‘BELIEVE ME OR NOT’

Actresses, female performers, autobiography and the scripting of professional practice

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Confessing the professional

Borrowed for the title of my chapter, *Believe Me or Not!* was the first of two autobiographies written by the Gaiety Girl, stage and screen performer, writer and celebrity raconteur Ruby Miller (1889–1976). Published in 1933, after the early death of her husband, the pianist Max Darewski, the book takes the reader on a chronological journey through Miller’s career, from objectified ‘stage beauty’ to silent film star and society celebrity – with an uncanny onscreen resemblance to the film ‘vamp’ Pola Negri (Darewski [Miller], 1933: 178; Miller, 1962: 111–12). Miller’s intense authorial voice shifts in register between a woman concerned to assert her professional achievements and one still grieving for a love lost too soon. Her second autobiography, *Champagne from My Slipper* (Miller, 1962), repeats numerous anecdotes from the 1933 autobiography, but covers an additional thirty years of professional activity: it speaks to an altered market and an ageing, differently nuanced readership. Both autobiographies articulate a professional presence in an industry transformed from one end of the century to another – by war, the emancipation of women, the development of the film industry and its impact on live theatre, by class conflict and shifts in the relationship between class and leisure, and by changed understandings of the social and cultural function of theatre. Miller challenges us to ‘believe her or not’ – and questions, up front, the precarious and fluid relationship between fact and fiction, through time and within the frame of autobiographical writing.

Fifteen years her senior, Ada Reeve (1874–1966), who had also spent a substantial proportion of her career working as a Gaiety Girl and in musical comedy, titled her late autobiography *Take It for a Fact* (Reeve, 1954), with a similar pointed reference to her sense of agency and

authority in the writing of her own professional life story. Reeve, with a characteristic lack of charm, orders us to read her reminiscences as a 'record' of fact, even though they were written in a moment of almost desperate nostalgia, late in her career, after numerous disasters with financial investments and professional disappointments (Lipton, 2013: 136). Reeve was a collector and avid custodian of theatre ephemera and documents relating to her own career: articles, reviews, letters, bills, bookings for shows, documents about purchases, sales and legal disagreements, contracts and invoices. Her archive was given to UK theatre collectors Raymond Mander and Joe Mitchenson, who added to it from their own collection, as well as helping Reeve to piece her autobiography together and secure a publisher in the 1950s.¹

Reeve's autobiographical 'facts', many of which can be evidenced by the materials in her archive, are woven into the fabric of a detailed and orderly recapitulation of a career spanning three-quarters of a century. This history tells us much more about professional practices than it does about Reeve's private life as a celebrity – her private 'self' is only implied or delineated in passing. We learn next to nothing about her disastrous marriages to men who clearly exploited her, or about her children, who she did not see from the mid-1930s to the end of her life in 1966. Nor indeed does she rely on 'telling tales' about her celebrity associates to maintain the rhythm and focus of attention from her reader. Reeve's main interest is to draw our attention to her role in shaping a successful career as the professional persona, Ada Reeve. She offers brittle but insightful criticisms of her colleagues, of unscrupulous or inadequate producers and performers, and is forthright in her assertions about her own unique talent and achievements over time. One ends up admiring her honesty and the detail with which she recalls working as a child performer in London's East End in the 1880s, in music hall, in musical comedy, as a producer; touring through the 'Dominions' – South Africa, the Antipodes and so on. She details how she supported a family; her prolific charitable war work – for which she was given the name 'Anzac Ada'² – and how she 'retrained' herself to work in 'straight theatre' and in film in her late sixties. While its author is intent on expressing her own unique individuality, *Take It for a Fact* offers the historian much by way of material about patterns of labour and the professional experiences of performers from the period. Equally, both Reeve's and Miller's autobiographies, as is the case with those of many other women working in the early half of the twentieth century, offer essential materials about theatre and performance practices more generally, as well as helping us

to shape historiographic questions about the autobiographic scripting of women's professional lives.

Many female performers of Reeve's and Miller's generation autobiographically locate their labour within a public culture of self-affirmation and reflection. Catering to a mass, fan-based market, they evidence an awareness of the growing interest in their activities as public figures and practitioners, in a labour market largely owned and run by men. Yet this is also, as Tracy C. Davis has suggested, a market where women were able to operate as self-defined professionals in ways less generally available to them as a gendered group in other spheres of work. From the late nineteenth century, 'the social stigma of acting, singing, or posturing in public was less distasteful than the rigours of manufacturing, distributive, or domestic trades' and 'the stage could provide a higher wage than any other legitimate occupation freely accessible to women' (Davis, 1987: 115). Female performers were still, however, obliged, in Sos Eltis's terms, to embrace 'carefully staging a private, domestic self to counter-balance their public stage persona' (Eltis, 2005: 171). This is reflected in the processes and productivity of what I call here the 'autobiographic scripting' of professional practice, which allows description and analysis of professional practice by the practitioners themselves. These cultural interventions make explicit contributions to our historiographic constructions and readings of women's professional theatre practice, allowing both a horizontal and vertical expansion of the analysis and field of enquiry, taking us beyond existing received and revisionist narratives. While recent work on nineteenth- and early twentieth-century actresses' autobiographies has shifted the emphasis from analysis of their involvement in the 'new drama' or in suffrage politics towards investigations of celebrity, philanthropic enterprise and professional practice (Eltis, 2005; 2013; Hindson, 2011; 2016; Paxton, 2018), overall there remains a significant body of autobiographical work by performers operating largely outside the 'legitimate' or literary theatre that is still untapped by feminist theatre historians.

