather the painter who, on the coloured canvas, reveals himself. The reason I will not exhibit this picture is that I am afraid that I have shown in it the secret of my own soul.”

‘Basil Hallward’, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 1891⁵²⁴

The proper criticism of a portrait is a consideration of its value as a criticism on the sitter...

Walter Sickert, 1897⁵²⁵

One of the first painted portraits of Sickert, by Wilhelm Füssli, depicted the three-year old Walter holding an apple in his nightshirt and was regarded by its subject as his “first appearance on any stage as Hamlet”⁵²⁶. His next portrait, aged twelve, saw him take on the role of the young Horatio Nelson for George W. Joy’s painting *Thirty Years Before Trafalgar: young Nelson and his grandmother*.⁵²⁷ Even within these two extremely early examples, Sickert’s physical depiction on canvas was seen through particular roles or referenced theatrical interpretations. In addition, the various photographs and portraits of Sickert from the 1880s and 1890s not only illustrate his constantly changing appearance but also his developing character and emerging artistic interests. As a young man, it was natural that Sickert would role-play with different personalities and appearances. What is

⁵²⁴ O. Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Press, 2001 first published 1891), 8. As Wilde tellingly stated in his preface: “To reveal art and conceal the artist is art’s aim”. *Ibid.*, 3

⁵²⁵ W. Sickert, “The Royal Academy” *The Speaker*, 15 May 1897. Gruetzner Robins, *op. cit.*, 168.

⁵²⁶ The painting is now lost. H.M. Swanwick, *I Have Been Young* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1935), 32-33.

⁵²⁷ The painting was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1883 (when Sickert was twenty-three therefore the preliminary work must have been done around 1872. V.O. Fuller, ‘The Letters [of Walter Sickert to Florence Pash]’. As quoted in Matthew Sturgis, *Walter Sickert: A Life* (London: Harper Collins, 2005), 42.

remarkable, however, is the sheer range of transformations he adopts throughout this period and beyond. Each portrait revealed a specific aspect of his character and as a result had its own costume and physical peculiarities.

A pen and ink self-portrait from 1882 provides an early example of Sickert exploring his own features/character for his art [Fig. 4.01]. The image is a fairly standard romantic self-portrait; Sickert broodingly confronts the viewer with a direct, and dramatic, gaze. Sketched only a few months after he had settled on his new artistic career it still retains strong aspects of Sickert the Actor. The portrait directly engages and acknowledges its audience, highlighting the shared relationship between audience and “performer”. Louise Jopling’s portrait (c.1883) [Fig. 4.2] echoes the self-portrait. Sketched roughly contemporaneously with Sickert’s self-portrait it reveals a more adult and more confident character. Typically for Sickert, his hairstyle and facial hair have transformed and the slightly chubby facial features of the self-portrait have slimmed for Jopling’s depiction. Taken as a comparison, the sketches could almost be of two entirely different persons.

The dramatic changes in Sickert’s physical appearance are clearly illustrated in a letter from Sickert’s sister-in-law, Maggie Cobden, to her friend Dorothy Richmond. On a short visit to Ellen, between acting commitments in the late summer of 1880, Sickert showed off his new long hair which “roused from silence” the local fishermen who asked: “Why he robbed the barber?”⁵²⁸ Six weeks later, on his return, Maggie was shocked at the change in his appearance noting his “beautiful locks” were trimmed and the remains “brushed straight up his head like a French boy’s”⁵²⁹. Not long after, he reappeared, this time as dandy in frock coat.⁵³⁰ In turn this outfit too was rejected in favour of a more bohemian one complete with opera hat “of Irving like proportions”⁵³¹. Although these constant changes of

⁵²⁸ M. Cobden to D. Richmond, 18 October 1880. West Sussex Record Office, Chichester, Cobden Archives (Trustees of Dunford House). Cobden Papers, 979.

⁵²⁹ M. Cobden to D. Richmond, 18 & 30 October 1880. WSRO Cobden Papers 979.

⁵³⁰ E.G. Craig, *Index to the Story of My Days* (London: Hulton Press, 1957), 50.

⁵³¹ M. Cobden to D. Richmond, 15 June 1881. WSRO Cobden Papers 979.

appearance and character proved a fascination for Maggie, it was her sister Ellen who eventually married the young painter, and it was she who would provide the world with an early analysis of Sickert's character through her semi-autographical novel *Wistons: A Story in Three Parts*.⁵³²

Ellen's novel, published in 1902, narrates the story of three daughters, one of whom, Esther (clearly based on the author), marries Robin Yaldwyn, a promising but lethargic writer evidently based on Sickert. Through the character of Robin, Ellen provides both an interesting physical reflection of Sickert and a revealing insight into his character:

Robin was tall and strongly slim, he had yellow hair and dark-blue eyes well cut and placed; his lips were beautifully shaped, the line of his jaw from ear to chin could not have been better drawn, there were no blurred outlines, and there was no clumsiness in him. But if clumsiness and tactlessness were latent in any one else, Robin's mere presence seemed to draw out and make apparent these defects, and though he never obtruded his own personality, other men often seemed to lose value by contact with him.⁵³³

Curiously, Ellen's description of Robin echoes Sickert's friend Oscar Wilde's Dorian Gray, that other enigma of identity: "...wonderfully handsome, with his finely-curved scarlet lips, his frank blue eyes, his crisp gold hair. There was something in his face that made one trust him at once. All the candour of youth was there, as well as all youth's passionate purity. One felt that he had kept himself unspoiled from the world. No wonder Basil Hallward worshipped him"⁵³⁴.

⁵³² E.C. Sickert (writing under the pseudonym Miles Amber), *Wistons: A Story in Three Parts* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1902). For following references and to avoid confusion I shall use "Cobden" as the author's name.

⁵³³ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁵³⁴ Wilde, *op. cit.*, 16. A description of the youthful Sickert by his friend William Rothenstein is also illuminating and provides a further connection between the similarities between Robin and Sickert: "people were always rather envious of him, even when he was young and unknown. He had so much, you know; wit,

The relationship of Esther and Robin provides a tantalising insight into Ellen and Sickert's own marriage. Esther's first meeting with Robin was promising, she was fascinated, and describes him as: "more wonderful and more beautiful than it's possible to imagine"⁵³⁵. Like Sickert, Robin too was involved in the arts: "He meant to write a famous novel; he said so very often, 'no one but myself knows what the modern novel should be, and so I've got to do it. Of course, there's no hurry. In fact, I do not mean to hurry, it would be against all my ideas: it would simply be absurd'"⁵³⁶.

Habits, too, were shared. Like Sickert, Robin loved to walk. At first he restricts his habit to country walks during the day but later he disappears at all hours and in all weather: "He walked alone in fine weather and in storms of wind and rain"⁵³⁷. Frequently, Robin would explore different locations, often searching out unusual or unfamiliar locations: "He liked walking, and sometimes started off at random and came back across new country without difficulty or hesitation"⁵³⁸. Sickert's habit of solitary walking was well known amongst his friends:

He was the cat that walked by itself. ... He knew North London like the back of his hand, he could tell us endless stories about the little streets and byways as we went along and pointed out pictures that we hadn't seen. It was another world to us.⁵³⁹

talent, looks, charm, it all came so easily to him ... And he didn't seem to realise how lucky he was. He always thought that everyone could do as he did if they wanted to". As quoted in Marjorie Lilly, *Sickert: The Painter and His Circle* (London: Elek, 1971), 30.

⁵³⁵ Cobden, *op. cit.*, 106. Echoing Sickert's own dual English/Germanic heritage: "It was said of Robin that he was hardly an Englishman, certainly not an Italian; he was just Robin". *Ibid.*, 99.

⁵³⁶ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁵³⁷ *Ibid.*, 158.

⁵³⁸ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁵³⁹ Lilly, *op. cit.*, 45. The love of walking and exploring London's streets often saw Sickert head off into unknown territory for investigation. Lilly noted such an event when, on a foggy morning in January 1918, he

Similarly, Esther's opinion of Robin provides an intriguing insight into Sickert's own interest in duality and frequent physical changes of character. Esther notes Robin's fondness for acquiring his acquaintances' secrets: "It was characteristic of Robin that no one had secrets from him. The cupboards were opened, the family skeletons were revealed, and he rattled them cheerfully and familiarly"⁵⁴⁰. In comparison, Sickert was well known for accumulating gossip: "Before he had been a week in residence at the Firth, he knew every nook and cranny of his own floor and the rambling basement, the names and occupations of the inhabitants, their appearance and their little ways. I never heard that anyone resented his knowledge of their affairs; indeed they all seemed anxious to gratify his curiosity"⁵⁴¹. By the end of Esther's story she has come to resent Robin and their irregular life of: "whirling excitement followed by monotony and flatness"⁵⁴². Her husband was, by now, a stranger to her: "Esther thought of Robin as she had first known him, with sympathies quicker and more sensitive than her own; with a charm that made all who came

suddenly exclaimed a desire to visit Petticoat Lane. Packing his old Gladstone bag he took Lilly and her friend across the city to investigate the area: "Sickert was enjoying himself tremendously. We had to keep a strict eye on him, as every now and then he darted down a side street when he thought he saw a Rabbi or some other elder, sitting on a doorstep.... 'Such a beautiful head! What a *beard*. A perfect Rembrandt...'" *Ibid.*, 20-21.

⁵⁴⁰ Cobden, *op. cit.*, 151.

⁵⁴¹ Lilly, *op. cit.*, 17. Patricia Cornwell also noted this interest, documented by his demands in a letter. Sickert would beg his friends: "Write, write, write!", "Tell me in detail all *sorts* of things, things that have amused you and *how* and *when* and *where*, and all sorts of gossip about everyone". Unfortunately Cornwell fails to provide a full reference to the source of this letter. P. Cornwell, *Portrait of a Killer: Jack the Ripper Case Closed* (London: Little Brown, 2002), 3. Amongst Sickert's acquaintances it was well known that he was the fountain of all gossip. In a letter held in Glasgow University Library to an unidentified recipient from 1892, Whistler mentions the recent scandal concerning Sydney Starr and Sickert's knowledge of it: "I don't know what happened: - - you had better ask Sickert to come to dinner to learn all about it..." Glasgow University Library. MS Whistler W996.

⁵⁴² Cobden, *op. cit.*, 148.

into his presence happier. Now he seemed nebulous; like a vapour he was always assuming some new and unfamiliar shape”⁵⁴³.

Whilst Ellen provides the Sickert scholar with an intriguing insight into their married life and Sickert’s habits and characteristics, his own self-portraits, and portraits by his contemporaries also reveal the ever-changing physicality of Sickert. By the mid 1880s Sickert had fallen under the spell of both Whistler and Degas and portraits from the period illustrate the effect the two had on, not only his art, but his physical appearance. In the 1880s Sickert and his fellow Whistlerians would: “rig themselves out on Latin Quarter lines, with huge bows of ribbon outside their coats instead of ties, and he used to look quite picturesque with an enormous flaxen moustache”⁵⁴⁴. Sickert the actor became Sickert the dandy and spoke, painted and dressed in the “picturesque” manner like his master.⁵⁴⁵ Under Degas’s influence his outfits and facial appearance became more formal echoing the older artist’s physical conventionalism [Fig. 4.03].

An interesting insight into Sickert’s fluctuating identity during this period is witnessed in Philip Wilson Steer’s portrait of Sickert (c.1894) [Fig. 4.04] and two of Sickert’s own self-portraits; *L’Homme à la Palette* (c.1894) [Fig. 4.05] and *Self-Portrait* (c.1896), [Fig. 4.06]. Steer’s portrait presents Sickert as a dashing, elegant and professional young man. The only clue to his profession are the canvases in the background. In contrast *L’Homme à la Palette* presents the painter in the pose of the Whistlerian dandy. Dressed smartly he holds the tools of his craft. Tellingly, the face is only very loosely defined perhaps highlighting Sickert’s uncertainty at classifying his identity so rigidly as Painter.

Self-Portrait (c.1896) [Fig. 4.06] echoes the earlier portraits. Sickert stares moodily at his audience. Rejecting the inclusion of props and concentrating on his own facial

⁵⁴³ Cobden, *op. cit.*, 148. Ellen divorced Sickert in 1899, the novel was published in 1902. Sickert found it “amazingly good”. Sickert to W. Eden, n.d. (c.1902), Birmingham University, Special Collection, AP22/23/1.

⁵⁴⁴ H. Vivian, *Myself Not Least* (London: T. Butterworth, 1925), 129-130.

