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## **‘The Power of Attraction’: the Staging of Wilde and his Contemporaries at the St James's Theatre, 1892–1895 — [Source link](#)**

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## **Responding to the ‘power of attraction’: the staging of Oscar Wilde and his contemporaries at the St. James’s Theatre, 1892-1895.**

### **Lucie Sutherland**

Keywords: Actor-manager, George Alexander, Treasury Book, West End, Matinée, Repertoire

William Archer, a cultural commentator most often associated with the promotion of dramatic naturalism, did not solely concern himself with dramatic form. He was also alert to the necessity for profit in professional theatre making, often demonstrating a concern with the economic viability of theatrical production in his writing. For example:

It would of course be idle to suppose that the comparative popularity of two plays is exactly indicated by the length of their respective runs [...] It is impossible, in short, without access to the books of the management, to measure with absolute precision the power of attraction exercised by any particular play.<sup>1</sup>

Archer states what theatre industry professionals and scholars of that industry know; only box office receipts can truly confirm the economic success of a production. Length of run and audience figures may be indicative, but accurate business records detailing the income generated by fee paying audience members will be the only way to ascertain the ‘power of attraction’ exercised by a piece of theatre. When Archer was writing, in the final decade of the nineteenth century, it was the role of the actor-manager to market a production as successful for the longest duration possible, frequently sustaining that production to demonstrate the ongoing prestige of the theatre entrepreneur. This is a practice that continues today, within commercial theatre, in what producer Julius Green terms the “‘perceived’ hit”, the production sustained at a loss over a number of weeks or even months to increase the likelihood of selling to regional and overseas markets, and to sustain the professional prestige of the producer.<sup>2</sup>

To examine the economic viability of a production, box office receipts portray income accrued through audience attendance, but when discussing the actor-manager system, in place until the first decades of the twentieth century, such business records are scarce. The challenge is twofold: not only to locate such resources, if they are still in existence, but then

to utilize such quantitative evidence constructively, to interrogate the actual practices of the theatre entrepreneur.

In the case of George Alexander, actor-manager at the St. James's Theatre in the West End of London from 1891 until 1918, such evidence, indeed archival evidence in general, is scarce. In the absence of a substantial body of material, journalism of the era and accounts of his work in the biographical writing by some contemporaries are key points of reference. The value of these lies not so much in their accuracy, which cannot finally be judged, but rather in what is conveyed by the ideological bias of the authors, by what Jim Davis and Victor Emeljanow have termed the 'recurring descriptive patterns and rhetorical formulas' that remain suggestive as to the commercial and artistic environment in which Alexander was operating.<sup>3</sup> It is frustrating, however, that in the absence of business records, the precise relationship between economic factors and managerial choices around repertoire cannot be measured. Where such records do survive, they must be utilized in line with other forms of evidence, to more fully interrogate the commercial infrastructure of professional theatre at a particular historical moment.

This article seeks to examine the managerial strategies of George Alexander during the first years of his career as an actor-manager, examining materials contained within a Treasury Book from the St. James's Theatre, a single volume covering the period from 11 June 1892, until 13 September 1895.<sup>4</sup> This is a record of gross box office income and also expenditure week to week (running Saturday to Friday) for productions within the theatre, and for some summer tours. Records cover productions at the St. James's Theatre from part way through the first run of Oscar Wilde's *Lady Windermere's Fan*, up to a week-long revival of *The Idler* by Haddon Chambers. The Book relates to many productions that endorsed the status of Alexander as a West End actor-manager, notably *Lady Windermere's Fan*, his first collaboration with Wilde, and Arthur Wing Pinero's *The Second Mrs Tanqueray*, the play which consolidated Alexander's commitment to staging new, English drama.<sup>5</sup> Also, importantly, the book holds records for a period of short running productions in 1895, including the premiere of *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

Expenses listed include rent and rates paid on the theatre building, advertising and printing costs, payments to musicians, salaries for members of the company, back stage and wardrobe staff, scenic designers and painters, front of house staff, payments for utilities, petty cash, and sundry expenses. Also, there are separate records of matinée performances, a practice which in itself provides evidence of the role of the daytime performance during this period, as it progressed towards a consistent role in commercial production practice. The

percentage payments to authors are also listed; it is the calculation of these percentages that necessitated the entry of box office takings, providing a specific record of income per production. There are limits to the specificity of this material; most notably, individuals are not listed under salary categories, and so it is not possible to confirm the amount paid to individual actors. However, this resource does reveal some business practices adopted by Alexander at an early stage of his managerial career: notably, the kind of agreements reached between writer and manager, the range of regular staff maintained at a West End venue, and the inclusion of the matinée performance.

Such precise data can establish the actions of Alexander in response to the level of income achieved by a production, week to week, and in response to additional factors that could influence the decision to keep a production on the stage, or to replace it. While the combination of influential factors operating upon one theatre professional may never be comprehensively ascertained, this article will examine how quantitative data, when set alongside alternative forms of evidence, can provide precise detail related not just to material conditions – income for example, and staffing – but can also allow for scrutiny of more elusive features of a managerial career. Specifically, such evidence allows for an assessment of responsiveness on the part of a theatre entrepreneur, a key feature of the actor-manager role. The need to respond to actual income during a production run, and, as in the case of *Earnest*, to external factors that influenced the longevity of a production, necessarily had an effect upon the practice of an actor-manager, and charting those responses by Alexander as represented through data available within the Treasury Book can assist in evaluating his professional practice. Therefore, after establishing some details about the professional life of Alexander and his approach to management, such data will be examined to assess the nature and the pace of response to income he exercised.

### **George Alexander and the St. James's Theatre Brand:**

After an initial career as an actor, Alexander began work as a manager in 1889, becoming lessee and actor-manager at the St. James's Theatre, King Street, Mayfair, in January 1891. His consistent position as actor-manager at that theatre across three decades ensured his place, in histories of late nineteenth and early twentieth century theatre, as one of a group of male entrepreneurs who dominated West End production and, through their work in London and touring activities, exerted immense influence upon the repertoire of 'legitimate' theatres, those under the purview of the Lord Chamberlain, during the period.<sup>6</sup>

As an actor prior to his entry into management, Alexander spent a significant part of his professional career, which commenced in 1879, working for Henry Irving at the Lyceum. It is apparent that he concurred with Irving's belief that 'the drama must succeed as a business, if it is not to fail as an art', although he had more conspicuous success than Irving in putting this aim into practice.<sup>7</sup> Whereas the older manager experienced bankruptcy and had to give up his lease on the Lyceum after more than twenty years as lease holder, Alexander's net profit over the course of his career at the St. James's Theatre amounted to £269,000, and the losses accrued on failed plays during the same period came to only one sixth of that amount, the manager building upon Irving's approach but developing financial strategies more suited to the increasingly competitive marketplace of West End commercial entertainment.<sup>8</sup>

The longevity of Alexander's career, and profit accrued, suggest managerial acumen, policies where repertoire and personnel (actors and authors) were marketed successfully to attract audiences, over three decades. In conjunction with this acumen, the site and appearance of the theatre he leased were intrinsically influential in sustaining Alexander in management. By leasing the St. James's, on King Street within Mayfair, he significantly chose a venue treated as part of the West End but actually situated beyond the traditionally acknowledged boundaries of the area. The exclusive reputation he courted was endorsed by this unique location, and exclusivity was further emphasized by his preference for staging plays that reflected the most privileged members of his contemporary society. A St. James's play was distinguished, in George Bernard Shaw's words, by a 'style of elegant unruffled naturalism'.<sup>9</sup> In practice, this meant a combination of archaeological realism in staging with roles for the actor-manager as society gentleman or romantic adventurer, conveying social and moral authority.

