



‘There were many occasions when the routine clamor [*sic*] and inattentiveness turned into more focussed demonstrations against a performance’.

Using at least two examples of different theatre riots, evaluate whether, and to what extent, focussed demonstrations related to ‘routine’ audience behaviours.

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Present in all collective behaviour is some kind of belief that prepares the participants for action.¹

This quotation from Neil Smelser’s *Theory of Collective Behaviour*, denotes that ‘routine’ behaviour is preconditioned by an individual’s ‘belief of how they should act in particular, communal situations. This ‘belief, I argue, is the product of the audience’s contextualised situation rendering the concept of ‘routine behaviour’ fluid. Therefore, I will discuss the Old Price Riots (1809) and The Playboy Riots (1907) individually to show how different kinds of behaviours emerge in different theatrical contexts. I will analyse the differing conceptions of ‘routine’ behaviour by discussing the two contexts chronologically to show the changed role of the audience from active to passive over time, and thus assess to what extent the audience remained within the bounds of this behaviour. However, after offering this answer to the question I will further query the appropriateness of the term ‘routine’ when referring to audience behaviour. I will propose that we should refine the term to encompass the multiplicity of not only the context, but also the audience, before the term ‘routine’ itself becomes redundant.

We, as modern scholars, can only learn about the events of the past through the mediated writings of historians compiled from the recorded reviews of individual witnesses; and although there is no alternative, the intricacies and bias of these mediations must be acknowledged. Louis Gottschalk writes that ‘the historian’s aim is verisimilitude with regard to a perished past – a subjective process – rather than experimental certainty with regard to an objective reality’.² Gottschalk recognises the aim of the historian to create something that appears to be true, highlighting the main concern of historian’s personal bias, as documents ‘respond only to the historian’s question.’³ There can be no definite ‘objective reality’, therefore, we must acknowledge the events as a construction by a particular historian, and continually consider the partiality of the historian in their own act of witnessing.

Before we can qualify to what extent the audience’s behaviour at the Old Price Riots can be deemed as ‘routine’, we first must establish what constituted ‘routine’ behaviour in a theatre audience in London around 1809. The theatre in the early nineteenth century was a far more turbulent place than it is today, as the experience of going to the theatre was a ‘social,

¹ Neil Smelser, *Theory of Collective Behaviour*, (London: Routledge and Keegan Paul Ltd., 1962), p.79.

² Louis Gottschalk, *Understanding History: A Primer of Historical Method*, 2nd edn., (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969), p.47.

³ Jacques Le Goff, *History and Memory*, trans. Steven Randall and Elizabeth Clamen, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), p.81.

participatory one, of which the performance itself only made up one part⁴, and the audience's role comprised the other. The audience, therefore, took an active role during a theatre visit and routinely 'talked during performances, often shouted and quite frequently responded in an even more forthright manner.'⁵ The early nineteenth century audience unrestrainedly vocalised their feelings about the performance directly to the stage; being a member of the audience gave you a voice, and consequently as Garrick, an eighteenth century actor and theatre manager, stated, the right to judge, as well as feel.'⁶

This generalised context of early nineteenth century audience gives us a foundation on which we can build the idea of 'routine' audience behaviour for the Old Price riots, as Thomas Postlewait writes of event and context as the 'basic categories that guide our historical assumptions',⁷ as he provides us with the model of 'EVENT=CONTEXT.'⁸ The audience's initial behaviour on the opening night of *Macbeth* at the Covent Garden theatre, marking the first day of the extensive Old Price Riots, was not unique from the normative audience behaviour at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The audience actively showed their disapproval by chanting 'Off! Off!' when John Kemble began the performance, and their 'hisses, hoots and curses drowned out the play.'⁹ Just as in 1815, the final act of a new comedy was 'drowned out by audience critics' in Drury Lane Theatre, showing the routine nature of vocal dissent.¹⁰

The Covent Garden audience in 1809 also showed their dissatisfaction with a particular actress, which was common in conventional audience behaviour. However, in this case was directly related to the broader context of the animosity between Britain and Napoleonic France, which caused the manifestation of Nationalism and xenophobia in Britain. Angelica Catalani, an Italian, who was married to a French Officer, was therefore an unpopular choice for the female protagonist. On the second night of the production the audience began chanting 'God Save the King – no foreigners – no Catalani'¹¹, and as hostility grew Catalani's name was mutated into 'Nasty Pussy'. Although the political nature of the attacks on the actress were more specific, the uproar created by these chants was a component of the 'routine' behaviour of a generalised early nineteenth century theatre audience. As the riots continued, however, the behaviour did not remain as restrained and shifted further away from the idea of 'routine.'

