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Henry Irving: Outstanding 19th Century British Actor. Concerning the Issue of the Genre of the Stage

The article is devoted to the English actor and theatrical producer of the Victorian Age, Henry Irving (John Henry Broddrib). During the course of his entire life on stage Irving aspired towards recognition of himself as a tragic actor. At the same time his natural gift revealed itself with full force in the genre of the melodrama and in characteristic roles. The article presents an analysis of the roles that disclose in the most precise and bright way the issue of the theater genre in the activities of Henry Irving. The production of the play “The Bells” by Leopold Lewis would become the indisputable theatrical victory of Irving as an actor and producer. The characteristic image of the respectable burgomaster and the repentant murderer Matthias acquires tragic features. William Shakespeare’s “Hamlet” would be perceived in an ambivalent manner by the audiences and professional critics. The tragic prince of Denmark would present himself before the public as a live person with his passions, pain and turmoil. The tragedies in Irving’s productions differed cardinaly from the traditional interpretations of that time, and the Victorian public was not prepared to accept at once such directional solutions. Notwithstanding this, the Lyceum Theater under his direction became the theatrical center of Victorian London. Matthias, Hamlet, Macbeth, Othello, King Lear and Richard III were the roles that disclosed the tragic duality of Henry Irving’s theatrical gift.

Keywords: Henry Irving, theater of the Victorian Age, English theater, Shakespeare, melodrama, tragedy.

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Генри Ирвинг: выдающийся английский актёр XIX века. К проблеме сценического жанра

Статья посвящена английскому актёру и постановщику викторианской эпохи Генри Ирвингу (Джону Генри Бродрибу). На протяжении сценической жизни Ирвинг стремился к признанию себя как актёра-трагика. При этом его природное дарование с полной силой раскрылось в жанре мелодрамы и характерных ролях. В статье приводится анализ ролей, которые наиболее точно и ярко раскрывают проблему сценического жанра в творчестве Генри Ирвинга. Спектакль «Колокольчики» (по пьесе Л. Льюиса) станет безоговорочной театральной победой Ирвинга как актёра и режиссёра. Характерный образ уважаемого бургомистра и раскаивающегося убийцы Матиаса приобретёт трагические черты. «Гамлет» Уильяма Шекспира будет неоднозначно воспринят зрителями и профессиональными критиками. Трагический датский принц предстанет перед публикой живым человеком со своими страстями, болью и смятением. Трагедии в постановке Ирвинга кардинально отличались от традиционных трактовок, и викторианская публика не была готова сразу принимать такие режиссёрские решения. Несмотря на это, театр «Лицеум» под его руководством становится театральным центром викторианского Лондона. Матиас, Гамлет, Макбет, Отелло, Король Лир, Ричард III – роли, раскрывающие трагическую двойственность актёрского дарования Генри Ирвинга.

Ключевые слова: Генри Ирвинг, театр викторианской эпохи, английский театр, Шекспир, мелодрама, трагедия.



The 19th Century British theatre passed through several periods of its development: the Neoclassical, the Romantic and the Post-Romantic. With the annulment of the theatrical monopoly in 1843 a new age in the history of British theatre began, which was later called the Victorian Age. The aesthetics of this period was Post-Romantic, because it realized the issues of “verisimilitude” of stage expression of the dramatic character and its milieu posed by the Romantic theatre. The Victorian theatre of the second half of the 19th century witnessed the appearance of a type of performance, the main aim of which was to create the illusion of verisimilitude; the most important means for new expression was the visual element, whereas the main discovery of stagecraft was the box-shaped stage which enclosed the space of the stage, made it hermetically self-reliable, capable of imitating the “architecture of everyday life.”

The theatrical life of the final quarter of the 19th century in England may legitimately be called the age of Henry Irving (his real name was John Henry Brodribb, 1838–1905). The Lyceum Theatre, in which he was the director, producer and leading actor, was the theatrical center of London. Notwithstanding the outward success, the owner and chief stage-manager of the Lyceum Theatre, who defined the theatrical image of London at that time, was compelled during the course of his entire life to vindicate the benefits of theatrical art. Virtually all of his theatrical works are devoted to this subject.

