

Fire on Stage

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One could argue that representing fire on the nineteenth-century stage was a little like showing an aviation disaster film as in-flight entertainment. Stage fires were always a little too close to the bone, because theatres themselves were fire-prone, to say the least. Across the century there were more than 1100 major conflagrations in the world's theatres and countless smaller fires. In Great Britain, almost every theatre seems to have burned down at some point: for example, Drury Lane in 1809, Covent Garden in 1808 and again in 1856, the Lyceum in 1830, the Garrick in 1846, Glasgow's Theatre Royal in 1849, the Pavilion in Whitechapel in 1856, the Surrey Theatre and Edinburgh's Theatre Royal in 1865, and Cardiff's Theatre Royal in 1877. Nor did the gradual displacement of gas by electric lighting in theatres do much to improve matters, since there were over ninety significant fires in Britain in the last quarter of the century. In 1881 theatre critic Clement Scott noted that 'the lovers of statistics declare that all theatres are burned down — sooner or later'.¹ (Of course, other large Victorian buildings, such as the emerging department stores, were also susceptible to fire: Harrods burned to the ground in 1883, and Whiteley's in 1887.) The death toll from such conflagrations could be staggering, with victims often killed in the crush to escape rather than by the flames or smoke. Such factors as the widespread use of wood in construction, the narrowness of exits, and the steep pitch of stairs made theatres very effective fire traps. The worst British fire of the century was at the Theatre Royal, Exeter on 5 September 1887, when 186 were killed, but even that appalling body count was outdone by a number of international disasters: 300 died in the Brooklyn Theatre in 1876, 447 at Vienna's Ring Theatre in 1882, and more than 600 at the Iroquois Theatre fire in Chicago in 1903.²

And yet, despite, or perhaps in part because of, this appalling record, fires were a staple feature of stage spectacle. A few plays, as we will see, placed them at the very centre of the entertainment, and as the century

¹ Clement Scott, 'Our Omnibus Box', *Theatre*, October 1881, pp. 243–56 (p. 243).

² 'Panics and Fires in Theatres by an Old Stager', *Chambers's Journal*, 29 October 1887, pp. 689–92; Eyre M. Shaw, 'Theatre Fires: Their Causes and Remedies', *New Review*, August 1891, pp. 146–54; Tracy Davis, *The Economics of the British Stage 1800–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 93–98.

went on stage fires became more and more elaborate. Actual or simulated conflagrations were conjured up using a diverse array of technologies, some of them very simple, some depending on the most recent scientific discoveries. Here, I want to give a short tour of these technologies and their use in the plays of the period and to speculate a little on the kinds of pleasure they offered. While onstage flames could draw people in, offering an experience of immersive suspense, for instance, they also interrupted the dramatic flow, reminding audiences that they were seeing a performance, getting something for their money. To this extent, we are reminded that nineteenth-century drama provided something of a mixed and spectacular ‘theatre of attractions’, closer at times to the circus than to the novel.

That fire was a common special effect on the nineteenth-century stage is less surprising when we consider that fire effects had been a part of the British theatre since the Middle Ages, when they were used, for example, to offer a glimpse of the eternal flames of hell and other supernatural phenomena. As Philip Butterworth describes, stage fire featured in such medieval and early modern plays as the Coventry *Resurrection*, the Anglo-Norman *Adam*, and the Cornish *Life of Saint Meriasek*.³ He lists a whole battery of materials that were used to create fiery effects, from aqua vitae to tallow to powdered varnish. Fire remained a key stage effect into the modern period. John A. Rice, for example, has described the extensive use of fire on the eighteenth-century stage, drawing on, inter alia, the accounts in Claude-Fortuné Ruggieri’s influential *Elémens de pyrotechnie* (1801, 1811, 1821). Ruggieri, the scion of a famous family of pyrotechnicians, summarizes some of the special-effect techniques that had been in use in Paris for decades. For instance, the illusion of a burning building could be produced quite simply by placing small quantities of burning tow behind painted flames. More dramatic effects could be achieved by burning lycopodium powder.⁴ This powder, which continued to be used in stage effects throughout the nineteenth century, is obtained by drying the spores of the lycopodium plant, also known as clubmoss. When ignited, the powder creates a bright flash, and thus was used to simulate lightning as well as fires. Spectacular fireball effects could be created by using a sort of bellows on the powder and alcohol as an ignition agent. As Ruggieri

³ Philip Butterworth, *Theatre of Fire: Special Effects in Early English and Scottish Theatre* (London: Society for Theatre Research, 1998), pp. 79–83.

