



LIKE A TRUE SERVANT JOHN PHILIP KEMBLE

A Brief Introduction
By Michael Peter Bolus

In *Paradoxe sur le comédien*, Denis Diderot writes: “To move an audience, the actor himself must remain unmoved” (Diderot, *The Paradox of Acting* 114). Diderot’s assertion strikes at the heart of a centuries-old debate regarding the nature and manner of the actor’s craft. While most modern acting theories stress a balance between technique and the cultivation of feeling, the question of emphasis remains unsettled. Should the actor foster an emotional connection with the character he/she is portraying or does such sympathetic feeling merely impede the crisp execution of a prefabricated design? Proponents of the latter perspective have dwindled considerably in the twentieth century, but two hundred years ago Diderot’s provocative statement would have enjoyed much greater credence. Of all the great English stage—actors, perhaps the one most exemplary of Diderot’s prescriptive musings was John Philip Kemble.

In his *Critical Essays on the Performers of the London Theatre* (1807), the English critic Leigh Hunt includes the following description of Kemble on stage:

For the expression of the loftier emotions no actor is gifted by nature with greater external means. His figure though not elegant is manly and dignified, his features are strongly marked with what is called the Roman character, and his head altogether is the heroic head of the antiquary and the artist. This tragic form assumes excellently well the gait of royalty, the vigorous majesty of the warrior, and the profound gravity of the sage; but its seriousness is unbending; his countenance seems to despise the gaiety it labours to assume, and its comic expression is comic because it is singularly wretched. (Donohue, *Theatre in the Age of Kean* 146)

Kemble was one of the nineteenth century’s last stalwart practitioners of an acting style still stubbornly described as “classical”; a style concerned with stateliness, dignity, and grace as opposed to passion, bombast, or “realism of emotion” (Brockett, *History of the Theatre* 407). Often referred to as the “teapot school” of acting (because of the actors’ preferred posture), Kemble’s style was frequently criticized for its stiffness, artificiality, and distanced coldness. Yet his sober, measured delivery was in strict accordance with the more fundamental principles governing Classicism; principles which favored the universal over the particular, abstraction over specificity, and the communication of general, timeless truths over lifelike reproductions of psychological intricacies.

Kemble’s acting style was soon to be eclipsed by the pyrotechnics of the romantic school, whose adherents included such popular contemporaries as George Frederick Cooke and Edmund Kean. Cooke and Kean placed no value on grace and dignity, and their willingness “to cringe or crawl on the floor” (Brockett, *History* 407) excited audiences for whom this new approach was both novel and revolutionary. Because Romanticism’s expressed aims were to upset the staid traditions of Classicism, the freshness of the Romantics’ interpretive methods were embraced as emancipating. It is perhaps more useful, however, to regard Kemble’s craft not as an evolutionary stepping-stone toward a more sophisticated or effective style of acting, but rather, as belonging to an aesthetic philosophy at fundamental odds with more prevalent creative currents.

Kemble was born in 1757, the son of Roger Kemble (1721-1802), a provincial actor-manager. While several of Roger’s twelve children became actors, it was John Philip and his older sister, Sarah Kem-

ble Siddons (1755-1831) who achieved the most high-profile notoriety. John Philip began his career in the provinces and didn't arrive in London until he was twenty-six years old. He established his reputation slowly but steadily, and by 1790 he was the most famous actor on the English stage. He was first brought to London by the proprietors of the Drury Lane Theatre, of whom the principal shareholder was Richard Brinsley Sheridan. He was to remain affiliated with Drury Lane until the summer of 1802.