He was not distinguished with an athletic physique, his self-confidence was only a mask, in addition he was not handsome or well-mannered. His attempts to be “an actor of explosive temperament” resounded against the weakness of his voice. Nonetheless, whenever he stood up on stage, each time he changed completely and beyond recognition, transforming into the character whose role he played. Henry Irving was that person, who by the strength of his talent of an actor was able to overcome all theatrical boundaries and clichés. Having become an acknowledged performer of characteristic roles of villains, Irving proves that he is capable of being an intriguing tragic actor. The latter exists quite organically both in melodrama and in tragedy. Being the director of the most successful theatre in London, with each new stage production he won over his audience numerous times.

No less remarkable was his friendship with Ellen Terry, the leading actress of the theatre and the mother of the well-known producer, scene designer and reformer of the art of the theatre Edward Gordon Craig. They resembled two verges of human talent. Terry was

endowed from nature with remarkable talents of an actor. In contrast to this, Irving was compelled all of his life to struggle with his outer deficiencies. Thus, during the course of his entire life, the first British actor, who obtained his rank of nobility, was forced to vindicate his professional validity. “His artistic life was one long struggle towards perfection: fault after fault he conquered, one by one he laid by his mannerisms, line by line he modelled the beautiful, sensitive face that he had evolved from his original immobile and rather ordinary features. To the hour of his death he worked incessantly, his whole career was a progression and those who witnessed his last performance probably saw him at his best” [5, p. 151–152].

From the age of fifteen the future actor attended classes of recitation, dance and a school for fencing. During that time he made the acquaintance of William Hoskins, an actor from the troupe of Samuel Phelps, from whom he took lessons of acting technique. In 1856 at the age of 18 John Henry Brodribb takes on the pseudonym of Henry Irving (in honor of Washington Irving, who wrote the “Sketch-Book,” the actor’s favorite literary work) and sets off to Sunderland with a recommendation letter to start his acting career. After Sunderland for two and a half years he worked in Edinburgh at the Theatre Royal and the Queen’s Theatre. He joined the Edinburgh theatrical group on January 9, 1857 and left it on September 13, 1859. Here he played 428 roles in 327 plays. He played roles of silent characters and reasoners, as well as the main characters of light comedies, burlesques and farces. During this period he performed numerous roles in Shakespeare’s plays: those of Florizel in “A Winter’s Tale,” Cassio in “Othello,” the Earl of Surrey in “Henry VIII,” four different roles in “Macbeth,” the most important of which was that of Macduff, as well as Paris and Tybalt in “Romeo and Juliet.” In “Hamlet” he played practically all the male roles, except that of the Prince of Denmark himself. His last role in Edinburgh was that of Claude Melnotte in Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s “The Lady of Lyons.” The rising star of the provincial stage was invited to Princess’ Theatre in London, and Irving went on to conquer London. In the very first play he acted in he had only six lines of text in his part, and those too were at the very beginning of the performance. As a result Irving was forced to cancel his three-year contract. Several reading evenings in London were followed by Dublin, the Theatre Royal in Glasgow and five months in Greenock. During that period he played small, insignificant roles, receiving a tiny salary. His acting career was inexorably sliding back to its initial stage.

The next stage was work at the Theatre Royal in Manchester. There he engaged in wearisome toil work. Irving gradually overcame his natural infirmities. His weak tenor voice with its dry timbre was developed by him until it reached low, velvety, noble bass notes. He developed the plasticity of his body. During this entire period only one single role was played by him with great success. It was the role of the villain Hardress Cregan from "The Colleen Bawn" by Dion Boucicault.

During the time of the young actor's work in Manchester, the 300th anniversary of Shakespeare was celebrated by a series of "Shakespeare readings" and "live pictures." Irving imagined John Philip Campbell in the role of Hamlet. It was at that particular moment Irving seemed to have physically perceived his power as a tragic actor. But he did not wish to imitate the stars of the past, since he felt the tragedy of the main protagonist in his own way.

In October 1864 Irving was discharged for his expressed obstinacy of behavior, and his wanderings resumed: Edinburgh, Bury, Oxford, Birmingham, Liverpool, Douglas. When Henry Irving left Manchester, he was 27 years old, and he had been working on the professional stage already for about 9 years.