⁴ John A. Rice, ‘Opera Pyrotechnics in the Eighteenth Century’, in *Theatrical Heritage: Challenges and Opportunities*, ed. by Bruno Forment and Christel Stalpaert (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2015), pp. 23–40. A pre-publication version of this essay is available on Rice’s website, ‘John A. Rice: History of Music’ <<https://sites.google.com/site/johnaricecv/operatic-pyrotechnics>> [accessed 17 August 2017]. The later editions of Ruggieri’s *Elémens de pyrotechnie* are available online, e.g., through the Gallica website of the Bibliothèque nationale de France <<http://gallica.bnf.fr/>> [accessed 17 August 2017].

explains, dazzling effects could also be achieved on stage by the use of *flammes de Bengale*, Bengal Fire, actually a sort of slow-burning firework or flare. Combined with some clever stage carpentry, these various resources could produce quite convincing illusions of buildings on fire. Ruggieri writes about the French stage, but the techniques he describes were also in use elsewhere in Europe: Rice notes that David Garrick at Drury Lane was making inquiries about the French lycopodium bellows in the 1760s, and it had become a common enough piece of stage wizardry for Schiller to mention it in *Die Räuber* in 1782.

When we come to the nineteenth century, the rise of melodrama meant that special-effect flames were in some demand. For instance, lycopodium powder was almost certainly deployed, alongside Bengal Fire, in the popular ‘blow-up’ endings of much early Romantic melodrama. Jane Moody argues that these explosive endings originated in the revolutionary and military spectacles put on at the end of the eighteenth century at Sadler’s Wells, Astley’s, and the Royal Circus, in plays such as *Paris in an Uproar* (1789), and Charles Dibdin’s *The Siege of Gibraltar* (1804).⁵ Explosive and fiery endings soon spread to other theatres, and provided the dramatic climax of such pieces as Isaac Pocock’s *The Miller and His Men* (Covent Garden, 1813). In the final act, as the hero, Lothair, escapes with his beloved from the lair of the *banditti*, he calls for the fuse to be lit to blow up the mill (*Fig. 1*):

LOTHAIR Now, Ravina, now fire the train.

*Ravina instantly sets fire to the fuze, the flash of which is seen to run down the side of the rock into the gully under the bridge, from which she has ascended, and the explosion immediately takes place.*⁶

Here, the fiery ending cleanses the world of the play of evil. Such ‘blow-up’ endings were given a new lease of life by the success of various stage versions of Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1834), which featured the spectacular eruption of Vesuvius in the last act.⁷

But before then, a new era of spectacle had begun in the late 1810s, when ‘red fire’ and ‘blue fire’ first began to appear, lending their eerie colour in particular to plays of the supernatural, much in vogue in this period. Where lycopodium produced a dramatic flash, the new coloured fires produced a smouldering, lingering glow. Red and blue fire were the products of modern chemistry, specifically of the combination of metal salts and a powerful oxidizing agent. An article in the *London Magazine* for August

⁵ Jane Moody, *Illegitimate Theatre in London, 1770–1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 27–28.

⁶ Isaac Pocock, *The Miller and His Men* (Philadelphia: Neal, 1831), II. 5.

⁷ On the long life of volcanic spectacles, see Nicholas Daly, ‘The Volcanic Disaster Narrative: From Pleasure Garden to Canvas, Page, and Stage’, *Victorian Studies*, 53 (2011), 255–85.



Fig. 1: A. Park, Hand-coloured nineteenth-century toy theatre plate for *The Miller and His Men*, date unknown. © V&A Museum, Harry R. Beard Collection, given by Isobel Beard.

1820 refers to ‘the beautiful red fire which is now so frequently used in the theatres’, listing its ingredients, besides sulphur, as nitrate of strontium, chlorate of potash, and sulphuret of antimony, or, as they would now be termed, strontium nitrate, potassium chlorate, and antimony trisulphide.⁸ (Strontium nitrate produced a red flame; the substitution of copper nitrate produced a blue flame.) Two of the ingredients listed here, potassium chlorate and strontium nitrate, were of relatively recent discovery: the first had been identified and developed as an explosive ingredient in 1786 by the French chemist, Claude Berthollet; strontium, a metal, had first been isolated in 1808 by Sir Humphry Davy, using ore mined at Strontian in Scotland. The powerful glow produced by the new chemical fire made it particularly useful for scenes of a supernatural nature. (Aptly enough, the town Strontian itself has a supernatural resonance: the Scots Gaelic version

⁸ ‘Literary and Scientific Intelligence’, *London Magazine*, August 1820, pp. 212–16 (p. 213). Magnesium seems to have been used in at least one American theatre to create blue fire. Cited in Douglas W. Hoehn, ‘The Life and Plays of Richard Brinsley Peake’ (unpublished master’s thesis, Ohio State University, 1979), p. 60.