As the number of West End venues rose, and increasingly complex business structures within the theatre industry forced actor-managers to revise their commercial practices and capitalize upon their specific appeal, their theatres effectively became brands encouraging audience, or customer, loyalty. What unified the various productions in Alexander's repertoire was this use of spectacular scenery or the equally extravagant realistic depiction of privileged domestic settings and fashionable costumes, and consequently, the high investment required to achieve these effects. As a result of this policy, at the St. James's Theatre, a venue that held just over 1,000 spectators, plays needed to run for a long period to recoup on initial expenditure. Artistic aims merged with the economic reality of their implementation, and a successful production also needed to be a long-running one.

The ornate realism associated with a St. James's production was not its only defining feature. Alexander had a stated aim, and one reflected within the repertoire he developed: 'it was from the outset - as it has always been - my desire and my very great interest to produce new plays by new men, and especially new Englishmen.' Alexander's managerial career remained consistently linked to producing plays that complied with this aim.<sup>10</sup> A supporter of the opportunities and restrictions experienced by West End managers, who had their repertoire simultaneously curtailed and endorsed by the Lord Chamberlain, his desire to produce new material was not determined by an interest in extending the thematic or aesthetic possibilities of English drama. Unlike Irving or Herbert Beerbohm Tree, Alexander never published his speeches, or monographs describing his approach to acting or management, and in interviews he distanced himself absolutely from the most prevalent debates about literary drama and theatrical reform that were ongoing during his managerial career. He was committed not to new forms of drama, but to producing new texts that could be defined by established genres and would comply with the demands of the censor, attracting a rapidly expanding potential audience to a venue associated with premieres. Eighty-six per cent of the new plays he staged were written by English authors, a statistic that confirms precise artistic aims and also Alexander's ability to realize those aims.<sup>11</sup>

A negotiation between this characteristic repertoire and the need for a particular level of income from his production of new work is apparent in evidence pertaining to his career. For example, in a letter from Alexander to the playwright Pearl Craigie, the actor-manager reveals both the economic realities of income from a production (of *A Debt of Honour* by Sydney Grundy) and a personal sympathy with the work and its author:<sup>12</sup>

'A Debt' is doing steady business (£1,100 a week) but this does not support going on long. Of course I am conscious that no-one should imagine it is coming off at present, it would be unfair to Grundy, and he is quite one of the best fellows.<sup>13</sup>

A balance struck between the drive for profit and a rather more fraternal impetus for maintaining the production is conveyed, demonstrating that economic factors were not the sole motivation for Alexander; decisions around length of run related to far more than economic imperatives. His decisions were based around a range of factors, and he publicly promoted the autonomous and subjective approach characteristic of his management, and the actor-manager system more broadly, at the time:

What I maintained and maintain is that legitimate management, if I may call it so, is a game of skill, into which chance enters very little [...] I can't speak for others, but for myself I can say without hesitation that what success I have attained has been due to my being entirely my own master in my theatre. I know what I want, and I do it, with no one to say me nay.<sup>14</sup>

This inclination towards autonomy was not unusual during the period, and was fostered by the processes of gentlemanly capitalism which, in the words of economic historians P.J. Cain and A.G. Hopkins, was 'composed of an intricate set of inter-locking sub-groups', providing financial aid and social status to male entrepreneurs.<sup>15</sup> Alexander was dependent upon private and unregulated investment that epitomized gentlemanly capitalism, professional relationships which emerged from 'formal mechanisms of belonging'.<sup>16</sup> West End gentlemen's clubs were the most obvious evidence of how business was facilitated by organized, ostensibly social environments, but Alexander's work in the City before becoming an actor, and his time in amateur theatre, were further examples of a type of social networking that would provide support for his management, allowing him to avoid the fiscal and administrative restrictions inherent to public companies.<sup>17</sup>

However, while a system of financial support that allowed him to maintain an impression of autonomy was implemented, it did not alleviate accountability to investors and so, while there was the opportunity to allow for the extended run of a production achieving a modest income this could not, as Alexander noted in response to the Grundy play, 'support going on long'. Responsiveness to box office income was necessary to maintain a profitable, and therefore feasible managerial career, and examination of the Treasury Book allows for closely scrutiny of such responsiveness in a way that other evidence, including correspondence, statements by the manager in the press, or the recorded length of a run, do not.

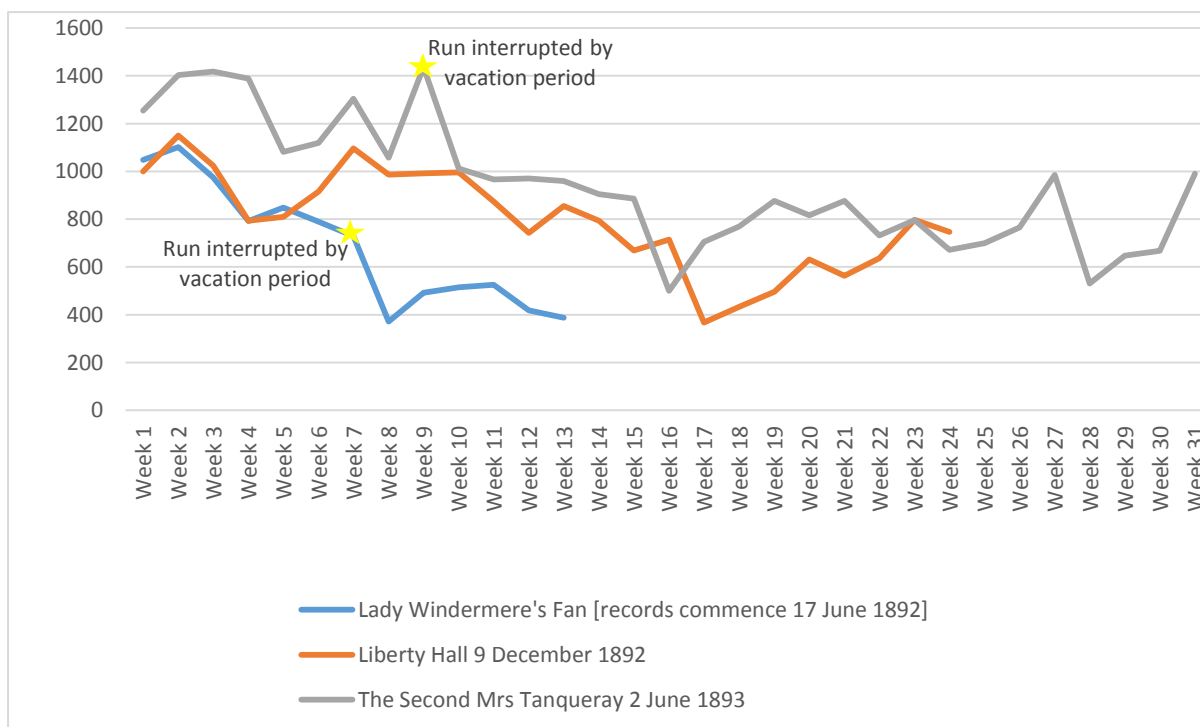
### **Responses to Commercial Success, and Failure:**

The Treasury Book provides evidence for a defining period in the career of this actor-manager, covering as it does some long running productions that were intrinsic to Alexander establishing his reputation as an eminent and distinctive West End manager, but also the critical and commercial failures - *Guy Domville* and *The Triumph of the Philistines* - that coincided with the short run of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, withdrawn from production after thirteen weeks because of the trial and imprisonment of Wilde. The record of income within the volume, when combined with knowledge of how long each production ran for,

becomes indicative of the pace and nature of response to the income achieved for each production.