At that time Dion Boucicault was looking for an actor who would play the villain in his new play "The Two Lives of Mary Leigh," which was later renamed into "Hunted Down." Not having found an appropriate choice, the playwright suddenly remembered the actor who played Cregan and invited him to play the role of the villain. On July 30, 1866 the world premiere of "Hunted Down" took place in Manchester. Irving began playing all the chief roles in the melodramas. In the summers he went on tours to Paris, Dublin and Bristol. But then American actor John Clark joined the troupe, and from that time Irving was given only small-scale comedy roles. As a result, he departed from the theatre.

A new Queen's Theatre opened up in London, the star of which was Irving's long-time friend from Edinburgh, the remarkable comic actor John Lawrence Toole. He helped provide the unemployed actor work in the theatre for the smallest salary. On the opening day three plays were shown. Irving played in David Garrick's old-time farce "Catharine and Petruchio." Here he met for the first time beginning actress Ellen Terry, with whom he later worked in partnership at the Lyceum for over twenty years. He stayed at the Queen's Theatre for a little over a year, having become the recognized performer of the roles of high-society villains. He played the role of the loafer and scoundrel in the play "More Precious than Life" and the cold-blooded villain in "The Lancashire Lass" by Henry James Byron, and the bandit Bill Sikes

from Charles Dickens' novel "Oliver Twist." The actor tried desperately to overcome his position, choosing the roles of positive heroes for his benefit performance, but was forced to play the role of the bankrupt gambler who marries for the sake of money in Le Thiers's play "Everything for Money." After the role played by him in James Albery's play "Two Roses," with which on June 4, 1869 the "Vaudeville" Theatre was opened, Henry Irving was pronounced to be one of the best character actors of London.

However, Henry Irving was attracted most of all to the roles of protagonist which contained in themselves a tragic duality. And what is even more remarkable – the specific techniques of Irving's theatrical performance underwent transformation of genre, and melodrama acquired features of tragedy. Two landmark roles in the actor's biography were the roles of Matthias from Leopold Lewis' play "The Bells" and Hamlet from William Shakespeare's play. Two polarly different characters, two genres distant from each other, connected in the artistry of one actor. The problem of genre in Irving's work will become the main conflict of his life.

The role of the Alsace burgomaster was played by Tallien and his successors, B. C. Coquelin senior and M. Goth. The French actors saw in burgomaster Matthias an average Alsatian, who killed a boarder of his hotel, a Polish Jew, solely for the sake of pure financial gain, and the fears were founded merely on the inevitable downfall of the image of the successful and respected bourgeois. His death, in correspondence with the author's original text, was the consequence of hallucinations caused by excessively drunk white wine. From this point of view, Matthias became a character from Balzac's "La Comedie Humaine" and could be played in the corresponding manner.

Irving approached this character from a different position. For him this was a suffering person, who nonetheless was able to adapt to visions aroused by his imagination. Persecuted by pangs of conscience day after day, he lived in expectation of retribution. His revealed fears were supposed to impress the audience. When committing the murder, Irving's hero seemed to act in an automatic fashion, as if driven by an insuperable force. This event altered Mathias' fate to such a degree that he became rich and after a certain while acquired the position of burgomaster. But each second of his life he remembered what he had done. At the end the main character seemed to begin existing in two parallel worlds, one which was real, and the other – created by his imagination, where the bells on the neck of the horse of the boarder killed by him rang

incessantly. More and more often his imagination had the upper hand over reality. In his visions Matthias received the impression that he was judged and condemned to death. At that moment the illusory world overpowered the main character, and he died.

In the cold evening of November 25, 1871 “The Bells” were staged in no less cold circumstances. The play was placed in the middle, between two other plays. George Belmore, who opened the performance with a farce, and who also appeared in “The pickwick Papers” in the role of Sam Weller, where Irving performed the role of Jinge, was supposed to be the star that evening.

Edward Gordon Craig in his book about Henry Irving writes that he saw over thirty performances of “The Bells.” Of course, he was not able to attend the premiere performance, because at that moment he was not yet born. But the descriptions of later performances from 1898–1900 provided rather precise perceptions of what took place on stage.