⁵⁴⁵ L. Jopling, *Twenty Years of My Life* (London: John Lane/Bodley Head. 1925), 227.

features the painting achieves a remarkable degree of dramatic intensity. In contrast to *L'Homme à la Palette* the image reveals the inner psychology of the artist, it is a painting of Sickert the man rather than Sickert the professional painter. Compare these two to the portraits by his friends from roughly the same period; a lithograph of Sickert by Whistler from 1895 [Fig. 4.07] and a portrait by Jacques-Emile Blanche from 1898 [Fig. 4.08] and there is a marked difference. Whistler's portrait presents Sickert as the perfect Whistlerian, nonchalantly sitting for his self-consciously informal portrait; a picture of refinement and dandyism. Blanche's portrait presents a similarly casual Sickert. In each example the artist presents a strand of Sickert's personality as they see it (and as Sickert wishes it to be seen) and highlight characteristics from his spectrum of personalities. In a sense this duality recalled Sickert's experiences with Whistler and Degas. In Whistler's case William Merritt Chase's character study deliberately contrasted the two sides of the artist:

One was Whistler in public – the fop, the cynic, the brilliant, flippant, vain, and careless idler; the other was Whistler of the studio – the earnest, tireless, somber worker, a very slave to his art, a bitter foe to all pretense and sham, an embodiment of simplicity almost to the point of diffidence, an incarnation of earnestness and sincerity of purpose. ... [The public Whistler was] a dainty, sprightly little man, immaculate in spotless linen and perfect-fitting broadcloth. He wore yellow gloves and carried his wand poised lightly in his hand. He seemed inordinately proud of his small feet and slender waist; his slight imperial and black mustache were carefully waxed; his monocle was indispensable.⁵⁴⁶

⁵⁴⁶ W.M. Chase, "The Two Whistlers: Recollections of a Summer with the Great Etcher", *Century Magazine*, 57. June 1910, 222-223. Menpes's *Whistler As I Knew Him* (London: Macmillan, 1904), can also be seen in this light. Sickert's "New Life of Whistler" (*Fortnightly Review*, December 1908. Gruetzner Robins, *op. cit.*, 178-188) would provide a similar character study. See also Jonathan Shirland, "'A Singularity of Appearance Counts Doubly in a Democracy of Clothes': Whistler, Fancy Dress and the Camping of Artists' Dress in the Late Nineteenth Century." *Visual Culture in Britain*, Volume 8, Issue 1, Summer 2007, 15-35, Andrew Stephenson "Buttressing bohemian mystiques and bandaging masculine anxieties" *Art History*. Vol. 17, No.2. June 1994, 269-278 and Andrew Stephenson's "Precarious Poses: the Problem of Artistic Visibility and its Homosocial Performances in Late-Nineteenth-Century London." *Visual Culture in Britain*, Volume 8, Issue 1, Summer 2007, 73-103 and "Refashioning modern masculinity: Whistler, aestheticism and national

In contrast was the private Whistler: "...at work since early morning, working like a fiend – and, in truth, looking like a fiend as he worked. The monocle of the night before had been laid aside for an unsightly pair of iron spectacles, so heavy that they were clumsily wrapped with cloth where they rested on his nose. His hair was uncombed; he was carelessly dressed"⁵⁴⁷.

The interpretation of Sickert by his artist and writer friends perfectly illustrates the many facets of Sickert's character. An illustration of the extreme character/costume changes of Sickert is provided by Max Beerbohm as part of his "The Old and the Young Self" series of 1924 [Fig. 4.09]. Beerbohm presents the 1920s Sickert reproaching his 1880s self: "Old Self: "No, you didn't think you were going to become a Master, and an Oracle, did you? You thought Jimmy Whistler was the last of the Oracles and Masters, didn't you? hmm, *p'tit imbecile*?" Beerbohm highlights the physical changes on Sickert through the previous forty years and uses Sickert's contrasting "costumes" to identify his separate selves. Sickert also appears in a very loose disguise as "Richard Dritter, the great painter" in Wyndham Lewis's novel *The Roaring Queen* with a: "great roguish Ninetyish voice, and with a high-hearted Ninetyish cackle"⁵⁴⁸. Dritter (who had "oddly tweed-clad legs" and had a "bristling beard"⁵⁴⁹) was a conundrum to the main protagonists of Lewis's novel and echoes Sickert's idiosyncratic character in particular his constantly changing facial hair. His interest in disguise and appearance becomes a discussion point in its own right:

identity." D.P. Corbett & L. Perry (ed). *English Art 1860-1914: Modern artists and identity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 133-149.

⁵⁴⁷ Chase, *op. cit.*, 222-223. Chase was not the only artist to explore the private Whistler. In the 1870s Walter Greaves produced a series of characteristic portraits of Whistler painting *Arrangement in Grey and Black: Portrait of the Artist's Mother*. Even as late as 1917, Greaves would return to the same subject. Interestingly they depict Whistler in his 'public' costume rather than Chase's description.

⁵⁴⁸ W. Lewis (edited and introduced by Walter Allen), *The Roaring Queen* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1973 originally written 1936), 114.

⁵⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 117.

‘I have never listened,’ said Richard Dritter, ‘to so much talk about sleuths and clues, and bloodstained axes and false beards, *never!*’ ...the burly Dritter laughed uproariously in his own enormous coarse grey beard as-if-it-had-been-false; and as he saw Osorio Potter’s eyes upon it (for Osorio wondered if Dritter were *disguised* and he was examining the place where the beard ended and the face began) he laughed again, with weighty German heartiness...⁵⁵⁰

Dritter’s background was, naturally, similar to Sickert’s:

‘I like Dritter, don’t you?’

‘Yes – why has he left us?’

‘How should I know! He was reputed to be the most brilliant talker of all those who gathered about Oscar.’

‘Oscar?’

‘Yes – a very intelligent man who lived long ago and came to a very sticky end.’

‘Oh. Yes, Dritter seems a good talker. Does he always talk like that?’

‘I expect so, it amuses him. He is a painter, of course, but like his master, Whistler, he has a tongue to his credit as well as a brush.’

‘Whistler?’

‘Yes.’

‘Who was that?’

‘A painter, too, like Dritter – a small man with hair dyed black, all but a white lock. Also with a goatish tuft upon his saucy Yankee chin.’⁵⁵¹

Although only a brief appearance, Lewis’s boisterous and mercurial characterisation was a recognisable one, and one which echoed Sickert’s own need for attention and performance. The performer in Sickert was never far from the surface.

⁵⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 114-115.

⁵⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 118.

Sickert and the Ripper Murders; Accusations, Incriminations and Misinterpretations

...he always enjoyed playing 'let's pretend'.

Marjorie Lilly, 1971⁵⁵²

Oh it is splendid to be accused of things, I have been accused of everything and have always pleaded guilty.

Walter Sickert, 1929⁵⁵³

Between 1905 and 1925 Sickert produced few self-portraits. Descriptions of his unusual behaviour and extreme costumed appearances, however, increased. As his work fell out of favour he retaliated with extreme performances. Sickert: "was an actor. He liked the dramatic moment and he liked to create it himself".⁵⁵⁴ His students became his audience and the classroom his stage.⁵⁵⁵ This interest in the theatre was not merely restricted to representations of performances, nor an interest in the dramatic interpretation on the canvas and, throughout this period, commentators tended to focus on a number of theatrical aspects of his personality and appearance.

The fascination of writers for Sickert's constantly changing personal appearance and habits reveals an interest in identity and performance which echoed the artist's own. Generally, these writers focused on Sickert's various physical transformations to illustrate his capricious personality, however, it is more apt to consider that he used these constant fluctuations not to hinder or confuse his public but simply in the same way an actor does - to better understand character and to, ultimately, provide greater emotionally, and visually, truthful images. To understand Sickert's development it is vital to remember his

⁵⁵² Lilly, *ibid.*, 19.

⁵⁵³ As quoted in D. Sutton, *Walter Sickert* (London: Michael Joseph, 1976), 225.

⁵⁵⁴ "Sketch for a Portrait". Radio Broadcast Transcript, 10 February 1961. IPLA, WRS Coll. Box 12.

⁵⁵⁵ For more on Sickert's teaching see Alistair Smith "Mr Sickert Speaks: the Artist as Teacher", Alistair Smith (ed), *Walter Sickert 'drawing is the thing'* (Manchester: Whitworth Art Gallery, 2005), 21-25.

background and life-long interest in the theatre, as Clive Bell noted: “Never forget - Sickert never let one forget - that his earliest passion and profession was the stage”⁵⁵⁶.

Performers are naturally narcissistic. Their product is their self and as a consequence they have a greater interest in their own appearance, habits and physicality. By the very nature of their professions actors, especially, also have a greater personal interest in the physical concept of identity and characterization than writers or painters. Whereas a writer, or painter, can invent and visualise characters they rarely have to become that person to create their work. The actor on the other hand has to imbue the personality, as the actor and writer Benoit Constant Coquelin noted:

When a painter is about to execute a portrait he first poses his model, and then, concentrating, as it were, in his brush all the striking features that his trained eye can seize, he transfers them to the canvas by the magic of his art, and when he has done this, his work is finished. The actor, however, has still something to do - he must himself enter into the picture. For *his* portrait must speak, act, walk in its frame, which is the stage, and it must convey the illusion of life to the spectator.⁵⁵⁷

To create a successful performance actors must merge their own experiences and physicality with another. The schizophrenic nature of this existence can be problematic especially when the actor has to put away the character and return to their everyday lives. Actors’ memoirs and biographies are littered with complaints that without a character the actor’s own personality is boring, insignificant and unfulfilled. As Denis Diderot noted: “It has been said that actors have no character, because in playing all characters they lose that

⁵⁵⁶ Bell, *op. cit.*, 22. As a contrast, it is useful to note that whilst there are numerous mentions of Sickert visiting the theatre (and the obvious first-hand information available in his own works) amongst his acquaintances it was well known that he rarely visited art galleries. Clive Bell noted that when the two of them visited the National Gallery, Sickert’s normally reliable internal compass failed him and he couldn’t find his way around the rooms. *Ibid.*, 25.

⁵⁵⁷ Coquelin, *op. cit.*, 893.

which Nature gave them, and they become false just as the doctor, the surgeon, and the butcher, become hardened”.⁵⁵⁸

By the late 1910s (and indeed until his death) Sickert’s increasing interest in costume, character and desire to create attention and reaction coincides with his artistic deterioration (at least in his critics’ eyes). Generally, this later period of Sickert’s *œuvre* receives scant attention from his historiographers and critics. This can be attributed to a number of reasons; the seemingly retrograde nature of his work in light of the development of modernism in art, the (generally perceived) substandard quality of work, and, ultimately, Sickert’s own self-destructive artistic criticism.⁵⁵⁹ A further reason, however, can be identified in the inability of critics to pigeonhole Sickert’s work to any established, or indeed expected, conventions. For example, Sickert’s use of mass produced photographs or Victorian illustrations was attributed to degeneration in his mental facilities rather than artistic experimentation. However, if we look at these works in light of Sickert’s interest in the stage, they reveal a theatricality which could only be achieved by an artist with an

⁵⁵⁸ Denis Diderot, *The Paradox of Acting* (translated by W.H. Pollock) (London: Chatto & Windus, 1883, (originally published c.1775), 64. Most recently, Judi Dench claimed not to be “good at my own company ... I need somebody to reflect me back, or to give me their reflection”. John Lahr, *Honky Tonk Parade: New Yorker Profiles of Show People* (London: Overlook Press, 2005), 225.

⁵⁵⁹ To a degree, this can also be attributed to the greater amount of press devoted to Sickert’s “performance” rather than the work itself: “But everything about Walter Sickert has to have the same air of paradox. He is so ingrainedly ‘frondeur’ that, since his wit, his talent and, above all, his taste make him the natural associate of the ‘libertarians’, he has by sheer cussedness been driven to become the advocate of Prussian discipline, of meaningless dexterity and of Victorian sentimentality, and is thereby externally condemned to practice no single of the virtues he preaches. For which last we, who admire his talent, are eternally grateful to that good fairy’s prophylactic gift”. Fry on Sickert, *New Statesman and Nation*. January 1925. Quote reprinted in R. Fry to V. Bell, 12 May 1921, D. Sutton (ed), *Letters of Roger Fry: Vol. I* (London, Chatto & Windus, 1972), 62. “London is full of pictures – an idiotic (I thought) show of paintings by Sickert [the echoes], which fall between so many stools they hardly exist. He tries to be witty by taking these unknown Victorians as a starting point and doesn’t succeed in being either them or himself”. V. Bell to C. Bell, 14 June 1931. Reprinted in Regina Marler, *Selected Letters of Vanessa Bell* (New York: Bloomsbury, 1993), 364.

inherent interest in a theatrical medium. Subsequently, they reveal much about theatrical traditions and fashions of the period in which they were produced.

A curious link between real-life events and the theatre can be witnessed in Sickert's association with the crimes of Jack the Ripper. Robert Emmons related that, at the time of the murders, a group of girls mistakenly identified Sickert as the Ripper: "He wore a loud check coat, long to the ankles, and carried a little bag for his drawings. One night in Copenhagen Street a party of young girls fled from him in terror, yelling, 'Jack the Ripper, Jack the Ripper!'"⁵⁶⁰ This tale was certainly popularised by Sickert and his ability to shock was notorious:

Sickert was the kindest and one of the most intelligent and charming men I have ever met. ... He still had his Saturday Afternoon. The studio was large and badly lit after the daylight had gone, and he loved shocking the guests, who consisted of all kinds of people, from the very grand to the humble, but serious, art student. He had a life-sized lay figure and an iron bedstead in one corner, with a pink counterpane; he said it always reminded him of the 'Camden Town Murder'. One day he placed the lay figure on the bed in a rather compromising position; sat next to it with his arms around its neck and waited for the guests. They all looked rather startled when they saw this unusual group.⁵⁶¹

A further link, between Sickert and Jack the Ripper, is evidenced in the writing of the novelist Marie Belloc Lowndes. In the early 1900s Lowndes and Sickert were frequent habitués of the Edwardian social scene and, according to the writer Edward Marsh, Sickert inspired Lowndes to write her most famous short story which would also inspire Alfred

⁵⁶⁰ Denys Sutton relates a slightly altered version in his biography in that Sutton states Sickert claimed to the girls that he was Jack the Ripper making them flee, while in Emmons the girls screamed the identification first. Robert Emmons, *The Life and Opinions of Walter Richard Sickert* (London: Faber & Faber Ltd, 1942), 49 and Sutton, *op. cit.*, 51. It is possible that he did change the denouement to suit his macabre sense of humour.

⁵⁶¹ Nina Hamnett, *Laughing Torso* (London: Virago, 1984 first published 1932), 96-97.