Two consecutive commercial successes in 1892, *Lady Windermere's Fan* and *Liberty Hall*, were followed by the collaboration with Pinero which cemented the association of Alexander with new work, *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray*. This run of new plays by English authors confirmed Alexander as a manager supporting new work at the St. James's Theatre. All of these productions ran for over twenty weeks, *Tanqueray* for over thirty, and in the case of both *Lady Windermere's Fan* and *Tanqueray*, the Treasury Book provides evidence that it was the interruption of a London run during the summer months that negatively influenced box office income, the departure of Alexander's company from the theatre during 'Vacation' weeks (the term used in the Treasury Book) to take productions on tour. The practice was sustained consistently between 1892 and 1895, allowing Alexander to foster the St. James's as a distinctive West End venue, sustaining the practice of a summer hiatus, while also linking the theatre, situated as it was within the Society arena of Mayfair, with the aristocratic practice of returning to London for the 'season' in November.<sup>18</sup> However, this absence from the St. James's between August and early November interrupted the commercially successful first run of each play, with audience attendance decreasing consistently once the plays returned to the St. James's in the Autumn. *Liberty Hall*, which premiered during December 1893, had a run that did not coincide with this hiatus; the dip in income shown in Figure 1 coinciding, instead, with Easter weekend, 1893:





**Figure 1: Variation in box office income per week for *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *Liberty Hall*, *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray*.**

What is evident from comparing the income week to week on each of these three productions, is the negative impact of the 'Vacation' period for both *Lady Windermere* and *Tanqueray*, the inability for either production to achieve income levels after the hiatus that were comparable to box office takings preceding the break. Although the sustained practice of the 'Vacation' was influential, the longevity of these productions in the first years of a managerial career surely consolidated not only the feasibility of management for Alexander, but also his status as a young manager establishing the characteristic nature of his career; that he was astute in selecting and producing new drama by authors based in England.

These three productions were maintained by the actor-manager until the steady decline in box office receipts was at a level below £400 and, for *Tanqueray*, the longest running at 223 performances, below £600. These financial records indicate that there was no requirement at this stage for the actor-manager to foster the impression of a "perceived" hit', although this became a necessity subsequently, most notably the historical drama *Guy Domville* by Henry James, that was staged in 1895 and in the wake of poor critical reaction, ran for only five weeks. This example, when compared to the three productions from 1892-3,

acts as a reminder that levels of profit could not be guaranteed prior to production; each new play needed to be presented to a paying audience before its economic viability could be confirmed.

For each of the first three productions included within the Treasury Book, box office returns indicate a substantial paying audience over half a calendar year, or more. To further examine the reasons why these productions did succeed, it is possible to assess alternative forms of evidence alongside the quantitative data found within the Treasury Book, to establish the extent to which such a profitable repertoire was the result of a manager clearly moderating (as far as can possibly occur with theatrical production) the element of risk in his choice of material. Notably, available evidence confirms that Alexander was not, at this stage in his career, consistently risk averse. The longest running production recorded within the volume is *The Second Mrs Tanqueray*, a problem play within which Pinero was demonstrating a desire to rearticulate the naturalism of Ibsen for the English stage under censorship. This play had been rejected by John Hare, a slightly more experienced manager, and was subsequently offered to Alexander, Hare noting in correspondence with Pinero: 'I now regret that I had not the good judgement and the courage that Alexander has shown but I do not grudge him the success he so well deserves'.<sup>19</sup>

The comment by Hare, albeit a politic one coming from an actor-manager seeking to sustain a relationship with a dramatic author whose work he had been willing to let go, is revealing. Alexander is represented as a sympathetic figure for Hare, embedded within the fraternal network of West End production practice. Hare also praises the acumen displayed by younger manager in judging *Tanqueray* to be suited to the West End stage. This indicates that early repertoire had already established Alexander as a successful producer of drama suited to a West End - acceptable to the censor - but demonstrably progressive, in comparison to the kind of material staged by older managers. Hare rejected the play as 'too daring', even 'too radical' in comparison with other problem plays staged in the West End, but Alexander accepted the opportunity to establish a professional relationship with an already successful English playwright.<sup>20</sup> How he generated a balance between this degree of innovation in repertoire, and his role as manager of a West End theatre situated on the borders of Mayfair and appealing to a Society, is indicated by the pattern of production confirmed within the Treasury Book. Although a hiatus within the first London run of a production was detrimental to the popularity of each production for its West End audience, the practice was maintained.

This critical and commercial triumph was followed by Alexander's most successful collaboration with Henry Arthur Jones, *The Masqueraders*. Here Alexander capitalized upon the success and notoriety of *Tanqueray* by again casting Mrs. Patrick Campbell in the leading role. The maintenance of a popular female actor is an astute commercial policy, demonstrating the mediation of risk exercised by Alexander. Relying upon the appeal of a tried actor within a new play, or collaborating with an established playwright (as both Jones and Pinero were at this time) to bring new English drama to the stage, could work to counteract the effects of any provocative material located in a new work. Therefore, neither his status as an established and competent businessman, well suited to remain supported by the fraternal networks of gentlemanly capitalism, nor the social exclusivity and prestige that were intrinsic to the St. James's brand, were fundamentally compromised by his decision to focus upon new material.

The Treasury Book does, however, cover a range of productions during 1895 that presented a challenge to the period of commercial and critical success experienced by Alexander throughout the preceding two years. *The Masqueraders* ran to the end of December 1894, and was followed by two plays that were presented for a very short time, and for particular reasons. Henry James's *Guy Domville* ran for only five weeks, this short run attributed to the hostile reaction James received from a significant portion of the first-night audience, a reaction described in detail to potential audiences by reviewers. Yet close attention to these reviews makes apparent a less sensational explanation for failure: the limited dramatic possibilities of James's text. In his scrutiny of the work created by James for the stage, Christopher Greenwood identifies how the author 'took the stage very seriously indeed. He wasn't at all interested in the plots or the plays staged there. Rather it was the human capacity for beautifully ordered existence, for wonderfully controlled, intellectually grounded behaviour, for the delight of delicately mannered performance.'<sup>21</sup> Unfortunately, the audience for *Guy Domville* was dissatisfied with the 'beautiful living' of James's protagonist, who chose his religious calling over marriage.

