

The Waterloo Summer of the Prince of Wales's Theatre: New Writing, Old Friends, and Early Realism in the Victorian Theatre.

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Shannon Epplett

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

**The Waterloo Summer of the Prince of
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Prologue

In her joint autobiography with her husband, Squire Bancroft, *Mr. and Mrs. Bancroft: On and Off the Stage*, actress and theatrical manager Marie Bancroft (*née* Wilt on), writes that following the 1866 season, her Prince of Wales's company obtained an engagement in Liverpool: "Before starting, we were told that there was a sort of epidemic at Liverpool; so several of us decided to live at Waterloo, a pretty seaside place a few miles off, where the train could take us every night after the performance was over. We occupied several villas facing the sea, and formed quite a little colony of our own, including Mr. Robertson (who came down for the purpose of finishing and producing his new comedy, *Ours*), Mr. and Mrs. Byron, Mr. and Mrs. Hare, my sister Augusta, myself, and Mr. Bancroft. We spent a delightful six weeks there."¹ "Mr. Bancroft" was the actor Squire Bancroft, who would soon become Wilt on's husband and partner in the theatre company. For the sake of clarity, Marie will be referred to as "Wilt on," although she was known professionally as Marie Bancroft after their marriage in 1867. **[End Page 149]** While Mr. Bancroft, Wilt on's sister Augusta, Mr. and Mrs. Hare, and Mrs. Byron were no doubt lovely people, they are walk-on players in this opening scene: Wilt on herself, Mr. Byron, and Mr. Robertson are the leading players. "Mr. Robertson" was the playwright T. W. Robertson; his play *Society* had been a long-running hit for the fledgling Prince of Wales's company in the previous season. "Mr. Byron" was Henry J. Byron, a successful playwright well-known for his comedic burlesques and Wilt on's then-current management partner. The nostalgic picture of seaside bliss that Wilt on paints in her autobiography masks the tempest underway in the three interlocking relationships. There is a significant body of scholarship on Robertson and Wilt on, but what is often overlooked is the role of Byron as a catalyst, and the interrelatedness of the three relationships: the friendship of Byron

and Robertson, the business partnership of Byron and Wilton, and the artistic collaboration of Wilton and Robertson. Together, Robertson and Wilton would change the face of Victorian theatre in pursuit of a new type of verisimilitude; theatre history often treats Ibsen as the motive force of modern realism, when in truth, Robertson and Wilton were moving the Victorian stage away from melodrama and toward realism two decades before *A Doll's House* played in London. If not for Byron, Robertson and Wilton never would have met, and Robertson might not have persisted as a playwright. Wilton made use of the talents of both men in her quest to shift her public image from "burlesque boy" to leading lady. In theatre history, it is often easy to lose sight of the human relationships that underlie the work that is created: Theatre is created by people in relationship to one another, and these relationships impact the work that is produced, for good and ill. Out of the interlocking alliances between Byron, Robertson, and Wilton, came a new way of writing a new kind of play. This article explores the interrelationships of three Victorian theatre artists, the work they created, and the impact they had on the popular theatre of their time.

To return to our summer at the seaside, Wilton writes that the Liverpool assizes (a circuit court that heard the most serious criminal and civil cases) were in session that summer. Wilton and other company members were friends with many of the barristers, who, like the acting company, were in town for the short term:

Our legal friends came down to Waterloo once every week, and the evenings were dedicated to entertainments improvised by ourselves. We had several mock trials in which Mr. Hare² was always condemned to the ignominious position of representing the criminal in the dock. It was interesting to hear the clever speeches, all about nothing, delivered by these rising young barristers. I was sometimes the Judge, and gave imitations of the various gentlemen...



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—SHANNON EPPLETT

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