# Dilettante Theatricals: The elite amateur in the Georgian period

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It is 1802. During a brief lull in Britain’s long-running war with revolutionary France, the London theatres are booming but things are far from peaceful on stage. A performance of Tom Thumb is disrupted by an angry mob led by a man bearing a tricolore. Yet this is a topsy turvy theatrical revolution. The mob is not made up of the disgruntled proletariat but rather comprises the stars of the professional theatre, including David Garrick, John Philip Kemble and Sarah Siddons led by Richard Brinsley Sheridan. They are protesting against the usurpation of their rights by a group of upper-class amateurs, The Pic Nic Society, or at least this is how James Gillray depicts them in his cartoon, Blowing up the Pic Nic’s; or, Harlequin Quixotte Attacking the Puppets. His image is distorted for satiric purposes but represents a real conflict between amateur and professional performers that occurred at the turn of the nineteenth century. This article will explore the context of that clash of values and consider what it can tell us about the history of the amateur.

There are different strands in the longer history of amateur theatre in England, including Christian traditions such as the performance of mystery plays by crafts guilds in the middle ages and seasonal entertainments such as masques in country houses. Eighteenth-century private theatricals had their origins in the latter in which social elites were patrons, participants and audience. Yet they differ in that, whether in country or town, they now adopted the repertoire and imitated the conventions of the professional theatre, including printing playbills and issuing tickets (Rosenfeld 1978; Russell 2007; Hawley 2014). It is hard to get a clear account of what the Pic Nic Society actually did as they were so often the target of satire and occasionally of panegyric. The Society probably started more or less informally early in 1801. The Hon Mrs Hobart – Albinia Countess of Buckinghamshire and the multi-talented French Émigré, M. Le Texier – fell out with another grande dame of the amateur scene, Elizabeth Craven, Margravine of Anspach and thus could no longer take part in her theatricals at Brandenburgh House, Hammersmith. They decided to put on theatrical entertainments in Le Texier’s Leicester Square rooms where he frequently did dramatic readings. As Le Texier could not provide dinner for all the members of the Bon Ton who wished to attend, Mrs Hobart proposed a picnic, which at that date meant a pot luck meal to which everyone contributed something, rather than something eaten al fresco. The first event was not a success. Le Texier’s readings were not entertaining or participatory enough. Moreover, the supper was a disaster: guests did not make allowances for the limited kitchen facilities at Le Texier’s lodgings and brought raw meat. A radically new plan was formed for a much more participatory and all-encompassing theatrical entertainment. The Pic Nic Society was founded: a subscription club steered by a committee of men and women and led by a general manager, the man about town, Colonel Henry Greville. They took over the Tottenham Street Theatre on the northern outskirts of London which had been used as a concert venue (Lorenzen 2014). They adapted it for their evenings’ entertainment which opened with dramatic performances of plays and proverbs (part play, part parlour game), moved onto a grand picnic supper and closed with the singing of catches and glees.[{note}]1 This, then, is a very early amateur theatrical club – not the first – an earlier middle-class society met in Lamb’s Conduit Street in 1799.