of it, *Sròn an t-Sithein*, translates as ‘point of the fairy hill’.⁹ We see it, for instance, in James Planché’s *The Vampire; or, The Bride of the Isles* (1820), English adaptations of Carl Maria von Weber’s *Der Freischütz* (1821), and versions of *Frankenstein* by Richard Brinsley Peake (1823) and Henry M. Milner (1826).¹⁰ In the first, it provided the unearthly light that accompanied the vampire Ruthven’s disappearance. In the second, it illuminated the magical bullet-casting scene in *The Wolf’s Glen*. In Peake’s *Presumption; or, The Fate of Frankenstein*, red fire is used to add an infernal tint to the laboratory from which the monster emerges in Act I; whereas in Milner’s *Frankenstein; or, The Man and the Monster*, it was used alongside fireworks in the spectacular last scene in Act II, in which the monster throws itself into Mount Etna as the volcano ‘throws out torrents of fire, sparks, smoke, etc’.¹¹

To get a better sense of how red and blue fire were put to work on stage, let us look briefly at another supernatural drama of this period, Edward Fitzball’s hit, *The Flying Dutchman; or, The Phantom Ship* (Adelphi, 1826). Fitzball’s play had been assembled from a variety of earlier sources; and as he noted in his memoirs, it was ‘not by any means behind even *Frankenstein*, or *Der Freischütz* itself in horrors and blue fire’.¹² In the play, blue fire marks the unearthliness of the accursed Vanderdecken, who visits the earth every hundred years to claim a victim. In Act I. 1, for example, set in the sea cave of the sorceress Rockalda,¹³ the ghostly captain appears from the waves to these stage directions:

thunder — soft music — the dark clouds disperse, the gong vibrates, and Vanderdecken, amid blue fire, appears from the waves, his features pale and haggard, and holding in his hand a black flag, emblazoned with a white Death’s head and cross bones.

⁹ *Sròn*, meaning ‘nose’, ‘head’, or ‘point’ in Scottish Gaelic is also found in such place names as Stranraer (the broad headland); *sithean*, meaning ‘fairy hill’ or ‘mound’, is also common in Scottish place names.

¹⁰ On these Romantic plays see, for instance, Maurice Willson Disher, *Blood and Thunder: Mid-Victorian Melodrama and Its Origins* (London: Muller, 1949), pp. 95–100; Roxana Stuart, *Stage Blood: Vampires of the 19th-Century Stage* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1994), pp. 76–83; and Frederick Burwick, *Romantic Drama: Acting and Reacting* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 60–68.

¹¹ *Frankenstein; or, The Man and the Monster, A Romantic Melo-Drama, in Two Acts* (Cobourg Theatre, July 1823), II. 8. This is available online in the Pennsylvania Electronic Edition <<http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/Milner/milnertp.html>> [accessed 17 August 2017]. Milner had also written an earlier adaptation of Mary Shelley’s novel, *Frankenstein; or, The Demon of Switzerland* (Cobourg Theatre, 1823).

¹² Edward Fitzball, *Thirty-Five Years of a Dramatic Author’s Life*, 2 vols (London: Newby, 1859), I, 168–69. Chemical fire was not Fitzball’s only special effect in the play: to create the effect of a phantasmagoric ship he used a magic lantern.

¹³ The sea cave of Rockalda bears a strong resemblance to Unda’s sea cave at Staffa in *The Vampire*.



Fig. 2: Robert Cruikshank, Frontispiece for Fitzball's *The Flying Dutchman; or, The Phantom Ship*, Cumberland's Minor Theatre II, London, 1829. Wikicommons.

Rockalda grants him leave to visit the earth again, one hundred years having passed since his last visit, to 'seek a bride to share his stormy fate'. At the end of their interview he exits as he arrived (Fig. 2):

thunder — Vanderdecken takes up his death-flag, and retraces his steps amid the waves — he ascends in blue fire as the scene closes.

In the final scene, with his scheme to carry off the heroine Lestelle as his chosen bride foiled, the ghostly captain vanishes for good, this time ‘amidst thunder and flames of red fire’ (III. 4).

The play’s marriage of special effects and elements of Gothic and popular nautical drama was calculated to please, and Fitzball (nicknamed ‘Blue-Fire Fitzball’, according to Frank Rahill) went on to be a veritable basilisk in his production of theatrical fire.¹⁴ Chemical fires also burn brightly, for instance, in his *The Devil’s Elixir* (1829) and *Carlmilhan; or, The Drowned Crew* (1835). These residual Gothic melodramas allowed full play to the stage pyrotechnician to an extent that suggests that the invention of red fire fuelled the creation of a certain kind of drama, rather than the drama driving the creation of special effects.

