

Three Women Theatre Pioneers



31. Cast list for *A Pageant of Great Women*

MM/REF/OR/PC/1

Cicely wrote this play (alternatively known as *A Pageant of Famous Women*) in 1909. A large group of actresses represented over 50 important female figures; Cicely took various roles in different productions, including Jane Austen listed under 'Learned Women' and Christian Davis (as indicated here) under 'The Warriors'. The Pageant was a popular genre for suffragettes, becoming a way to combine drama, social commentary and spectacle, as well as create a sense of commonality and group cohesion. They were also a natural consequence of the movement's large scale demonstrations and rallies.

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Front cover images:

Emma Cons OV/LB/394

Lilian Baylis MM/REF/PE/PR/LB

Cicely Hamilton MM/REF/OR/PC/1

28. Women's Theatre General Committee

MM/REF/OR/PC/1

The Women's Theatre Inaugural Week was 8th - 13th December 1913, and organised by the Actresses' Franchise League. Apart from Cicely, contributors included George Bernard Shaw, William Archer and Flora Annie Steel. The aims of the Women's Theatre were described as follows:

- * To present plays, written either by men or women, which show the women's point of view
- * To provide a new outlet for the activities of women members of the theatrical profession
- * To run the theatre on a co-operative basis, guarantors sharing in the profits
- * To help and forward the Women's Movement to enfranchisement and to promote the unification of all suffrage and feminist societies

29. Photograph of a scene from *How the Vote was Won*

MM/REF/OR/PC/1

Co-written by Cicely Hamilton and Christopher St. John, and produced by Edy Craig, this was the first major hit of suffrage drama. First performed in 1909 at the Royalty Theatre, London, it was then put on at major fund-raising exhibition organised by the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU). The play is a satire that takes to comic extreme Parliament's view that women are too weak and feeble to be independent of men, and also shows the power that women can have if they work together. In the play Horace Cole's house is inundated by his female relatives during a General Strike called by suffragettes. Eventually he realises that women need to be given full citizenship alongside their male counterparts and joins the Cause.

30. Photograph of a scene from *Diana of Dobson's*

MM/REF/OR/PC/1

Cicely's play was one of the most important social dramas of the Edwardian period. Written in 1908, it depicts the exploitation of the live-in female employee by her male employer. A reviewer of the time noted that the play 'voices very boldly the revolt of the modern woman against her subjugation, her craving for interest in life, her hatred of monotony, and her desire for a "good time"'.

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Introduction

Queen Victoria presided over a remarkable process of industrial, scientific and cultural change which resulted in Britain becoming the largest trading nation in the world. Its population rapidly expanded, and the rise of the middle classes led to an increase in leisure time. The ideal woman was the 'Angel in the House' depicted in Coventry Patmore's popular 1854 poem, one whose sole reason for living was to serve her husband and provide a comfortable home.

Theatres became increasingly sophisticated and the actor-managers held sway over increasingly commercial enterprises, which courted female audiences with daintily decorated auditoriums and entertaining but unchallenging comedies. In contrast, Henrik Ibsen's social realism developed a sense of theatre with a moral purpose and his portrayal of heroines such as Nora in *A Doll's House* and the eponymous *Hedda Gabler* reflected the real changes starting to take place in society.

Such characters helped forge the figure of the New Woman, a phenomenon of the 1890s. She was seen variously as a figure of fun, an active threat, and a political emblem. Young, middle class, single, intellectually curious, and financially independent, she sought freedom from, and equality with, men. In the process, she was prepared to overturn all conventions and accepted notions of femininity

Whilst the Edwardian age capitalised on the social, scientific and industrial advance of the previous century, there was also a considerable desire to break away from the Victorian era. One of the ways in which this showed itself was the demand for women's rights. Because of the industrial revolution, more women than ever were in employment and, ironically, the promulgation of clubs and societies led to increased opportunities for political debate. After the full vote was achieved in 1928, the writer Virginia Woolf would finally be able to 'kill off' the notion of the Angel in the House in her essay 'Professions for Women' (1931).

Against this background, three women helped to shape a theatre suited to the twentieth century: in terms of management, our relationship with Shakespeare, and the utilisation of theatre as a political tool. Lilian Baylis's early life was influenced by the suffrage movement, which helps to place her in context of women such as her aunt, Emma Cons, and friend, Cicely Hamilton. These women rejected gender expectations by remaining unmarried and childless, their energies directed instead towards their careers. In forging independent and unconventional lifestyles, all suffered prejudice and criticism, but went on to demonstrate the pioneering role that women could hold in the theatre – as administrators, managers, actresses, and dramatists.

