

Introduction

The unattributed manuscript of *Daft Dora; Or, The Sorrows of Susan, The Child of the Wreck*¹ presents the reader with a fascinating example of the challenges associated with theatrical research. Licensed by the Lord Chamberlain's Office in August 1852, it remained unperformed until over a year later. No playbills or reviews exist, only two adverts in the *Era* and *Reynold's Newspaper* bear witness to a run of just two weeks from 3 October to 15 October at The Britannia Saloon. Given the commercial failure of *Daft Dora*, the fragility of the evidence is not surprising. The awkward title betrays the play as a poorly constructed melodrama that attempted to fuse several tropes popular in Victorian theatre, notably the 'idiot' child, the innocent heroine and the shipwrecked orphan. To add to the difficulties of representation, *Daft Dora* is a hybrid of comic, nautical, domestic and sensation dramas. Yet it is this variety that indicates the popular trends a journeyman playwright was commissioned to capitalise upon. The desire to attract an audience in a rapidly shifting market is evident in the unauthorised changes made to the play after it was licensed. The manuscript lodged at the Lord Chamberlain's Office is a clean copy without corrections or alterations, whereas the promptscript makes significant changes to the nature and scope of the play.² The additional songs and speeches catered for the specific tastes of the East End audience, whilst the changes to Susan's role allowed The Britannia's company to represent the play without the aid of a guest actress. Alongside the original promptscript, this introduction aims to explore the creative process of licensing and performing the melodrama *Daft Dora*.

Melodrama at The Britannia Saloon.

The manuscript was unattributed, and was presented in 1852 by Samuel Lane, the proprietor of The Britannia Saloon in the Hoxton district of London. Heralding itself as 'The People's Theatre' on its playbills and posters, The Royal Britannia Saloon typically staged a commissioned new melodrama or domestic drama, a speciality act, a pantomime and concluded with a well-known favourite drama each night. Playbills from the 1850s indicate that gymnasts, acrobats and ghost-effects were popular with the audience, along with the appearance of giants, minstrels and side-show entertainments.³ The Britannia's success derived from the manager Samuel Lane and his wife Sarah's ability to cater for the taste of the people living in the immediate vicinity of the East End. However, the saloon's geographical position and local audience gave The Britannia a bad reputation in respectable circles. Even when it showcased major stars such as Ira Aldridge as Titus Andronicus on 15th March 1852, the critic for *The Times* undercut the professionalism of a 'tragedy well-acted and mounted with care and propriety' with a scathing commentary on how the 'characters

¹ The punctuation is my own as both manuscripts lack any.

² The original promptscript, annotated by the stage-manager Frederick Wilton, is lodged at The Templeman Library, The University of Kent at Canterbury, in the Pettingell Collection, PETT MSS.D.2.Spec.Coll.

³ See Jim Davis (ed.), *The Britannia Diaries of Frederick Wilton* (London: The Society for Theatre Research, 1992), p.188, where Wilton records the appearance of a two-headed nightingale and Giant & Giantess on stage in his entry for 7 Aug 1871.

are falsified to suit the weak invention of the modern dramatic cobbler'.⁴ Another review in *The Times* for the same year focused more on the saloon's reputation as the 'boudoir of the East' than on the performance.⁵ Certainly the audience's familiarity with the long-standing company and the type of plays featured would account for its notoriety, but the theatre's playbills indicate at least a semblance of respectability, as they advertise 'No persons admitted to the Boxes unless suitably attired'. However, it was only when Samuel Lane demolished the saloon in 1858 and rebuilt The Britannia Theatre on the same site that his company's professionalism was accorded with respectability. The new design's attention to acoustics was noted by Dickens when he visited The Britannia in 1860, as was the reverence for drama displayed by the 'closely attentive' audience.⁶