The Pic Nic Society marked a significant development from private theatricals but not in the fact that a meal was central to the events. Refreshments were usually a part of the entertainment in country house theatricals, especially if performers and guests were resident for the duration of the run. It was important that it was conceived as fully participatory – not everyone would act, but many would share the organisational load, more would join in the singing and all would contribute financially. It seems like a viable model for an amateur organisation, but the Pic Nic Society lasted barely nine months. Why? It was not for lack of enthusiasm, or talent – many of the performers were seasoned amateurs and continued to perform after the failure of the Pic Nics. Nor lack of money – mostly they were loaded and could easily afford the annual subscription of 10 guineas for gentlemen and 5 guineas for ladies. What brought them down was the big guns of the patent theatres, backed by the threat of legal prosecution and reinforced by the constant bombardment of the press.[{note}]2 The Pic Nic Society was a threat to the monopoly of the patent theatres in several respects. While most upper-class private theatricals were staged in country houses during holiday periods, the Pic Nic performances would take place in London and during the ‘season’ – the winter months when the patent theatres took advantage of the influx of those who came to London to attend to parliamentary and legal business. Its performances would thus clash with those of the Theatres Royal, drawing their audiences from them. A defender of the rights of the Pic Nickers who identified himself only as W. Cutspear: explained ‘the nobility, and more opulent gentry, thus paying for private dramatic entertainment, instead of seeking for it at a public theatre, would necessarily diminish the usual quantity of cash, in the treasurer’s box.’ (Cutspear 1802: 22) The patent theatres were dependent on their box office takings.[{note }]3 In the third quarter of the eighteenth century, ticket prices ranged from 5 shillings for a box to 1 shilling for a seat in the upper gallery. By 1800 prices had risen to 6 shillings for a box and 3 shillings 6 pence for the pit; social hierarchy was maintained in theatre architecture and ticket pricing. The Theatres Royal were in a strange position: the cost of staging productions made theatre a very precarious business and the Theatrical Licensing Act contained and curtailed their actions, but their monopoly of the right to perform spoken drama allowed them to bully and suppress would-be commercial competitors. The battle of the Pic Nics was a case of one powerful interest group clashing with another. Both capital and cultural capital were at stake.

Although Gillray depicts the pic nickers and their opponents as two camps separated by the spiked line of the footlights, they were in reality not so separate. Members of the social and theatricals elites attended each other’s parties and slept in each other’s beds.[{note}]4 They also worked together in private and public theatres. Amateur performers often hired professional actresses and actors, dancers, musicians and scenic artists to augment their talents. The elite participated in the running of professional theatres. Albinia Hobart’s husband, George, third earl of Buckinghamshire, was manager of the King’s Theatre, Haymarket c. 1769-73. In 1809, Greville and Tom Sheridan co-managed the Drury Lane troupe after the fire which destroyed the theatre made them move to the Lyceum. This is surprising because Tom Sheridan, when a member of the Pic Nic Society management committee, had acted as a double agent, leaking the information to his father which enabled him to blow up the Pic Nics (Price 1966: III, 26, n.).

The complex correspondences between amateur and professional are registered by Gillray in his Blowing up the Pic Nic’s. The amateurs have usurped the place of the professionals on the stage, but the professionals are depicted as the revolutionaries bearing tricolore banners naming radical playwrights such as Kotzebue and Schiller. There are visual continuities across the divide of the proscenium too: the dagger carried by Mrs Siddons is answered by the blunt knife of little Lord Valletort eating his picnic supper. Ample-bosomed Mrs Billington is echoed by Mrs Hobart, her breasts cruelly exposed to view.[{note}]5 Gillray’s satire also exaggerates the inversions that follow from the audience taking on the role of actors. His Pic Nic Society is performing Tom Thumb, a play that they did not perform but which is an apt choice satirically for a number of reasons. Tom Thumb (first perf. 1730) was written by Henry Fielding, himself a playwright, officer of the law and a puppet master – there are some parallels here with the multi-stranded career of playwright, theatre manager and MP, Sheridan. Itwas written partly as a satire on what Fielding saw as topsy-turvy artistic and political culture: bombastic verse is preferred to the true sublime; a dwarf Tom Thumb is magnified into a hero. To emphasise the mis-directedness of Sheridan’s attack on the Dilettante, Gillray combines references to Tom Thumb and Don Quixote. His subtitle is Harlequin Quixotte attacking the puppets alluding to an incident in Cervantes’s anti-Romance in which the deluded Don attacks a puppet show, thinking the performance is real action. Similarly, Fielding’s Thumb claims to have rescued the country by slaying a percussion of giants. But, it is revealed that ‘it was all a Trick, / He made the Giants first, and then he kill’d them’ (Lockwood 2004: 392). Thus, Sheridan blew up the Pic Nics (in the sense of inflating them) into a terrible threat before he blew them up (i.e. exploding them) by wielding the pen of the press. Like Don Quixote, Sheridan tilts at threats of his own imagining. A few Pic Nic entertainments were not going to topple the Theatres Royal. Moreover, aristocratic amateurs were not the real threat. The real menace was the unlicensed theatre and, in a sense, it had already won because, in an attempt to counter the threat of popular modes of entertainment, the patent theatres had absorbed them into their own practice (Moody 2000; Worrall 2006).