Hitchcock in his first major feature. One of Sickert's favourite anecdotes concerned his renting a room in which Jack the Ripper had supposedly resided. Whilst staying at a lodging house in Mornington Crescent Sickert's landlady told him of a mysterious resident who had stayed there at the time of the murders. The resident, a young man training to be a veterinary, used to stay out all night and, on his return, the landlady and her husband would hear him pace his room until he would leave early to buy the morning newspapers. On one occasion they noticed that he had burnt one of his suits in the fire. Their suspicions fully aroused they considered telling the police. However, before they could do so, the boy fell ill and his family took him home to Bournemouth where he died a few weeks later. Sure enough, after his removal from London the Ripper murders ceased.⁵⁶²

According to Marsh, Lowndes overheard Sickert's story and used it as the basis for her short story *The Lodger*.⁵⁶³ Lowndes' tale concerned a religious fanatic and a (seemingly) misogynist character with the mysterious name of "Mr Sleuth" (echoing shades of Sickert's "Mr Nemo" perhaps?) who lodges with Mr and Mrs Bunting on the Marylebone Road and who may, or may not, be the notorious murderer; the Avenger. First appearing in *McClure's Magazine* in January 1911 the story was turned into a novel in 1913. Hitchcock later used it as a basis for his 1927 film *The Lodger: A Story of the London Fog*.

⁵⁶² Osbert Sitwell, *Noble Essences* (London: Macmillan, 1950), 190-91. Sickert also regaled Andre Dunoyer de Segonzac with stories of the crime on his visit to London in 1920. Segonzac, letter to Denys Sutton, 16 November, 1968. GUL, MS Sutton, Accession 4669, Box 37.

⁵⁶³ C. Hassall, *Edward Marsh* (London: Longmans, 1959), 548. Lowndes later claimed a different source: "...after I heard a man telling a woman at a dinner party that his mother had had a butler and a cook who married and kept lodgers. They were convinced that Jack the Ripper had spent a night under their roof". Diary entry from 9 March 1923. Reprinted in Susan Lowndes, *Diaries and Letters of Marie Belloc Lowndes 1911-1947* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1971), 97. Sickert later claimed to have written the name of the accused in a copy of Casanova's memoirs which he had then gave to Albert Rutherston. The book was destroyed during the Second World War. Sutton, *op. cit.*, 51. Sitwell, *op. cit.*, 191.

Whether Lowndes based her novel on Sickert's story or not, Sickert certainly dramatized the killer's bedroom in a painting. Entitled *Jack the Ripper's Bedroom* (c.1908) [Fig. 4.10] the work depicts Sickert's own bedroom in Mornington Crescent. Beyond the title (and his landlady's story) the painting has no connection to the Ripper murders, only one victim was murdered in her home (Mary Kelly in her single room in a rundown lodging house at 13 Miller's Court, Spitalfields) therefore the representation is an entirely fictional one. It is perhaps no surprise that Sickert was interested in the Ripper murders. As Marjorie Lilly noted, he was always interested in stories of mistaken identities and liked to think of himself as something of an armchair detective: "Only unsolved crimes detained him, for the solution of which he had endless plausible theories."⁵⁶⁴

Like the Camden Town Murder Series, however, the image presents an interesting discourse on the value of a title and how it influences the viewer's interpretation of an image.⁵⁶⁵ Without the title the painting is merely a standard voyeuristic depiction of a woman at her dressing table in a fairly middle-class apartment. The scene is taken from the viewpoint of the woman's observer; possibly her lover or husband. Beyond this reading the painting is somewhat innocuous. However, by providing the work with a specifically loaded title Sickert changes the narrative of the work and provides the painting with an

⁵⁶⁴ Lilly, *op. cit.*, 17.

⁵⁶⁵ The title was seemingly Sickert's own. Wendy Baron, *Sickert: Paintings and Drawings* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2006), 309 (under fig. 247.2). For more on the series, and Sickert's use of titles, see Rebecca Daniels enlightening article, "Walter Sickert and urban realism", *The British Art Journal*, Vol. III, No. 2, Spring 2002, 58-69; Lisa Tickner's "Walter Sickert: The Camden Town Murder and Tabloid Crime", *Modern Life and Modern Subjects: British Art in the Early Twentieth Century* (London: Yale University Press, 2000), 11-47; L. Tickner, "Walter Sickert and the Camden Town Murder", Barnaby Wright (ed), *Walter Sickert: The Camden Town Nudes* (London: Courtauld Gallery, Paul Holberton, 2007), 45-55 and Stella Tillyard, "W.R. Sickert and the Defence of Illustrative Painting." Brian Allen (ed.), *Studies in British Art 1: Towards a Modern Art World* (London: Yale University Press, 1995), 189-205. See also David Peters Corbett, "'Gross Material Facts': Sexuality, Identity and the City in Walter Sickert 1905-1910", *Art History*. Vol. 21. No. 1, March 1998, 45-64 and Susan Sidlauskas, "Walter Sickert's *Ennui*", *Body, Place, and Self in Nineteenth Century Painting* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2000), 124-149.

altogether ominous and sinister interpretation. The female is now one of the Ripper's victims. The girl, unknowing of her fate, has her back turned to her audience. By implying the Ripper murders, and the fact she is in a stranger's bedroom, Sickert also infers the girl's livelihood - prostitution.

As viewers of the scene we are also impotent in the action. Like an audience for a play, we are unable to change the outcome of this narrative; the end result is unalterable . In a further twist to the horror we are also aware that we are placed in the position of the viewer of the actual scene, and as a result, take on the role of the protagonist Jack. The value of a particular title therefore forces the viewer to be involved in an alternative and melodramatic reading of the image. Sickert is fully aware of the theatricality of this subtext and utilizes it to further the latent drama of his narrative.

Sickert's Studio; shady suburbs, dingy dwellings and the convenience of costume

As he and the painter Ambrose McEvoy were walking down Charlotte Street one day they saw a notice, 'Studio to Let'. McEvoy grasped Sickert's arm and hurried him away. 'Be a man, Walter!' he implored. 'Pass it, pass it!'

Marjorie Lilly, 1971⁵⁶⁶

London! Like the evening star, you bring me everything.

Walter Sickert, 1910⁵⁶⁷

The location, and identification, of Sickert's work to Camden Town highlights the value of a suitable locality for the painter's settings. Amongst his friends, Sickert was well known for choosing the most shabby and dramatic locations for his studios: "His taste for the dingy lodging-house atmosphere... [His] genius for discovering the dreariest house and most forbidding rooms in which to work was a source of wonder and amusement to me. He himself was so fastidious in his person, in his manners, in his choice of his clothes; was he affecting a kind of dandyism *à rebours*?"⁵⁶⁸ The location was a vital ingredient in Sickert's search for authenticity. Each studio had its own attractions and each would inspire his work in varying ways. Marjorie Lilly provides us with an interesting insight into Sickert's choosing of a new studio in the spring of 1918:

At last, however, he came upon his treasure trove. A crooked room at the top of a crooked house in Warren Street, so rightly named. I fear that I failed to appreciate the significance of this grisly chamber. All I saw was a forlorn hole, cold, cheerless, the ceiling so black and hammocky that I begged him not to go there, foreseeing mountains of plaster descending on his head at any moment.

⁵⁶⁶ Lilly, *op. cit.*, 43.

⁵⁶⁷ Sickert, "The Polish Rider". *The New Age*, 23 June 1910. Gruetzner Robins, *op. cit.*, 249.

⁵⁶⁸ W. Rothenstein, *Men and Memories 1872-1900* (London: Faber & Faber Ltd, 1931), 167.

But we were not looking at the same thing. All he saw was the *contre-jour* lighting that he loved, stealing in through a small single window, clothing the poor place with light and shadow, losing and finding itself again on the crazy bed and floor. Dirt and gloom did not exist for him; these four walls spoke of the silent shades of the past, watching us in the quiet dusk. Here, the psychological and the visual aspects of his art came together; here he could transform some incident, a figure at the window, an inscrutable presence, the listless gesture of a hand, the droop of a head, to the universal.⁵⁶⁹

The locations were chosen for a number of reasons. Principally for their dramatic and aesthetic possibilities. The studios, in effect, were stage-sets, each dressed accordingly. Sickert would decorate them not only to aid his compositions but also to inspire his feel for the subject. As Lilly noted:

He had two fervent crazes at the moment, crime and the princes of the Church; crime personified by Jack the Ripper, the Church by Anthony Trollope. Thus, we had the robber's lair, illuminated solely by the bull's-eye lantern; when he was reading Trollope we had the Dean's bedroom, complete with iron bedstead, quilt and bookcase. the ecclesiastical flavour so congenial to him was somewhat marred by the red Bill Sykes handkerchief dangling from the bedpost; but the presence of this incongruous article in the Dean's bedroom was not a passing whim; it was an important factor in the process of creating his picture, a lifeline to guide the train of his thought, as necessary as the napkin which Mozart used to fold into points which met each other when he too was composing. Sickert was working now on one of his Camden Town murders and while he was reliving the scene he would assume the part of a ruffian, knotting the handkerchief loosely round his neck, pulling a cap over his eyes and lighting his lantern. Immobile, sunk deep in his chair, lost in the long shadows of that vast room, he would meditate for hours on his problem. When the handkerchief had served its immediate purpose it was tied to any doorknob or peg that came handy to stimulate his imagination further, to keep the pot boiling. It played a

⁵⁶⁹ Lilly, *op. cit.*, 43-44. See also Daniels, "Walter Sickert and urban realism", *op. cit.*

necessary part in the performance of the drawings, spurring him on at crucial moments, becoming so interwoven with the actual working out of his idea that he kept it constantly before his eyes.⁵⁷⁰

Sickert's working habit was to mentally "rehearse" his productions in the morning and to paint, usually from 10am until 4pm.⁵⁷¹ A photograph of Sickert in his studio at 1 Highbury Place, c.1930 [Fig. 4.11], illustrates the various objects and images which inspired the artist. Across the walls are various paintings and Victorian illustrations. Also on the wall is what appears to be a mask of the Greek playwright Aeschylus.⁵⁷² The room itself is dramatically atmospheric. Its high ceiling and niche arch creating a theatrical air. Central to this photograph is Sickert himself. Unlike other, more traditional, photographs of painters in their studios Sickert adopts a characteristically surreal position. Perched on a chair, placed on a table, Sickert sits in his tweed suit with cigar in hand and chef's hat on his head. Behind him is the recently painted *The Raising of Lazarus* and in front of him are the studio steps he posed on for its original photograph. The photographic pose is a typically eccentric one which enables the artist to resist any psychological insight of the "real" Sickert. It is impossible to detach Sickert the painter from Sickert the performer. Frequently he would use props and costumes to aid his understanding of the character's motives in his paintings, when cooking even the simplest of meals, for example, he took on the persona and appearance of a chef.⁵⁷³ Like his costumes the studios too could change

⁵⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁵⁷¹ On requesting a visit to his studio in the mid 1910s, Nina Hamnett was advised: "You had better come every morning at nine, as I get up at six in Camden Town, swim for an hour, think for a bit, and have breakfast". Hamnett, *op. cit.*, 96-97.

⁵⁷² Aeschylus was the father of Tragedy. The addition of a mask of Aeschylus would be entirely characteristic of Sickert, the manner of his death would have humoured him. According to legend, Aeschylus was killed when a large eagle dropped a tortoise on his bald head after it had mistaken it for a stone.

⁵⁷³ Lilly, *op. cit.*, 19. For more on Sickert's use and selection of studios and props see Rebecca Daniels, "Walter Sickert and urban realism", *The British Art Journal*, Vol. III, No. 2, Spring 2002, 58-69; Nicola Moorby "'A long chapter from the ugly tale of commonplace living': the Evolution of Sickert's *Ennui*", Smith, Alistair (ed). *Walter Sickert 'drawing is the thing'* (Manchester: Whitworth Art Gallery, 2005), 11-14

their appearance swiftly. Describing Sickert's Frith studio Marjorie Lilly noted its constant transformations from: "the robber's lair, the Dean's bedroom; then the studio would become a sort of parlour overnight with strange or banal objects conjured up from heaven knows where, which vanished on the morrow as suddenly as they came"⁵⁷⁴. After a "prolonged cooking craze" which saw Sickert cover the walls with pots, pans and expensive gadgets he once again suddenly changed the setting:

The cooking utensils, of course, vanished suddenly, to be followed by a sort of clothier's shop; masses of Sickert's wardrobe adorned the walls, rows of suits neatly suspended from coat hangers on his cupboard doors with stacks of headgear on the pegs above them. ... But the wardrobe scene too, was rapidly superseded by something else. Next day a profusion of little ornaments might be all the go; old prints, jaded curling yellow photographs of bygone beauties and dusty portraits filled every conceivable space...⁵⁷⁵

This assimilation of character would also see him search out the particular locations where his heroes lived and worked. In 1905 for instance, Sickert took a studio at 76 Charlotte Square which had once been used by Constable. Sickert took great pride in having his letterheads printed with "Constable's Studio" on them. The Rowlandson House studio was named so (by Sickert) after the eighteenth-century draughtsman (although Rowlandson never lived there). Sickert also took over Whistler's old studio at 8 Fitzroy Street and also a studio at 15 Fitzroy Street which had once been used by William Powell Frith. Perhaps, however, his most loaded acquisition was a studio on the corner of Hampstead Road and Granby Street which was on the site where Sickert's great literary hero, Charles Dickens, had once been schooled. It was in this studio that Sickert produced the majority of his domestic interiors during his Camden Town phase: "Dickens undoubtedly helped to inspire the Camden Town scenes and his association with Camden

and Susan Sidlauskas, "Walter Sickert's *Ennui*", *Body, Place, and Self in Nineteenth Century Painting* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 124-149.

⁵⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁵⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.