Biographies

In middle drawer

Emma Cons (1838-1912)

Born in London, Emma's family originated from South Africa where their name was Konss. She and her four sisters (including Lilian Baylis's mother) were all independently-minded women who challenged convention by taking up careers. They also had a strong sense of social justice and took up philanthropic causes. Emma trained as an artist, suffering from prejudice by male artists who resented her presence, before joining the Ladies' Co-operative Art Guild. After working for Octavia Hill (1838-1912), who championed social housing and founded the National Trust, she became one of the first female alderman on the London County Council. In 1880 she re-opened the Royal Victoria Palace in Waterloo. She renamed this as the Royal Victoria Coffee and Music Hall (later known as the Old Vic), vowing to bring the works of Shakespeare as well as opera to the masses. Lectures were also given here, and this would eventually develop into Morley College, a place of education for working men and women, funded by Bristol manufacturer and philanthropist Samuel Morley. Before Emma's death from a cerebral haemorrhage in 1912, she ran the Old Vic with help from her niece, Lilian Baylis.

Lilian Baylis (1874-1937)

Lilian has been credited with laying the foundations of the Royal National Theatre, the English National Opera Company, and the Royal Ballet. Born in London to a theatrical family, she was brought up to believe that women could achieve anything that they put their minds to. A talented musician, Lilian played the violin and mandolin, joining the family's concert group, the Gypsy Revellers. From 1891-97 the family moved to South Africa, where the troupe continued to tour. After Lilian's poor health drew her back to England, she was offered a job by her aunt, Emma Cons, at the Royal Victoria Hall. Eventually she took on more of the management, overseeing the lecture, concert and film programme, and variety shows. After her aunt's death in 1912, Lilian became the leaseholder and obtained a licence to stage full theatrical performances. Her real love was opera, and this was performed at the Old Vic as well. Lilian resurrected the Sadler's Wells Theatre, Islington, in 1931, mainly as a means to develop a dance company, headed by Ninette de Valois. Well-known figures included Robert Helpmann and Dorothy Hyson. For a time, the two companies were known as the Vic-Wells companies, but eventually theatre productions were focused at the Waterloo location, and ballet took place in Islington. In 1929, Lilian was made a Companion of Honour. She died in 1937, aged 63, before the opening night of *Macbeth* starring Laurence Olivier.

24. Photograph of Lilian Baylis and one of her dogs. Photographer unknown; n.d.

MM/REF/PE/PR/LB

Lilian was a great lover of dogs and owned many in her lifetime. One infamous anecdote given about her was that she trained her dogs to bite the ankles of anyone asking for a pay rise!

25. Programme for *Tannhauser*, performed in the presence of The Princess Christian and The Princess Victoria of Schleswig-Holstein, 1912

OV/P/38/12

Lilian believed that operas such as *Tannhauser* were more popular with audiences than Shakespeare. An interview for *Theatre World* in 1931 quotes her as saying, rather patronisingly, 'One would imagine that the artificiality of the operatic tradition might prove a great difficulty, at first, to an audience which is for the most part practically uneducated, but we have found over and over again that simply-produced opera will draw where Shakespeare is rather suspect'.

26. Photograph of Lilian Baylis standing in front of a queue waiting outside the Old Vic to see *Othello*. Photographer Graphic Photo Union; c. 1920s

OV/P/44/2/8

Lilian saw productions of Shakespeare at the Old Vic as an important stream of revenue. From the start of the First World War, two productions were staged weekly. The plays were popular with a large range of people, including those from the immediate vicinity and those who would normally only attend the West End, the heart of London's theatre world. Lilian was adept at recognising and supporting talent. John Gielgud was one of many actors who was prepared to accept low wages for working at the Old Vic, and he made his name here by playing the roles of Hamlet, Macbeth and Richard II.

27. Official letter regarding Lilian Baylis's death

MM/REF/PE/PR/LB

The Old Vic was inundated with letters and telegrams after Lilian's death, expressing deep sadness at her passing, and commemorating her great achievements. This is a letter drafted by the Old Vic to send out to sympathisers. Many believed that the cause of death was overwork rather than the 'angina pectoris' detailed on her death certificate.