There was an inevitable reaction against the blood-and-thunder school, and Fitzball and his contemporary James Planché were dismissed by some critics as mere ‘blue-fire mongers’.¹⁵ By the following decade, red and blue fire were increasingly seen by critics, if not by audiences, to be passé: an 1845 review of J. B. Buckstone’s melodrama *The Old Mint* (Surrey Theatre) describes it as having ‘as much red fire in it as in any of the productions of our old dramatists’.¹⁶ Red and blue fire, it was felt, should be confined to Astley’s and similar venues that specialized in spectacle as well as plays.

However, it would be a mistake to think that these chemical flames burned no more on stage after the 1830s; like lycopodium powder they were a special-effects resource in theatres into the twentieth century, though they never again had quite the centrality that they did in the 1820s and 1830s.¹⁷ They also enjoyed an afterlife in amateur performances, as the publishers of plays for amateur actors (e.g., Dick, French) also supplied special-effects equipment, including ‘colored fire in bulk’, and magnesium wire, which later replaced lycopodium in the production of lightning effects.¹⁸ And,

¹⁴ Frank Rahill, *The World of Melodrama* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1967), p. 159.

¹⁵ ‘Our Actors!’, *Metropolitan Magazine*, October 1836, pp. 120–40 (p. 139).

¹⁶ ‘The Drama and Public Amusements’, *Critic*, 21 June 1845, pp. 165–66 (p. 165).

¹⁷ Its use was not without risks. In 1877, during a performance of Augustin Daly’s *Round the Clock* at the Olympic Theatre in New York, ‘the dress of an actor in the company was set on fire by a lighted lycopodium’ [*sic*] (‘In America’, *Theatre*, 6 March 1877, p. 65). Lycopodium powder is still sold for use in stage magic.

¹⁸ Eileen Curley, ‘Parlour Conflagrations: Science and Special Effects in Manuals for Amateur Theatricals’, *Popular Entertainment Studies*, 6.1 (2015), 26–41 <<https://novoajs.newcastle.edu.au/ojs/index.php/pes/article/view/151>> [accessed 17 August 2017] (p. 30). Curley cites such guides as Tony Denier, *The Amateur’s Hand-Book and Guide to Home or Drawing Room Theatricals* (New York: French, 1866); Charles Harrison, *Theatricals and Tableaux Vivants for Amateurs* (London: Upcott Gill, 1882); A. D. Ames, *Hints to Amateurs: A Practical Guide to Home and Amateur Theatricals* (Clyde, OH: Ames, 1885); and W. D. Emerson, *Practical Instructions for Private Theatricals* (Chicago: Dramatic Publishing Company, 1899).

of course, they lingered in the toy theatres that were popular children's playthings for much of the century, sold by Green, Skelt, Redington, Pollock, and others. The dramatist F. C. Burnand (1836–1917), writing in the 1870s, fondly describes his early experiences with Skelt's Juvenile Drama set. With his 'little stage, oil-lamps, and blue and red fire', he happily recreated *in parvo* such plays as *Der Freischütz* and *The Miller and His Men*.¹⁹

With the arrival of 'sensation drama' in the 1860s, not only did stage fire reappear, but it sometimes became the very *raison d'être* of dramatic production. Existing fire special effects like lycopodium powder and red fire were combined with new techniques and more lavish sets to create mixed media 'sensation scenes' that were aimed at holding audiences spellbound. The supernatural and romantic yielded to a more realistic aesthetic in which elaborate settings were realized for the sole purpose of combustion. Audiences delighted in suspenseful rescues, but also, it seems, in destruction for its own sake. Sensational fires feature in, for instance, Dion Boucicault's *Octoroon* (Winter Garden, New York, December 1859; Adelphi, London, 18 November 1861), with its burning riverboat, and C. H. Hazlewood's adaptation of Mary Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*, which recreates the episode in which Lady Audley tries to incinerate the over-inquisitive Robert Audley in his bed at the Castle Inn (Victoria, 23 May 1863).²⁰ But the most successful was in Boucicault's spectacular take on 'local drama', *The Poor of New York* (Wallack's Theatre, New York, December 1857), which introduced, as Michael Booth put it, 'the most notable stage fire of the century'.²¹ In the great sensation scene, the blackmailer-turned-hero Badger dashes into a burning tenement house in the Five Points to secure the receipt that will incriminate the real villain of the piece, the dishonest banker, Gideon Bloodgood:

The house is gradually enveloped in fire, a cry outside is heard. 'Fi-er!' 'Fi-er!' — it is taken up by other voices more distant. The tocsin sounds — other churches take up the alarm — bells of Engines are heard. Enter a crowd of persons. Enter BADGER, without coat

¹⁹ F. C. Burnand, 'My Time, and What I've Done With It', *Macmillan's Magazine*, April 1873, pp. 508–24 (p. 519). Robert Louis Stevenson (1850–1894), a generation younger than Burnand, describes his own adventures with the toy theatre sheets in his essay 'A Penny Plain and Twopence Coloured' (1884); *Der Freischütz* and *The Miller and His Men* feature in his account too, though it is not clear that he ever staged the plays. In his 1998 autobiography *Threads of Time* (Washington: Counterpoint, 1998) the director Peter Brook vividly describes seeing a toy theatre performance of *The Miller and His Men* at an Oxford Street bookshop in the 1930s (p. 6); by this period the toy theatres were the subject of nostalgic interest.