The Britannia was renowned for its melodramas and used a succession of resident dramatists and freelance writers, such as George Dibdin Pitt (late 1840s - early 1850s), William Seaman (1850s) and Colin Hazlewood (late 1850s – 1870s) to write new feature pieces. The genre's polarisation of character, championing of impoverished virtue and spectacular innovations particularly appealed to the largely working-class audience. Commissioned plays made full use of the specific range of developing technology within theatres to represent spectacular scenes such as shipwrecks, avalanches, storms and train crashes. Beyond these features, melodrama is a difficult genre to define and *Daft Dora* is typically problematic. It appears to fuse two different strands of melodrama, using images of shipwrecks and smugglers from nautical drama in the first act and images of virtuous heroines, villainous squires, stolen wills and court scenes from domestic drama in the second. As the title suggests, Dora is the focus of the first act whilst her 'adopted' sister Susan is the heroine of the second. A dual female focus was common to Victorian melodrama, but the play fails to successfully unite the two, which mars the construction of the play, particularly as the 'daft' Dora becomes the lucid detective who reveals her sister's innocence in the final courtroom scene. Both Dora and Susan's family units are destroyed by dramatic shipwrecks and images of children orphaned through shipwrecks were a common feature of Victorian drama. Watts Phillips' *Nobody's Child* (n.d.), J.R. Planché's *The Child of the Wreck* (n.d.) and Edward Fitzball's *The Floating Beacon; or, The Wild Woman of the Wreck* (n.d.) all used the figure of the orphan to elicit sympathy from the audience and highlight the difficulties faced by a social outcast.⁷ Interestingly, *Daft Dora*'s use of doubled orphans, one of which saves the other from the villain, precedes the long-running epic melodrama *The Sea of Ice* (1853), which uses the same basic format. However, unlike the numerous versions of *The Sea of Ice*, *Daft Dora* complicates the plot by presenting the heroine Dora in a variety of situations that require numerous guises or disguises. Dora is the victim of kidnapping and no less than three shipwrecks, and is constructed as the image of Ophelia, a boy, a slave, a servant and then a detective throughout the course of the play. Without anticipating any feminist response to her appearance on stage bound,

⁴ Review of 'Titus Andronicus' from *The Sunday Times*, 21 March 1852 in the V&A Theatre Museum Archive.

⁵ Review clipping of 'Punch and Judy' from *The Times*, January 1852 in the V&A Theatre Museum Archive.

⁶ See 'Two Views of a Cheap Theatre' from *All the Year Round*, 25 February 1860 reprinted in Michael Slater and John Drew (eds), *The Dent Uniform Edition of Dickens' Journalism Volume 4: The Uncommercial Traveller and Papers 1859-70* (London: J.M. Dent, 2000), p.56.

⁷ All of these plays are now available from The Victorian Plays Project at <http://victorian.worc.ac.uk>.

gagged and dressed as a boy, Dora's presence on stage is distinctly problematic and often unsettling. She is the only link between the various plot strands designed to attract the audience. Her shifting character is difficult to align with the melodramatic polarisation of character, prefiguring the multiplicities of Hazlewood's heroines within the emerging genre of sensation drama of the late 1850s and 1860s.

Reconstructing the First Performance.

Given the unconventional aspects of *Daft Dora*, its commercial failure was perhaps inevitable. The only surviving record of the play's first performance appears in the form of two brief adverts from the *Era* and *Reynold's Newspaper*. On Sunday 2 October, an announcement appeared in the *Era* heralding the performance of a new and exciting drama *Daft Dora* to be played all week. It was the main attraction amongst a bill that included Madmosielle Culline's tight rope act, the spectacle of the Largest Children in Suffolk, the vocal talents of Mr C. Woodman and a secondary melodrama *The Heart of a Mother*. Whereas *The Heart of a Mother* was 'supported by all the strength of the company', a skeleton castlist is given for *Daft Dora*. Presumably in order of significance, the advert lists Mr J. Reynolds, C.J. Bird, W.R. Crawford, W. Rogers, H. Carles, W.H. Newnham and Mesdames Yarnold, B. Ware, Atkinson, J. Hackney and Power. The list remained unchanged in the advert in *Reynold's Newspaper* for Sunday 9 October, but neither attribute members of the company to specific characters. At most the play's run lasted two weeks which would explain the lack of playbill or reviews.