In left-hand drawer

21. Advertisement for Penny Science Lectures, 1906

OV/P/PG/4

Emma Cons established the 'Penny Popular Scientific Lectures' in 1882. She persuaded well-known scientists to give unpaid weekly lectures at the Old Vic on the latest scientific experiments. William Lant Carpenter gave the first one on 'The Telephone—How to Talk to a Man a Hundred Miles Away'. Although the lectures had originally been designed as a cost-cutting exercise - artists did not have to be paid when a lecture took place - they became an early example of Emma's attempts to bring education to the masses. Audiences swelled to 800 - 900 people per week, who each paid from one penny to three pence, making it affordable for the majority of local people.

22. Photograph of Lilian Baylis, aged 16, playing a mandolin. Photographer Jas. Russell & Sons; c.1890.

OV/P/44/1/3

Lilian's early experiences of touring with the Gypsy Revellers gave her an early taste of show business. Her aunt had included concerts at the Old Vic, but as Lilian's first love was opera, she wanted to take this further. After Emma's death in 1912, Lilian obtained a new licence and put on entire operas, two or three times a week. These were sung in English to appeal to a wider audience, but as the theatre was chronically under-funded, singers found the conditions far from ideal. Lilian gave support for the composer, Ethel Smyth, whose career was hampered by her gender. In 1922 the *Old Vic Magazine* ran an article which celebrated seeing 'an opera by a woman at a theatre created and managed by a woman'.

23. Emma Cons Memorial Sculpture designed by Sir John Coscombe, 1935

OV/P/63/7

Lilian spent many years writing a memoir of her aunt, which finally appeared in Cicely Hamilton's 1926 history of the Old Vic theatre. The memorial sculpture was designed in 1935; prior to this a memorial plaque was unveiled on the side of the Old Vic in 1929. Part of its inscription read: 'Large-hearted and clear-sighted, courageous, tenacious of purpose and of great personal modest, her selfless appeal drew out the best in others and was a constant inspiration for service to all with whom she was associated'.

Cicely Hamilton (1872-1952)

Known for her suffrage activism and writing, Cicely wrote a history of the Old Vic in 1926, which contained a biography of Emma Cons by her niece Lilian Baylis. Brought up by foster parents after her mother went missing, Cicely's last name was Hammill but she changed it to Hamilton when she started acting to avoid any embarrassment to her family. She soon turned to writing and political activism, becoming the first female member of the British Society for the study of Sex Psychology, and authoring the socialist-feminist tract *Marriage as a Trade* in 1909. A year earlier she started the Women Writers' Suffrage League with Bessie Hatton, which included figures like Olive Schreiner, May Sinclair, Sarah Grand and Ivy Compton-Burnett. Along with Christopher St John (Christabel Marshall), Cicely wrote some of the most feminist productions of the time. These include social drama *Diana of Dobson's* (1908) and suffrage plays *How the Vote was Won* and *A Pageant of Great Women* (both 1909). Cicely wrote and acted in plays for the Pioneer Players, an all-female theatre company started by Edy Craig, daughter of the actress Ellen Terry, and Chris St John's partner. When war broke out, Cicely initially took up nursing, before becoming one of the first to realise the importance of entertainment for the troops. She took her theatre company to the Western Front where they performed a number of works, including her nativity play, *The Child in Flanders*; this was later published in 1922. After the war she worked tirelessly for female equality and the peace movement. She died in 1952.

List of Exhibits

These are positioned on and in Lilian Baylis's desk. This, along with the armchair, were used by her at the Old Vic Theatre, London. There are also two banners on Suffrage Drama and the Actresses' Franchise League, located nearby, which were originally exhibited at the Votes100 M-Shed event on 30th June 2018.

On Desk: Top Row (left to right)

1. Photograph of Emma Cons. Photographer unknown; n.d.

OV/LB/394

Emma was one of the many nineteenth-century women who flourished under the Victorian preoccupation with self-improvement and philanthropic causes. She studied art, joining the Ladies' Cooperative Art Guild in London, which was run by Caroline Hill, mother of Octavia who became a housing reformer and founder of the National Trust. Emma went on to work for Octavia, and during this time became passionate in her view that education and culture should be available to the working classes.

2. Photograph of Lilian Baylis (aged 25) seated between two young ladies. Photographer London Stereoscopic Co.; c.1899

OV/P/44/1/2

Many photographs of Lilian are in existence. It was difficult for her to smile, given a facial paralysis which gave her mouth a lop-sided look. The different accounts that Lilian gave for this mark her out from an early age as a performer interested in story-telling.