Attracted by the prestige of the author, Alexander selected this type of play over two alternatives suggested by James - a contemporary comedy or drama. The play differed from the St. James's repertoire up to this point, not only in its historical setting, but by the manner in which James placed emphasis upon the observation of human relationships, rather than points of crisis and denouement. However, Alexander defended his decision to produce *Guy Domville* by making reference to his definitive policy as actor-manager:

With my great wish to unite literature with the stage, I then produced a play by Mr. Henry James. *Guy Domville* was received very unfavourably on the first night, but it was a production of which I was, and always shall be, proud, in spite of that particular audience's adverse verdict. It had a fair run, which satisfied me, for it attracted to the St. James's the whole of the intellectual London audiences available for any theatre.<sup>22</sup>

He excused the production as part of his investment in new work, insisting upon its literary merit and identifying a specific audience that was attracted to his theatre, emphasising the unique repertoire and ambience of the St. James's. However, evidence within the Treasury Book undermines the claim of a 'fair run' in economic terms. The entries for *Guy Domville* are unusual in comparison to other productions recorded in the volume, as they do not include a record of box office income: this is not necessary to calculate payments to each author, since both James and the author of the one act play which preceded *Guy Domville*, Julian Field, each received a set amount per performance: £6 for James, £1 for Field. This exceptional procedure suggests that even though the production was maintained for five weeks, income was low enough to allow for a regular, modest payment to each author that was at a lower amount than a percentage from each performance would be for a commercial successful piece. In comparison, even the lowest return listed in the Book - of £35.16.6 for a matinée performance of *The Triumph of the Philistines* by Henry Arthur Jones on June 8 1895 - earned its author £2.18.3 at seven per cent of box office takings for a single performance.

Twelve productions had a shorter run than *Guy Domville* during Alexander's managerial career, yet this production indicates how Alexander sustained the prestige of his management by representing poorly received productions as the result of his determination to promote new 'literary' work. That is, he publicly focused upon a policy that was successful rather than an individual production that was not. *Domville* was replaced in February by *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the run of the latter play ending after thirteen weeks because of the scandal engulfing Wilde at precisely the time of the premiere. In the aftermath of this production, Alexander then mounted comic drama *The Triumph of the Philistines*, and when that piece ran for only five weeks, he filled the remaining two weeks, until the Vacation, with revivals of *The Idler* and *The Second Mrs Tanqueray*. This is where the Treasury Book concludes, the week-long revivals a response to the short lived productions mounted by Alexander during 1895.

Although these revivals were a necessary response to failed productions, they were also a rapid response, indicating the flexibility of this manager in bringing past productions back to the stage to keep the theatre open. This is not the only kind of flexibility demonstrated by Alexander during this period in response to the returns achieved for a production. Before taking productions off stage, there is evidence within the Treasury Book that Alexander made some changes to both the money paid to authors and the number of performances each week. Where this policy of rapid change is most evident, when scrutinising the Treasury Book, is during the first production of *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

### **Managerial Responses to Intra- and Extra-Theatrical Conditions: *The Importance of Being Earnest* in 1895:**

Dominant narratives around this first production recount that *Earnest* was a well received piece, but one that was intrinsically and detrimentally linked to events in Wilde's life. Wilde needed to liaise with Alexander to ensure the Marquess of Queensbury was refused access to the theatre for the first night of the production, 14 February 1895 and, after Wilde's arrest, Alexander removed the name of the playwright from all advertising and then, with the conviction and imprisonment of Wilde, withdrew the production. An examination of evidence – reviews and advertisements for the play, the dates of the production and of the trials – work to confirm this narrative. However, such pre-existing accounts can be further interrogated, challenged, or consolidated, through scrutiny of the financial data relating to this production within the Treasury Book.

Before examining material related to *Earnest*, however, it will be helpful to determine what the Treasury Book suggests about the professional relationship between Wilde and Alexander over a longer period of time, and before the tumultuous thirteen weeks of the production. The percentages paid to each author serves to identify their status as writers for commercial theatre and how that influenced the agreement they reached with Alexander. In the case of *Lady Windermere's Fan*, the author received six per cent for regular weekly performances, and five per cent for matinées, falling to five per cent for every performance after the summer hiatus. In contrast R.C. Carton, the author for *Liberty Hall* which was staged next at the St. James's, received seven per cent for all performances, Pinero received ten per cent for each weekday performance of *The Second Mrs Tanqueray* (seven per cent for matinées), and Jones received fifteen per cent for each performance of *The Masqueraders*.

Established reputations within the sphere of West End production – where Carton, Pinero and Jones had been operating much longer than Wilde – rather than the status of the author beyond that professional sphere is seen to drive the agreement put in place between author and manager. This is consolidated by the higher percentage Wilde was awarded for *The Importance of Being Earnest*, his fourth play for a West End management: ten per cent for both evening and matinée performances. This may be explained by his increased status as a dramatic author by this time, but also by the circumstances under which Alexander mounted the production of *Earnest*: he arranged with Charles Wyndham to take over the rights to the play, to replace the poorly received and failing production of *Guy Domville*.

Records are not available, within the Treasury Book, for the first weeks of income from *Lady Windermere's Fan*, however, by examining income levels for all the premieres staged at the St James's Theatre during the period covered by the Book, it is possible to see that although Wilde was the only writer to have two plays staged by Alexander during the period, they did not provide the greatest revenue for the manager:

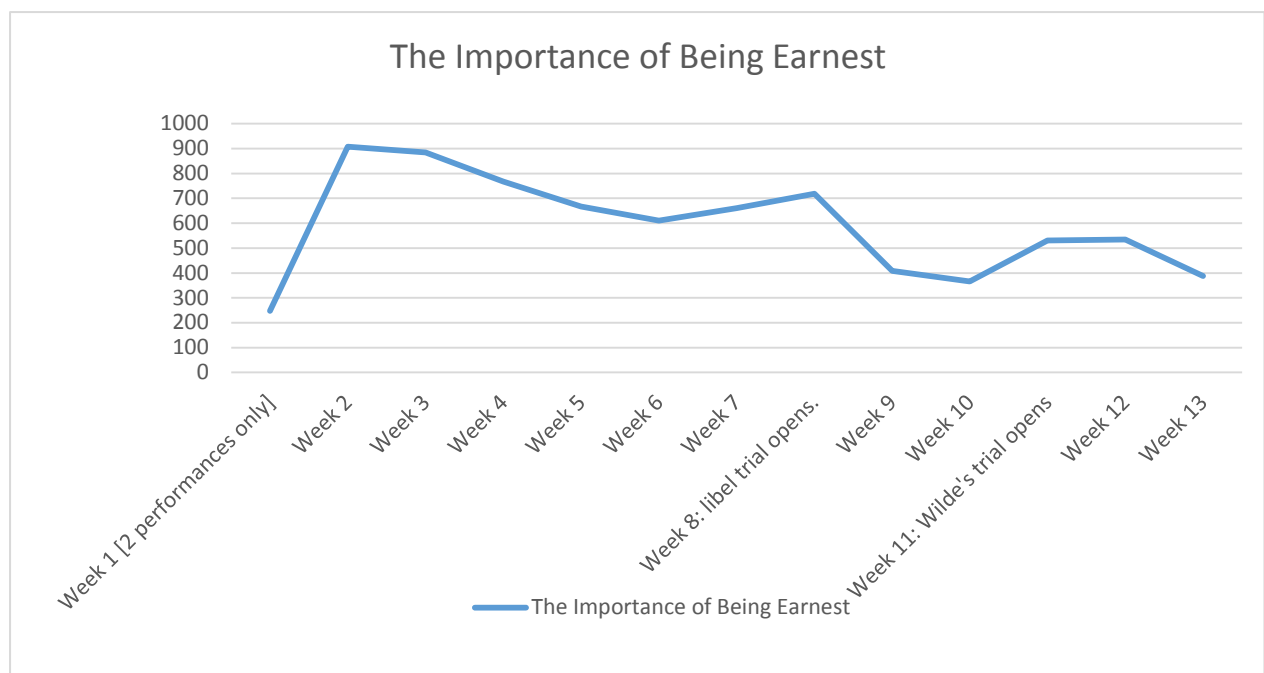
<b>Production</b>	<b>Length of run</b>	<b>First week takings (evening performances)</b>	<b>Highest gross and week in which it was achieved</b>	<b>Lowest gross and week in which it was achieved</b>
<i>Lady Windermere's Fan</i>	27 [records begin at week 17]	Not available	£1101.19 [18]	£418.6.6 [29]
<i>Liberty Hall</i>	24	£1000.15.6	£1150.13.6 [2]	£367.14 [17]
<i>The Second Mrs Tanqueray</i>	31	£1254.17	£1441.2.6 [5]	£500.9.6 [15]
<i>The Masqueraders</i>	19	£1408.5.6	£1509.7 [3]	£500.4.6 [19]
<i>Guy Domville</i>	5	N/A	N/A	N/A
<i>The Importance of Being Earnest</i>	13	£908.14 for first full week [only two performances in Week 1]	£908.14 [2]	£388.16 [13]
<i>The Triumph of the Philistines</i>	5	£771.8	£983.7.6 [2]	£550.4.6 [5]

**Figure 2: Revenue recorded within the Treasury Book.**

These details also indicate that it was possible for Alexander to make in excess of £1,400 per week on productions at the St. James's Theatre at this time, from the six evening performances staged. These figures establish that the collaborations between Alexander and Wilde produced material that performed well in terms of income, but while *Lady*

*Windermere's Fan* was amongst the most commercially profitable productions for Alexander during the first years of his managerial career, the two Wilde plays were not pre-eminent in economic terms.

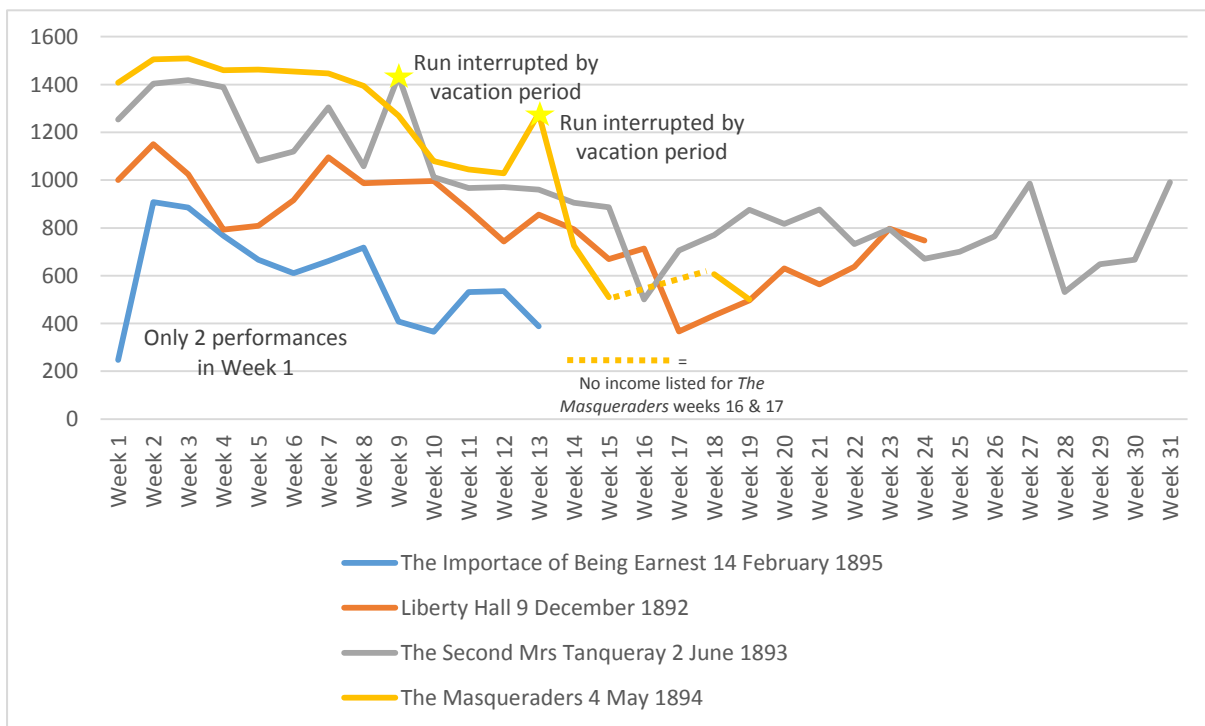
This precise record of income for the two premieres is useful, not only for the evidence presented as to Wilde's commercial value for the West End actor-manager, but also, because the Book provides evidence as to the particular appeal of *Earnest* in line with the notoriety experienced by its author off-stage at the time. Taking weekly income for evening performances, the pattern of box offices takings may be considered:



**Figure 3: Weekly box office takings for *The Importance of Being Earnest*.**

The production never achieved the level of income and profit derived from *Lady Windermere's Fan*; examining the box office returns, it is apparent that by mid-June 1892, week seventeen of its first run, that production was making over £1,000 per week in evening performances alone, dropping to £418; *Earnest* never reached the £1,000 mark. Also, while it is possible to examine the very public events overtaking Wilde's professional life at the time of the first run of *Earnest* – most notably, there is an increase in income during week 8, when the libel trial against Queensbury opened; it was at the end of that week that Wilde's name was taken off all marketing for the production – what becomes clear from close scrutiny of box office takings, is that this production drew a substantial audience for its first, full week,

but after that, takings for the production were in a steady decline. There is no evidence that this resulted in any changes to the percentage paid to Wilde, however. Statistics within the Treasury Book suggest that Alexander did draw up contracts with some authors, including Pinero and Jones, where royalties were paid at a lower percentage with a decrease in box office takings, but the consistent amount paid to Wilde throughout the thirteen week run indicates that if such conditions were present in the contract between Alexander and Wilde, no action was taken to alter the agreement before termination of the production.



**Figure 4: Variation in box office income per week for *The Importance of Being Earnest*, *Liberty Hall*, *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray*, *The Masqueraders*.**

The steady decline in income from the second week of the production is distinctive, when compared to the variation in income experienced by other premieres that preceded *Earnest* (excluding *Guy Domville*, as box office income is not recorded for that production). There is some fluctuation in income for those other productions, related to a variety of factors. For example, there are sudden increases in income, in line with the approaching absence of Alexander’s company for the ‘Vacation’ period, and press announcements of the termination to a run. In comparison to the patterns demonstrated for other productions, the steady decline



in a paying audience for *Earnest* is uncharacteristic of the earnings experienced by Alexander as recorded within the Book.