However, valuable information can be gained from the original promptscript in the Pettingell Collection housed at the Templeman Library, University of Kent at Canterbury. It is a very fragile manuscript, with several alterations made by the playwright before its use by the acting company. The playwright added a risqué song, cut early comic scenes, changed the ending and added headings to later sensational scenes. 'The Chamber of the Dead!' and 'Duel in the Dark!' were added to II.v⁸, whilst 'Sensation' appears in the final scene where Dora proclaims Harry Hinton the villain.⁹ These headings resemble the descriptive titles which appeared on handheld playbills, enabling a partial reconstruction of such ephemeral evidence. The manuscript was then annotated by The Britannia's stage manager Frederick Wilton and was clearly a working text complete with lighting cues, comments and cuts. Amongst the technical notes, Wilton remarks on a page of scribbles: 'this drawing done by Bartolo, one of the Aztec Children (the girl) 11 years of age. September 28th 1853'. This dates the rehearsals to the week before the first advertised performance, as *Daft Dora* was billed alongside the spectacle of The Largest Children in the World to contrast with the Aztec Lilliputians.

Wilton records the length of the first performance as 1 hour and 38 minutes, giving a break of 4 minutes between each act. He also carefully noted when scenes could not be cut, as was the practice if the previous play had overrun: 'Every word of this scene must be spoken / next scene hang a quick set'.¹⁰ The text is re-formed by both the practicalities of performance and the energies that the performers bring to it. In the stage direction for the end of Act I, the playwright unusually adds a note: 'N.B: A

⁸ *Daft Dora*, Lord Chamberlain's Plays, p.44. All page references refer to the e-edition.

⁹ *Daft Dora*, Lord Chamberlain's Plays, p.47.

¹⁰ PETT MSS.D.2.Spec Coll., f.50r and Lord Chamberlain's Plays Add.Mss. 52934 B, II.vi.

bustle of this kind can be better arranged by the stage manager, than by description; particularly as many incidents and ideas arise at rehearsal.’ The manuscript is accompanied by a partial cast list for the 1853 production, recorded by the early twentieth century actor Arthur Williams from an unknown source:

Charles Seabright.....	Mr J. Reynolds
Caleb Strike.....	Mr J. Mordaunt
Seagrave.....	Mr W. Smith
Watch.....	Mr Cecil Pitt
Crab.....	Mr William Rogers
Conky.....	Mr Harry Carles
Rosa.....	Mrs Green

Closer inspection of Wilton’s marginal notes reveals more of the original cast: Mr Lamour, Mr Ellis and Mr Lamb played the smugglers, Mr Davison played the part of the Usher, whilst Miss E. Green played the part of Emma Stanfield. The names of Mr Car (possibly an abbreviation of Carles) and Mr Rudway appear opposite the final scene but are not connected to particular characters. Many of these names do not appear in the advertised castlist, problematising any reconstruction of the initial performance.

The company’s leading ladies Mrs Lane, Mrs E. Yarnold and Celeste Stephan (the première danseuse) are not mentioned in the promptscript, potentially indicating the difficulty of casting the title roles of Dora and Susan from *The Britannia’s* stock company. It is possible that the play was written for a guest actress and then shelved when the contract was not fulfilled. Melodramatic heroines and bitches parts were well within the capabilities of Sarah Lane, wife of the theatre manager Samuel Lane. Indeed she played the principal boy in the *Britannia’s* Christmas pantomime for the duration of her career. The *Era’s* advert lists Mrs Yarnold first, however castlists often ran in order of a character’s rank or age rather than the significance of the role itself. Yarnold was a proficient melodramatic actress and a principal member of *The Britannia’s* company. On 7 October, Yarnold played the title role of Phoebe Hessel, a multiplicitous character that crossed gender boundaries as ‘a Housemaid; afterwards a Soldier; and afterwards a Nurse’.¹¹ The age of both actresses would also potentially preclude them from the role of the young Dora, although Sarah Lane was distinctly evasive about her age even on official records. The 1861 census records her age as 25, contrary to the evidence that she was born in either 1822 or 1823 and therefore 38 at least. What is clear is that whoever played either Dora or Susan was unable to overcome the play’s stylistic flaws.

Attribution and the Journeyman Playwright.

The promptscript is in the same hand as the Lord Chamberlain’s manuscript, and is a holograph manuscript signed Andrew Campbell. Campbell appears to have worked as a freelancer for *The Britannia* during the 1850s, writing melodramas that were often pastiches of well-used formulas. His full name was Andrew Leonard Voullaire Campbell (1789-1870), which he shortens to Andrew Campbell during his time with

¹¹ See the playbill for *The New Britannia* for 7 October 1863, located in The Templeman Library, University of Kent at Canterbury.