Hitherto I have applied Postlewait's EVENT=CONTEXT model by equating context to a generalised national macro-context, however, the micro-context is crucial to the audience behaviour. As Covent Garden Theatre distanced itself from its previous circumstances, symbiotically the audience behaviour altered; thus in other words, as the theatre became less routine, the audience's behaviour became less routine resulting in 'more focussed demonstrations.'

In the Old Price riots the audience were not disgruntled with the performance, albeit apart from Angelica Catalani, but rather with changes to the theatre building and prices. John Phillip Kemble, the manager of Covent Garden Theatre, had raised the price of admission to

⁴ Neil Blackadder, *Performing Opposition: Modern Theatre and the Scandalized Audience*, (London: Praeger, 2003), p.6.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Allardyce Nicoll, *The Garrick Stage: Theatres and Audience in the Eighteenth Century*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1981), p.93.

⁷ Thomas Postlewait, *The Cambridge Companion to Theatre Historiography*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p.9.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.10.

⁹ Nigel Cliff, *The Shakespeare Riots: Revenge, Drama and Death in Nineteenth-Century America*, (New York: Random House, 2007), p.36-7.

¹⁰ Marc Baer, *Theatre and Disorder in Late Georgian London*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), p.173.

¹¹ Cliff, p.37.

help finance the cost of the reconstruction of the theatre, and had also transformed the third tier into a row of twenty-six private boxes which he hoped would be rented by leading families for the season.¹² In addition, the ‘relatively roomy old gallery’ on the top level of the theatre had been replaced by ‘a squash of seats that were so hemmed in by the roof arches that the protesters complained they were no better than pigeon-holes.’¹³ The whole dynamic of Covent Garden Theatre had changed—privileging the upper classes – as Kemble orientated the theatre towards a more elitist audience. Subsequently, this altered the role and motivation of the lower class audience whose uproar was outrage with the playhouse rather than the play, as was the usual practice.

The audience took on an active role in the Old Price Riots, consistent with the routine early nineteenth century audience’s behaviour; however, it quickly surpassed the confines of ‘routine’ talking and shouting, and became extraordinary due to its premeditative quality as rioters attended for the sole reason of interrupting the performance. The rioters arrived in a costume of their own, decorated with ‘hats and medals, fans and handkerchiefs, waistcoats and caps, bearing printed placards and painted banners’,¹⁴ all of which directly stated their aims by ‘prominently display[ing] the letters “O.P.”.’¹⁵ The Old Price rioters usurped the role of actor offstage by their adoption of theatrical conventions including costume and physical performance as they set up their own production that rivalled the play performed onstage.

The rioters created a dance in which they regularly chanted “O.P.”, and staged races up and down the bench aisles. They surpassed the earlier notions of their active role by making their movements physical rather than vocal, creating a pantomimic feel which was juxtaposed with the serious nature of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*. When these performances became monotonous ‘the benches were pushed aside and gymnastic displays, sword fights and wrestling matches kept *everyone’s eyes off the stage*’¹⁶ (my emphasis), as one eye witness tellingly recounts that ‘the witticism and eccentricities of those in the gallery are sometimes quite as entertaining as any part of the legitimate performance.’¹⁷ Therefore, although the rioters still occupied the rightful physical position of the audience – the gallery – they adopted the role of actor by drawing attention of other spectators through their charismatic production. This surpassed the ‘routine’ actions of a typical early nineteenth century audience who were vocally active yet still responded to the events on stage. The above quote also importantly shows that the audience was not unified in this performed opposition; some individuals remained in the routine role of spectator, their only deviance being that they watched the rioters offstage rather than the performance onstage.

The crucial moment that symbolised the Old Price rioters’ complete disparity from routine audience behaviour was the staging of an Old Price Ball on the sixtieth night of the riots, which transformed the theatre into a ballroom. The rioters’ premeditated behaviour had distanced so much from routine audience behaviour that it in fact mutated the purpose of the theatre space. Therefore, although I acknowledge that the rioters’ behaviour was founded upon the active quality of a normative early nineteenth century audience, I disagree with Marc Baer’s assertion that the culmination of the rioters’ behaviour in the Old Price riots ‘was only a variation of normal patterns of audience participation in or reaction to the theatre.’¹⁸ The Old Price rioters surpassed the notion of ‘routine’ when their demonstrations became

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., p.38.

¹⁷ Thomas Wright, *Some Habits and Customs of the Working Classes*, (1987), p.162,

<<http://www.victorianlondon.org/publications.habits.htm>> [Accessed 5 May 2011]

¹⁸ Baer, p.182.

physical, pre-planned and focussed, eventually transforming the theatre from a place where one watched a performance to a place where one took part in a performance, and became an actor offstage.

