

In the city of Calcutta there are no cobras: Representations and Erasures of India in Victorian theatrical culture

Jim Davis

When Daniel Bandmann, a German actor who performed (sometimes quite unintelligibly) in English, decided to undertake a world tour, he included not only Australasia, Singapore, Ceylon and China in his itinerary, but also Calcutta, Madras and Bombay. His account of these travels 'An Actor's Tour or Seventy Thousand Miles with Shakespeare' is typical of the genre of actor memoirs that appeared in the late nineteenth century. He is often opinionated, boastful of his encounters and friendships with British aristocrats and officials, and quick to pass judgment. His tour was one of the most extensive ever undertaken by a European actor at that time, lasting three and a half years. Yet he does not focus on his work as an actor other than incidentally; he does not present himself (at least consciously) as cultural missionary or ambassador. Instead, the bulk of the book focuses on his own recollections of the places he visited and on what he observed: he may share the prejudices of his contemporaries about the supremacy of European civilization and the position of Shakespeare at its apex, but he is prepared to look. Like J. B. Howe, whose own memoirs use the term, he is a 'cosmopolitan actor'. He is one of a significant number of European actors whose reasons for travelling (other than the obvious mercenary ones) were not so much expressive of colonial relationships as of a global and cosmopolitan perspective which embraced countries throughout the world and, in the case of actors who performed in Britain and Ireland, a commitment as much to Dublin, Belfast, Manchester, Liverpool, and the east end of London as to an exclusive alignment with west end theatres and an inflated sense of their own social and cultural importance.

When the west end comedian Charles Mathews the younger, visited Australia from 1870-71, he insisted on raised prices at all theatres at which he performed and continually informed the Australian press, whenever there were complaints, how lucky they were to have him there and that they must be prepared to pay for quality products. His memoirs are largely preoccupied with this issue rather than his impressions of Australia, which were generally pretty poor. He did not even record his impressions of India, to the best of my knowledge, although he stated in his farewell speech in Calcutta in 1876 that he had found the climate so much more agreeable than expected that he had been able to complete his engagement in half the time he expected it to take. After 'describing the rapidity with which his eyes had been "dazed with diamonds, pearls, emeralds, and cloth of gold; with rajahs, maharajahs, and babus, balls, dinners garden parties, races, regattas, steeple-chases, polo matches, tent-pegging, illuminations, fireworks, receptions, levees, presentations, installations"', he added, equally flippantly, that he was disappointed at first to find that the 'City of Palaces' had not consisted of marble studded with precious stones and that he had seen so few elephants.¹

¹ *Freeman's Journal and Daily Commercial Advertiser* (Dublin), 11 February, 1876

At the same time as Mathews was touring Australia, so was Daniel Bandmann. As Mathews vacated a theatre, Bandmann arrived, announced he was a ‘people’s actor’, put the prices back to normal and, unlike Mathews or, a little earlier Charles Kean and his wife Ellen, who must really take credit for fulfilling to perfection the role of what Australians call ‘whingeing poms’, responded warmly to his habitat and its people. Like Joseph Jefferson, the American actor, who provides a wonderful account a few years earlier of the Chinese theatre in the gold fields of Victoria, he looks at the world around him and takes an interest in it.

Failure to look is a form of erasure and all too often symptomatic of a colonialism or imperialism which is only too happy to erase culture and language or to look at colonial oppression in self-justifying terms of black and white. Henry O’Neil’s paintings ‘Eastward Ho’ and ‘Home Again’ show soldiers departing for and returning from India at the time of the Indian Mutiny – significantly, both paintings have a specifically British perspective; any concept or representation of India is totally non-existent. Perhaps the excessively conservative O’Neil felt it was too unworthy or too inconsequential to represent. Boucicault’s Indian Mutiny drama *Jessie Browne or The Relief of Lucknow* (1858) is at least set in India and includes Indian characters, but with its melodramatic structure pitting the heroic Scottish soldiers against the evil Nana Sahib, the flimsy evidence on which Boucicault based his plot and the failure to acknowledge the causes of the mutiny mean this is not so much a play about India as a play that uses India for conventional dramatic purposes. Nana Sahib was much reviled in Britain at the time, for he was held responsible for the Cawnpore massacre in which several thousand women and children were killed. His motivation in the play is his rather unlikely lust for Mrs Campbell, an officer’s widow; if she will succumb, he will call off the siege of Lucknow, but, as Mrs Campbell tells him, ‘England would spurn the peace bought thus with the honour of one of her people’. Later, when the siege has worn down the troops and they look as if they will be overcome by the mutinous sepoys Mrs Campbell begs the commanding officer, Randal MacGregor:

Oh recollect Cawnpore! These children will be hacked to pieces before our eyes—ourselves reserved for worse than death, and then mutilated, tortured, butchered in cold blood...Kills us! Put us to a merciful death ere you fall...if you leave us here, you are accessories to our dishonour and our murder

Fortunately Randal does not have to act on Mrs Campbell’s request, since the sudden arrival of another Scottish regiment, appropriately playing ‘The Campbells are comin’ and then ‘Auld Lang Syne’ on the bagpipes, saves the day. The multiple causes of the Indian Mutiny and the fact that it might have been averted if the introduction into the Indian army of Enfield rifles, the loading of which required the biting or tearing of a cartridge greased with cow or pork fat, had been more sensitively considered, are never acknowledged. One of the most popular British and American melodramas of the nineteenth century with an Indian setting not only ignores the complexities of Anglo-Indian relations at this point, but uses Scottish ballads as a form of displacement and erasure at the play’s conclusion.

This failure to look is also apparent in the many accounts of amateur theatre, garrison and otherwise, in India. An endless diet of west end comedies and farces ensured that those garrisoned or serving as clerks in India were able to look homewards culturally rather than at what was around them. And, if the East was the feminised 'other' of Said's orientalism, British soldiers and other British settlers in India were the feminised 'others' of amateur drama. One member of the Calcutta Amateur Theatrical Society recalled how, during the cold weather season, they used to give about six productions. All female roles were taken by young boys and the writer recollects dressing up as a girl in his younger days and usually taking the role of leading lady, including Viola in *Twelfth Night* and Lady Gay Spanker in *London Assurance*. A certain Mrs. Cable was apparently 'invaluable' to the "ladies" of the company. 'She chose the material for the gowns, designed the style and cut, tried them on, and saw that we were properly and immaculately turned out to the smallest detail'.² The writer explains that, on performance nights he never ate anything before going on, and 'assisted by the aid of tight lacing...could generally manage to squeeze [his] waist within the compass of 24 inches', although this could create problems if one had to sit oneself on a low sofa during a performance. In *London Assurance* J. T. Hume, 'our worthy and much respected Public prosecutor...portrayed the important part of Grace Harkaway, and a very charming and presentable young lady he made'.³ Some performers were not so well attired: a complaint about three cross-dressed performers at Simla in 1838 was that they wore gowns without plaits in them and without bustles or petticoats. Another performance the same year had been hampered by a performer who acted women's parts well, but would not shave off his moustachios.⁴ The cross-dressing by soldiers serving in the garrisons of empire and other colonial amateurs is fascinating, whether one interprets it as transgressive behaviour or even as a form of surrogate suppression or control of colonial women.

If a focus on frocks was one outcome of amateur theatricals in Simla, Calcutta and elsewhere, another (as indicated above) was the focus on a very parochial, largely contemporary repertoire, the high points of which, by the end of the nineteenth century, were most likely to be the comic operas of Gilbert and Sullivan or the plays of Pinero. When Colonel Moore-Lane — then a captain — arranged to take a company of amateurs on tour through all the big cities of India, playing "My Milliner's Bill," "The Parvenu," and "Creatures of Impulse," — a tour eventually abandoned because of his wife's (who was leading lady) illness — he was persuaded to admit local children to a dress rehearsal at Poona:

Colonel Moore-Lane, being a kindly soul, and also knowing what a splendid audience school children make, consented willingly. He was surprised, however, to find, instead of the hundreds of smiling white faces he expected to see, row upon row of grave little copper- coloured visages, the little Indian children from the missionary schools. The harder he and his company worked to raise a laugh, the graver and graver this audience grew. They had been brought up to regard every

² Montague Massey, *Recollections of Calcutta for over Half-a-Century* (1918), pp. 31-33

³ Derek Forbes, 'Simla: Amateur Theatrical Capital of the Raj', *Theatre Notebook* 62: 2 (2008), p. 78

⁴ *Ibid.*

sahib with the greatest respect, and the more ridiculous the sahibs on the stage made themselves, the more cause the little brown scholars found for not being drawn into anything so disrespectful as a laugh.⁵

Given the repertoire they were playing, it is hardly surprising that the amateurs had little relevance to their spectators or that, given the nature of colonial structures, they could not elicit a response. Once again the failure to 'look' is a failure to engage.