Therefore, when examining the weekly income derived from the first production of *Earnest* alongside that for the other productions, what is most striking is that, while there were peaks in attendance around both trials, there was not the fluctuation in income experienced by the other productions. Rather, this was a premiere that achieved modest income in comparison to prior long running successes; there was strong interest during the first full week, but not in line with the income of £1,000 and over experienced by the Carton, Pinero and Jones pieces. There was a consistent decline in takings with the exception of the two trial weeks, and this differs from the increase in income during the first weeks found in the earlier, long running productions. This indicates that in the context of other St. James's productions in the first half of the 1890s, the production experienced modest success with paying audiences. While the trials did necessitate the removal of the production, the income achieved from the very start of the run would have made this a less successful collaboration between Wilde and Alexander than *Lady Windermere's Fan*. This brings further specificity and rigour to the dominant narrative of a successful production curtailed by extra-theatrical events.

### **The Role of Matinée Performance:**

Prior to the trials, the income derived from *Earnest* was at a modest level for productions staged by Alexander between 1892 and 1895, but takings declined at a steady rate which did not merit an end to the run after little more than one month, as had occurred with *Guy Domville*, and was to happen with *The Triumph of the Philistines*. It is also important to note that, as with all productions at this time, Alexander mounted matinée performances to increase profit from the production. For *Earnest*, there were two matinées per week initially, dropping to one in week seven. The alteration to matinée performances, alongside the decision by Alexander to remove Wilde's name from all advertising and display materials, directly demonstrates a correlation between the arrest and trials and the longevity of this production. However, the choice to retain a minimum of the Saturday matinée parallels usual practice for Alexander across all the productions recorded within the Treasury Book, demonstrating the extent to which the daytime performance was becoming a consistent feature of West End repertoire at this time.

Throughout the Book, every production includes a Saturday matinée performance, with a mid-week performance added for a number of long running productions, and on two occasions, three matinées within a week. This additional, or ‘special’ matinée was linked to charity fundraising and therefore, not intrinsic to profit derived from the production, but certainly to the prestige of that production and by extension, the theatre management: *Liberty Hall* during the seventh week of its run, *Tanqueray* during the twenty-sixth week of its run.<sup>23</sup> The flexibility demonstrated around daytime performances demonstrates the actor-manager responding to the audience numbers for evening performances. The additional income accrued from these performances, for which authors were regularly paid a lower percentage than for the six evening performances each week, confirms their role for commercial managers, and with increasing regularity by this time. However, the convention within the Book to list matinées separately points to the continued evolution of the daytime performance, towards the conventional aspect of West End repertoire it has now become.

When Alexander became manager of the St. James’s Theatre in 1891, the matinée performance had become a frequent, although not consistent feature of West End repertoire; the inclusion of regular matinée performances one indication by this decade that West End audiences were increasingly diverse. The afternoon performance was just one response of theatre entrepreneurs to a growing middle-class audience, and during the 1870s and 1880s it grew in popularity.<sup>24</sup> John Hollingshead’s introduction of the matinée at the Gaiety Theatre in 1871 to trial new dramatic material and performers made it a familiar part of West End repertoire, and in the same decade Charles Wyndham and the Bancrofts also gave matinées.<sup>25</sup> These managements recognized how to maximize the profit to be obtained from long-running productions within that commercial arena, encouraging attendance at regular daytime performances.

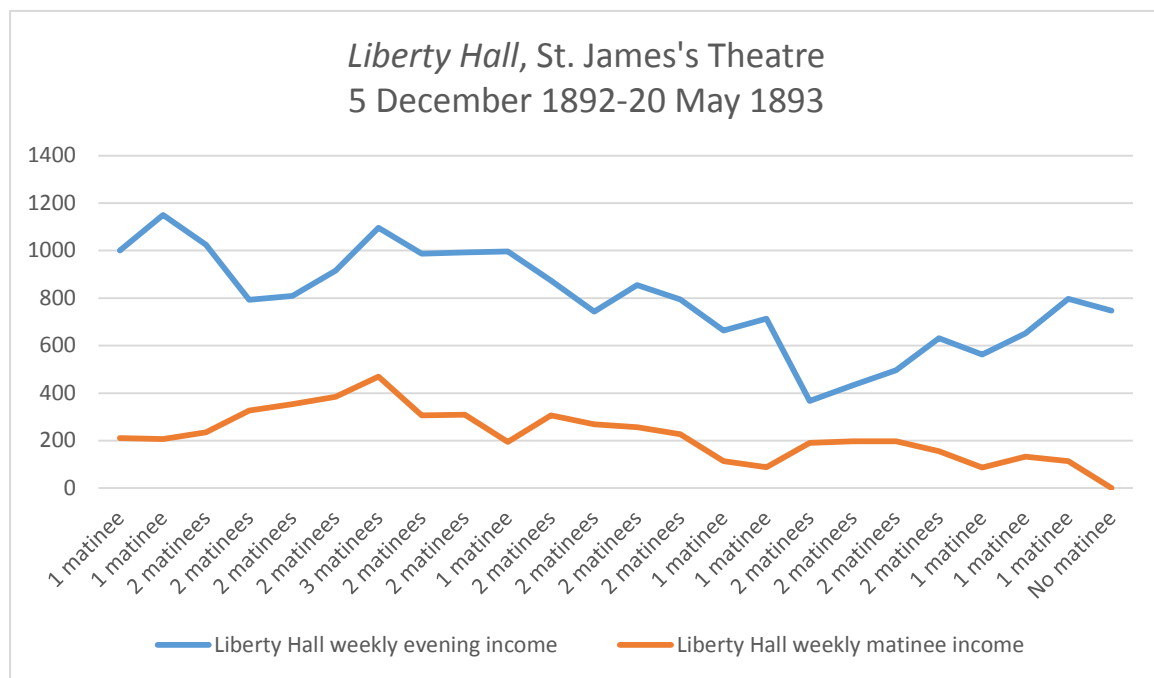
A sophisticated rivalry was developing for the urban audience that was dispersed throughout London’s West End and suburban theatres, providing economic motivation for the regular addition of matinées to West End repertoire during the period of Alexander’s management. The West End matinée provided a formal brand of leisure which emerged as a by-product of industry. The working week, and structured leisure time, was an incidental result of middle-class economic prosperity. The population of London grew consistently: in 1850 two and a half million people lived within ten miles of Westminster, by 1900 the figure was six and a half million; twenty per cent of the population of England and Wales. Owner-occupied houses were being built rapidly to the north and south of the city, and were purchased by families with an income of between £150-200 per annum. With increased

prosperity came smaller family units and domestic staff, freeing home-owners to display their economic prosperity via an increasingly leisured lifestyle. The development of a cheap public transport system that expanded alongside urban housing assisted in this process. Structured working patterns were in place by the end of the 1870s, with a 54 hour week being typical for office workers during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. This meant that West End managers structured their productions around a system of priorities that distinguished ‘working’ and ‘leisured’ audiences.<sup>26</sup> Alexander demonstrates awareness of this developing audience, available to extend the profits accrued from productions generating high returns for evening performances, through his implementation and also his curtailment of weekday matinée performances.