By 1907, when *The Playboy of the Western World* was staged at the Abbey theatre, the generalised routine role of the audience in Europe had changed from turbulence that dominated the nineteenth century. The audience no longer played an active role in the theatre experience, and instead became passive spectators. Blackadder writes that in the twentieth century 'the standard pattern of behaviour for theatre spectators entailed keeping silent, except for laughing or whispering, until interval or final curtain'¹⁹, a far cry from the nineteenth century audience's behaviour. This behaviour had been gradually establishing itself since the late-nineteenth century as Michael Booth argued that after 1880 English 'theatres were reasonably quiet and well-mannered places.'²⁰ Booth's words can be applied to theatres in Ireland as the passivity of the twentieth century audience was a phenomenon that swept throughout Europe rather than being solely contained in England as 'normative audience behaviour at the Abbey reflected the prevailing values and standards (of restraint) of the wealthier spectators'²¹, despite a few discordant episodes in its history.

What we know about the Playboy Riots is a cause for concern as one witness aptly protests that 'I was present at the much misrepresented first performance of *The Playboy of the Western World* and find the reaction of the audience still grossly distorted.'²² There is no doubt that a riot occurred, however, the details vary with different sources. Paige Reynolds specifically suggests that there was 'hissing, stamping and yelling'²³, while Blackadder provides a more comprehensive account of the action through the critical use of localised sources such as the *Freemantle's Journal*. The evidence, therefore, will be taken from Blackadder's account of events as he focuses on the audience and how they perform in opposition, which is a similar aim to that of this essay.

Blackadder writes that the week of the Playboy riots 'became and remains the most tempestuous week in Irish theatre history'²⁴, as he charts the audience's changing behaviour throughout the period which *The Playboy of the Western World* was staged. On the opening night the audience, although they disrupted with some hissing, groans and counter-cheers, remained restrained – being more shocked than outraged – in keeping with routine early twentieth century conduct. The rioters at the play's premiere initially objected to the events presented on stage, and these objections were then intensified by external factors. There is much speculation over the moment that caused the initial shock and riotous behaviour; the use of the word 'shift', and the image of a man with a bloody bandage which distanced the play from the comedic genre and moved it into 'unrelenting realism'²⁵, have been recorded as credible suggestions. However, what is agreed upon is the acceptance that the audience viewed the play as 'a slur upon national identity and morality'²⁶, which was heightened by John Millington Synge's authorship, his supposed misapprehension of Ireland, and the strained Anglo-Irish relations.

¹⁹ Blackadder, p.2.

²⁰ Michael Booth, 'The Theatre and its Audience' in *The Revels History of Drama in English VI: 1750-1880*, ed. Michael Booth, (London: Methuen, 1975), p.21.

²¹ Blackadder, p.74.

²² C.P. Curran, *Under the Receding Wave*, (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1970), pp.106-7.

²³ Paige Reynolds, *Modernism, Drama and the Audience for Irish Spectacle*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p.38.

²⁴ Blackadder, p.69.

²⁵ Curran, p.107.

²⁶ Margaret Llewellyn-Jones, 'Introduction' in John Millington Synge, *The Playboy of the Western World*, (London: Nick Hern Books, 1997), p.ix.

As the play continued to be staged the audience reaction shifted further from the 'routine', as their disturbance of the performance grew in magnitude and became premeditated. The *Daily Express* reported that the heightened shouting, foot stamping and hisses 'turn[ed] the play into a dumb show'²⁷ as Willie Fay, who played Christy and directed, wrote that 'as it was impossible for us to be heard, I arranged with the cast that we should simply walk through the play, not speaking a word out loud.'²⁸ The exploits of the rioters forced the play to change its theatrical form into a mime, suggesting the rioters had the power to direct the stage rather than simply observe, violating their 'routine' spectator role. The rioters' behaviour continued for over a week in a focussed attempt to prohibit the production of the play, rejecting their observatory role in their repeated attendance. The dual nature of the audience, however, must be acknowledged as some theatre attendees condemned the rioters' behaviour and attempted to restore traditional order to the theatre and passivity to the audience. Despite this, if we again apply Postlewait's general EVENT=CONTEXT model, it is clear that the rioters in the audience defy the 'routine' passivity of the early twentieth century audience as they become active in showing their dissent.