Not only had Craig attended the performances as an audience member, but he was also present at the rehearsals in the theatre, observing the dramatic process from within. For this reason he accentuated his attention on describing not as much the outward parameters of the performances as the emotional experience of the main protagonist, expressed for the most part by the actor’s plastic and mimetic motions. And indeed, notwithstanding the fact that the performances were products of the Victorian Age with its “archeological naturalism” and ardent attitude towards the outward appearance of the smallest details of staging, the actor took the leading position in it. It was as if the character came to life against an ideal picturesque background and began to act, not surpassing the boundaries of the alternating pictures. However, subsequently, when Henry Irving became the director of the Lyceum Theatre, he would always perform in the leading roles. But during that entire evening he was not the star either in the first or in the last production. “The Bells” – this was the play that was entirely his creation.

Edward Gordon Craig writes that during all the performances Irving’s appearance on stage was met with standing ovation. In contemporary psychological theatre such a reaction on the part of the audience may appear to be inappropriate. But during Irving’s time the actors’ entrances on stage were among of the most important constituents of their profession. Moreover, Craig defines most precisely, what the essence of the performance of “The Bells” was – “no more than a series of variations on a single theme, – namely, Irving” [1, p. 109]. Irving’s entire role was a tragic dance. On pictures and etchings depicting Henry Irving in the

role of burgomaster Matthias, he is always presented in the dynamics of the movement of his whole body. His eyes and pose remind us once again of the nature of his chief talent of an actor – his characterizations. He transformed his natural infirmities into the special traits of his individuality. Not having perceived a state of harmony within himself (since the talented actor and theatrical producer were contained in an infirm body), Henry Irving desperately sought for it without. And by creating the images of his protagonists, by disclosing their essence, he obtained this harmony in his existence on stage. The most successful roles of Irving carried in themselves the features of the protagonist suffering from his inner duality, from the discrepancy between the inner and the outer, from the lack of harmony between himself and the surrounding world. The character of Matthias became a breakthrough of his hitherto hidden spiritual and physical forces.

The “Times” newspaper gave the best description by the effect produced by this play on the audiences: “Mr. H. Irving has thrown the whole force of his mind into the character, and works out bit by bit, the concluding hours of a life passed in a constant effort to preserve a cheerful exterior, with a conscience tortured ‘til it has become a monomania. He is at once in two worlds between which there is no link – an outer world which is ever smiling, an inner world which is a purgatory. The struggles of the miserable culprit fighting against hope are depicted by Mr. Irving with a degree of energy which seems to hold the audience in suspense” [3, p. 88].

The ensuing silence in the theatre hall was caused by the horror and the absolute credibility of the events that took place on stage, and suddenly, as an outshot there were standing ovations and a squall of approving response. As the curtain fell, Irving knew that all of London was at his feet.

Prior to that, the “Times” wrote about Irving merely as a good character actor and performer of roles of high-society villains. In this instance they branded the premiere of “The Bells” as the birth of a new tragic actor. In substance, the play itself did not contain in itself either any tragic moods or such a deep disclosure of the main character’s inner world. Henry Irving created his own work of art by means of this play. The dual world of the main protagonist was one of the main premises of classical tragedies. The substantial conflict occurs between the character’s inner spiritual world and his place in the real world. Henry Irving went a step beyond the literary material and the labels attached to him of the “high-society villain” and the “good character actor.” He did not cease being a wonderful character actor,

but such distinctness of character acquired features of veritable tragic qualities.

“The Bells” presents one such example of how the 34-year-old actor, already past the prime of his youth, became acknowledged by everybody and for the rest of his life. One single evening, one step on stage, and result was a lifetime of popularity, lasting from 1871 to 1905, the year of his death. If the actor’s lengthy path towards this first victory is to be remembered, then his proclivity towards characters tinted by more than one hue becomes understandable. Being confident in and having sensed within himself the strength of a tragic actor, Henry Irving did not yield to the temptation of being recognized as a good performer of characteristic roles of “high-class villains.” His individuality consisted in this combination of characteristic and tragic features.

When in 1874 Irving announced for the first time his intentions of playing the role of Hamlet, everybody understood that he claimed a part of the great glory of old days, along with Garrick, Campbell, Kean, Macready and Phelps. But Irving turned out to be the most successful of the five actors who played this role during the following three seasons.

It is difficult to estimate the influence exerted on Irving by other Hamlets. Similarly to many other actors of the Victorian Age, he was well instructed in the numerous traditions of performance of this role. Irving played with Booth and Fechter, taking the role of Laertes, when their tours brought them to the provincial theatres in Manchester in 1861 and in Birmingham in 1865. Undoubtedly, he was familiar with their rendition of the image of Hamlet; some elements were appropriated by him from Phelps, whom he watched in a theatrical performance for the first time at the age of 12. The first Hamlet remained in the actor’s memory forever.