²⁰ George Roberts's adaptation of Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* for the more genteel St James's Theatre (February 1862) dropped the burning inn episode.

²¹ Michael Booth, *Victorian Spectacular Theatre 1850–1910* (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 63.

or hat — he tries the door — finds it fast; seizes a bar of iron and dashes in the ground floor window, the interior is seen in flames. [...] BADGER leaps in and disappears. [...] The shutters of the garret fall and discover BADGER in the upper floor. Another cry from the crowd, a loud crash is heard, BADGER disappears as if falling with the inside of the building. The shutters of the windows fall away, and the inside of the house is seen, gutted by the fire; a cry of horror is uttered by the mob. BADGER drags himself from the ruins, and falls across the sill of the lower window. DAN and two of the mob run to help him forward but recoil before the heat; at length they succeed in rescuing his body — which lies C. LIVINGSTONE, PAUL, and PUFFY, rush on. DAN kneels over BADGER and extinguishes the fire which clings to parts of his clothes.²²

It is not clear how elaborate the original fire scene was, and Boucicault probably developed this part of the production further when elaborate ‘sensation scenes’ came into vogue a few years later, in part driven by the runaway success of his own *The Colleen Bawn* (1860). Thus, in February 1864, Boucicault localized *The Poor of New York* as *The Poor of Liverpool*, with elaborate recreations of such familiar city sights as the Adelphi Hotel. The tenement in the Five Points was transformed for Liverpool audiences into 19½ Cherry Lane.²³ It soon became a huge hit, and audiences thronged to see the ‘House on Fire’ scene. The reviewer for the *Liverpool Daily Post* considered that:

The house is burnt down in such splendid style as has never, we fancy, been witnessed on the stage, every physical incident of house conflagration being counterfeited with wonderful power. The falling of beams and joists, the continual ascent of volumes of lurid smoke, and every other detail is enacted with vivid reality. The ‘sensation’ is crowned by the feat of Mr Cowper

²² *The Poor of New York: A Drama in Five Acts* (New York: French, 1857), p. 44 (v. 2). Boucicault had collaborated with three journalists, Seymour, Goodrich, and Warden, on the play, which was adapted from Edouard-Louis-Alexandre Brisebarre and Eugène Nus’s *Les Pauvres de Paris* (Paris: Ambigu-Comique, 1856), a play that had also inspired Stirling Coyne’s *Fraud and Its Victims* (Surrey, London; and Barnum’s Museum, New York, 1857), and Benjamin Barnett and John Beere Johnstone’s *The Pride of Poverty; or, The Real Poor of London* (Strand Theatre, London, 1857). Charles Reade wrote the authorized translation, *Poverty and Pride* (1856), and his novel *Hard Cash* (1863) also derives from its story of a family ruined by an unscrupulous banker. Interestingly, the *New York Times* review of Boucicault’s production does not mention the fire scene. On the complicated history of English adaptations of this play, see Sarah Meer, ‘Adaptation, Originality and Law: Dion Boucicault and Charles Reade’, *Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film*, 42 (2015), 22–38.

²³ The ‘House on Fire’ scene is clearly flagged in newspaper advertisements for the play. See, for example, the notice for the new production at the Royal Amphitheatre in the *Liverpool Mail*, 6 February 1864, p. 4.

as Badger in mounting a ladder in the greatest apparent peril and entering the burning room to secure the paper Crawley [i.e. Gideon Bloodgood in the original] has hoped to destroy. He is brought fainting out of the now completely gutted house as the drop-curtain once more descends.²⁴

Boucicault was astute enough to realize that an effective fire scene depended on more than an effective fire, and this reviewer was also impressed by the fact that during the 'House on Fire' 'there would appear to be hundreds of people on stage'. The *Liverpool Mail*, which thought the 'great "sensation" scene [...] almost too natural to be pleasant', was also impressed by the 'noisy mob of nearly a hundred people'. A later article from the same newspaper complained, however, that 'choking smoke' filled all parts of the house.²⁵ So successful was the play for the Royal Amphitheatre that a rival production soon sprang up at the nearby New Adelphi Theatre. The author himself also realized that he had a winner and that he could monetize the play further in regional theatres by wrapping local details around the key sensation scene. He deprecated his own play as a 'bobtail piece — with local scenery' but explained that 'I localize it for each town, and hit the public between the eyes; so they see nothing but fire'.²⁶ Soon they were seeing nothing but fire in *The Poor of Manchester* (18 March 1864), *The Poor of Birmingham* (2 April 1864), *The Poor of Leeds* (16 May 1864), and *The Streets of Glasgow* (6 June 1864).