On September 30, 1783, Kemble launched his London career with a production of *Hamlet*, and, in the very same season, tackled many challenging roles from both the classical and modern repertoire: Richard III, Sir Giles Overreach in *A New Way to Pay Old Debts*, King John (with Sara Siddons as Constance), Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*, and the titular hero of *Cato*, which became one of his most popular and enduring roles. While the ensuing nineteen seasons at Drury Lane continued to solidify his reputation as one of the premiere actors of his generation, he did not escape some rather harsh criticism of his manner of preparation and delivery. The above-quoted Leigh Hunt, for example, though sporadically complimentary of Kemble's talent, could be a ferociously vicious detractor:

He appears to submit everything to his judgment, and exhibits little of the enthusiasm of genius...he sometimes turns from one object to another with so cautious a circumflexion of head, that he is no doubt very often pitied by the audience of having a stiff neck. His words now and then follow one another so slowly, and his face all the while assumes so methodical an expression, that he seems reckoning how many liens he has learnt by heart...he does so dole out his words, and so drop his syllables one by one upon the ear, as if he were measuring out laudanum for us...he is always stiff, always precise, and he will never, as long as he lives, be able to act anything mad unless it be a melancholy mad statute.(Shattuck, *Kemble* xii)

William Hazlitt hastened to add that he moved slowly, from pose to pose, "with as much care as if he were a marble statue and as if the least trip in his gait, or discomposure of his balance, would be sure to fracture some of his limbs"(Shattuck, *Kemble* ix). Some believed that Kemble's "deliberation and solidity, statuesqueness, abstraction, and unrelieved, humorless dignity"(Shattuck, *Kemble* xii) might appeal to those who subscribed to decidedly neo-classical conceits; but even Kemble's admirers conceded that "he sometimes sacrificed energy to grace, that by overly precise and even distribution of emphases he enfeebled what should have been vehement, and that by too elaborate a building up of an action he often lost the surprise of it (like a clock that clicks a warning that it is about to strike the hour)."(Shattuck, *Kemble* xii) As the Romantic zeitgeist began to build momentum, Kemble's acting style slowly began to fall out of favor.

Though many would continue to question his art, his reputation as an illustrious and effective leader of the English stage continued to grow. On September 23, 1788, he assumed the office of acting manager at Drury Lane. In his first season as manager, Kemble staged and acted in a wide variety of classic plays from the English canon. He also accelerated his own mastery of the Shakespearean repertoire by assuming some of the more celebrated roles: Macbeth, Romeo, Malvolio, and in one of his most triumphant performances, Caius Marcius in *Coriolanus*. In addition to staging the plays, Kemble would prepare detailed "promptbooks," not merely for use by the company's actors and technicians, but for sale to the theatre-going public. Although the Shakespeare texts included in these volumes have been "adapted to the stage" by Kemble himself, the surviving promptbooks remain valuable sources in efforts to recreate late eighteenth-century productions at Drury Lane.

The promptbooks also offer interesting insights into Kemble's working habits and methods of preparation. He would pore over scripts and 'was studious to a fault, weighing every syllable and its accom-

panying action with a scrupulousness verging on pedantry; and he was determined to communicate the total result of his study that his rate of playing was oppressively slow.”(Shattuck, *Kemble* ix) The books also reveal his penchant for antiquarianism—the practice of attempting historical accuracy in all aspects of scenic and costume design. This inclination is rather paradoxical as it runs contrary to Classicism’s insistence on general nuance and suggestion as opposed to localization and particularities.

At the end of the 1802 season, after numerous conflicts with Sheridan and failed attempts to buy into the proprietorship of the theatre, Kemble resigned his post. By September of 1803, he had purchased one-sixth of Covent Garden and assumed the office of acting manager. He graciously retained the services of his rival George Frederick Cooke, and even ceded to him several major roles. Kemble spent the next six years building Covent Garden’s repertory of classic and modern plays. Just as Covent Garden’s stature was reaching its zenith, however, tragedy struck. On September 20, 1808, the theatre was destroyed by fire. The company spent the next year at an interim location—the King’s Theatre in Haymarket, where it continued to produce plays.