Performances of “Hamlet” towards that time became rather standard occurrences. Even in the premiere evening the public was well instructed in the techniques of playacting and standards of production. Edmund Keane paved the way for the tradition of star actors. The latter were not as much concerned with the theatrical performance in general, building it in such a way as to provide the main protagonist with the opportunity of demonstrating the power of tragic experience. During each performance the actor made use of all the wealth of the colors of his or her theatrical palette, sometimes even somewhat congesting the performance of mimicry, gesticulation, impressive poses, movements and modulations of voice. The means of expression were not always in accord with the psychological truth of character. There

were moments when the actor created a sensation with a stroke of genius, with a bright gesture, which conveyed the meaning of the scene, speech or gesture. The traditional type of production of “Hamlet” was so familiar to everybody that the minutest changes or insertion of anything new generated a sensation. Innovation for its own sake more often than not had a discouraging effect, but when a novel idea appealed to the audience, it was tantamount to genius. Thus, the actor MacReady was celebrated for his rendition of Hamlet’s madness with a swift and characteristic stride along the edge of the stage; swinging his handkerchief, as if in idle indifference to everything, though morbidly concealing his feeling of the approaching triumph. Only one change in “Hamlet” was important – it was the star-actor, who frequently shortened his textual role in order to demonstrate an assortment of newly discovered effects.

Irving changed this kind of course of events. In both of his productions he was restricted in means, since in 1874 he had not yet become the full-fledged owner of the Lyceum Theatre. Even by 1878 he had not gathered the complete ensemble which supported him in his later performances. Nonetheless, he was able to present the most realistic version of “Hamlet” for that age. He tried to determine and convey the meaning of each word, and not merely to declaim beautiful verses. Prince Hamlet was no longer draped in beautiful clothes appropriate for the palace. He wore a simple costume of black silk, a short camisole and a heavy golden chain on his chest, and had his face disclosed to the public. All of the monologues of the man protagonist were poignant and perturbate reflections. The audience saw the pale, weary face with eyes filled with pain. Due to the natural infirmities the voice of Hamlet at times broke off into unpleasant raucous notes, whereas his gait became unsteady and nervously twitched. But all of this merely gave the protagonist his own inimitable individuality. Hamlet performed by Irving was an integral, complex and mystical figure, but at the same time an intimate and vivacious person. He ceased from being simply the “tragic prince of Denmark.”

In reality, Irving’s hero was so free from typical theatrical clichés, so truthful and remote from the standards that the premiere in 1874 placed the audience into an impasse, and the wary silence in the hall continued up all through the third act.

Irving frequently reiterated that the true aim of art was beauty, whereas truth is the indispensable part of beauty. His Hamlet was, first of all, a living person, with his hysterical outbursts, melancholy, madness and with his sense of duty towards the family’s downtrodden



honor. He was not ideal, – just as no person is ideal. The “Hamlet fever” began on October 31, 1874, and during that season the play was staged over 200 times.

After his triumph in the role of Hamlet, Henry Irving continued to produce William Shakespeare’s tragedies: “Macbeth,” “Othello,” “King Lear” and “Richard III.” And each production differed cardinally from traditional renditions for that time. And even though the audience was not immediately receptive of such decisions, nevertheless, the Lyceum Theatre hall was always full. The conclusion can be arrived at that Irving achieved his aim. But besides the author’s wish that came true, there existed something else, which was independent and immutable – it was natural talent. In pursuit of the fame of the tragic actor, did he

not depart farther and farther from his natural talents? During the production of “Othello” Irving signed a contract with Edwin Booth – during the course of six weeks they changed their roles of Othello and Iago eleven times. Henry Irving sincerely and legitimately considered his Othello to be a dramatic misfortune, while his Iago was incomparable. He was eminently charming, improvised and felt himself absolutely free.

Brilliant characteristic roles – the things he always distanced himself from – were livelier and more expressive than the tragic roles to which Irving aspired all his life. Henry Irving was prevented from fully realizing his dramatic potential and become a great grotesque actor by his ambition and the desire of the audience to see Shakespeare’s heroes on stage.



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