The Britannia. His career as a minor playwright became established in the 1830s with plays such as *Lyieushee Lovel; or, The Gipsy of Ashburnham Dell! : a melo-drama in 3 acts* (n.d.), *Gambler's Life in London; or, Views on the Country and Views in Town: Being a moral, ludicrous, laughable, bombastical, natural, allegorical, undisguised, visionary, strange, disjointed, and true dramatic picture of metropolitan oddities, in three acts* (1829), *The Rent Day, and Distraining For Rent* (1835), *Demon of the Desert; or, The Murderer's Sacrifice: a Melo-dramatic spectacle, in two acts* (1829), *Rule Britannia: a Nautical Drama in 3 acts* (1836) and *Bound 'prentice to a Waterman; or, the Flower of Woolwich: a nautical drama, in three acts* (1836). This is his first phase of writing and it may be that he toured America or lived abroad during the late 1830s and 1840s as he disappears from public records. He does not appear in the 1841 census and his marriage, if any, to Elizabeth Sophia Broomfield is unrecorded. The 1851 census lists him as Andrew Voutlaire Campbell, Comedian with a wife and seven children. Given the financial burden of a large family, it is not surprising to find him still writing when in his seventies and he is listed as a 'public writer' living in the Britannia district of Hoxton in the 1861 census. *Daft Dora* appears in this second phase of writing, alongside *Woman Fiend or Gunhilda the fearful: in 2 acts* (n.d.), *Oscar the Dane: or, The Mysterious Man of Australia: a Drama on 3 acts* (1852), *Britannia: Mont Blanc or the Ice Fiend of the Alps* (1853), *Swindler: a Drama in 2 acts* (1857), *Kaffir War: a drama in 3 acts* (1860), and *Perilous Pass: a Drama in 2 acts* (1862). Many of Campbell's plays were clearly written to capitalise upon trends in popular drama, often condensing several ideas and contemporary references at the expense of plot structure and pace. Given Campbell's status as a minor dramatist and his propensity for the popular, it is not surprising that he left the licensing manuscript under the name of The Britannia's long-standing proprietor Samuel Lane.

Licensing and Textual Alterations.

Lane had a good reputation with the Lord Chamberlain's office, having previously withdrawn plays due to their improper proximity to current events.¹² Given the huge number of plays that were sent for licensing, many theatres were largely self-governing and initially Samuel Lane's Britannia seems to be an example of this. By the 1870s Lane's stage manager Wilton had developed a close professional relationship with the official W.B. Donne, who had read and licensed *Daft Dora*. Donne refused the license for *The Devil's Pool* in 1871 as the author had annoyed him by writing 'immediate' on the manuscript, but Wilton apologised and play was granted a license.¹³ By 1875, Wilton was on such terms with the Lord Chamberlain's Office that he could visit and discuss changes before any refusal could be issued.¹⁴ This negotiation between theatre and licensor suggests another source of creativity, countering contemporary fears over the potentially restrictive nature of the licensing process. Whilst reviewing The Britannia's latest melodramatic offering in 1850, Dickens used his article 'The Amusements of the People II' to attack the Lord Chamberlain's Office. Arguing that the Lord Chamberlain's royal connections reduced the Office to a 'mere piece of Court favour', Dickens felt that the harsh censorship imposed upon smaller theatres without royal patent denied these smaller

¹² Jim Davis (ed.), *The Britannia Diaries*, p.12.

¹³ Jim Davis (ed.), *The Britannia Diaries*, p.190.

¹⁴ Jim Davis (ed.), *The Britannia Diaries*, p.219.

theatres' potential as an educative force for the largely working-class audiences.¹⁵ However, despite appearances, the prompt manuscript offers evidence that there were ways to avoid the censor's gaze.