On 1 August, the most lavish version of the play, *The Streets of London*, opened at the Princess's Theatre, with George Vining as Badger. The famous 'House on Fire' at 19½ Cherry Lane had now become '19½ Pipemaker's Alley, Bedfordbury, at the back of St. Martin's Lane'.²⁷ This time, to further enhance the realism of the scorching flames, not only are there crowds of supernumeraries, but a 'fire engine with real horses' is brought on stage (*Fig. 3*).²⁸ *The Times* declared it 'the best burnt house ever destroyed upon any stage', and commended the 'appalling reality' of the fire scene in a play that was already remarkable for its exact reproductions of real London locations.²⁹ Not everyone, though, was impressed by the

²⁴ 'Royal Amphitheatre', *Liverpool Daily Post*, 11 February 1864, p. 5.

²⁵ 'Public Amusements', *Liverpool Mail*, 13 February 1864, p. 6; and 'Public Amusements', *Liverpool Mail*, 20 February 1864, p. 6.

²⁶ Letter to Edward Stirling from the Royal Hotel, Glasgow, cited in Townsend Walsh, *The Career of Dion Boucicault* (New York: Dunlap Society, 1915; repr. New York: Blom, 1967), p. 95.

²⁷ Bedfordbury in the 1860s was one of London's slums; Pipemaker's Alley was a real street, demolished in the early 1880s and replaced by model dwellings owned by the Peabody Trust.

²⁸ 'Drama: Princess's', *London Daily News*, 2 August 1864, p. 2.

²⁹ 'Princess's Theatre', *The Times*, 3 August 1864, p. 11.



Fig. 3: Concanen, Lee, and Siebe, Chromolithographic advertising card for *The Streets of London*, Princess's Theatre, 1864. © V&A Museum.

sensational turn: here is Charles Dickens's account of the play given in a letter to John Forster:

I went the other night (8th October) to see *The Streets of London* at the Princess's — a piece that is really drawing all the town, and filling the house with nightly overflows. It is the most depressing instance, without exception, of an utterly degrading and debasing theatrical taste that has ever come under my writhing notice. For not only do the audiences — of all classes — go, but they are unquestionably delighted.³⁰

Dickens was not himself averse to using dramatic fire scenes in his novels, but he felt that this turn towards spectacular realism on stage was unhealthy; what this fire threatened to consume above all was the taste of the theatre-going public.

³⁰ Cited in John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens*, 3 vols (London: Chapman and Hall, 1872–74; repr. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), III: 1852–1870, 271.

Sensational fires, then, did not delight all, their very realism a strike against them in some eyes. But how was this realistic inferno created? John Jennings gives an account of the *Streets* in his 1886 book *Theatrical and Circus Life; or, Secrets of the Stage, Green-Room and Sawdust Arena*:

Anybody who has witnessed Milton Nobles' *Phoenix* properly placed on the stage, or *The Streets of New York*, must have been, the first time, both terrified, and still somewhat delighted, with the fire scenes.³¹ Of late years they have been made wonderfully thrilling, and almost perfect facsimiles of the Fire Fiend himself. The scene-painter gets up his house in three pieces. The roof is swung from the 'flies'; the front wall is in two pieces, a jagged line running from near the top of one side of the scene to the lower end of the other side. If shutters are to fall, as in *The Streets of New York*, they are fastened to the scene with 'quick match', a preparation of powder, alcohol, and lamp wick. Iron window and door-frames are covered with oakum soaked in alcohol or other fire-quickenning fluid. Steam is made to represent smoke, and the steam itself is obtained by dissolving lime in water. A platform from the side affords a footing to the firemen who are fighting the flames in the very midst of the burning building, and an endless towel with painted flames keeps moving across the picture after the first wall and roof have been allowed to fall in, while red fire plays upon the whole picture and 'flash torches' are made to represent leaping tongues of flame.³²

Useful though it is, we cannot take at face value this description of the 1864 sensation scene. For one thing, some of these effects were already known to Ruggieri, whom Jennings may have drawn upon. And, if he is basing his account on his own experience, he is writing in the 1880s and may be describing effects not present on the Princess's stage in 1864. Curiously, he glosses over an effect that almost certainly was used at the Princess's: limelight. As Percy Fitzgerald explains in a piece in the *New*

³¹ Milton Nobles's *Jim Bludso; or, Bohemians and Detectives* (c. 1875), later retitled *The Phoenix*, in which a heavy-drinking bohemian, Carroll Graves (aka Jim Bludso, aka The Phoenix), reinvents himself and seeks revenge upon the villain who nearly burned him alive. This lively revenge melodrama drew American regional theatre audiences for decades. An original promotional poster featuring the fire scene is available online via the digital library of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania <<http://digitallibrary.hsp.org/index.php>> [accessed 17 August 2017].