Although the new Covent Garden opened with a production of *Macbeth* on September 18, 1809, Kemble was soon confronted with yet another calamity: the “Old price” riots. The trouble began when theatre management announced that because of the great expense incurred during the theatre’s reconstruction, ticket prices would have to be raised considerably. Additionally, the third tier would be converted into private boxes to separate the gentry from the pit. As Kemble took the stage to make a pre-performance announcement on opening night, he was greeted by a “sudden, deafening uproar”(Donohue, *Kean* 52). Shouts of “No imposition,” and “Old Prices” peppered the collective groans and cat-calls. Banners and placards were aggressively waved, and though the performance proceeded as scheduled, it was “largely in pantomime, for scarcely a word was heard”(Williamson, *Man* 40). The riots continued for sixty-seven nights, until Kemble finally conceded to the rioters’ demands. Although the tumult had subsided, Kemble emerged from the nightmarish experience bitter and disillusioned.

Kemble’s farewell season took place from September 9, 1816 to July 17, 1817. On June 23 he appeared as Caius Marcius in a revival of his much lauded production of *Coriolanus*. It was to be his final public appearance. Six years later, John Philip Kemble died. On the occasion of his retirement, William Hazlitt wrote the following:

If he had not the unexpected bursts of nature and genius, he had all the regularity of art; if he did not display the tumult and conflict of opposite passions in the soul, he gave the deepest and most permanent interest to the uninterrupted progress of individual feeling; and in embodying a high idea of certain characters, which belong rather to sentiment than passion, to energy of will, than to loftiness or to originality of imagination, he was the most excellent actor of his time.(Donohue, *Kean* 146)

Hazlitt’s notion of the “regularity of art” may strike an odd note with modern readers who have been inculcated with still prevalent romantic notions of artistic inspiration, the individual genius, and the primacy of the imagination. There was a time, however, when art was judged by its calculated sense of balance, order, and harmony; its measure, cognition, and wholeness; its nuance, subtlety, and suggestiveness; its timelessness and universality; its exhibition of a mastered set of acquired skills. Kemble’s craft, often labeled artificial, stiff, monotonous, and studied, sprung not from an inferior understanding of the actor’s function, but from an altogether different aesthetic sensibility; a sensibility similar to those espoused not only in Diderot’s later writings, but in tracts by such modern theorists

and practitioners as Arthur Symons, Gordon Craig, and Bertolt Brecht—a sensibility which favors calculation over instinct, detachment over emotional intimacy, and symbolic gesture over idiosyncratic mannerisms.

In “The Actor and the Uber-marionette,” Craig writes:

The whole nature of man tends toward freedom; he therefore carries the proof in his own persona that as material for the theatre he is useless. In the modern theatre, owing to the use of the bodies of men and women as their material, all which is presented there is of an accidental nature. The actions of the actor’s body, the expression of his face, the sounds of his voice, all are at the mercy of the winds of his emotions: these winds, which must blow forever round the artists, moving without unbalancing him. But with the actor, emotion possesses him; it seizes upon his limbs, moving them wither at will. (Walton, *Craig* 83)

Craig’s furious attacks on the actor’s status, his insistence that “acting is not an art,” and “art arrives only by design” (Walton, *Craig* 82) were in direct response to creative tendencies that had become predominate by the turn of the century—tendencies fostered, in part, by actors like Cooke and Kean. One suspects that Craig might have mustered a bit more patience for actors had John Philip Kemble been the preeminent star of Craig’s day; an actor who, “like a true servant,” (Walton, *Craig* 24) exhibited a willingness to subordinate his own emotional torrents in favor of prefabricated design, precision, and unwavering consistency.

Works Cited

Brockett, Oscar. *History of the Theatre*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1968.

Carlson, Marvin. *Theories of the Theatre*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984.

Diderot, Denis. *The Paradox of Acting*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1957.

Donohue, Joseph. *Theatre in the Age of Kean*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1975.

Richards, Kenneth and Thomson, Peter. *The Eighteenth Century English Stage*. London: Methuen and Co., 1972.

Rowell, George. *The Victorian Theatre: A Survey*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956.

Shattuck, Charles. *The Kemble Promptbooks*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1974.

Walton, J. Michael. *Craig on Theatre*. London: Methuen Drama, 1983.

Williamson, Jane. *Charles Kemble, Man of the Theatre*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1964.

Wilmeth, Don. *George Frederick Cooke: Machiavel of the Stage*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1980.