

Aquatic Drama

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In the winter of 1804, Sadler's Wells Theater diverted water from the New River to fill a shallow copper tank of water. There it staged shipwrecks and naval battles, fountains and spectacular effects. The playbills for its first show, *The Siege of Gibraltar*, advertised:

a grand Naval Spectacle, presenting that memorable monument of British Glory, the Siege of Gibraltar; with an exact representation of the armament both by Land and Sea, of the combined forces of France and Spain, with real Men of War and Floating Batteries, built and rigged by professional men from his Majesty's Dock Yards, and which float in a receptacle containing nearly 8000 cubic feet of real water (Nicoll 1930, p.42).

Subsequent playbills hawked 'real ships of 100, 74, and 60 guns, &c. built, rigged, and manoeuvred in the most correct manner'(Nicoll 1930, p. 43); the manager, Charles Dibdin, cast children for the parts of the drowning Spanish sailors struggling in the waves.

Aquatic dramas – dramas which created spectacular effects using real water – were quite popular during the Romantic period. At both legitimate and illegitimate theaters in London and in the provinces, audiences could enjoy lakes and fountains, waterfalls, majestic seas and fairy grottoes made out of real water. The first record of a water tank at the major houses comes from the 1794 remodeling of Drury Lane, where

the tanks were installed as much for fire protection as for spectacular effects. But aquatic drama quickly caught on, especially at Sadler's Wells, where the theater's proximity to the New River and its manager's fondness for nautical subjects made it the center of the aquatic craze. For a time, Sadler's Wells was known as the 'Aquatic Theatre,' and during the heyday of interest in aquatic drama, it could mount up to three aquatic spectacles per season.

Of course, aquatic theater was not limited to the British regency. As early as 1200 B.C.E. the Egyptian drama known as *The Triumph of Horus* was performed on the sacred lake within the temple precincts of Edfu. Julius Caesar staged a sea battle, or *naumachia*, in 46 B.C.E. to commemorate his quadruple triumph, and later Roman Caesars and Emperors staged naval battles as gladiatorial combats, using captives and prisoners as soldiers. Aquatic battles and spectacles were occasionally staged during the court masques and festivals of the late middle ages and renaissance. Water may have been part of the theaters of the Restoration - John Dryden's 1665 *The Indian Emperor* calls for a fountain onstage, and *The Fairy Queen* (1692) requires cascades, side-fountains, and a central fountain 'where the Water rises about twelve Foot'(Forbes 1980, p. 91). But perhaps the greatest water effects staged before the Romantic period were at Henry Winstanley's late seventeenth-century 'Water Theatre' in Piccadilly, which featured 'the greatest curiosities in waterworks, the like never performed by any'(Forbes, p. 91). Trick fountains, spouts, and mingled fire-and-water effects were used to create moving tableaux, such as a 'flying dragon' or a 'prospect of the Coaches going to Hide Park [*sic*] in cascades of water'(Forbes 1980 pp. 91-92). Nor were water spectacles

limited to England, even in the Regency. In 1807, a grand *naumachia* was held for Napoleon in the Civic Arena of Milan.

But aquatic spectacles were particularly appropriate for Romantic London. The tanks at Sadler's Wells arrived just in time for a vogue in nautical subjects. The figure of 'Jolly Jack Tar,' defender of king, home, and country, was a popular figure onstage, starting with Thomas Smollett's *The Reprisal; or, the Tars of Old England* (1757), and continuing into the nineteenth century with Jerrold Douglas's *Black-Eyed Susan* (1829) and Edward Fitzball's *The Pilot* (1825). Shipwrecks, pirates, and mutinies were equally popular. Scene painters followed the rage for aquatic subjects even in plays that did not have nautical themes: theatergoers were treated to naval battles, boat races and sea journeys through panoramas, dioramas and realistically painted sets (Mayer 1969, pp.131-32). Charles Dibdin himself wrote over 100 sea songs, many of which were performed at the theater.

The setup at Sadler's Wells was quite elaborate. Edward Leger (1872) describes a large tank 'of an irregular shape, about ninety feet long, and in some places twenty-four feet wide, the depth being something under five feet, but sufficient for men to swim in'(p. 4). Measurements given elsewhere, for example in newspaper advertisements heralding the launching of the tank, suggest widths of up to forty feet and a length of 'nearly 100 feet.'(Forbes 1980, p. 95). Two side channels, about 3 or 4 feet wide, led from the sides of the tank and gave floating access from the wings. At the top of the theatre there was another tank, fifteen feet square and five feet deep, which was used to produce waterfalls. Dibdin kept a troupe of 'water-boys' who set the scenery, operated model ships and chariots, and made waves when called for by the script. The tanks evidently presented

something of a hazard backstage – Dibdin reported that on one night ‘many more of the people of the Theatre, than were intended, went into the water, and among them myself’(Forbes 1980, p. 97). The ‘water-boys’ were among the better-protected. Dibdin gave them ‘thick duffil trousers’ and a glass of brandy before and after their immersion; Dibdin was proud to report in his *Memoirs* that only two workers, one consumptive and one who ‘had a predisposition to Decline,’ died in his fourteen years at Sadler’s Wells (Forbes 1980, p. 98).