³² John Jennings, *Theatrical and Circus Life; or, Secrets of the Stage, Green-Room and Sawdust Arena* (Chicago: Globe, 1886), pp. 189–90. This section substantially repeats an article he had published in the *Scientific American* in 1881. In Celtic folklore, the 'Fire Fiend' is credited with causing explosions in mines, but in the nineteenth century the term came to be used more widely to describe the unknown agents of fire.

Quarterly Magazine in 1876: 'All the great triumphs of modern stage effect date from the introduction of strong light.' Oxyhydrogen limelight was in use for a variety of stage spectacles from the 1840s, and by the sensation era it was well established in theatres as a source of focused and intense light. A significant element in the creation of various stage special effects, it was particularly useful in sensational fire scenes, as Fitzgerald goes on to describe:

The ordinary lime-light, turned on to the full, suffused the stage with a flood of light, and seen through crimson glasses [i.e. filters] imparted a fierce glow of the same tint. Any vapour of the whitest kind moving in such a medium would at once give the notion of volumes of lurid smoke.³³

Localized variants of *The Poor of New York* ran for years, and other dramatists followed Boucicault's example in deploying dramatic fire scenes.³⁴

In 1871 Wilkie Collins opted to remove Sir Perceval's incineration from the stage version of his own *The Woman in White* at the Olympic (October 1871), perhaps feeling, as one reviewer put it, that 'audiences have had enough of stage conflagration'.³⁵ And yet, stage fires continued to blaze despite the rise of Ibsenite problem plays and other forms of theatre that forsook spectacle for dialogue. In, for instance, H. J. Byron's *Mabel's Life* (Adelphi, 1872), the plucky Mabel escapes from a cellar by the novel expedient of setting the house on fire (by then, as the *Athenaeum* complained, an 'Adelphi drama' had come to mean a more-or-less random concatenation of sensation scenes). In J. Wilton Jones's *Haunted Lives* (Olympic, May 1884), the 'sensation scene' formula was updated by introducing a burning ship rather than a house. A horse-drawn fire engine returned to the stage of the Princess's in August 1888 for the American import, Joseph Arthur's fireman-centred melodrama *The Still Alarm*; though the real centre of attention in that play seems to have been life at the fire station rather than the burning house to which the firemen are summoned.³⁶ A burning petroleum store provided the spectacle in James Willard's melodrama *In the Shadow of Night* (Pavilion, 18 June 1900), in which 'the stage appears one mass of flames'.³⁷ Audiences were treated to ever grander novelties towards the end of the century (in 1897 alone they could see a steam crane and a lifeboat in *Sons of the Sea*, and a rescue by 'flying machine' in *Our Eldorado*),

³³ Percy Fitzgerald, 'The World Behind the Scenes', *New Quarterly Magazine*, October 1876, pp. 144–61 (pp. 153, 154).

³⁴ For instance, *The Poor of Southampton* was on the boards of the Theatre Royal in March 1865, with the Royal Insurance Fire Brigade lending a hand.

³⁵ 'The Theatres', *Orchestra*, 13 October 1871, pp. 19–20.

³⁶ 'The Still Alarm', *Era*, 4 August 1888, p. 7.

³⁷ 'The London Theatres', *Era*, 23 June 1900, p. 11.

but fires continued to draw, especially on the provincial circuit. In Arthur Bearne's *The Life We Live* (Newcastle, January 1899), for example, the great sensation scene depicts a fire in a cotton mill; and *The Ship on Fire* (Empire Palace, Hanley, November 1897) rather explains itself. Fires could also be built into animal acts, as we see from such pieces as *The Fire Alarm; or, The Dog's Devotion*, played by a touring Australian troupe of dogs in 1894, which promised 'ultra-sensational effects and marvellous canine sagacity'; there was also a rival production, *The Dog Fire Brigade*.³⁸ As Jacky Bratton has shown, the advertisements of the *Era* newspaper are a rich resource for tracking all sorts of theatrical activity, and, in this case, they remind us that, for those producing the scenes, fire was just another speciality to be marketed.³⁹ Thus, in the 1880s, we see advertisements by Charles Dornton aimed at theatre managers for the great 'Fire' scene by the backdrop painter Beverley (advising that 'Scenery will not fit any but large stages'); and Messrs. R. H. Wilfrid and Wm. Chas. Lloyd's 'Express' Company tout, alongside their 'Revolving Bridge for Special Train Sensation', their 'New Chemical Effects for Fire Sensation'.⁴⁰