3. Photograph of mandolin players, including Lilian Baylis as a young girl in centre. Photographer unknown; n.d.

MM/REF/PE/PR/LB

Lilian was an accomplished musician. As a child she learnt to play the violin and mandolin. She worked as a performer and musician in London and South Africa, where members of the Konss-Baylis family successfully toured as a troupe called the Gypsy Revellers. They had once performed in front of the future Edward VII.

17. Photograph of Lilian Baylis at a Christmas party. Photographer unknown; n.d.

MM/REF/PE/PR/LB

Lilian copied many aspects of her aunt's management style, one of which was the tradition of throwing parties. This generated a community spirit, as well as media coverage for the theatre. At Christmas time, presents were handed out to economically disadvantaged children in the local area. In this photograph, she is seated next to Charles Laughton; Flora Robson is in the same row, on the far left.

18. Photograph of Robert Helpmann and Dorothy Hyson. Photographer unknown; 1939-40

OV/P/40/16

Lilian opened the restored Sadler's Wells Theatre in London on 6th January 1931. At her peak she was running theatre, ballet and opera companies, a singular achievement that marked her out as a cultural innovator. The Vic-Wells Company (as it became known) honed the careers of some of the major figures of their time, including Laurence Olivier, Michael Redgrave, James Mason, Margot Fonteyn, and Robert Helpmann.

19. Advertisement for a performance of *Diana of Dobson's* in Bristol

PR/31/170/32

Although the play is subtitled 'A Romantic Comedy in Four Acts', *Diana of Dobson's* (1908) is an example of social realism, a genre utilised by Henrik Ibsen and his followers. A year later, Cecily Hamilton wrote the feminist tract, *Marriage as a Trade*. This booklet examines at how women's intellectual capacities were overlooked because their energies had to be directed towards becoming a wife and mother.

20. Photograph of Cicely Hamilton. Photographer unknown; n.d.

MM/REF/OR/PC/1

In 1935 Cicely wrote her autobiography, *Life Errant*, in which she stated that 'my personal revolt was feminist rather than suffragist'. That is, enfranchisement for women was only one element of their need to live a fully independent and free life. Cicely started her career as an actress, and soon became aware that her male counterparts received more money, and that the female roles on offer were either that of wives and mothers, or 'fallen women'. In contrast, her plays depict strong women who embody her feminist views.

14. Information printed on Actresses' Franchise League programmes during the First World War

MM/REF/OR/PC/1

Suffrage drama is an early example of theatre being used in the UK as a political tool. These plays promoted the importance of female enfranchisement, but also took up social issues as well, such as the sexual double standard, the injustices of the class system, and poor working conditions. By 1914 suffrage drama became irrelevant in many respects as the political movement towards the vote was overtaken by world events. However, plays were still put on as fund-raisers for the war effort, as indicated by this advertisement in an AFL programme.

15. Publication: *The Woman's Theatre – What it Means* by Cicely Hamilton

MM/REF/OR/PC/1

Cicely shared her feminist views in a range of different publications. This one is taken from a programme from the Actresses' Franchise League. Here she states that 'Quite a number of women of late have shown themselves capable of taking a hand in the administrative work of the theatre...Women stage-managers and women business-managers, we think, are still regarded with suspicion; we wish to show there is no cause for it'. As a good friend of Lilian, she may well have been thinking of her example, and that of her aunt's.

On Desk: Bottom Row (left to right)

16. Letter by Lilian Baylis to her parents [F. W. Baylis and Liebe Konss Baylis] on the death of Emma Cons, 29th December 1912

OV/LB/17

Emma died at 8.20pm, Wednesday 24th December 1912. Lilian gives a moving account of her aunt's last moments to her parents in this letter, which demonstrates their close relationship, as well as the importance to Lilian of her career. She writes: 'I felt if I let myself go I'd swiftly never leave off sobbing and weeping, but I know my work will be a comfort and I must not give way'.

4. Page from Lilian Baylis's account book in her handwriting

OV/SB/000374

Lilian kept careful accounts throughout her career. This book lists a variety of Old Vic productions in 1924, including *The Merchant of Venice*, the Shakespeare Festival and Opera. The profits were not large, and it was a constant battle to ensure the financial security of those theatres under her management. The poor wages – if any - given to those who worked here were legendary, but that did not stop people from wanting to be part of Lilian's vision of bringing culture to a wider audience.

5. Photograph of Edward VII seated on stage of the Old Vic. Photographer Worlds Graphic Press Ltd.; [c.1881?]

OV/P/44/2/6

Group photograph, including Edward VII seated on the stage of the Old Vic Theatre; Emma is on his right, Lilian wears an extravagantly feathered hat. The date of this photograph is given as c. 1881 but Edward only reigned from 1901-1910.