Lieut Colonel Newnham-Davies recalled in 1898 that:

Simla, the summer capital of India...is the Mecca of amateur actors abroad, and the Simla Amateur Dramatic Club is probably the best equipped amateur club in the world.⁶

He also draws attention to the existence of amateur dramatics throughout India, at Poonah, Lucknow and Calcutta, noted for a time for the excellence of its Gilbert and Sullivan productions. Admittedly, he is contributing to an anthology of essays on British amateur theatricals, but there is the usual reluctance to look beyond the parochial activity of putting on English plays for English (and sometimes selected Indian) audiences in a country that offered far more for the percipient observer. Derek Forbes, in a recent article on Simla amateur theatre in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, suggests that:

One of the results of this sheltered repertoire [of middle-brow English plays] though not necessarily its understood purpose, would surely have been to give nostalgic comfort for the certainties of the motherland...Easy-going plays which reminded participants and audiences of life in the old country were consoling, perhaps fortifying, to engage in or watch...on a par with the suspension of disbelief for a couple of hours the act of theatre could allow expatriates to imagine themselves back home.⁷

In another article Forbes also draws attention to the widespread existence of theatricals for 200 years of British Indian history, shrewdly noting that that they 'produced a widespread permutation of the sub-culture which appeared to take little notice of concurrent social and political realignments or even military upheavals'.⁸ So far so good, but when Forbes suggests that the story of British theatre under the Raj, is 'within its limits, as broad and intriguing as that of the Raj itself'¹, I have to demur. For me it is the absorption in amateur theatricals to the exclusion of external perspectives and the function of amateur theatre as a form of erasure of anything that does not constitute the mother country that give grounds for concern and which should be the focus of our consideration.

⁵ Lieut.-Colonel Newnham Davies, 'Amateur in Foreign Parts', in W. G. Elliot, ed., *Amateur Clubs and Actors* (London: Edward Arnold, 1898), pp. 230-31

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 221

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 91

⁸ Derek Forbes, "'Our Theatrical Attempts in this Distant Quarter": The British Stage in Eighteenth Century Calcutta', *Theatre Notebook* 61: 2 (2007), p. 75

Of course there were plenty who did write about India and who, even if their tone is patronising, condescending, superior or just invested with the prejudices of their times, were genuinely trying to look and engage. Thus Daniel Bandmann devotes considerable space to his impressions of India. Bandmann is not an exemplary figure - his violent treatment of his female partners was notorious – but he is more disposed to write about his impression of places than of the reception of his theatrical performances, although he usually manages to let us know (in parenthesis) that the latter was generally exemplary. He is susceptible to social snobbery – there is far too much name-dropping throughout the book, But he is also astute and engaged. In his chapter on New Zealand and discussion of the Maoris, for example, he comes up with the observation that ‘history shows, in not a few cases, England has not been sufficiently wise and politic in the management of her colonies’.⁹

Bandmann’s visit to India commenced in 1881 in Madras, a beautiful town’ in his opinion, even if the food (the curry excepted) was wretched. Calcutta however was the first performance venue to be visited: after steaming up the River Ganges Bandmann recalled:

The first impression of Calcutta is most dazzling. The city is a perfect wonderland of Oriental munificence and grandeur. There are rows on rows of houses heavily built, of a rough, stony, massive appearance, without windows or doors to be seen, and entirely surrounded by elaborate balconies which lead into the interiors, and every house completely walled in, with one or two grand portals through which you gain entrance.¹⁰

Besides the architecture, Bandmann also notices the water-carriers, or *metas*, who carry the water supply to every house in the city, as well as watering the streets to keep them cool and pleasant.

Bandmann’s observations are, however, tinged with an assumption of the superiority of European culture. Commenting on the Cooch Behar, ‘a passionate lover of Shakespeare’, he adds:

In fact, the love of Shakespeare is inherent in the Hindu mind, or rather, it is an inevitable blossoming of inherent qualities and dispositions beneath the influence of European education, which all the higher classes in India now enjoy... The Hindu learns his English through the immortal Bard, and so, from the very earliest years, his devotion is kindled toward this supreme master of the drama, and he comes to him in after-life as “guide, philosopher and friend”. The Hindu is a proud and eloquent creature; he is full of form and dignity; besides, he loves poetry, and Shakespeare’s sublime ideas and magnificent diction touch him to the quick.¹¹

⁹ Daniel Bandmann, *An Actor’s Tour or Seventy Thousand Miles with Shakespeare* (Boston: Upples and Company, 1885), p. 63

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 121

¹¹ *Ibid.* pp. 134-5

Another acquaintance, whose favourite topic was Shakespeare, according to Bandmann, was Babu Keshub Chunder Sen. ‘With a grand, imposing, athletic figure, a noble bearing’, says Bandmann, ‘he combined an expressive dignity which reminded one of the patrician Roman’:

He was full six feet high, broad shouldered, deep chested, of slightly olive complexion, mild, eloquent eyes, firm, set lips, genial chin, black moustache, and long black hair, which hung carelessly over a well-developed forehead. The stamp of nobility was upon him....He was my *beau ideal* of an “Othello make-up”.¹²

For Bandmann it was

A pleasure beyond description to see the natives of India enjoying a Shakespearean performance; the intelligence and enthusiasm they evince far succeeded that of any European audience with whom I am acquainted.¹³

He even played for several nights in exclusively Hindu theatres, where *Othello* and *The Merchant of Venice* had been particularly requested:

They followed the play with rapt attention, and it was evident from the succession of pauses, in which one might have heard a pin drop, and outbursts of applause, which would have drowned a thunder-clap, that they not simply watched the movement of events and the changed relationship of the personages of the play, but, in a most philosophical way, entered into the secret inner life of each of them, and comprehended the entire development of the plot...I have never been so well understood as Shylock as I was that evening by those three thousand Hindus and Moslems...¹⁴

In Bombay the Parsees, whom Bandmann considered ‘the cleverest people in India’ – possibly as clever, if not cleverer – than the Europeans – also showed themselves to be great lovers of Shakespeare, even volunteering to play with Bandmann’s company on one occasion, doing wonders, said Bandmann, ‘considering that they were alien to the language, and not even Europeans’.¹⁵ In all these accounts there is certainly a touch of the cultural missionary or even schoolmaster; Bandmann is almost infantilising his Indian spectators in his approving account of their powers of reception and comprehension.

Bandmann is not just obsessed by Indian responses to Shakespeare. Late at night, on the banks of the Ganges, he watches the cremation of dead bodies at the Burning Ghaut, ‘a scene most weird and appalling’.¹⁶ Returning from this excursion with a magician called Mr Kellar he stops off to view the Red-light district, where to his disgust he sees

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 136

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 141

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 142

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 174, 170

¹⁶ *Ibid.* p. 148

Streets full of the most horrible spectacles and orgies of vice I have ever beheld. We passed houses upon house crowded with beautiful, well-shaped Jewish women, all from the Roumanian districts, principally Bant, Croatian and Servian, following a trade of infamy and lust. They are brought over by their masters, chiefly Jews also, like slaves, for whom they live a life of degradation...With disgust I called on the cabman to turn back and drive home as quickly as possible, for I felt that here, even more than at the Burning Ghaut, I had looked on the horrors and terrors of death.¹⁷

Hindu hospitality, the exchange of new year gifts, the chewing of betel-juice or of lime leaves to relieve digestion, the provision of nuts, spices and sherberts on social visits are chronicled by Bandmann, who also praises the Hindu sense of humour. In this he says, but in this alone, they resemble the Chinese, compared with whom 'they are not half so clever, but far better-hearted. If the Hindus possessed the brain of the Chinese and the Chinese the conscience of the Hindus, Europe would have to fear these great nations'.¹⁸ Hindu marriage is also discussed, as is what Bandmann sees as the greatest Hindu ambition, which is to become a lawyer.

These reflections are largely drawn from Calcutta, but Bandmann also offers his opinions on Bombay, which he describes as 'the most picturesque and in many respects the pleasantest'¹⁹ city in India. Here he observes the Parsees. Having found the Hindu women 'short, thin and ugly' (although the Hindu men were of fine stature and splendid proportions)²⁰, he discovers that

The Parsee women are very beautiful and allowed to go at perfect liberty, wherever their own sweet will takes them, without let or hindrance from their noble lords, and to act as they like, just as European ladies. It is a charming sight to see a handsome Parsee lady dressed in her picturesque costume of embroidered silk and coiled hairdress...one is carried away by her lovely, perfect shape, rounded form, black, sparkling eyes, and pure, pale skin.²¹

The funeral rites of the Parsees, whose bodies are eaten by vultures, crows and magpies (rather than buried or cremated) at the Silent Towers on the top of Malibar Hill also intrigue Bandmann, while one night in Bombay he witnesses the impressive spectacle of a Hindu marriage, although he found the 'abundance of Hindu tom-tom music, in which there was more noise than harmony'²², a little overwhelming.