The autobiographic script, revisionism and the (feminist) historian

There are two key challenges associated with an analysis of these autobiographies, which are both performative acts of writing and material objects. One challenge relates to 'how' we read them – hinted at by Miller and her request for us to 'Believe me or not' – and the other relates to

how we process these readings. I have argued elsewhere for a 'spectrum' of reading approaches to actresses' autobiographies (Gale, 2006), in order to interpret their contribution to an understanding of 'business practices, the careers of women, the nature of audiences and the cultural status of theatre' (Postlewait, 2000: 159). Here Jacky Bratton's warning against the 'masculinist assumption ... that men ... have a sense of their unique importance in the public life of the day' (Bratton, 2003: 102), while women don't, resonates for the historian. Autobiographies by female performers often share similar characteristics – written at speed, frequently without editing, containing glossy photographs from childhood, professional stardom and back to domestic scenes of the 'actress at home'. They might include correspondence with other artists and fans, or bear witness to the fame and infamy, rise and fall of fellow performers. Absorbing in and of themselves, they are part of a wider accessible auto/biographic scripting process that might include interviews, reviews, scrapbooks, letters, lectures and reminiscences (Gale, 2018).

Questions of authenticity are frequently applied to critiques of actresses' autobiographies as repositories of data. For Thomas Postlewait they are 'historical records but ... epistolary fictions' (Postlewait, 1989: 254) or 'records of consciousness' (Postlewait, 2000: 160). However, Bratton's insistence that the autobiography has to be read 'in its own terms, accepting the picture it paints as the intended activity of its authors' as 'actors, those who do, not objects' is key here (Bratton, 2003: 101). Female performers' autobiographies are markers of their authority as both professional and social actors, as well as being 'manufactured' for 'publicity and profit' (Postlewait, 2000: 164).

'Autobiographic scripting' is embedded in both public and private processes of self-formation and self-fashioning. Theories of selfhood and identity generally accept that the 'performance of self' is 'already entangled amongst a complex web of relations' (Holmes, 2009: 400), the articulation of which is as valuable as any narrative of singular identity provided in a theatrical autobiography. For the feminist theatre historian, any search for a 'coherent and stable identity' (Smith and Watson, 2002: 11) is overridden by the desire to find confluences between different generations of performers, and the ways in which they do or do not express their collective identity as professional workers. An integral component of any process of revisionist history formation, autobiographies are reflective of a process of self-evaluation, written by workers who spent their professional lives *performing and inventing* fictional characters and personae, and mixing socially and professionally with

people who did the same. Authors sometimes explicitly and quite deliberately play with notions of the authentic and the inauthentic, as Bratton notes, deflecting 'us from themselves even as they describe who they are' (Bratton, 2003: 101).

Revisionist histories are resource-consuming and labour-intensive: for Susan Bennett, such histories have not reversed the fact that 'new knowledge remains collectively marginal, still in the shadow of theatre history's customary archives' (Bennett, 2010: 66). Her analysis is based on the suggestion that revisionist histories have included 'both people and places that had heretofore been ignored' (2010: 63), facilitating a kind of salvaging of loss. Revisionist practice might be better expressed, however, as facilitating the undermining of the more pro-active historical process of *intentional dismissal* and *deliberate misplacement*. The greater proportion of the autobiographies examined in this chapter, for example, have been largely dismissed, and this mirrors the generic exclusion of women's cultural labour from histories, exclusions that feminist revisionist processes have sought to override. A largely masculinist ownership of theatre history persists, as does, of course, gender inequality. The rationale for the continuing marginalisation of revisionist histories, therefore, is the same as that which has driven the need for such histories in the first place: the marginalisation of women's creative labour continues and, as the following case studies evidence, you don't have to work in the margins to become marginalised. The 'dynamics of disavowal and forgetting' so eloquently identified by David Savran (2004: 211) remain dominant in our historiographic practices: revisionist histories, involving a *continual process of renewal and challenge*, act as a means of interrogation, and a mode of continually unsettling entrenched and received narratives. They disrupt the authority of what Bennett sees as the immovable 'customary archives' of theatre history.