The behaviour of the rioters in the Playboy Riots was conceivably further away from the idea of 'routine' than the Old Price rioters' behaviour due to the kinetic change from passive to active. Ironically, if the Playboy rioters were situated in the Old Price riots in 1807 their behaviour would be deemed routine, thus showing that each audience was a direct product of their contextual period. I believe that the reaction of both the Old Price rioters and the Playboy rioters has achieved such a powerful historical resonance because their behaviour was the exception and not the rule. I have attempted to stress this idea through my terminology by referring to the theatre spectators as an 'audience' when their behaviour constitutes 'routine' actions, and 'rioters' when I believe they surpass the role of a 'routine' contextualised audience.

Thus far I have applied Postlewait's EVENT=CONTEXT model rather simply to ensure the validity of the term 'routine'. I believe, however, that the appropriateness of this term when referring to audience behaviour needs to be questioned with a more intricate exploration of 'CONTEXT'. Postlewait provides a four part analytical model to expand the idea of context in which he links 'event' to World, Agents, Reception and Artistic Heritage. So, if we apply this model to the Playboy Riots, the rioter's behaviour is interfaced with how the play interrelates with the Irish 'world'; the reaction to the 'agents' W. B. Yeats, Anne Horniman – a wealthy English lady funding the Abbey, and Synge with his attempt to write a play he 'will make sure annoy[s] them'²⁹; the tension between what is expected and what is realised which comprises the 'reception'; and the 'artistic heritage' which includes the plays that have previously been performed at the Abbey, and the National Theatre Society's aim to exhibit work which spoke for the nation resulting in overall success by 1906.³⁰ Subsequently, a unique context is created that relates to more than simply the time-period within which the production is performed. Therefore, as all theatrical productions are subjected to these different contextual elements, I argue that there can never be a 'routine' context for a theatre production, and correspondingly there can never be a 'routine' audience reaction due to their symbiotic relationship.

The concept of 'routine' audience behaviour also becomes problematic because of the tendency to talk about the audience as a whole rather than acknowledging the individuals who

²⁷ 'Disturbance at the Abbey Theatre', *Daily Express*, January 29 1907, rpt in Robert Hogan and James Kilroy, *The Abbey Theatre: The Years of Synge, 1905-1909*, (Dublin: Dolmen, 1978), p.126.

²⁸ W.G. Fay and Catherine Carswell, *The Fays of Abbey Theatre*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1935), p.215.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.211.

³⁰ See Joseph Holloway, *Joseph Holloway's Abbey Theatre*, ed. Robert Hogan and Michael O'Neill, (Southern Illinois University Press, 1967), p.57.

comprise the group. It is impossible to mathematically quantify the reaction of the audience accurately as the 'reviews' only 'tell us what the event meant for a handful of influential people.'³¹ However, audiences tended to be diverse, whether purposefully in the Playboy Riots as Lady Gregory paid students to attend and cheer for the performance, or coincidentally in the Old Price riots as some of the audience still arrived as spectators to see the performance rather than to disrupt it. It is reductive to suggest that an audience's diverse reaction always amounts to the same or 'routine' reaction, as Kershaw acknowledges that it would be wrong to propose that in collective behaviour 'everyone involved is working from a single script'³² with the same intentions and reactions. The diversity of reaction to theatre thus cannot be contained and reduced to the all encompassing term 'routine'. The term in fact rejects the individuality of human nature which is vital in collective behaviour, as demonstrated through Smelser at the beginning of the essay.

For these reasons I suggest that the expression of 'routine audience behaviour' needs to be replaced with '*accepted* audience behaviour'. As although a macro-context of the time period can be used to loosely define the concept of 'routine', the idiosyncrasies of every context and audience deny any further accurate definition. The behaviour of the rioters in both the Old Price Riots and the Playboy Riots surpassed the notion of 'accepted' audience behaviour when they categorically disregarded the performance through their premeditated actions, rejected their place as spectators and received the condemnation of Kemble and Yeats. The Old Price rioters usurped the role of actor offstage and forced the mutation of the theatre space into a ballroom, while the Playboy rioters caused the performance to change into a mime through their riotous behaviour. The binary role of theatre is reversed as the performances were affected by the audience, rather than the audience being influenced by the plays.

We can only learn about the events from the past by the affect they have had upon the literary, social and political landscapes today; the actions of both audiences are continually discussed as 'riots' as opposed to 'audience behaviour', which thus solidifies my argument that the rioters defied the accepted behaviour of their contextualised time-period in their focussed demonstrations. In this essay the rioters lost the title of 'audience' when they stopped reacting to the impetuses of the performance, creating a spectacle of their own which can also be analysed with the terminology of performance through theorists such as Baz Kershaw.

³¹ Postlewait, p.14.

³² Baz Kershaw, *The Radical in Performance: Between Brecht and Baudrillard*, (London: Routledge, 1999), p.98.

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