In many ways, the Pic Nic Society has much in common with amateur theatre of the twentieth and twenty first centuries: it was not-for-profit and had a complex relation to the professional; its repertoire largely comprised favourites from the commercial stage but included some avant-garde and foreign texts that were not mainstream, as well as popular comedies by Garrick and his ilk. It also demanded high level of commitment of time and resources. We might deduce from the fact that many of its members performed in private theatricals in numerous venues for many years that it provided the kinds of emotional and social benefits that recent critics have attributed to amateur creativity (Gauntlett 2018; Merrifield 2017; Stebbins 1982). Yet, in key respects it was substantially different. In their deep and extensive study of modern amateur theatre, Nicholson, Holdsworth and Milling delineate the ways in which amateur theatre is situated in relation to patterns of labour and leisure conditioned by the industrial revolution and by the radically shifting post-industrial capitalist environment (Nicholson, et al. 2018). Lord Snooty and his pals were clearly not locked into a system of alternating periods of work and free-time determined by paid employment. Yet nor were they merely the idle rich. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, officers of state, army officers, imperial administrators, their wives and families engaged in private theatricals as a way of both relaxing from their duties and maintaining the social networks that supported the establishment. Social elites also engaged in other artistic pursuits such as music and the fine arts. For women in particular, proficiency in the arts was a vital element of their accomplishments as well as a pastime. The nature of private theatricals complicates the professional/amateur binary and raises simple but important questions: what values were associated with the amateur in that period? And what might this say to us now?

The term ‘amateur’ is one of several terms in a larger lexicon and has a diversified and a developing history. It was not used in the same way across time nor across all the arts. Even today, membership of an amateur choir or orchestra is less sneered at than participation in ‘am dram’. In the eighteenth century, amateur meant a lover of the arts. It derives from the term virtuoso which conveyed very positive associations of expertise, taste, broad-mindedness and interests across the arts. Moreover, it meant a connoisseur or collector, that is, an expert consumer rather than a performer, producer or active participant in the theatre. As Kim Sloan points out in a study of amateur artists and drawing masters, ‘it was not until around 1780 that it came to mean not only someone who loved and understood, but also practised the arts, without regard for pecuniary advantage.’ (Sloan 2000: 7) The faintly derogatory term ‘am dram’ and the more respectful ‘amateur theatre’ were not used during the Georgian period. Not only was ‘theatricals’ the more usual term, including for performances at the licensed theatres, but it was commonly coupled with terms such as ‘Private’, ‘Bon Ton’ (indicating the fashionable social elite) or ‘Dilettante’ (meaning connoisseurs or mere dabblers, depending on your sympathies), or the location such as ‘Wynnstay’ or ‘Brandenburgh House’ was used to distinguish it from the commercial theatre. Georgian newspapers ran notices and reviews of private theatricals immediately after listings for the Theatres Royal. The earliest reference to ‘amateur theatricals’ in the press that I have found occurred in 1828 (Morning Post, 26 April 1828). ‘Amateur’ was not used as the antonym for professional nor to imply inferior artistic standards before the nineteenth century. This is because the lover of the arts occupied a position of privilege. Gentleman had the twin resources of money and leisure, reinforced by education, access to culture and power, and a keen sense of entitlement. The elite and nobility were the gate-keepers of taste. ‘Active leisure’ was a hallmark of this class (Vickery 2009: 107). Elite women were also expected to create needlework and other arts and crafts of a higher standard than that of ‘mere artificers’ (Sloan 2000: 7; Vickery 2009). While amateur and professional are frequently distinguished by their relations to profit and to expertise, these distinctions are inseparable from larger issues of class and values.