It is not clear how the plumbing was managed. We know that the tanks were filled with water from the New River; Charles Dibdin’s *Memoirs* mention a series of troughs fed from an ‘Archimedes’ wheel’ leading into the back side of the tank (Forbes 1980, p. 97). According to Denis Arundell (1965) it took twelve men twelve hours to fill the tank, working in teams of four. After Dibdin left the theater, the tank was connected to the New River Main by a series of pipes. Robert Wilkinson (1819) mentions a ‘Leather hose, 4 inches calibre, that can be conveyed to any part of the theatre with the greatest ease’ and a ‘steam-engine, which fills the tank in twenty-six hours.’ There is distressingly little evidence on how often the tank was drained. The Sadler’s Wells doorkeeper of the day, R. Wheeler, whose recollections were attached to Dibdin’s *Memoirs*, recalls that: ‘Full houses were the reward of having a leaden tank full of putrid water – for it was not renewed but once in two months’(Forbes 1980, p. 97). But we have no information on how –or how often - the drainage was accomplished.

The water scene was usually the final sensation of the evening’s entertainment. The preceding action would take place on a wooden stage laid over the tank. The stage

was manually removed by stagehands while the audience waited, a process that took twenty minutes or more. Edward Leger recalls that:

Previous to these water scenes the drop scene was let down for the last act of the piece. In the interval that audience could plainly hear the water run into the tank, while gusts of air strongly agitated the act drop, which was after a few minutes partly drawn up to allow the first edge of the rising platform free action upwards, as the great tank extended to within six feet of the footlights (Leger 1872, p. 4).

In 1823 Dibdin's successor installed an apparatus to raise the stage mechanically to avoid the delay.

Needless to say, the illusions produced by this splendid scenery did not always reach strict standards of verisimilitude. The *Times* observed on the first night of the season in 1813:

Two large ships were also brought forward for the first time, and received with great applause. To be sure it would have been better if they had not so often run aground; but this, indeed, was not surprising when a man was able to walk round one of them with the water not higher than his knee; by which means it manifestly appeared, to the great relief of the audience, that even if a shipwreck had been the consequence, there was no imminent danger of drowning. But, considering the narrow seas in which they had to

navigate, and the numerous shoals on every side, the new performers played their parts very creditably and much to the satisfaction of a very crowded house (Mayer 1969, p. 96).

Nonetheless, the technology that went into building these spectacles is nothing short of amazing. *The Siege of Gibraltar* (1804) featured 117 ships designed by shipwrights at the Woolwich Shipyard (Cox 1999, p. 171). Playbills advertised ships which could ‘work down with the wind on their starboard beam, wear and haul the wind on their larboard tacks, to regain their situations,’ ‘built, rigged, and manoeuvred in the most correct manner, as every nautical character who has seen them implicitly allows’ (Nicoll 1930, p.43). They were able to ‘fire[. . .] at broadsides,’ and supplemented by:

the conflagration of the town in various places, the defence of the garrison, and attack by the floating batteries, [which] is so faithfully and naturally represented, that when the floating batteries take fire, some blowing up with a dreadful explosion, and others, after burning to the water’s edge, sink to the bottom; while the gallant Sir Roger Curtis appears in his boat to save the drowning Spaniards, the British tars for that purpose plunging into the water, the effect is such as to produce an unprecedented climax of astonishment and applause (Nicoll 1930, p. 43).

Edward Leger’s (1872) report of *The Battle of the Nile* (1815) is somewhat less spectacular – he remembers only ‘real model ships, about three feet in length’ (p. 4). But

he still found the spectacle impressive: 'L'Orient was really blown up in a first-rate style.' The play, he reports, was 'a triumphant success' (Leger 1872, p.4).

And while the aquatic drama started with military dramas such as *The Seige of Gibraltar*, *The Battle of Trafalgar* (1814) and *The Battle of the Nile* (1815), the tank was quickly used for other purposes. Shipwreck stories were popular. In 1823 Sadler's Wells presented the 'serio-comic romantic aquadrama' *The Island, or Christian and His Comrades*, an aquatic spectacular based on the Mutiny on the *Bounty* (and Lord Byron's poem of the same name), capped once again by a sea battle. Edward Leger (1872) describes a drama, most likely *The Ocean Fiend* (1807), 'wherein some fugitive villain dashed headlong into the water from a high rock, or a bridge, followed by an avenger between whom a desperate struggle and fight would take place'(Leger 1872, p.4). In *Philip and his Dog* (1806), the villain of the piece threw himself into the tank 'to escape justice and his pursuers'; the 'famous dog Bruin' leapt in after him, seized the murderer by the throat, and drowned him (Leger 1872, p. 4). Clarkson Stanfield's 1829 diorama of *Virginia Water* at Drury Lane included a 'hydraulic apparatus' apparently capable of discharging thirty nine tons of water (Forbes 1980, 103). Often, the spectacle overwhelmed the plot of the drama: *The Times* commented that the final performance of *The Ogre; or, Little Thumb* at Covent Garden in 1807 contained 'an overflowing trough of New River water, [but was] without an intelligible plot'(Mayer 1969, p.100).