Town was one reason why Sickert loved North London”⁵⁷⁶. In tribute to Dickens, Sickert renamed the studio Wellington House Academy after the school which had stood on the site.⁵⁷⁷

These locations, particularly during his Camden Town period, provided Sickert with inspiration and a basis on which to create a narrative for his work. The natural drama of the site inspired his paintings and the location’s seemingly seedy and low class reputation only highlighted the potential drama: “Much of the world we live in is becoming hideous. But skill and selection may collocate a part of one ugly thing with a part of another ugly thing and produce a third, which is beauty”⁵⁷⁸.

Sickert’s fashion for a variety of studios echoed his fascination for changing his appearance (almost on a daily basis according to his contemporaries) and is often seen as an example of his mercurial character.⁵⁷⁹ However, if we consider his theatrical background it can provide us with a more substantial and enlightening understanding of Sickert’s creative process. Sickert was fascinated by the variations of costume and noted so in 1896: “How

⁵⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁵⁷⁷ Dickens was a constant inspiration for Sickert’s art and his own character. As already noted he based his “thug” costume on descriptions of Bill Sykes and borrowed his stage-name “Mr. Nemo” from *Bleak House*. Jacques-Emile Blanche also recalled Sickert referring to a studio at William Street as a “Dickensian Bleak House” which delighted Sickert with its drunken charwoman and quarrelling residents. J-E. Blanche, *Portraits of a Lifetime: 1870-1914* (Translated and edited by Walter Clements. Intro by Harley Granville-Barker) (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1938), 190.

⁵⁷⁸ Sickert, as quoted in Lilly, *op. cit.*, 43.

⁵⁷⁹ The extremities of Sickert’s costume changes can be seen in his visit to Edinburgh in 1923 during his “Bill Sykes” phase. Sickert arrived wearing his red neckerchief and with a peaked cap low over one eye. On being informed it was not suitable attire to deliver a lecture at the Edinburgh College of Art he promptly bought a top coat, leather gloves, Malacca cane and a tall silk hat. Sickert, letter to A. Schweder, 16 January 1923, London, Tate Gallery Archive (TGA) 8120/1/17. Also Simona Pakenham, typescript: “Walter Sickert & My Grandmother”. GUL. MS Sutton, Accession 4669, Box 48.

endless, and infinite, and complicate, the distinctions and subdistinctions of costume, its character, its significance!”⁵⁸⁰ [Fig.’s 4.12 & 4.13]

His sense of theatre was as keen as that of his idols, Hogarth, Degas and Dickens; he loved to invent fresh disguises cropping his head like a convict on Monday or producing a vast square beard on Friday, which seemed to grow as fast as Jack’s beanstalk. ...His dress varied accordingly; at one moment, the painter in open shirt with carpet slippers, at another the farmer with Norfolk jacket and leggings, again the man about town with morning-coat, striped trousers, loves and cane. We never knew when we met him in the hall or passage, what fresh quirk had overtaken him whether we should see the artist, *homme du monde*, the farmer, the professor, the Tichborne claimant...⁵⁸¹

Undoubtedly, this unpredictability could be a confusing and bewildering experience: “He was always difficult to recognise if one had not seen him for some time. He might appear with an enormous beard like a Crimean veteran or he would dress himself in very loud checks and a bowler hat and look like something off a race-course”⁵⁸².

[This] Proteus, this chameleon... His genius for camouflage in dress, in the fashion of wearing his hair, and in the manner of speaking rival Fregoli’s. He could appear outwardly as well dressed as a tailor’s dummy, as raggedly as a tramp; he could be mistaken for a seaman at Dieppe or a gondolier...⁵⁸³

⁵⁸⁰ Sickert, “Lord Leighton’s Studies”. *The Speaker*, 26 December 1896. Gruetzner Robins, *op. cit.*, 120.

⁵⁸¹ Lilly, *op. cit.*, 16.

⁵⁸² Hamnett, *op. cit.*, 165. Constance Collier, the actress and one-time fiancé of Max Beerbohm, recalled Sickert: “He looked as if he had stepped out of a page of ‘La Vie de Bohème’He wore very baggy trousers in some bright colour, rather long hair, a béret on his head, and a flowing tie... He was rather fierce when you first met him. He ought to have been gentle according to his looks, but one soon got over that. He was a charming friend to the people he liked”. Constance Collier, *Harlequinade* (London, John Lane, 1929), 153-154.

⁵⁸³ Blanche, *op. cit.*, 49. Sickert’s “genius for camouflage” could however find him in trouble, such as the time when a Broadstairs town clerk asked the police to remove a “disreputable looking tramp” from the

Sickert's fascination with creating a performance would even find him visiting Paris to take part in what was, seemingly, an early attempt at performance art:

One day he would be John Bull and the next Voltaire; occasionally he was the Archbishop of Canterbury and quite often the Pope. He was an actor in all companies and sometimes a buffoon. He would dress up as a cook, a raffish dandy, a Seven Dials swell, a book-maker, a solicitor, or an artist even. And the disguise generally worked - *épaté-d* I mean: only - so the story goes - when he went over to Paris to see the Manet exhibition in the Tuileries dressed up as one of the gentlemen in that master's *Musique aux jardins des Tuileries* did the performance fall flat. That was a Parisian experience to which he never referred.⁵⁸⁴

Sickert's costume was often the highlight of a visit and sparked considerable attention: "Met the great Walter Richard Sickert and his wife at lunch. He looks like a rather disreputable old bookmaker, as Cedric Hardwicke would play one - in a plaid suit, with swallow-tailed coat and a grey billycock hat..."⁵⁸⁵ Of course, the use of costume for the creation of a character is a vital tool for an actor to better understand his characters, as John Gielgud noted:

It is always important to me, in a character part, to be able to satisfy myself with my visual appearance... the right clothes - help me at once to find the right movements and gestures for the character. ... Photographs taken at a dress

seafront. The tramp in question was Sickert taking his evening walk. R. Lewis, "Walter Sickert at St Peter's", *Kent Life*, 5 March 1992, 34-35. At a Buckingham Palace garden party he had been invited to Sickert turned up in his brown checked jacket and a top hat. Much to his own pleasure he was stopped by a footman who thought he was part of a theatrical troupe due to perform at the party. J-E. Blanche, *La Pêche aux Souvenirs*, Paris 1949, 413.

⁵⁸⁴ Bell, *ibid.*, 23.

⁵⁸⁵ Leather bound notebook, 7 April 1932. Martial Rose Library, Gwen Ffrangcon-Davies Archive, File 19 SB 19.

rehearsal only show a kind of mask, a sketch of the actor's invention, just like his performance at an early rehearsal. Photograph him again after he has been acting the part for a fortnight, and the whole expression has deepened, and developed into something much more complete, revealing the mental conception of the part in the eyes and mouth as well as in the lines and shadows that are painted over them.⁵⁸⁶

As an actor, Sickert knew how to utilize this not only for the purposes of his paintings but also for a "performance" in its own right. Clearly, the nature of performing and of attracting attention through costume was more than just an aid to his paintings. Sickert carried these performances outwith his studio, changing his dress (and character) to response to his surroundings, or rather, to highlight his arrival in various situations. Sickert required an audience and when he had one he rarely disappointed.⁵⁸⁷

Evidently, therefore, Sickert was no human chameleon; his "characters" were not intended to help him merge into social situations but were intended, rather, to highlight his own appearance and to attract attention. This habit manifested itself in a variety of ways; either in his role as a "story-teller" or in a full-scale barrage of eccentricity, the unpredictability of Sickert could be extremely intimidating.⁵⁸⁸ Denton Welch related a surprising performance by Sickert on a visit to his home in the 1930s:

⁵⁸⁶ J. Gielgud, *Early Stages* (London: Macmillan, 1939), 168-169.

⁵⁸⁷ Even if it was only for a stall holder in Caledonian Market, where Sickert, dressed as a tramp, with: "...an old trench coat, ancient straw hat with a broken brim. His trousers were stuffed into brown leather army boots that reached almost to his knees, and as the boots had no laces, the upper parts jumped backwards and forwards as he walked. Nearby was a second-hand piano. 'Mind if I try it?' he asked the owner of the stall. 'Go ahead Guv'nor'; thus encouraged, the greatest artist in England sat down at the piano, rattled off an old music-hall tune and then spun himself round several times on the revolving stool. 'Very fine tone,' he gravely assured the owner and wandered off through the crowd. 'Rummy ole bloke,' commented the stall holder – 'I wonder 'oo he is.'" L. Browse, "Sickert's Life", *Sickert* (London, Faber & Faber Ltd, 1943), 17.

⁵⁸⁸ Sickert enjoyed reading to his students and would act out parts in the novels he read. Marjorie Lilly recalled a reading course he constructed which began with Balzac. His intention was to teach the students about style and construction and also to familiarize them with the French language. Eventually it resorted to a

As I was looking at this last picture [*The Miner*, c.1935], Sickert appeared in the door. My first sight of him was rather overwhelming. Huge and bearded, he was dressed in rough clothes and from his toes to his thighs reached what I can only describe as sewer-boots. He had seen me staring at the picture and now said directly to me: “That picture gives you the right feeling, doesn’t it? You’d kiss your wife like that if you’d just come up from the pit, wouldn’t you?”⁵⁸⁹

The one-man performance continued as Sickert first apologises for not having visited Welch himself, after hearing he was ill, and enquires as to his health:

“Well, you don’t look very ill,” he said. “I thought you’d be in a terrible mess. Didn’t you fracture your spine or something?”

I nodded my head.

He made an amusing, whining baby’s face.

“Look here, I’m very sorry I didn’t come and see you, but I can’t go round visiting.” He waved his hand round the room. “You see, I have to keep painting all these pictures because I’m so poor.”⁵⁹⁰

The performance took a more eccentric turn when Sickert, standing in front of the fireplace: “began to dance on the hearth in his great sewer-boots. He lifted his cup and, waving it to and fro, burst into a German drinking song. There was an amazing theatrical and roguish look on his face.”⁵⁹¹ Uncomfortable, Welch finds his eyes drawn to Sickert’s boots **[Fig. 4.14]**; even this however attracts attention:

typically Sickertian performance: “Sickert choose a more accommodating Balzac, *Eugène Grandet*, and gave us such a spirited rendering of Père Grandet, stammer and all...” Lilly, *op. cit.*, 23.

⁵⁸⁹ D. Welch, *A Last Sheaf* (London: Lehmann, 1951), 13.

⁵⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁵⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 14.

“Ah, I see that you’re staring at my boots! Do you know why I wear them? Well, I’ll tell you. Lord Beaverbrook asked me to a party, and I was late, so I jumped into a taxi and said: ‘Drive as fast as you can!’ Of course, we had an accident and I was thrown onto my knees and my legs were badly knocked about; so now I wear these as a protection.”⁵⁹²

Welch’s embarrassment continued, concluding with Sickert’s parting shot: “‘Goodbye, goodbye!’ he shouted after us in great good humour. ‘Come again when you can’t stop quite so long!’”⁵⁹³

Even in his elderly years, the actor in Sickert never left him. Invited to deliver a speech, along with Henry Rushbury, at the Fine Art Trade Guild in Mayfair in the 1930s, Sickert advised his friend: “Take the advice of an Old Actor. Raise your volume and speak to the little boy at the back of the gallery”⁵⁹⁴. Evidently, the need for performance was a

⁵⁹² *Ibid.*, 15.

⁵⁹³ *Ibid.*, 17. The eccentric experience was echoed by Edith Sitwell: “We knew Mr Sickert very well, and my brothers have often undergone that dancing and singing experience. But the boots are new to us. We never found out why he behaved like that. He could be kindness itself. I can’t tell you how kind he was to me when I was seventeen, and trembled with shyness when spoken to! – Sometimes he would pretend to be ninety. At other moments he would give recitations from *Hamlet*. I think his one aim was to observe reactions!” Sitwell to Denton Welch, 14 September 1942. Reprinted in J. Lehmann & D. Parker (ed), *Edith Sitwell: Selected Letters* (London: Macmillan, 1970), 64. Sitwell elaborated on this in a later note: “...you succeeded in getting the actual *movements* of Sickert dancing. I didn’t quite explain what I meant when I said he wanted to ‘observe reactions’. He was not treating one like a mouse. But he wanted to know what one would do. My brothers were present when Mr Sickert got Wyndham Lewis so entangled that he had to invent, on the spur of the moment, a character in his book *Tarr* who had not figured in that work. The trap laid bare was, I am told, of a really marvellous ingenuity”. *Ibid.*, 93.

⁵⁹⁴ Rushbury also commented on Sickert’s love of performing old songs which “he sang at length with great gusto but not always in time but he has a good memory of the words.”, “After the dinner I met Sickert and he insisted that we should go into the library and sing Victorian songs of which he knew as many as I did. It was a fine night and he took me by the arm and we crossed the Court Yard singing ‘We’ve got a Navy – a fighting Navy that keeps our foes at bay.’ He was wearing bright red socks and engaging himself with the gusto of a boy”. GUL SP Box 70. R. Ross file. MS Notes on Sickert by Henry Rushbury. Paul Ayshford (Lord)

vital part of Sickert's make-up. His need to entertain was paramount. In particular, his: "legendary changes of 'character' – from dandy to fisherman, from gamekeeper to chef, each one perfectly sustained..." attracted considerable attention and were deliberately calculated for such purposes by Sickert.⁵⁹⁵

Sickert could variously appear as a: "highly distinguished lawyer with a nautical bent" or resemble the "sea-dogs of Pollet"⁵⁹⁶. Costume was a vital part of Sickert's understanding of character and he exploited its suitability to attract attention and to create a reaction. In turn, costume is a vital ingredient in an actor's process of creating a character:

Methuen also recalled that, when studying under Sickert in the 1920s, he dressed and spoke like an actor. "Sketch for a Portrait". IPLA WRS Coll. Box 12. Sickert constantly referred to himself in terms of an actor rather than a painter. When discussing his lack of a permanent home to his sister-in-law Sickert claims: "I shall never make a home, only what actor's call 'diggings.'" Sickert to Antonia Schweder, 19 January 1922. TGA 8120.1.6.