The most frequent practice, demonstrated in the Treasury Book, of paying a lower percentage on these daytime performances indicates that this was a policy that could increase profit for a production. For example, Pinero earned ten per cent of box office takings for evening performances of *The Second Mrs Tanqueray* and seven and a half per cent for matinée performances; for *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, Wilde received seven and a half per cent, then five per cent for all matinée performances. There are also examples of established dramatic authors receiving the same percentage for every performance, daytime and evening, with R.C. Carton paid seven per cent for *Liberty Hall* and Jones fifteen per cent for each performance of *The Masqueraders* (after the first week of evening performances, for which he received ten per cent).<sup>27</sup> However, there is evidence within the Treasury Book that if Alexander could not consistently make savings on these daytime performances through the amount paid to the author, he was able to employ a fiscally astute policy towards the manner in which marketing for these matinées was integrated within weekly advertising. Expenditure on newspaper advertisements and bill posting was taken from the weekly income for evening performances, with no evidence within the Book of separate marketing for daytime performances. While some cost would be accrued for additional space to detail weekly matinée performances within marketing materials, this was subsumed within weekly advertising costs and exemplifies the manner in which Alexander sought to increase profit on productions, adding additional matinées to the weekly Saturday performance in line with attendance for the seven performances regularly scheduled for each production.

To examine the role of the matinée performance further, the following graph illustrates the pattern of weekly matinées for one of these productions, *Liberty Hall*. The inclusion of two matinées for the majority of this production run, after a pronounced increase in revenue during the second week of the production, consolidates the impression of a piece

experiencing high demand at the box office. While the income derived from two matinées does decline throughout the run, there are not the more extreme shifts in weekly income experienced with evening performances, designating the versatile second matinée performance as a modest but evident feature of a production that accrued a high level of income during the first weeks of production, sustaining that production and fostering the long run:



greatly improved, while the pit, which, with its added slope, should constitute one of the best points from which to witness the performance, has been considerably enlarged.<sup>29</sup>

The average audience capacity of new theatres built to stage legitimate drama between 1891 and 1918 was 1,087, with half of these venues accommodating fewer than 1,000 audience members.<sup>30</sup> Alexander surely intended to associate himself with this trend for smaller venues, paradoxically appealing to suburban and provincial audiences by generating a reputation of exclusivity, while making his productions increasingly available to this audience base through increasingly regular implementation of a weekday matinée performance.

### **The Role and Value of Quantitative Data:**

The inclusion or removal of matinée performances per production in line with sales for evening performances supports the argument that in the final decade of the nineteenth century, before the advent of formal unions, or consistent formal guidelines for negotiating with actors and authors, the actor-manager could still operate with a significant degree of autonomy.<sup>31</sup> The claim by Alexander that ‘I know what I want, and I do it, with no one to say me nay’ is upheld by the evidence within the Treasury Book of how rapidly he could respond to the financial returns on a production, with those responses potentially to the detriment of actors and authors, in terms of income.<sup>32</sup> It is important to note however, that as well as demonstrating the autonomy of the actor-manager, such responses did sustain a piece, and extended the revenue stream for those affiliated with a production.

The conclusions drawn from close attention to the Treasury Book do not challenge former assumptions regarding the working practices of Alexander as actor-manager: that he prized autonomy, balanced creative and economic imperatives, and, in the precise case of his working relationship with Wilde, responded to the scandal engulfing the dramatist by distancing himself from the writer and eventually, until the first decade of the twentieth century, from his work. However, what the kind of quantitative data found within the Book can do, is allow for greater rigour in the analysis of these facets to his career, how they were influenced or compromised by the need to respond to actual box office income each week.

The Treasury Book establishes that during the early 1890s, when Alexander needed to respond to modest or poor income, the response was through a combination of available strategies including the adjustment of payments to authors, the manipulation of matinée repertoire, and the decision about when to close a production. The disparity between the

maximum amount recorded for a week of evening performances during the period – £1,408 – and other weekly income, a significant portion of which is outlined within the graphs used here, establish that it was possible for Alexander to maintain a production that was earning well below the maximum potential profit available, and that he would do so to sustain a premiere, to further consolidate the St. James's brand, as intrinsically linked to new work.

Importantly, the data within the Book offers proof that key features defining the managerial career of Alexander, autonomy and commitment to staging new work, did not prompt fiscally erratic or irrational behaviour. A steady reduction in income for longer than one month, or a failure for income levels to rise above the takings for the first week of a production within the initial month of a run, resulted in the termination of that production. The Treasury Book shows an actor-manager willing to accept some decline in income, but abiding by fiscal imperatives in the development and maintenance of repertoire, as might be expected of a commercial manager who remained lessee of a West End theatre over three decades. In addition, these precise financial records allow for more specific conclusions to be drawn about the strategies implemented by Alexander that allowed him to negotiate key factors – the size of the St. James's Theatre, the developing convention of the matinée performance, his commitment to new English drama, and events beyond the theatre industry, as in the case of *Earnest*, that influenced a production run – to present the repertoire of his choosing, even though individual plays might experience short and unprofitable runs within that repertoire. Essentially, data within the Book demonstrates that the range of weekly income considered feasible, to keep a production on stage, was broad.

As Archer acknowledged, to ascertain the engagement of a paying audience with new work the length of production run is not enough; we need more data. Material contained within financial records is suggestive of audience behaviour and here, with the summary of weekly income for a handful of productions, there is evidence that the most renowned play from the era began as a modest commercial success. That this kind of evidence can determine, with precision, the economic viability of the premiere of *Earnest*, a production so often discussed in line with the personal rather than the professional circumstances of its author, demonstrates that the usefulness of financial records extends beyond scrutiny of profit and loss. This kind of material allows for extended analysis of a managerial career, to prove rather than to accept claims of the autonomous practices implemented by actor-managers by the late nineteenth century. Records like the Treasury Book are rare, but where they survive, should be used in conjunction with other forms of evidence to interrogate the professional practice of actor-managers in the era immediately preceding the commercial production

company and increased professional regulation for the theatre industry. Only the figures will confirm how many audiences members would pay to see a production, information that is distinctly valuable to any examination of a theatre and the industry professionals developing work there; the multiple factors that generate ‘power of attraction’.

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<sup>1</sup> William Archer, *Theatrical World of 1897* (London: Walter Scott, 1898), pp. 356-7.

<sup>2</sup> Julius Green, *How to Produce a West End Show* (London: Oberon, 2012), p.290.

<sup>3</sup> Jim Davis and Victor Emeljanow, *Reflecting the Audience: London Theatregoing, 1840-1880* (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2001), p. 99. Examples of works that engage in such anecdotal accounts of Alexander’s career are A.E.W. Mason, *Sir George Alexander and the St. James’s Theatre* (London: Macmillan, 1935) and Walter Macqueen-Pope, *St. James’s: Theatre of Distinction* (London: W.H. Allen, 1958).

<sup>4</sup> Uncatalogued Treasury Book from the St. James’s Theatre, 1892-1895, V&A Theatre Collection.