6. Poster for Grand Concert in the presence of the Prince and Princess of Wales, 1910

OV/P/38/1

Royal Concerts were a way for Lilian to legitimise the work of the Old Vic and bring it to the prominence of larger audiences.

On Desk: Middle Row (left to right)

7. Booklet: *History of the Royal Victoria Hall and Morley Memorial College, 1894*

OV/M/14

While working with Octavia Hill, Emma became an advocate of the temperance movement after seeing the link between alcohol, poverty and violence. Her next venture would be the Coffee Tavern Company, which operated a series of alcohol-free cafes in London. When the lease for Victoria Hall became available, Emma opened it as a coffee-house theatre in 1880, a place where audiences could watch a morally upright repertoire. Unsupported by revenue from the sale of alcohol, the financial fortunes of the theatre began to suffer. This history was written by Caroline Martineau, Principal of Morley Memorial College, which Emma helped to set up.

8. Programme for Shakespeare's Birthday Special Matinee, 1923

OV/PG/11

Lilian claimed that the Old Vic was the 'Home of Shakespeare'; to commemorate the 300th anniversary of the First Folio in 1623, all of Shakespeare's plays were produced, and Lilian championed some of the greatest exponents of his work, such as John Gielgud, Ralph Richardson, Sybil Thorndike, and Peggy Ashcroft. She also brought Tyrone Guthrie, who was one of the most important exponents of Shakespeare in the first half of the twentieth century, in as artistic director. However, they had quite different views on theatre: she saw it as education for the masses, he believed in the commerciality of the star system.

9. View of Victoria Hall and Morley College, c. 1894

OV/M/14

Victoria Hall (the Old Vic) had always suffered from being on the 'wrong' side of the River Thames; that is, located away from the more sophisticated entertainment being purveyed in London's West End. Emma helped to change its fortunes, a situation that was built upon when Lilian took over the management. Having always felt the limitations of her education, it is not surprising that Emma went on to found Morley College. This was first located in the Vic, until all the space was needed when full theatrical programmes were put on. Eventually the College moved to Westminster Bridge Road, supplying courses on a wide range of subjects. Well-known figures who lectured there included Virginia Woolf and her sister Vanessa Bell, Ralph Vaughan Williams, Gustav Holst and Sir Ernest Shackleton.

10. Photograph: Interior of Old Vic during visit by The Prince and Princess of Wales, 3rd March 1910

OV/P/41/4/2

By 1910, the Old Vic had been transformed by Emma from a theatre located in an inauspicious part of London and with a dubious reputation, to the kind frequented by royalty and West End audiences. This was a far cry from just 30 years earlier when 'literally sacks' full of shrimps' heads and tails, periwinkle shells, nut-shells, and dried orange-peel' had to be dug out of the pit.

11. Group Photograph of a garden party at the home of Lilian Baylis, 27 Stockwell Park Road, London. Photographer unknown; n.d.

OV/LB/393

This was Lilian's home from 1912 (the year of her aunt's death) to 1937 (the year that she died). Prior to this, the two women lived at Morton Place, off Lambeth Road, South London.

12. Photograph of Sybil Thorndike, Lilian Baylis and Ethel Smyth. Photographer unknown; n.d.

OV/P/44/2/5

Lilian was great friends with Cicely Hamilton, who wrote the lyrics for Ethel Smyth's suffragette anthem, 'The March of the Women'. In this photograph, Lilian is shown alongside Ethel (in tie) and the actress Sybil Thorndike, in their degree gowns. Lilian received an Honorary M. A. Degree from Oxford University in 1924, and proudly wore her gown whenever possible. She believed the honour to be 'a great dignity conferred on the Old Vic and all it stands for'.

13. Manuscript of a Speech: 'My Aims and Ideals in the Theatre', 1928

MM/REF/PE/PR/LB

It is notable that Lilian positioned herself as a professional woman. Along with Cicely, she joined the Women's Provisional Club, founded in 1924. Their fortnightly meetings followed the format of the male Rotary Club and did much to support female workers. Occasionally the WPC met at the Old Vic. Lilian wrote numerous pieces on the role of women in the theatre, and her vision for the Old Vic, as indicated in this manuscript. This is the draft of a speech broadcast by the BBC on 24th October 1928 at 9.15pm. Having seen the mass appeal of radio, this is one of many speeches she gave from 1923 onwards.