⁵⁹⁵ "Latterly he preferred a free and fantastic version of his 'workaday' self. I recollect, for instance, his coming to meet me at Margate Station in the summer of 1938 wearing a huge, long-peaked grey cap, a suit of bright red, rough material (the coat with long tails and the trousers egregiously ample) and an outsize pair of khaki bedroom slippers". J. Rothenstein, *Modern English Painters. Volume One. Sickert to Grant* (London: Arrow Books, 1962 originally printed 1952), 61. Similarly, William Plomer noted Sickert's desire to perform. In this case, he found a partner in Lady Ottoline Morrell: "Our two guests got on like a house on fire. After a time they began swapping recollections of the music halls, and became so enkindled that they rose to their feet and performed from memory a music-hall turn, with a pas de deux and a duet. Neither was young, so their animation was the more glorious. Sickert, wearing a Harris tweed frock-coat with trousers to match, and doeskin spats, held his arms to Lady Ottoline and performed what was almost a series of high kicks. she, strikingly dressed as usual, with a flying scarf of flame-coloured chiffon, jingling ornaments, and hoop-like earrings, held out her long arms to him and repeatedly raised and extended a stork-like leg until it was almost parallel with the ground. And together they sang, or rather declaimed, with tremendous gusto and emphasis: 'I throw my affection in your direction, You're just my size and style!'" William Plomer, *At home* (London, Jonathon Cape, 1958), 100.

⁵⁹⁶ Attributed to Virginia Woolf regarding a photo of Sickert from the 1930s. J-E. Blanche, *More Portraits of a Lifetime* (translated and edited by Walter Clement) (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1939), 119. See also Blanche, *Portraits of a Lifetime*, 48.

If an author, after having conceived the character, suddenly sees him standing before him, in tangible bodily form, with his clothes, sometimes even his mannerisms, he knows he can go ahead with his creative work, without fear of being wrong; for the character will then take him by the hand and lead him; he will not be the one to find the works: the character will do it for him.⁵⁹⁷

Sickert extended this interest to his everyday performance. At an exhibition in 1937 at the Redfern Gallery he appeared dressed in a: “seaside boatman’s peaked cap, poacher’s coat, thick tweed trousers and his customary, huge, thick-soled black boots”⁵⁹⁸. Examining the works on show he further intimidated the crowd by exclaiming at various works; “That’s not a Sickert. It’s much too good for a Sickert”⁵⁹⁹. The suitability of costume and a costume’s own identity interested Sickert and he certainly looked upon his outfits in these terms. In the summer of 1940 Cecil Beaton visited Sickert and found him working on a painting of Temple Bar. Whilst talking Sickert, pointing to an old jacket in the corner of the studio, incongruously confided to Beaton that he had: “always wanted to be a bus conductor. That coat over there... I like it because I feel like a bus conductor in it”⁶⁰⁰.

In addition to his costumed disguises Sickert also liked to experiment with facial hair in an attempt to create certain personas and characters. This habit held a curious fascination for his contemporaries. Its varying length and style provoked a remarkable amount of responses, often flattering, but usually scathing: “A few months afterwards in London he shaved his moustache, a frizzle of gold - God only knows why! and ever since

⁵⁹⁷ Charles Dullin, “The Birth and Life of Characters”. *Souvenirs et notes, travail d’un acteur* (translated by H.J. Salemsen), Paris 1946. Reprinted in Toby Cole, & Helen Krich Chinoy (*Actors on Acting*, New York: Crown, 1949), 226.

⁵⁹⁸ *Cavalcade*, Vol. 4, 1 January 1938, 36.

⁵⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 36. According to Blanche, Sickert’s friends enjoyed impersonating him in the Ebury Street get-togethers: “...when no outsider was present, we used to amuse ourselves by imitating Sickert’s tone of voice in imaginary conversations with such people as his charwoman, his colourman, the postman, a peer, or an ambassador”. Blanche, *More Portraits of a Lifetime*, 122.

⁶⁰⁰ Cecil Beaton, *The Years Between: Diaries 1939-44* (London, Weidenfield & Nicholson, 1965), 47-48.

has sought new disfigurements: cropping his hair, growing a beard”⁶⁰¹. “Sickert was Walter then. His hair was dark gold. The play of the muscles round his lips had a strange ironical – a fascinating movement. What an ass he was, when he became Richard, to wear a beard and obscure that attraction. Perhaps he got tired of women”⁶⁰².

For Sickert, the beard was a vital part of his “disguise”. It aided his characterisation and his art. He liked the idea that it could shock and surprise his acquaintances, even his own mother: “Walter and Christine came to see me, she is such a good woman and so fond of my boy. Though he will let an ugly beard grow which disguises him so that I pass him on the street”⁶⁰³. The ever-changing beard was a useful addition to his costume and an easy and effective method of altering his appearance [Fig.’s 4.15 & 4.16]:

I was admiring his newly designed set of whiskers – ‘Ah! I’ll tell you how they came about. Walking down the shabbier end of Tottenham Court Road, I called in at a shop of an old Art Dealer. High upon the walls I see a framed photograph. I said I see you have a portrait of the Tichborne Claimant. Yes! he said how much is it worth to you – would sixpence hurt you? I took it home and here you see a fine copy of the Tichborne Claimant’s beard.’⁶⁰⁴

The beard provided a strong physical presence and identifying feature: “Even his beard had a truly disconcerting way of changing its shape and position from day to day”⁶⁰⁵. The beard became a focal point for Sickert and was an integral ingredient of his performance: “[I am growing a] handsome red beard ...I hope it will be a type-Lord-Spencer. ... I shall be appearing soon I suppose with my halo and my beard at Victoria and thence to Waterloo

⁶⁰¹ George Moore, *Conversations in Ebury Street* (London, Chatto & Windus, 1969 first published 1924), 124.

⁶⁰² E. Bagnold, *Enid Bagnold’s Autobiography* (London: Heinemann, 1969), 72.

⁶⁰³ Ellen Sickert (mother) to Mrs Muller, 26 September 1916. TGA TAM 18E microfiche.

⁶⁰⁴ H. Rushbury, ‘MS Notes on Sickert’, R. Ross File. GUL SP Box 70.

⁶⁰⁵ Allinson, GUL SP Box 34.

Place or St Pancras”⁶⁰⁶. Such was its impact that the beard was often the first discussion point for Sickert’s friends. On his marriage to Ellen, the beard was pointed and trimmed with a little moustache - perfectly fitting for a newlywed.⁶⁰⁷ In 1913, during his second marriage, the beard was thick, white and bushy - illustrating his commanding status: “it amuses me to be hoary, immensely. An old hoar hare as Shakespeare says”⁶⁰⁸. In Dieppe, in 1920, inspired by stables near his home, Sickert dressed like a farmer, bought expensive riding breeches and grew a huge square, rustic beard.⁶⁰⁹ By September 1927, Hugh Walpole noted its appearance changed again, this time to a “little grey peaked beard”⁶¹⁰. The beard made intermittent appearances until 1928 when it was once again:

...enormous and absolutely square, like a spade. He would never have been permitted to grow such a furzebush in Christine’s day; there were limits to the amount of beard she could stand and constant arguments as to why he must shave his head so often, where the hair should be. I reminded him of this; he fingered the preposterous growth complacently...⁶¹¹

Towards the end of his life the beard symbolised, and accentuated, his elderly status. Cecil Beaton thought it made him look like King Lear.⁶¹² Clifford Ellis noted it aided his performance as an “old man... not answering questions unless he felt like it” as did William and Alice Rothenstein.⁶¹³ On his 79th birthday they found him “[playing] the centenarian beautifully”. Disappearing to fetch his teeth before lunch they found him

⁶⁰⁶ Sickert to William Eden, undated (probably c.1898), GUL SP Box 34.

⁶⁰⁷ Blanche, *Portraits of a Lifetime*, 50.

⁶⁰⁸ Sickert to Ethel Sands (undated). As quoted in Sturgis, *op. cit.*, 446.

⁶⁰⁹ A. Rothenstein to Beerbohm, 17 February 1920. Quoted in Mary M. Lago & Karl Beckson, *Max and Will. Max Beerbohm and William Rothenstein: Their Friendship and Letters 1893-1945* (London: J. Murray, 1975), 108.

⁶¹⁰ R. Hart-Davis, *Hugh Walpole* (London: Macmillan, 1952), 271.

⁶¹¹ Lilly, *op. cit.*, 168.

⁶¹² Beaton, *op. cit.*, 47-48.

⁶¹³ Clifford Ellis, *Bath Weekly Chronicle*, 31 January 1942, 14.

descending the stairs to the garden “on his backside”. With his huge beard growing up to meet the “Dieppe sailor’s peaked cap” jauntily cocked over one eye Rothenstein had to admit there was “not much of his face to be seen”⁶¹⁴.

From his early acting career to his elderly years it was clear Sickert enjoyed using facial hair as part of his characterisation of character. Hair was clearly a useful disguise and a common tool for the actor. An interesting insight into Sickert’s awareness of the visual uses of facial hair can be seen in a brief letter addressed to Lady Eden from 1898. In preparation for an amateur production with Lady Eden, Sickert’s first preparation was to purchase a fake moustache: “I went this morning to the Strand... I have bought a moustache and a complexion for the part and spirit gum to stick the moustache on with”⁶¹⁵. Facial hair was clearly an important attribute to Sickert’s identification of his character. The combination of disguises and costumes not only aided Sickert’s creation of character for his works they also enabled him to remain detached and objective from his contemporaries: “None the less he ... did his best to wear a mask. In fact he wore a series of masks”⁶¹⁶. The notion that Sickert wore a variety of “masks” would be stretched to its obvious conclusion with a series of self-portraits in the late 1920s.

⁶¹⁴ William Rothenstein to Max Beerbohm, August 1939. Quoted in Lago & Beckson, *op. cit.*, 152.

⁶¹⁵ Sickert to Lady Eden, 1 January 1898, Birmingham Special Collections, AP22/14/36.

⁶¹⁶ E. Newton, “As I knew him: A Personal Portrait”. IPLA WRS Coll. Box 12.

Sickert Reborn: The Fall of Walter and the Rise of Richard Sickert

Portraits have a double interest. There is character, and sense of social interest...

Walter Sickert, 1896⁶¹⁷

“Had I been two, another and myself,
Our head would have o’erlooked the world”

Robert Browning, 1855⁶¹⁸

Sickert’s interest in acting and identity reached a critical, and extremely dramatic, conclusion in the late 1920s. In 1927, after suffering a prolonged illness (possibly a stroke) Walter Sickert announced his “rebirth” as “Richard Sickert”, identifying himself now with his middle-name, with a series of self-portraits depicting the artist in Biblical roles. There were several reasons for this development. In the mid 1920s it would appear that Sickert suffered some form of nervous breakdown. The catalyst for which came from a number of sources; both the death of his second wife Christine and his mother, his dwindling financial security, and his alienation (and criticism) from the younger avant-garde artists, all combined with the downward spiral of his career during the late 1910s and early 1920s made it an extremely difficult period, both emotionally and financially. A rebirth was extremely welcome. The birth of Richard gave him *carte-blanche* to experiment and also provided him with an excuse to behave and act differently. Clearly the “birth” of Richard Sickert was an incredibly energetic development in Sickert’s *œuvre*.

Sickert’s regeneration is perhaps not surprising considering his lifelong interest in the shifting nature of identity. Since the 1880s Sickert had regularly used pseudonyms in

⁶¹⁷ Sickert, W. “The Grafton Galleries.” *The Speaker*, 12 December 1896. Gruetzner Robins, *op. cit.*, 118.

⁶¹⁸ Robert Browning, “Andrea del Sarto (The Faultless Painter)”, *Men and Women* (London: J.M. Dent & Co., 1903 first published 1855), 162-170.

his acting career and writings. A brief look at Sickert's signatures on the articles he wrote between the late 1880s and the 1920s lists a multitude of *nom de plumes*; An Enthusiast, A Whistlerite, Your Art Critic, An Outsider, Walter Sickert, Sickert, Walter R. Sickert, Richard Sickert, W.R. Sickert, W.S., R.S., S., Dick, W. St., Rd. Sickert L.L.D., R.St.W., R.St.A.R.A., and RDST A.R.A.⁶¹⁹ Surprisingly, in contrast, between 1907 and 1926 Sickert painted remarkably few self portraits. In fact, there is only one self-portrait of any note from this period; *Self-Portrait: the Bust of Tom Sayers* (1913) [Fig. 4.17]. The image presents Sickert's portrait, as seen through a mirror, with a large garish blue and white vase and a bust of the nineteenth-century pugilist Tom Sayers on either side of his reflection. The inclusion of a marble bust of a popular working class hero rather than a classical figure suggests Sickert's links to the working class areas of London, in particular Camden Town where Sayers retired to after his boxing career ended.⁶²⁰

Sickert, however, presents himself only loosely affiliated to the objects in the composition. His portrait is reflected in *Self-Portrait: the Bust of Tom Sayers* and as such, although it shares a similar space in the composition with a variety of props which allude to Sayers, the self-portrait remains distant from them. Initially, the image suggests that by connecting his own portrait to that of Sayers, Sickert has synchronized his character to that of the locally famous boxer. However, on a closer reading, Sickert separates his physical self (and ultimately his psychological self) from the objects around him. The symbolic qualities of these props, in terms of their value as symbols of the society and culture Sickert has located himself within, are compromised by Sickert's reluctance to be seen sharing the

⁶¹⁹ In addition, during his exhibition at the Salon d'automne in 1908 Sickert adopted the more French *nom de plume* of René Sickert. As noted in Anna Gruetzner Robins, "Walter Sickert and the Language of Art", in G. Brockington, *Internationalism and the Arts in Britain and Europe at the Fin de Siècle. Cultural Interactions: Studies in the Relationship between the Arts, Vol. 4* (Germany: Peter Lang, 2009), 38.