A consistent defence of the rights of the amateur (or rather, an attack on the standards of the professional) was mounted by the dilettante Horace Walpole (1717-93), son of the Prime Minister, man of letters and, towards the end of his life, Earl of Orford. He attended numerous private theatricals and was friends with people who went on to found the Pic Nic Society. He collected art works by amateurs, made notes on ‘Ladies and Gentlemen Distinguished by their Artistic Talents’ and published and repeatedly expanded A Catalogue of the Royal and Noble Authors of England. Professional training was, in his view, a restriction on genius (Roman 2011). He repeatedly advised his friend Robert Jephson not to submit his plays to the patent theatres where he claimed professional actors would mangle the speeches and managers bastardize his text: ‘Managers will take liberties, and often curtail necessary speeches, so as to produce nonsense. Methinks it is unkind to send a child, of which you have so much reason to be proud, to a foundling hospital.’ (Lewis 1937-83: 41.409-10) Walpole’s attitude represents a significant deviation from the usual narrative. As Claire Cochrane points out, theatre history usually charts the march of the avant-garde and sidelines the amateur because it is not progressive (Cochrane 2001). Walpole’s elite amateurs are even harder to assimilate into this history than middle class ones. However, Walpole argues that the patent theatres were conservative because governed by the profit motive and limited by their theatrical conventions. He preferred a greater latitude: ‘Rules for History, Tragedy &c. one wd think,’ he quipped, ‘only had been invented to hinder any thing being excellent in its kind; or to render the execution east to a fool as to a genius. It is, as if a horse was to say to a cat, you must not walk gracefully upon the top of a House.’[{note}]6 For Walpole, amateur = good, professional = bad. His sense of aesthetic value is bound up with his sense of social superiority. His advocacy for the amateur is not part of a democratic and inclusive process as it is for participatory arts programs which characterize twenty-first century publicly-funded initiatives, but it does promote experimentation. As well as pioneering the Gothic revival in architecture, Walpole invented an entirely new genre – Gothic fiction – and wrote a play about deviant sexuality which pushed at moral as well as artistic boundaries. In his postscript to this play, The Mysterious Mother, he argued that the character of the Countess, the mother in question, ‘is certainly new, and the cast of the whole play unlike any other that I am acquainted with’ (Walpole 2003: 254). Critics often see this experimental aesthetic as a reflection of his ambiguous sexual identity; it also reflects the rebarbatively cavalier attitude of his class. The Pic Nic Society similarly allowed themselves freedoms in their flamboyant entertainments and conspicuous consumption of supper as well as music and theatre. In addition to performing Shakespeare and other spoken drama banned from unlicensed theatres, they performed French proverbs and Le Barbier de Seville – possibly the first British performance in French of Beaumarchais’s comic opera. Should we, then relegate private theatricals to the category of ignorable because smacking of privilege and entitlement? Or, given that it was a significant part of cultural life, can we make use of the questions they raise about relations between rivals to extend our own thinking and practice? Let me present two groups who have done just that.

It is 2018. I am sitting in the Yale Centre for British Art watching a group of British and American academics performing a staged reading of *The Mysterious Mother*.[{note}]7 The passionate countess in his Gothic tale of double incest is played by Georgina Lock, for whom some of the American audience will later confuse me as we are both well-spoken English women of a certain age. The scheming monks are played with great gusto by two young theologians. The audience is largely comprised of British and American theatre historians and Walpole enthusiasts. It is a kind of private theatrical in that it is a non-commercial event, generously funded by Yale’s Lewis Walpole Library; performers and audience are drawn from the same social group and some of our theatrical pleasure derives from seeing the off-stage life of the performers appearing through the on-stage character, as in a pentimento or palimpsest. Directed by Mitzi Anderson with a brutally short rehearsal period, this amateur performance could not aspire to the high standards achieved by regular amateur theatre societies with more time at their disposal. Yet it contributed meaningfully to our conference on Walpole both by providing experiential material for further research and by introducing a joyously camp spirit of play which felt subversively oppositional in the current academic climate of measurable outcomes.