Aquatic spectacles were also popular in pantomime. Often they were used to show the magic powers of Harlequin or the benevolent agent. In *Fashion's Fools*, the benevolent agent, Temperance, creates Harlequin by animating the pump at the Blackfriars Monastery; the pump, before its replacement by Harlequin, presumably

pumped real water. An 'Aquatic Metamorphosis' takes place in *Harlequin's Magnet*, performed at Covent Garden in 1805. In *Fairlop Fair*, the Genie of the Oak unites the lovers before a panoramic scene of the Deptford Dock Yard, where they witness a ship launch to celebrate their new beginning. The aquatic tanks were also used to create spectacular scenery, both realistic and exotic. *The Mermaid* takes its audience from the 'Bed of the Ocean' to a 'Submarine Grot,' to Billingsgate, Regent's Canal, Strand Bridge, the Head of the Thames, New River Head, the reservoir at Sadler's Wells, and finally into a 'Fancy Aquatic Scene,' all likely staged using backdrops in front of water. In *Harlequin Brilliant; or, The Clown's Capers*, an aquatic scene of a shipyard at a British dockyard changes to a 'Magnificent Marine Temple,' 'in which Neptune appeared in his car with his Sea Horses, Tritons, etc.,' while the ship *Brittania* 'rose out of the *mimic* Main' while the first verse of 'Rule Britannia' was sung in full chorus (Mayer 1969, p.98-99). Dibdin's Celtic piece *An-Bratach* (1805) concludes with a view of 'Fingall's Cave, in which the Spectre will arise from the immense body of real water.' In the finale of *Fashion's Fools*, Temperance invites the company to her garden, where 'crystal streams from magic fountains flow'(Mayer 1969, p. 97); the scene then changes to the 'Garden of Fashion with Fountains of Real Water.' *Harlequin and Moore's Almanack* featured 'An Illuminated Revolving Aquatic Temple, with Fountain, Etc.'(Mayer 1969, p. 98). In Covent Garden's 1813 production of *Harlequin and the Swans*, water was used for the Swans' Pool and Bath of Beauty; the *Morning Post* commented that it was 'one of the most elegant and fanciful designs we have ever witnessed in a theatre'(Mayer 1969, p.100-101).

It is unclear when the practice of using the tanks ended. The heyday of aquatic drama was between 1804 and 1816. During Dibdin's last three seasons at Sadler's Wells, 1816-1819, the tank was used only sporadically. While his successors maintained the tradition for a few years, by 1824 reviewers were reacting with disappointment. A review of *The Brazen Water Tower* (1824) reported: 'The last scene represented a lake of real water, but we think this scene as now managed is not near so effective as Mr Dibdin used to make it' (Forbes 1980, p. 103).

By this time, however, aquatic drama had spread to the minor houses and to the provinces. R. Morris, who for some years was Dibdin's property man, gave hydraulic demonstrations at Astley's and the Lyceum between 1803 and 1805. Vauxhall Gardens built a Hydraulic Temple in 1821; by 1823 there was some evidence that Morris was doing his shows there. At the Coburg in 1828 Morris presented a hydraulic display with 'jets d'eau of real water, Chinese and horizontal fountains' (Forbes 1980, p. 103). Moncreiff's *Cataract of the Ganges*, which first appeared at Drury Lane in 1823, was popular in the provinces; if theaters did not already have water machinery already, they installed it for this production. Aquatic theater moved to America in the 1820's, when New York City's Lafayette Theater was redesigned for equestrian and aquatic drama. In 1840, the Bowery Theater in New York covered its entire stage in water and staged a drama on the decks of a fully-rigged ship.

Aquatic drama continued in theaters until the outbreak of the First World War. An 1841 production of *Giselle* at Sadler's Wells used fountains with real water; in the 1880's, 'Professor Johnson, the Man-Fish,' toured with a swimming display. Even well into the twentieth century, where one might expect that film would have deadened the

novelty of theatrical invention, an early 1970's production of *Pyjama Tops* at the Whitehall Theater showed that 'real' water drama is not dead.

Cross References: Charles Dibdin, Nautical Melodrama, Pantomime/Harlequinade, Sadler's Wells, Spectacle

Index terms: (in addition to the above) aqua drama, aquatic drama, *Battle of Gibraltar*, Bruin (dog), fountain, *The Island, or Christian and his Comrades*, Napoleon Bonaparte, *naumachia*, nautical melodrama, naval battles, Thames river, water garden, water theatre

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