Wilton's diary claimed that plays were sometimes performed without a license, but *Daft Dora* was sent for license in the standard way, prior to performance.¹⁶ It was performed a year after the official process, but in that time the manuscript underwent several significant changes, all of which the Lord Chamberlain would have been unaware of, as the play was not resubmitted. Structurally, Act I is split into two, to form a three act drama. Act II therefore begins at Scene 7.¹⁷ Many of Campbell's later additions were cut by Wilton during rehearsals, including the scene with the Jewish Pedlar and the scenes between Eugene Ephraim and Madame de la Poule. Wilton's most significant alteration to the working text was the removal of all the dream scenes in the final act. This alters the play's structure, as Mrs Seagrave's dream in I.vii forms a link between the nautical drama and the following domestic drama. It also makes the play easier to stage, for the dream sequence requires a more technically complex use of the corsican trapdoor to allow the vision of Mrs Seagrave to appear to Susan at the beginning of the final act. Along with structural changes, Campbell made two additions to the text which are worth noting. He adds a risqué song at end of what becomes II.iii, about an opera singer who breaks her contract, falls from grace and comes to land on her back. The line is loaded with sexual connotations although the song ends with a moral that promotes honesty over ambition. The song appears completely out of context with the scene, and may well have been written in reference to current events familiar with the largely working class audience. The practice of adding songs after the Lord Chamberlain had licensed the play was in evidence later in 1872, as Wilton notes that *The Britannia* was reported for a similar offence. On the 23 September 1872, Lord Chamberlain demanded to see copies of all the songs sung at *The Britannia* as one was reputed to refer to the then prominent Tichbourne case.¹⁸ Direct contemporary references were clearly frowned upon, but Campbell persisted in his efforts to attract the 'people's theatre' audience whilst avoiding the censor. He re-wrote the ending of *Daft Dora* from the stage direction 'The Body of Hinton is taken off'.¹⁹ This alteration virtually erases Susan from the final act in favour of the character Mr Justall. Justall becomes the focus of patriotic comments on the nobility of the English justice system.

This alternative ending has more in common with the comic genre than melodrama. It's self-referential final line and desire for approval from the audience is in contrast to the expected spectacular tableaux of virtue's triumph over evil. This new ending goes beyond the death of Hinton, Susan's release and Ephraim's imprisonment, to the detriment of the melodramatic form. The structural changes made by Campbell and

¹⁵ Charles Dickens, 'The Amusements of the People II', *Household Words*, 13 April 1850 reprinted in Michael Slater & John Drew (eds), *The Dent Uniform Edition of Dickens' Journalism. Vol. II: The Amusements of the People and Other Papers: Reports, Essays and Reviews 1834 – 51* (London: J.M. Dent, 1996), p.197.

¹⁶ Wilton writes that the company performed Hazlewood's *The Collier's Strike* on Wed 26th June 1867 unlicensed, cited in Jim Davis (ed.), *The Britannia Diaries*, p.125.

¹⁷ *Daft Dora*, Lord Chamberlain's Plays, p.16.

¹⁸ Jim Davis (ed.), *The Britannia Diaries*, p.209. The Tichbourne case concerned the return of a man, Arthur Orton who claimed to be the long lost heir Sir Roger Tichbourne. The case against Orton began in 1871 after he had convinced the mother of the real heir to give him an annual income and public recognition. Orton was proved to be a fraud.

¹⁹ *Daft Dora*, Lord Chamberlain's Plays, p.53.

cuts made by Wilton bear witness to the difficulties and challenges faced by the modern reader and the Lord Chamberlain's office alike in assessing a developing text. The play *Daft Dora* is, like all plays, an evolving, unstable product of the author and stage manager's attempts to avoid the censor and appeal to the audience.

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Further Reading

Peter Bailey, *Popular Culture and Performance in the Victorian City* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998)

Michael R. Booth, *English Melodrama* (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1965)

Jacky Bratton, *New Readings in Theatre History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003)

Jim Davis (ed.), *The Britannia Diaries 1863-1875. Selections from the Diaries of Frederick C. Wilton* (London: The Society for Theatre Research, 1992)

Judith Flanders, *Consuming Passions: Leisure and Pleasure in Victorian Britain* (London: Harper Perennial, 2007)

Michael Hays & Anastasia Nikoloploulou (eds), *Melodrama: The Cultural Emergence of a Genre* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999)

Arthur Lloyd Website of Victorian music halls:

<http://www.arthurlloyd.co.uk/Britannia.htm>