⁶²⁰ Sayers, who was the first English boxer to fight an international match when he fought the American John C. Heenan, was a familiar and charismatic figure in the area, along with his dog "Lion".

same visual plane. By detaching the two; self-portrait and objects, Sickert is both separate, and part, of his locale, emphasising his belonging but also his independence.⁶²¹

A contemporary caricature of Sickert, by the Polish cartoonist Jan Junosza de Rosciszewski (better known as Tom Titt), published in *The New Age* on 15 May 1913, presents a different physicality to Sickert's own interpretation [Fig. 4.18]. In *Mr. Walter Sickert (After his own manner)* Rosciszewski presents a portly, bespectacled and clean shaven Sickert. The figure, with his bow tie, boater and bottle-top spectacles presents a telling contrast to the idiosyncratic Sayers. Here is Sickert the middle class, slightly academic and somewhat woolly artist rather than the working class, gruff, confrontational figure he attempts to promote.

Sickert's return to self-portraiture, and performing for the canvas, came after a break of nearly fourteen years when he returned to the subject in 1927. The series, essentially consisting of three works; *Lazarus Breaks his Fast* (c.1927), *The Servant of Abraham* (1929) and *The Raising of Lazarus* (c.1929-32), provides a remarkably pertinent insight into Sickert's theatrical psychology. Although the titles were added by Sickert to the works after their completion it is important to remember that Sickert was working from previously composed photographs, as such it is possible that he had a title in mind as he transferred the image from photograph to canvas. As in *Self-Portrait: the Bust of Tom Sayers* Sickert identifies himself as the character he appears to be acting. In turn, the works are also, by extent, portraits of Richard Sickert rather than Walter.

The first in the series, *Lazarus Breaks his Fast* [Fig. 4.19] is visually self-explanatory. However, as the first portrait of "Richard Sickert" *Lazarus Breaks his Fast* is a

⁶²¹ A similar interpretation can be garnered from his earlier *Self-Portrait the Painter in his Studio* (1907). Once again, Sickert uses the motif of the mirror to juxtapose two realities and to illustrate the artifice of viewing and identity, In this case a contrast is established between the paintings depicted in the mirror and the casts on either side of the mantelpiece - a Hellenistic *Venus* and Michelangelo's *Dying Slave*, with a further, indecipherable, cast behind him.

particularly loaded title. Alluding to the Biblical story, Sickert casts himself in the title role; the figure whom Christ raised from the dead. Based entirely on a photograph, the portrait, with its “halo” of light from behind the back of the figure’s head, is clearly intended to be interpreted in theatrical/religious terms. In addition, the vibrancy of the work is in marked contrast to the earlier works of Walter Sickert in terms of its treatment and use of media. In this respect the creation of “Richard” Sickert was entirely useful for the aging artist. Sickert used the character of “Richard” to excuse experiment with techniques, sources and treatments that “Walter” was reluctant, or indeed had been overtly hostile, to. For example, as a painting by Richard Sickert, the work reveals a greater reliance on the use of photography as a visual source for a painting than Walter Sickert usually admitted. In July 1893, Walter observed: “In proportion as a painter or a draftsman works from photographs, so he is sapping his powers of observation and of expression. It is much as if a swimmer practised in a cork jacket, or a pianist by turning a barrel organ... I heard from the lips of Sir John Gilbert, a splendid authority. *‘I think,’* he said, *‘an artist must do it all himself’*”⁶²².

By 1929, Richard Sickert had a very different opinion on the use of photography: “A photograph is the most precious document obtainable by a sculptor, a painter, or a draughtsman... To forbid the artist the use of available documents of which the photograph is the most valuable, is to deny to a historian the study of contemporary shorthand

⁶²² Sickert, “Is the camera the friend or foe of art?” *Studio Magazine*, July 1893. Gruetzner Robins, *op. cit.*, 97. Sickert had earlier criticised the use of the camera as a tool for the amateur artist: “A moment’s thought soon convinces the ambitious beginner that he had best go at it the whole hog at once... without further trouble. Buy a Kodak. Snap it around. Have the photos mechanically enlarged on the canvas, and colour to taste!” Sickert, “The New English Art Club.” *New York Herald*, 14 June 1889. Gruetzner Robins, *op. cit.*, 54. He reiterated this idea in 1912: “The camera, like alcohol, or a cork jacket, may be an excellent servant to a draftsman, which only he may use who can do without it. And further, the healthier the man is as a draftsman, the more inclined will he be to do without it. For a student who cannot, or will not, learn to draw, the camera spells suicide”. Sickert, “The Old Ladies of Etching-Needle Street.” *English Review*, January 1912. Gruetzner Robins, *op. cit.*, 288.

reports”⁶²³. As such, these works painted by Richard, rather than Walter, enabled the artist to experiment with techniques in ways never personally previously attempted. The contrast between the personalities of “Richard” and “Walter” is extremely telling and undoubtedly an extension and consequence of Sickert’s theatrical interests. Walter Sickert was well known as a “scoffer” on Modern Art yet as Richard he could, and would, experiment with elements of modernism with gusto.⁶²⁴ Whilst Walter was an Impressionist; linked to both Degas and Whistler, Richard was an intellectually tentative modernist; during the “Echoes” phase he is both Victorian illustrator and modernist painter; whilst painting the later theatrical and newspaper portraits he is both a modernist (in terms of media and approach) but also a nostalgic (in terms of subjects and visual sources).

Sickert’s direct follow-up to *Lazarus Breaks his Fast* was the equally self-regarding *The Servant of Abraham* (1929) [Fig. 4.20]. Once again based on a photograph the image provides an even more direct and confrontational image of the painter. Sickert’s gaze demands our attention, and by extension our focus is directed entirely on the portrait and character of the composition. The title extends the religious significance to what can be initially interpreted as a fairly simple yet direct portrait. The unnamed servant of Abraham was entrusted by his master to search Mesopotamia for a wife for Abraham’s son Isaac. The servant, guided by God, found Rebecca and the two were married. As a result the covenant between God and Abraham was fulfilled. In casting himself as the servant Sickert therefore egotistically casts himself as the instrument of divine will.

⁶²³ Sickert, (as Richard). “The Haig Statue.” *The Times*. 15 August 1929. Gruetzner Robins, *op. cit.*, 591. Sickert has also earlier noted the value of the camera as: “the infallible, disinterested, and instantaneous witness”. Sickert, (as Richard). “Evidence of Camera.” *Daily Telegraph*. 6 April 1929. Gruetzner Robins, *op. cit.*, 578. In 1924 he had also advised Cicely Hay (Mrs R.R. Tatlock): “You will get ideas for pictures. Take snapshots if you can get hold of a camera and notice the setting of one thing against another”. Sickert to Mrs R.R. Tatlock, 24 June 1924, IPLA. WRS Coll. Box 2. Folder 2.2.

⁶²⁴ Moore, *op. cit.*, 113.

The Raising of Lazarus (c.1929-32) [Fig. 4.21] furthered the divine connection. Inspired by the gift of a life-size lay figure (supposedly once owned by William Hogarth) and its delivery to his studio in Highbury Place, Sickert immediately saw the artistic potential in the scene and restaged it for a photograph with himself and Cicely Hey. Sickert placed himself at the top of his studio ladder, egotistically taken on the role of Christ, whilst Hey played the role of Lazarus's sister. The lay figure, held precariously between them, "acted" the role of Lazarus.⁶²⁵

Taken as a series, the three paintings, created so soon after his illness, are a remarkably self-assured and experimental group of works. By presenting himself as, variously, reborn by Christ, the instrument of God and finally as Christ himself, the images illustrate Sickert's remarkable strength of self-esteem (and extreme narcissism).

In contrast to his semi-religious portraits, the 1920s also saw Sickert take on the role of "matinée idol" for his female students. Sickert's relationships with women, and his interpretation of these relationships on canvas, provides an interesting illustration of Sickert's interest in the theatrical. He often singled out his female students for praise, and they, in turn came to adore him. Enid Bagnold clearly felt attracted to him, but was keen to point out that she did not fall in love with him:

Sylvia Goose was a pupil. Harold Gilman worked there too, coming in and out, not exactly a pupil. McEvoy was the same. The rest were women, devoted and dull. Sickert liked his pupils as the Old Masters liked them, protective, disrespectful, chiding, kind and half contemptuous. 'My flock – poor creatures.'... I didn't fall in love with him. Or hardly. We were all enslaved,

⁶²⁵ According to Wendy Baron, the performance went further than merely staging the scene. Cicely Hey told Baron that Sickert directed her to act as though she really was Lazarus's sister and to bring to the scene the emotion at witnessing the resurrection. Hey was convinced her acting skills must have been lacking as Sickert only painted her from behind. Wendy Baron & Richard Shone (ed), *Sickert Paintings* (Newhaven & London: Yale University Press, 1992, 294. For more on Cicely and Sickert see Alistair Smith "Walter and Kikely", Alistair Smith (ed), *Walter Sickert 'drawing is the thing'* (Manchester: Whitworth Art Gallery, 2005), 17-20.

enchanted. The day glittered because of him. But he had a doctor's morality about his students. Women on the whole were kittle-cattle to him. Like Tonks (then Head of the Slade) he would sigh and say – 'So brilliant girls are! And then the damn fools marry.' 'If you write,' he said to me, 'you can carry all that along with love: you can put love into it. But drawing, painting – it's for nuns!'⁶²⁶

Sickert often found himself surrounded by a class of dotting females and clearly revelled in the attention. When told that several girls wanted to join his class he replied: "with a broad grin and with thumbs stick in his waistcoat (a characteristic attitude): 'Ah, you see, I am the Lewis Waller of the Art Schools.'"⁶²⁷ His fondness for the fairer sex was well known (his *doppelgänger* Robin in *The Wiston's* had an affair with aptly named Lady Fanny⁶²⁸) and the charms of the fairer sex were a vital ingredient in Sickert's choice of entertainment, although he freely admitted to a preference for the unidealised female form ("They asked me what I liked best and I said, my own particular brand of frump"⁶²⁹).

Sickert's visual interpretation of "Sickert the charmer" reveals an interesting insight into his own particular interpretation of this aspect of his character. *The Juvenile Lead* (1907) [Fig. 4.22] depicts the forty-seven year old Sickert gazing outwards towards his audience. Physically the portrait certainly doesn't tally with the modern conception of a juvenile lead: Sickert presents himself as an obviously middle-aged and unromanticised figure, complete with bowler hat and spectacles. However, in the theatre a juvenile lead was usually played by an actor at the peak of their theatrical experience and maturity; Nigel

⁶²⁶ Bagnold, *op. cit.*, 73-75.

⁶²⁷ Waller was a *matinée* idol of the period. As quoted in Sutton, *Walter Sickert*, 145.

⁶²⁸ Cobden, *op. cit.*, 177.

⁶²⁹ Sickert in conversation with George Moore and Max Beerbohm on their favourite kind of woman. Lilly, *op. cit.*, 28. Describing his models he admitted preferring the extreme: "*Middling?* What a word! I can't abide anything middling. Very fat or very thin but middling never!" Lilly, *op. cit.*, 47. This often attracted criticism from his sitters who were often shocked to see themselves "robustly depicted as down-to-earth, flesh and blood mortals rather than exquisite abstractions". Lilly, *op. cit.*, 54.

Playfair played the “coming-of-age” Tony Lumpkin in Oliver Goldsmith’s *She Stoops to Conquer* at the age of fifty-four, Frank Benson was still playing Hamlet at the age of seventy. In portraiture, the face is typically the key to the subject’s character, in Sickert’s later self-portraits however he tends towards anonymising the face. Deciding to reject the flamboyance and eccentricity of earlier self-portraits Sickert reveals a wholly more introspective personality. Sickert himself aptly called this portrait: “a punching ball” and there is no doubt it is a remarkable honest portrait in its physical self-effacement.⁶³⁰ The question remains, however, as to whether this portrait is a true reflection of the artist or merely another mask amongst many.

As a comparison, an earlier charcoal portrait *Self-portrait (with glasses)* (c.1903-04) [Fig. 4.23] and an oil, *Self-Portrait with La Giuseppina* (1903-04) [Fig. 4.24], reveal the narcissistic characteristics of Sickert persona (and interestingly a tendency for himself to favour the right-side of his face for portraiture). In both cases Sickert presents himself visually confronting the viewer. Typically, in his portraits of females his sitter is usually depicted looking off to one side. His portraits of males are more confrontational. In both self-portraits Sickert chooses to depict himself in a particularly dramatic mood. There is an ambiguous, yet wholly palpable, drama behind these two self-portraits unlike, perhaps, the more introspective *The Juvenile Lead*.

In truth, Sickert’s most successful portraits (and in many cases self-portraits) are those in which he incorporates two figures - most frequently a male and a female figure. This is evident in his Camden Town Murder series and his numerous portraits of Hubby and Marie. In later years Sickert cast himself in the roles Hubby previously played and Thérèse in Marie’s. During the 1930’s Sickert produced a series of semi-autobiographical works depicting himself and Thérèse in situations that, at points, echo his earlier Camden Town interiors. Entirely based on photographic sources, the series reveals a touching

⁶³⁰ “As a punching-ball I am working at a life-sized head of myself in a cross-light which will I think become something in time”. Sickert to Nan Hudson, c. April 1907. As quoted in Wendy Baron, *Sickert: Paintings and Drawings* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2006), 70.

relationship between the artist and his wife. As Cecil Beaton noted, their relationship was: “a mellow friendship with a certain play-acting allurements of master and mistress, obedience and revolt”⁶³¹. In terms of their narrative and gesture, the paintings also referenced a number of theatrical subjects in their titles and situations.