Bandmann looks at India with European eyes. But at least he looks, unlike the amateur actors or Boucicaut in *Jessie Browne*. Inevitably his is a subjective account replete with

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 149

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 157

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 168

²⁰ Ibid., p. 157

²¹ Ibid., p. 170

²² Ibid., p. 175

misunderstandings, prejudices, and a whiff of patronage and condescension. Yet he is attempting to engage with the culture he is visiting and to represent it, in however orientalisising a perspective, as he perceives it. While any such account will be tainted with a degree of racism (even if only reflecting contemporary western prejudices) and will take for granted many of the pro-imperialist and pro-colonial attitudes of the day, it is important that we look for something other than the neatly fitting tropes of post colonial theory through which to analyse the reactions of such figures as Bandmann. Actors inevitably carry cultural baggage with them on their travels, but they can also be observant, sensitive and aware. Although we tend to think of the great European actors and actor managers of the nineteenth century as unbridled ego-maniacs, we perhaps do this at our peril, ignoring what I earlier referred to as a cosmopolitan rather than imperialist or colonial attitude to touring globally. In effect I am not saying anything very new here: I am merely wondering whether cosmopolitanism (or perhaps a variation of it) might provide a useful basis for investigating the interaction of nineteenth century actors with the different countries they visited when they travelled the globe. Actors like Bandmann are opinionated and their opinions are inevitably affected by the inherited ethical and moral criteria they take for granted. There is an element of economic inequality, in that the European actor is privileged and exploitative, for the basic premise of the global tour is to make money. Yet there is an interest in and response to difference, even if that interest and response are couched within a western framework of values.

Using Dan Rebellato's book *Theatre & Globalization* I wondered to what extent three of the key categories about which he writes – globalisation, cosmopolitanism, localisation - might be appropriate to this discussion. Was the commercial touring of European actor-managers, with the inevitable emphasis on Shakespeare, an early form of globalization stamping the brand name of Shakespeare across the world in the way in which Lloyd Webber has been our contemporary brand of globalized theatrical entertainment? Or is the sense that Shakespeare does elicit responses that are not purely based on branding, on commercial exploitation and consumerism, but on the recognition of shared values across cultures, even of the potential for universality (a word I have to confess I struggle with enormously), and that actors like Bandmann are looking for points of interaction and commonality (even while recognising difference) something- is this something that should push us toward cosmopolitanism as a way forward here? Admittedly Rebellato warns us:

The cosmopolitan principle that all human beings are members of a single moral community is not without its critics. Imperialists in the nineteenth century and neoconservatives in the twenty-first have rampaged cross the globe in the belief they know the universal truths of humanity, determined to bring civilization and democracy to the rest of the world. 'Universalism'—a belief that the same principles are valid for everyone—has become tainted by association.²³

²³ Dan Rebellato, *Theatre & Globalization* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p.64

Cosmopolitanism has certainly been condemned as a form of ethical imperialism, which relies on assumptions of privilege. And as such it may not be an appropriate discourse for my purposes. And when we turn to the amateur theatricals or the Scottish ballads previously discussed is this a form of inverse localisation nineteenth century style? Of an imperial power reverting to the safe and familiar as a form of protection against contamination from the ‘other’? an exportation of the ‘little Englander’ syndrome? I am not sure that any of this quite adds up, but I am aware of the need to rethink the way we have been dealing with some of these historical relationships and that we need a relatively elastic discourse through which to negotiate the historical interactions of European actors with the countries they visited that moves, when appropriate, beyond the limitations of postcolonial and orientalist discourses.

‘In the city of Calcutta there are no cobras’, wrote Bandmann, who was clearly fascinated by this particular reptile, ‘although the cellar of the Theatre Royal, where I played part of the season, is said to be infested by them’.²⁴ Throughout his stay at the theatre he could never persuade anyone to go under the stage and clear out the cellar of its accumulated debris. In my own way I am also arguing that we recognise the cobras that infest our understanding of global theatrical relationships in the nineteenth century, get down into the cellar and clear out the debris.

I first gave a version of this paper in Delhi earlier this year. One Delhi scholar rightly pointed out that the Australian and Indian experiences, which I discuss in this paper, need to be differentiated, insofar as India had been occupied by the British, whereas the circumstances of Australian settlement (other than for the aboriginal population) was somewhat different. He also felt that Bandmann’s descriptions of India were emphatically orientalising and that orientalist and postcolonial discourses were the most appropriate means through which to analyse Bandmann’s impressions. A second scholar shared my concerns: she was feeling increasingly entrapped by postcolonial theory, in particular, and felt there was a real need for finding alternative discourses through which to explore Anglo-Indian relationships historically. Some of the western scholars, particularly those with an interest in twentieth century theatre, were highly suspicious of, even hostile to, any engagement with cosmopolitanism. So, for me, the question remains: how do we analyse transnational relationships between European actors and the countries they visited in ways that enable a more variegated and less predictable set of conclusions to emerge from our explorations?

²⁴ Bandmann, p. 153