In fact, stage fires, like other sensation scenes, continued to draw the crowds well into the early twentieth century in Britain, by which time the cinema had begun to outmatch the theatre with its capacity for special effects. Ben Singer has tracked a similar pattern on the other side of the Atlantic, where barnstorming 'ten-twenty-thirty' melodrama also relied on multiple and increasingly extravagant effects: for example, a fireworks factory in flames, a train steaming through a burning forest, and San Francisco razed to the ground in, respectively, *The Searchlights of a Great City* (author unidentified, 1902), Ramsay Morris's *The Ninety and Nine* (1902), and Lincoln J. Carter's *While Frisco Burns* (1905).⁴¹ As it grew in power, of course, the rival new entertainment wasted little time in cannibalizing the old, drawing upon the plots, characters, and situations of its predecessor. Thus, not only was the fireman-as-hero the main appeal of one of the earliest short narrative films, *The Life of an American Fireman* (Edison, 1903), but when longer films arrived, one of the first was *The Streets of New York* (Pilot Films, 1913), 'from the well known play by Dion Boucicault', complete with an elaborate fire scene (*Fig. 4*).

From supernatural illusionism to the spectacular local realism of the long sensation era, fire effects fulfilled multiple functions on the

³⁸ Classified ads, *Era*, 20 January 1894, p. 25.

³⁹ Jacky Bratton, *The Making of the West End Stage: Marriage, Management and the Mapping of Gender in London, 1830–1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 46–85.

⁴⁰ Classified ads, *Era*, 17 December 1881, p. 25.

⁴¹ Ben Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and Its Contexts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), pp. 155–56. See also, Rahill, pp. 172–83.



Fig. 4: Poster for *The Streets of New York*, Pilot Films, 1913. Courtesy of Heritage Auctions.

nineteenth-century stage. Far from being meaningless spectacles, fires could convey a sense of the numinous, act as stand-ins for divine retribution, or provide testing grounds for the hero, for example. But stage fire must have always reminded audiences that what they were seeing was special, a show; they were getting something for their money, be it an eerie glow from beyond the grave, a burning building in London's Bedfordbury, or a forest in flames. Thus, while the use of fire on stage takes us back to medieval mystery plays, and perhaps even to the ritual origins of drama, we must also bear in mind that the nineteenth-century theatre was rarely too far away from the rival attractions of the circus, stage magic, fire-eating, and the diverse other entertainments described by Richard Altick in *The Shows of London* (1978). In this respect, stage fire, like other sensational effects, could work not to reinforce but to undercut the immersive pleasures of

the drama, spotlighting its nature as performance. To paraphrase Tom Gunning's suggestive description of early cinema, nineteenth-century melodrama always offered something of a 'theatre of attractions', and this became increasingly the tendency towards the end of this period. Peter Brooks many years ago described the characteristic rhetorical figures of melodrama as antithesis and hyperbole, but late nineteenth-century melodrama was also often characterized by tmesis, or perhaps parenthesis and hypostrophe, with multiple sensation scenes breaking up any sense of continuous dramatic action. Stage fires, like all such powerful set pieces, offer a species of popular romantic irony.

But as I noted at the beginning, for nineteenth-century audiences, stage fire must have also been a somewhat anxious pleasure. However aware they were of the stage fire as performance, the risk of theatrical flames becoming real ones was all too obvious. Theatre fire stories spread quickly: when *The Poor of Liverpool* opened in 1864, its runaway success attracted a modest level of press attention, but when an actress's dress caught fire as she stood close to a prop candelabra the story was picked up by papers all over Britain and Ireland.⁴² Theatres became safer places in the early twentieth century, with the introduction of efficient fire curtains, wider exits, and panic bars and reduced usage of timber in stage and set construction. When Oliver Wendell Holmes, in the 1919 case *Schenck v. United States*, famously stated that 'the most stringent protection of free speech would not protect a man in falsely shouting fire in a theatre and causing a panic', a panic in a theatre would probably have been a good deal less lethal than just a few years before.⁴³ There is no question that the end of the fire trap era was anything but an unequivocal positive. But it is just possible that theatre audiences never again experienced quite the same anxious delight in stage fire as their forebears had.

⁴² She was saved from serious injury by a quick-acting member of the cast. One of the first reports is 'Accident from Fire at the Amphitheatre', *Liverpool Daily Post*, 18 February 1864, p. 5.

⁴³ *Schenck v. United States*, 249 U.S. 47 (1919), <<https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/249/47/case.html>> [accessed 17 August 2017].