The first in the series, *The Front at Hove. Turpe Senex Miles, Turpe Senilis Amor* (dated 1930) [Fig. 4.25], takes its subtitle from a line in Ovid’s *Amores*: “An old soldier is a wretched thing, as is senile love”⁶³². The painting depicts Sickert and a female, likely Thérèse, sitting on a bench at Hove. The composition comprises two main points of focus; the group of figures in the bottom left and, beyond them, the elegant curve of the Georgian Adelaide Crescent. The inclusion of the crescent is, perhaps, a celebration and acknowledgment of more traditional architecture in this period of modernism; part of Sickert’s continual campaigning for the past. Ultimately, however, the main focus of the image is the tentative romance of the couple seated on the bench. The male turning towards the coy female suggests the flirtatious nature of their relationship. The tentative distance between the two figures is heightened by the inclusion of a top-hated figure sitting in the seat adjacent to (and therefore visually between) the couple.

In terms of style and narrative, the work recalls Sickert’s *English Echo* series of the same period. The composition consists of a number of horizontals; the path, bench and low wall slicing across the canvas. The paint is also applied in broad areas of colour; from the grass, pathway and sky to the vivid dashes of blue on the building. It also updates the suggested relationship of the couple from *Summer Lightning* (c.1931-32) and *Idyll* (c.1931-32) [Fig.’s 4.26 & 4.27] amongst others.⁶³³ The subtitle is an obviously ironic comment on Sickert’s recent marriage to Thérèse Lessore. The flirtatious nature of the couple and their

⁶³¹ Beaton, *op. cit.*, 47-48.

⁶³² Ovid, *Amores*, I, IX, line 4. As quoted in Baron, *op. cit.*, 529.

⁶³³ The inclusion of the top-hated figure suggests a contrast between the figure’s costumed elegance and Sickert’s crumpled dress, however, it may also have been added as an element of Sickert’s nostalgia for the nineteenth-century; by the 1930s the wearing of a top hat in everyday use was extremely rare.

evidently aging years clearly delighted Sickert. The romance contains an added tenderness with the consideration of the figures' mature status and the suggesting (from the title) of a life lived before.

Extending the mature romance of *The Front at Hove. Turpe Senex Miles, Turpe Senilis Amor* Sickert depicted himself and Thérèse as an ageing Romeo and Juliet in one further painting. Completed during his later Shakespearian phase, *Romeo and Juliet at Reculver* (c.1935-37) [Fig. 4.28] was obviously inspired by the balcony scene in the play. The painting may also have been inspired by Sickert's friendship with the actress Gwen Ffrangcon-Davies who had played Juliet, alongside John Gielgud as Romeo, at the Regent Theatre in 1924. The play was restaged by the Oxford University Dramatic Society in 1932 with Peggy Ashcroft as Juliet. It was also produced at the New Theatre, London in 1935 with Gielgud and Laurence Olivier sharing the roles of Romeo and Mercutio and Ashcroft again as Juliet. In both cases Ffrangcon-Davies had been disappointed not to be cast as Juliet following her success in 1924. It was generally assumed that she was too old to return to the role (in 1932 Ffrangcon-Davies was forty-one). As the rejected potential leader (and saviour) of Modern Art Sickert may have, therefore, sympathised with Ffrangcon-Davies's disappointment and reinterpreted the Romeo and Juliet as a meeting between two older figures in empathy.

True to form, by the later 1930s Sickert's scenes of tentative romances were starting to be tainted by his natural interest in domestic drama. As a result they drifted towards a series of failed relationships and domestic confrontations. A suitable example, *Home Life* (dated 1937) [Fig. 4.29], depicts the elderly Sickert emerging from his wine cellar at St Peter-in-Thamet with a bottle of wine in each hand. The composition is deliberately mysterious and atmospheric. This ambiguous painting, with its dark tones and murky colours, certainly doesn't depict the comfortable home life that the title suggests. The bare darkened cellar is at odds with the concept of a pleasant "home life" and the positioning of the figure, with his back towards his audience and the wooden pillar slicing down the left hand of the image creates an unsettling viewpoint. In essence, therefore, the work recalls

earlier images; such as the unsaid drama of *Off to the Pub*. In retrospect, it was natural that Sickert would return to domestic drama. He always preferred the tragic and comic to the romantic: “Tragedy and comedy, low comedy and high comedy, were the subject matter in the days of the great masters. The professional routine of to-day tends, for the sake of painting, to forget the reason for painting, which has been, is, and will remain, illustration”⁶³⁴. It is perhaps no surprise to see him favour these ambiguous relationships in his later work.

The Domestic Bully (c.1935-38) [Fig. 4.30] reinforces the (suggested) dramatic breakdown of the relationship. Set in the kitchen at St Peter’s-in-Thamet the scene depicts two women in the kitchen and Sickert entering from the door on the right hand side. The two females seem oblivious to the male figure and carry on with their tasks. The stance of the male figure and his directional gaze suggests he has entered the kitchen to speak to the females. In response, the women physically and psychologically ignore his arrival suggesting that the space belongs to them and that the male figure’s appearance is an unwelcome intrusion. The title reinforces this reading. The ineffectuality of the male figure’s appearance can also be read as a self-ironic depiction of Sickert’s own role in the St Peter’s-in-Thamet household. By the late 1930s, the elderly Sickert was increasingly fragile and relied on Thérèse more and more, not just for his everyday care but also as an assistant with his painting. His position as the dominant figure of the house, and ultimately his own work, had become seriously compromised. A photograph of Sickert and his constant Thérèse, originally published in *The Daily Telegraph* on 24 February 1938 [Fig. 4.31], depicts the infirm Sickert seated at a desk and surrounded by the disorderly remnants of his studio; the newspapers, photographs, prints and the debris of paintings. The same impression (and Thérèse’s assistance) was captured by William Roberts’ portrait *He knew Degas* (1938) [Fig. 4.32] in which the bedridden Sickert paints as his wife selects suitable newspaper photographs for inspiration. The image recalls the shabby interior of Sickert’s

⁶³⁴ Sickert, “Richard Sickert on why our artists fail” *Daily Herald*, 10 November 1931. Gruetzner Robins, *op. cit.*, 612.

Mornington Crescent apartment as captured by Powys Evans in his cartoon from 1926 [Fig. 4.33].⁶³⁵

Sickert's mental and physical decline came in the late 1930s as his memory started to fail him. Friends (and knowing taxi drivers) would find him wandering lost in Bath and return him home.⁶³⁶ Thérèse would often find him waiting in the barn at the bottom of the garden waiting for the students who never came.⁶³⁷ *Home Sweet Home* (c.1935-39) [Fig. 4.34] and *The Invalid* (1939-40) [Fig. 4.35] illustrates not only the deliberate isolation of the elderly Sickert, but also his increasing frailty. Depicting the artist alone in the front porch of his home at St Peter's and in his garden at St George's Hill House in Bathampton Sickert casts himself as the artistic recluse. In both cases he chooses not to depict himself at work, perhaps suggesting his inability to paint. Equally, a sense of melancholy pervades the narrative. The once virile artist has been tamed by age and the passing of time.

Sickert's final self-portrait, *Reading in the Cabin* (1940) [Fig. 4.36], was inspired by a series of photographs by Cecil Beaton who visited Sickert in the summer of 1940. Beaton photographed the couple in their home at Bathampton as well as their garden [Fig. 4.37]. In the painting, the aged Sickert lays slouched in his armchair complete with his sailor's peaked cap reading a book while Thérèse looks devotedly on. The portrayal of the artist is in marked contrast to Beaton's photographs which highlights Sickert's elderly fragility. In the painting Sickert still presents himself as the patriarch; here is not the painter and nurse in his last years, but the seafarer (notably with spectacles removed) reading to his attentive audience. The painting was to be the last to capture a performance by Sickert the actor. In the autumn of 1941 Sickert suffered a series of strokes and was confined to his bed. He died on the evening of 22 January 1942.

⁶³⁵ Powys Evans, "Mr. Richard Sickert A.R.A.", 88 *Cartoons by Powys Evans with a Preface by Richard Sickert ARA* (Kensington: Cayme Press, 1926), 67.

⁶³⁶ Lilly, *op. cit.*, 170-71.

⁶³⁷ *Ibid.*, 171.

“Identity-formation” in Texts, Portraits and Self-Portraits c.1880 - c.1940

The artist-actor gives the best of himself; through his interpretations, he unveils his inner soul. By these interpretations only should he be accepted and judged. When the final curtain falls between him and his audience, nothing can be said or done, add or detract from his performance. His work is done, his message is delivered.

Eleonora Duse, n.d.⁶³⁸

An actor who “lives his part” is a creative actor; the one who simply imitates different human emotions without feeling them each time is a “mechanical” one. The difference between them is the same as between a human being and a mechanical puppet, or as between an artist’s painting and a photograph. No matter how fine a photograph may be, it could never be a work of art. It is nothing but a copy, a mechanical repetition of life, a stamp - while a painting is unique, being an individually created bit of “better” life.

Ryszard Boleslavsky, c.1923⁶³⁹

The nature of a self-portrait is biographical; both in terms of a physical representation of the artist at a specific time and place and in terms of a psychological interpretation of the sitter’s personality. The portrait’s value lies in its insight and truthfulness of its sitter as well as its artist. In Sickert’s case his self-portraits depict him in particular roles and personas. It is tempting to read these works as facades, or masks, hiding the real character. However the truth is more complex, these works are portraits of Sickert

⁶³⁸ Duse to Sir John Martin-Harvey. J. Martin-Harvey, *The Book of Martin-Harvey* (London: Sampson Low, 1930), 55.

⁶³⁹ Ryszard Boleslavsky, “Living the Part”, lecture notes translated by Michel Barroy. Manuscript, 1923. Theatre Collection, New York Public Library. Reprinted in Cole & Chinoy, *op. cit.*, 511. Boleslavsky (1889-1937) was the first to formally teach the techniques of Stanislavsky and the Moscow Art Theatre to American actors.

the Actor, more than Sickert the Painter and, as such, reveal a greater truth and insight into their creator than perhaps have previously been giving credit. Duse and Boleslavsky's statements on the creation of character and the vitality of the experience share a number of similar interests and concerns with Sickert's own. As he noted: "I should probably define success in portraiture as something different from what it has lately been the fashion to insist upon. The best portrait is, I should say, the canvas that would give the spectator the truest idea of the physique, and through the physique, of the character of the sitter"⁶⁴⁰.

The need of performance, not only in his own life but in his work, was a key aspect of Sickert's creative process. In particular, his insistence on the human figure as the main focus for all art, especially in contrast to the modernism of the early twentieth-century would see him take a particular stand: "The human figure [is] the proper study of mankind in the studio as in the library..."⁶⁴¹ In his teaching he insisted on students concentrating on the human figure: "Let us start with a piece of furniture – a table, a chair, or a bed. Relate your figures to this setting and let us have them doing something – making love, quarrelling, misconducting themselves – as you please – but *doing* something"⁶⁴². Sickert's interest in adopting personas and characters inevitably led him to rely on certain created characters and identities to help and instruct him in various situations:

He had his Burns days, his Byron days, his Whistler days, his Degas days, his Napoleon days, his Dr Johnson days and many other days, and when his own good nature had involved him with a bore whose visits, in spite of marked hints,

⁶⁴⁰ Sickert. "Solomon J. Solomon", *Art News*. 10 March, 1910. Gruetzner Robins, *op. cit.*, 203.

⁶⁴¹ Sickert. "The Naked and the Nude". *The New Age*. 21 July, 1910. Gruetzner, *ibid.*, 262.

⁶⁴² Sickert extended this advice: "You and I are going to have a talk on superficiality. My colleagues at the Academy think that finish means smooth neat paint. Don't believe them. Finish consists in relating the figures and objects, the one to the other and to their setting. You must be able to walk about in a picture. It should give you the sensation of something exciting happening, taking place in a box as it were... Paint direct sketches from nature and your pictures from drawings". Browse, "Sickert's Life", 15.

appeared interminable, he would murmur, ‘What would *Byron* have said to this infliction? *He* would not have permitted it for a moment.’⁶⁴³

Clearly, for Sickert, these various elements of character; costumes, false (and real) beards and moustaches, the variety of studios and the use of studio props, and the constant “performing” for an audience all contributed to, and were a vital part, of Sickert’s character. These elements were part of his creative process and inspired the drama and narrative in his paintings. Their influence extended way beyond the canvas. Sickert was the constant performer, psychologically his use of performance enabled him to adopt other characters as a social aid, they were a defence mechanism which simultaneously allowed him to artistically experiment. The “actor” of his character excused his actions in certain situations; Sickert the old man, Sickert the eccentric, Sickert the dandy; as John Rothenstein noted: “the variations in which he presented himself to the world are legendary”⁶⁴⁴. The exploitation of character naturally reached its peak with Sickert’s own expression of duality in the “birth” of Richard Sickert. This interest in identity and the concept of the “self” naturally led to accusations of narcissism and would ultimately detract attention from his work: “Walter Sickert’s coming. He’s very nice but not really interesting like Derain. Too much of a *homme de peinture* in the sense of *homme de lettres* – you know what I mean. He’s almost entirely occupied with himself and his effect. It’s surprising that with such a temperament he’s so good an artist...”⁶⁴⁵

As noted, in terms of both text and imagery there is an anecdotal nature to depictions of Sickert. However, the notion and value of this information should not be underestimated. As Paula Backscheider noted: “[t]here must be reasons that an anecdote survives, is repeated, and regardless of how its veracity is questioned continues to be a

⁶⁴³ Lilly, *op. cit.*, 17. Lady Hamilton thought Sickert reminded her a little of “a mixture of Shelley, Keats and Lamb”. London, The Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, King’s College London Library. Jean Hamilton Archive, Microfilm diary, entry dated 17 May 1904.