It is 2019. I am sitting on a green li-lo shaped like a plane – a portable lawn or ‘grass on vacation’ – with the archivist of Fortnum & Mason and two Japanese architects, Hiroshi Ota and Kaori Ito, in a marquee in the Chelsea Physic Garden. When the rain stops, we will go outside and eat little sandwiches and admire lacquerware and shibori textiles. For now, Hiroshi Ota is gleefully telling me that the term Pic Nic derives from an aggressive card game played in early modern France and roughly translates as ‘fuck you’ (though other sources translate pique-nique as to pick or steal something of little consequence). The Tokyo Picnic Club was founded in 2002 to celebrate the bicentenary of the original Pic Nic Society, though it is not a theatrical group. Rather it stages sociable sit-ins to raise awareness of the spatial restrictions experienced by urban dwellers: ‘Park area per person in Tokyo is only 5.2m2, while 29.1m2 in New York, 26.9m2 in London. [In] Addition to that narrowness, the parks in Tokyo excludes people, with their too many plants, "keep off the grass" signs, fixed benches and such early closing times.’[{note}]8 Insisting on the right to room for leisure, the TPC is oppositional, but presents a model of co-existence. Staging a land-grab no bigger than a picnic rug, the TPC also insists that there are ‘No hosts and guests in pic nic.’[{note}]9 As with the original Pic Nic Society, everyone has to share. What I take from these examples of picnic performance is that the amateur is both oppositional and partaking in a shared enterprise. Even if not a radical act, a picnic can be a critical one.

**Endnotes**

1 Gillray satirised the centrality of music to their performance in his print The Pic Nic Orchestra (London: Hannah Humphrey, 1802).

2 I have found at least ninety items about them in the London papers, 1802-03, some of which were reprinted in the provincial papers. That seems like a lot, given that they only put on 10 shows.

3 Although the Theatres Royal gained income from selling shares and earned a small proportion of their income from fruit concessions, space rental and so on, the bulk of their income came from the box office. London Stage, IV, 1, xlviii.

4 Sheridan, for example, attended private theatricals at Richmond House, London in 1788 and had affairs with the Pic Nic Patronesses Frances, Lady Crewe and Harriet Duncannon, Lady Bessborough (not at the same time). Peniston Lamb, 1st Viscount Melbourne, one of the managers of the Society, had an affair with an actress, Sophia Baddeley. Lord Craven – son of the Margravine - married an actress: Louisa Brunton. Charles Stanhope, fourth earl of Harrington (1780-1851), a dandy and friend of George IV, married the actress Maria Foote in 1831. Miss E Hobart married Richard Cumberland, son of the playwright. Numerous other examples could be cited.

5 For more details about the subjects portrayed in this print, see Wright 1873: 287-89 and the description on British Museum Collections Online website: <https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=1478991&partId=1>

6 Walpole’s Notes and Drawings, Lewis Walpole Library MSS vol. 170.

7 A recording of this production, dir. Misty Gale Anderson, text abridged by David Worrall, can be seen along with reflections from the participants and a video of the accompanying conference at Staging the Mysterious Mother: <https://www.18thcenturycommon.org/collections/staging-the-mysterious-mother/?fbclid=IwAR1fXtEtXdgMjH0fB6Tg6b1iVYbrT-ZlKW9BzdaiRm7E_X4OLKjlzng5yLg>

8 Tokyo Picnic Club Website: <http://www.picnicclub.org/english/aboutus.html>. The website briefly mentions the Kogei picnic in Chelsea. See also Chris Michael, ‘Can guerrilla picnics end Tokyo’s 50-year war on public space?’, The Guardian, 12 June 2019: <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2019/jun/12/can-guerrilla-picnics-end-tokyos-50-year-war-on-public-space>

9 15 Rules of the Tokyo Picnic Club: [www.picnicclub.org/15rules/05.html](http://www.picnicclub.org/15rules/05.html), rule no. 5.

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