<sup>5</sup> The term English drama is used here as one frequently employed by Alexander, although a more accurate definition would be English language drama since, even when taking only the plays within the Treasury Book into account, there is work by an Irish author (Wilde) and an American author (Henry James).

<sup>6</sup> Alexander’s management of the theatre was inaugurated with the first night of *Sunlight and Shadow* (transferred from the Avenue Theatre) on 31 January 1891. His final appearance at the theatre was in *The Aristocrat* on 2 June 1917, but he remained Lessee and Manager until his death on 16 March 1918. From this point until December 1918, ‘The Representatives of the Late Sir George Alexander’ was published under ‘Lessee and Manager’ on St. James’s programmes, until Gilbert Miller became Lessee on 1 January 1919.

<sup>7</sup> Irving quoted in Jeffrey Richards, *Sir Henry Irving: Theatre, Culture and Society* (Keele: Keele University Press, 1994), pp. 10-11.

<sup>8</sup> Mason, *Sir George Alexander and the St. James’s Theatre*, pp. 210-216. Chapter 12 gives details of profit achieved by Alexander, and the figures of profit and loss on individual productions throughout the book suggest that Mason had access to business records that are now lost. His desire to give a wholly complimentary impression of Alexander’s career should be taken into account, but I am using these figures as one of a limited number of available pieces of evidence when analysing income and

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repertoire. Alexander's personal wealth, as recorded at time of death, was £90, 672 10s. 3d., so this record of net profit is conceivable. (This figure is taken from Alexander's will, held at the National Archives).

<sup>9</sup> Bernard Shaw, *Dramatic Opinions and Essays*, 2 vols (New York: Brentano's, 1907), II, p. 336.

<sup>10</sup> *Parts I have Played: A Photographic and Descriptive Biography of Mr. George Alexander* (London: The Abbey Press, 1909), p. 5.

<sup>11</sup> Calculated from detail of Alexander's repertoire in J. P. Wearing, *The London Stage 1890-1899: A Calendar of Plays and Players 1890-1899* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1976); *1900-1909* (1981); *1910-1919* (1982) and Mason, *Sir George Alexander and the St. James's Theatre*, pp. 235-42.

<sup>12</sup> Between 1898 and 1902 Alexander produced three plays by Craigie, and some correspondence regarding these productions, dated between March 1st 1899 and January 27th 1902, is held in the University of Rochester: Department of Rare Books and Special Collections.

<sup>13</sup> Letter from George Alexander to Pearl Craigie, October or November 1900, held at the University of Rochester: Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, D12: Craigie Papers.

<sup>14</sup> 'Real Conversations X: With Mr. George Alexander' in William Archer, *Real Conversations* (London: William Heinemann, 1904), pp. 197-215 (pp. 202-3). The twelve interviews in this edition originally appeared in the *Pall Mall Magazine*, between January 1901 and July 1903.

<sup>15</sup> P. J. Cain and A. G. Hopkins, 'Afterword: The Theory and Practice of Gentlemanly Capitalism' in *Gentlemanly Capitalism and British Imperialism: The New Debate on Empire*, edited by Raymond Dumett (London: Longman, 1999), pp. 201-212 (p. 201).

<sup>16</sup> Tracy C. Davis, *The Economics of the British Stage: 1800-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 297.

<sup>17</sup> After the Companies Acts of 1856, 1862 and 1867, it was possible to found public limited liability companies with multiple investors. However, private and informal investment continued alongside the new business structures that were often adopted by music-hall impresarios. As Tracy Davis explains: 'The proportion of corporate to private companies within the entertainment industries is incalculable, since there was no form of registration for private companies.' (*The Economics of the British Stage*, p. 172).

<sup>18</sup> The theatrical season had evolved in line with the social season for aristocratic society which, in turn, was linked to when Parliament sat. In 'Edwardian London West End Christmas Entertainments, 1900-1914', J. P. Wearing describes how 'the season began at the beginning of September each year and ran until the end of July the following year. August was a dead month theatrically; in any given year, only one out of seven West End theatres was open (and very rarely the fashionable ones)'. In *When They Weren't Doing Shakespeare*, edited by Judith Fisher (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1989), pp. 229-40 (p. 234). Alexander returned to the London venue later than this in the



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Autumn, providing further evidence that he wanted to foreground parallels between his venue and the aristocratic society present within Mayfair, living in close proximity to the St. James's Theatre.

<sup>19</sup> John Hare to Arthur Wing Pinero, 25 May 1893 in Harvard Theatre Collection, MS Thr 65 [7].

<sup>20</sup> Pinero wrote the play for John Hare and Olga Nethersole, but it was rejected by the manager of the Garrick as unsuitable for his audience. Mason suggests that Hare found the play 'daring' (*Sir George Alexander and the St. James's Theatre*, p. 45); Peter Raby that the established manager found it 'radical' ('Theatre of the 1890s' in *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian and Edwardian Theatre*, edited by Kerry Powell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 183-206 (p. 186)).

<sup>21</sup> Chris Greenwood, *Adapting to the Stage: Theatre and the Work of Henry James* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), p.10.

<sup>22</sup> *Parts I Have Played*, p. 6.

<sup>23</sup> For recent work on the charity matinee during this era, see Catherine Hindson, "'Gratuitous Assistance'?" The West End Theatre Industry, Late Victorian Charity and Patterns of Theatrical Fundraising' in *New Theatre Quarterly*, 30:1 (2014), pp. 17-28.

<sup>24</sup> The other notable response was the abolition of half-price admission and the introduction of advanced booking during the 1860s and 1870s.

<sup>25</sup> After Hollingshead introduced matinées at the Gaiety, regular Saturday matinées were introduced when *Diplomacy* was produced at the Prince of Wales' in 1878. In 1877 Wyndham produced infrequent matinées during the 555 performance run of *Pink Dominoes*. However, these afternoon performances were poorly attended.

<sup>26</sup> These details of population growth are taken from Michael Booth, *Theatre in the Victorian Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 3, and Erika Rappaport, *Shopping For Pleasure: Women in the Making of London's West End* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), pp. 16-47.

<sup>27</sup> For the purposes of calculating royalties, six performances a week was the standard for contracts at this time, with arrangements sometimes, but not consistently, made for additional performances. Collections of contracts between managers and authors confirm this practice, for example, the contracts drawn up by Herbert Beerbohm Tree, held in the Herbert Beerbohm Tree Archive, Bristol Theatre Collection.

<sup>28</sup> When Alexander entered management at the St. James's, he charged: Boxes £1 1s, Stalls 10s 6d, Dress Circle 7s and 5s, Upper Boxes 3s, Pit 2s, Gallery 1s. After renovations in 1900 prices were as follows:, Boxes £4 4s, Stalls 10s 6d, Dress Circle 7s, Upper Boxes front row 5s, rest 4s, Pit 2s 6d, Gallery 1s.

<sup>29</sup> *Era*, 13 January 1900, p. 13.

<sup>30</sup> Statistics are taken from Diana Howard, *London Theatres and Music Halls: 1850-1950* (London: The Library Association, 1970).

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<sup>31</sup> The Actors' Association (founded 1891) was not reconstituted as a trade union until 1918; it was replaced by Actors' Equity in 1929.

<sup>32</sup> 'Real Conversations X', pp. 202-3.