⁶⁴⁴ Rothenstein, *op. cit.*, 58.

⁶⁴⁵ R. Fry letter to V. Bell, 12 May 1921. Sutton, *Letters of Roger Fry*, 507.

compelling portrait of a person”⁶⁴⁶. Sickert, as performer and artist was fully aware of the merit of these tales. Consequently, these interpretations are extremely valuable as cultural commodities.⁶⁴⁷ However, their value also lies in their enlightening quality; their usefulness in expanding our understanding of Sickert the Actor and subsequently a greater understanding of his works, aims and influences. As a result, their worth lies in the sense of “identity-formation” and as such their truthfulness is immaterial.⁶⁴⁸

⁶⁴⁶ Paula R. Backscheider, *Reflections on Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 110.

⁶⁴⁷ As Oscar Wilde succinctly quoted: “...there is only one thing in the world worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about”. Wilde, *op. cit.*, 6.

⁶⁴⁸ Jacqueline Bratton, *New Readings in Theatre History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 102.

Conclusion: Walter Richard Sickert and the Theatre, c.1880-c.1940

And all the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players.
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts.

'Jaques'. *As You Like It*, c.1600⁶⁴⁹

The house, where man is born, and married, and dies, becomes his theatre...

Walter Richard Sickert, 1914⁶⁵⁰

As this thesis has shown, Sickert's debt to the theatre, both in terms of his work and life, cannot be underestimated. From his depictions of music-hall performers and audiences, Sickert revealed an interest in the authority of the performer and the relationship between performer and audience. In particular they disclose Sickert's interest in capturing the theatrical experience and the ephemeral energy of the performer. This significantly identifies the difference in Sickert's work from that of his immediate contemporaries, especially Whistler and Degas, and provides a vital analysis of the theatrical experience as depicted on canvas.

The Fitzroy Street/Camden Town paintings reveal a previously overlooked element concerning Sickert's interest in the developing concern with theatrical naturalism whilst simultaneously revealing Sickert to be a keen dramatist through his exploration of the themes and situations prevalent in the New Drama. The study provides potential for further investigation into the dialogue between Sickert's artistic interpretations and the theatre of the New Drama, particularly through correlation between set design, reviews, theatrical

⁶⁴⁹ Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, Stanley Wells & Gary Taylor (general editors), *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988, reprinted 1997), Act II, Scene 7, Lines 140-143, 638.

⁶⁵⁰ Sickert, "A Stone Ginger", *The New Age*, 19 March 1914. Reprinted in Anna Gruetzner Robins (ed). *Walter Sickert: The Complete Writings on Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 344.

discussions and the general *milieu* of the theatre, including Sickert's choice of subject matter and treatment. Sickert's paintings provide a teasing record of a previously visually neglected period of British drama.

Sickert's theatrical portraits of the actresses Gwen Ffrangcon-Davies and Peggy Ashcroft, as well as his depictions of Shakespearean productions during the 1920s and 1930s reveal an interest in the rediscovery of Shakespeare as a metaphor for the future of painting whilst providing an examination of Sickert's methodology in his choice of subject matter. Finally, the theatrical interpretation of Sickert's character and personality, through his self-portraits as well as painted portraits and textual interpretations, reveal the artist's interest in the theatrical significance of identity. Ultimately, his experiences as an actor provided the perfect understanding of character and situation which would colour his interpretations, as the actress Madge Kendal noted:

The playing of many parts naturally gives to the actor and actress a curious insight into the sentiments and passions that sway and bias human nature. The earnest actor, who has heart and soul in his work, and conscientiously studies the various parts he is called upon to play, is compelled to think, more than the mere man of business, of human strength and weakness, of hate and love, of joy and sorrow; for in their turn he has to portray them all...⁶⁵¹

Fundamentally, this thesis has aimed to provide a greater understanding of Sickert's interest in the theatre whilst simultaneously provided a visual history of the major themes and interests affecting the British theatre during Sickert's lifetime. Sickert's interpretations are important therefore because they provide not just a vital visual record in terms of subject matter but also illustrate and reflect the treatment of the theatre during his lifetime. As such, they provide the theatre historian with a valuable source of visual information.

⁶⁵¹ Madge Kendal, "The Drama: paper read at the Congress of the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science", September 1884. Reprinted in Russell Jackson, *Victorian Theatre* (London: A&C Black, 1989), 131.

It is self-evident Sickert did not simply copy theatrical photographs and illustrations, rather he distilled, adapted and interpreted them from a variety of theatre sources including, first-hand experience as an actor, conversations with friends, reviews and discussions in texts as well as general theatre ephemera and his own personal experience as an audience member. Crucially, Sickert's interpretations built and extended upon theatrical themes, compositions and subjects then prevalent in the British theatre. This was only possible through Sickert's interest and knowledge of the traditions and development of the theatre. As a result his paintings reveal an unparalleled theatricality which has previously been neglected in readings of his work. Ultimately, whilst the theatrical experience remains ephemeral, Sickert provides the viewer with a permanent impression of the visual and emotional experience of the theatre.

As Sickert noted in 1890, early in his artistic career, a painter can provide a poorly constructed image as long as his subject and treatment was valid: "In dealing with subjects of human interest, there is one quality which is essential. It is sometimes found in work which is artistically deficient, but it is never absent from the finest work - I mean dramatic truth"⁶⁵². For Sickert "dramatic truth" derived from the stage and influenced and instructed his work. Ultimately, knowledge of the relationship between painting and the stage is vital for a greater understanding of Sickert's work and the two were intertwined. The muse of the theatre was a powerful one for the artist. As he noted in 1934: "The influence between brush and mask has at the best periods been reciprocal"⁶⁵³.

⁶⁵² Sickert, "Art", *The Whirlwind*, 12 July 1890. Gruetzner Robins, *op. cit.*, 72.

⁶⁵³ Sickert, "Painters and the Stage", *The Times*, 12 December 1934. Gruetzner Robins, *ibid.*, 672.

Appendix I

Below is a note of the key productions of Ibsen which took place in London between 1900 and 1920.

- *The Wild Duck* (1884), at the Great Queen Street Theatre for seven performances between 3 and 11 March 1905
- *Hedda Gabler* (1890), Waldorf Theatre, two matinee performances on 29 May and 7 June 1905
- *The Wild Duck*, Court Theatre, six matinee performances between 17 October and 3 November 1905
- *An Enemy of the People* (1882), five performances at His Majesty's Theatre between 2 November 1906 and 20 January 1906
- *Lady Inger of Östråt* (1854) translated by William Archer, for two matinee performances at the Scala Theatre on 28 and 29 January 1906
- *The Pillars of Society* (1877), at Great Queen Street for one performance on 3 February 1906 (this was revised at the same theatre for three performances between 23 and 24 March in the same year)
- *Hedda Gabler*, Court, seven performances between 5 and 26 March 1907
- *Rosmersholm* (1886), Terry's Theatre, eight matinees between 10 and 15 February 1908

- *The Master Builder* (1892), Edmund Gosse and Archer translation, Court, one performance on 16 March 1909
- *An Enemy of the People*, His Majesty's, one matinee on 7 December 1909
- *John Gabriel Borkman* (1896), translated by Archer, Court, one matinee on 25 October 1910, revived for one matinee performance at the same theatre on 26 January 1911
- *A Doll's House* (1879), translated by Archer, The Royalty Theatre, two matinees on 14 and 21 February 1911
- *A Doll's House*, Court & Kingsway Theatres, fifty-two performances between 6 March and 12 May 1911
- *The Master Builder* (Gosse & Archer), Little Theatre, twenty-eight performances between 28 March and 12 May 1911
- *Hedda Gabler* (Gosse & Archer), Kingsway, twenty-five performances between 27 May and 17 June 1911
- *A Doll's House*, Kingsway, eight matinees between 21 November and 14 December 1911
- *Rosmersholm*, Court, two performances on 26 and 29 March 1912
- *A Doll's House*, Court, one matinee on 28 March 1912
- *Rosmersholm*, Little, one matinee on 28 May 1912

- *A Doll's House* (Archer), Court, six matinees between 15 and 25 October 1912
- *Brand* (1866), translated by Archer, Court, two matinees on 10 and 11 November 1912
- *The Pretenders* (1863), translated by Archer, Haymarket Theatre, thirty-five performances between 12 February and 15 March 1913
- *The Wild Duck* (Archer), St James's and the Savoy Theatres, eight performances between 1 December 1913 and 22 January 1914
- *A Doll's House*, Vaudeville, one performance on 27 January 1914
- *Ghosts* (1881), translated by Archer, Court, one performance on 26 April 1914
- *Ghosts* (Archer), Haymarket, one matinee on 14 July 1914

See J.P. Wearing, *The London stage 1900-1909 a calendar of plays and players* (Scarecrow Press: London, 1981) and *The London stage 1910-1919 a calendar of plays and players*, (Scarecrow Press: London, 1982).

Appendix II

Below is a short list of articles by Sickert which illustrate his distrust of modern art and general support for the art of the Nineteenth Century. All reprinted in Anna Gruetzner Robins (ed.) *Walter Sickert: The Complete Writings on Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), include:

- “French art of the Nineteenth Century”, *Burlington Magazine*, June 1922
- “Some French Cartoonists”, *Morning Post*, 6 June 1922
- “The Derby Day”, *Burlington Magazine*, December 1922
- “Wood-cuts of the ‘sixties at the Tate”, *Burlington Magazine*, March 1923
- “French Painters of the Nineteenth Century at the Lefèvre Galleries”, *Nation and Athenaeum*, 19 May 1923
- “A great Renoir”, *Southport Visitor*, 24 May 1924
- “Daumier’s Pictures”, *Daily Telegraph*, 4 Feb 1925
- “Manchester City Art Gallery: Holman Hunt and the Pre-Raphaelites”, *Manchester Guardian*, 8 March 1926
- “Farquharson & Courbet”, *Daily Telegraph*, 7 April 1926
- “Millet’s ‘Coup de vent’”, *The Times*, 9 Nov 1926
- “Constable’s Country”, *The Times*, 6 January 1927

- “The Early Giants”, *The Times*, 14 December 1927 (on Leech and Keene)
- “John Everett Millais”, *The Fortnightly Review*, June 1929
- “Within the Nineteenth Century”, *Burlington Magazine*, February 1932

Appendix III

Below is a brief list of productions of Shakespeare from 1900 to 1939 illustrating the growing trend for Shakespeare on the London stage.

As You Like It: 1900-1909 (7 productions, 157 performances)
1910-1919 (8 productions, 65 performances)
1920-1929 (9 productions, 127 performances)
1930-1939 (11 productions, 202 performances)

Macbeth: 1900-1909 (3 productions, 7 performances)
1910-1919 (6 productions, 143 performances)
1920-1929 (10 productions, 201 performances)
1930-1939 (9 productions, 177 performances)

A Midsummer Night's Dream: 1900-1909 (5 productions, 331 performances)
1910-1919 (9 productions, 245 performances)
1920-1929 (11 productions, 326 performances)
1930-1939 (10 productions, 393 performances)

A Winter's Tale: 1900-1909 (3 productions, 65 performances)
1910-1919 (5 productions, 82 performances)
1920-1929 (5 productions, 42 performances)
1930-1939 (3 productions, 60 performances)

One of the few Shakespeare productions which bucked this trend was;

The Taming of the Shrew: 1900-1909 (6 productions, 242 performances)
1910-1919 (11 productions, 132 performances)
1920-1929 (10 productions, 154 performances)

1930-1939 (5 productions, 110 performances)

Ratios sourced from J.P. Wearing, *The London stage 1900-1909 a calendar of plays and players* (London: Scarecrow Press, 1981); Wearing, *The London stage 1910-1919 a calendar of plays and players* (London: Scarecrow Press, 1982); Wearing, *The London stage 1920-1929 a calendar of plays and players* (London: Scarecrow Press, 1984); Wearing, *The London stage, 1930-1939 a calendar of plays and players* (London: Scarecrow Press, 1991).

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Sickert's letters to Ethel Sands, Nan Hudson, Gwen Ffrangcon-Davies, Andrina Schweder and the microfiche of Sickert's mother's (Ellen) correspondence.

Sickert's letters to Mrs R.R. Tatlock, "Sketch for a Broadcast" and "As I knew him: A Personal Portrait" are all held in the Walter Richard Sickert Collection at the Islington Public Library Archive in London.

Other notable sources of correspondence include;

The letters from Sickert to Alfred Pollard held in a private collection (Mrs Alice Woudhuysen).

Several of Sickert's letters to William Eden are held in Birmingham University, Special Collection Department.

Lady Hamilton's letter is held (on microfilm) in the Jean Hamilton Archive at the Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, King's College London Library.

Sickert's letter to Henry Irving and H.W. Swanwick's, 'Notes on Walter Richard Sickert' are held in the Victoria & Albert Museum, National Art Library Special Collections Department.

Maggie Cobden's letters to Ellen Cobden and Dorothy Richmond are held in the Cobden Archives at the West Sussex Record Office, Chichester.

Ffrangcon-Davies's scrapbooks and notebooks are held in the Gwen Ffrangcon-Davies Archive at the Martial Rose Library in the University of Winchester.

William Poel's letter to Lilian Baylis is held in the Lilian Baylis Collection, Bristol Theatre Collection, Bristol University.

Andre Dunoyer de Segonzac's letter to Denys Sutton is held in the Sutton Archive at Glasgow University Library as is Simona Pakenham's "Walter Sickert & My Grandmother" and Henry Rushbury's "Notes on Sickert" and various other items.

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