For Postlewait, female performers' 'own ambitions and contributions are seldom acknowledged' (Postlewait, 1989: 260) in their autobiographies, but a nuanced spectrum of reading practices suggests that this is more of an exception than a rule. Any kind of 'writing-out of self' will be dependent on the social and cultural frame for gender at any given historical moment, and autobiographic scripting represents, 'not the revelation, but the *construction*, of identity' (Bratton, 2003: 104, my emphasis). Autobiographic authors intentionally operate an *undoing* of a constructed or mythologised 'self', explicitly reconstructing the divided relationship between the public and private as part of the process of

writing autobiography. Following George Herbert Mead's definition, the division between the 'I', the veridical or 'true' self, and the 'me', the public self as 'seen by others', is inevitable (Rojek, 2001: 11). This divide, particularly nuanced for celebrities, is constructed anew in autobiographic writing, and many actresses' autobiographies play creatively with this so-called fissure between the self, as scripted by others, and the self-scripted 'I'.

When critiquing the autobiographic intercession of layers of 'self' over time on stage or film, with 'selves' as developed through familial, educational and social contexts, we have to question our impulse to make absolute divisions, as Erving Goffman suggests, between the 'false' and the 'authentic' (Lawler, 2008: 109), or the public and the private. We need to understand articulated selves as relational interactions of all these aspects. A central impulse behind many women's theatre autobiographies from the first half of the twentieth century, contrary to Postlewait's suggestion above, appears to be precisely the need to discuss work and the experience of labour – alongside taking the opportunity to capitalise on the momentary currency and market value of celebrity status. The impulse to script autobiography is also entangled with formations of private or domestic life and with the complex dynamics of autobiography as 'a popular form of communication' more generally (Postlewait, 2000: 166). The autobiographic self arguably then reflects the 'modern attempt to comprehend the relation of self to society' (Gagnier, 1991: 221). For female performers, this 'society' is determined by issues of professional practice and legacy, as well as by their social and cultural position as women: they offer what Gagnier, following Beatrice Webb, sees as a subjective view of a 'philosophy of life or work' (Gagnier, 1991: 266).

Performing women employed in London's commercial West End theatres and in early and mid twentieth-century film were working with the 'kinds of theatrical practice ... that have held millions spellbound but have been routinely dismissed by scholars' (Savran, 2004: 212). Many of these workers fall outside definitions of 'feminist', 'political' or to a large extent 'experimental' or modernist: their careers sit outside an academic analysis which, in David Savran's words, 'valorize[s] the transgressive over the normative, theory over practice' (Savran, 2004: 217). Rather, they epitomise the impact of 'industrialisation, urbanization and the emergence of commodity culture' (Savran, 2004: 215) on the making and selling of theatre in the first half of the twentieth century.

The autobiography of a career not yet 'lived': Phyllis Dare

The musical comedy star Phyllis Dare (1890–1975) wrote her autobiography in her mid-teens, less than ten years into her career. It is lively, confessional, wistful and replete with acute observations about theatrical life and the experience of fandom. Presumably encouraged to write this work by her, largely parental, professional support team, *From School to Stage* was serialised in *The Penny Illustrated Paper* and *Illustrated Times* from July 1907, then published in book form in the same year. Having had some success in children's roles and in the musical comedy *The Catch of the Season* in 1905, a short UK tour ended with Dare's sudden withdrawal from the London theatre scene to a boarding school in Belgium: a surprising career move by a performer with a rising professional profile. Dare was one of the most popular of the postcard beauties whose images were reproduced on dozens of postcards for mass circulation in the early 1910s. Her sudden professional exit is perhaps explained by a high-profile libel case in 1906 that linked Dare's name to Seymour Hicks, who brought the case against a Liverpool man caught spreading libellous rumours (see also Viv Gardner's chapter in this volume). The accused had tried to impress his fiancé by claiming to have insider information on Dare and Hicks's 'forbidden' sexual assignations (she would have been underage, and Hicks was married to the popular musical comedy performer Ellaline Terriss [1871–1971]). The libel case ran through the latter months of 1906: the accused was sentenced to eight months with hard labour, having 'exposed Mr. Seymour Hicks and Miss Dare to the contumely of their fellow-men'.³ The press gave little credence to the accused, who had posed as Dare's brother. He had given misleading information to his fiancé, a barmaid in a public house in Lime Street, Liverpool, well used by the theatrical profession. By the time of sentencing, Dare had already returned to England and successfully taken over the lead in *The Belle of Mayfair* at very short notice from Edna May in October 1906, ahead of May's understudy. Dare was just 16 at this point. The market value of her autobiography was no doubt generated in part by the publicity value of the libel case. *From School to Stage* also marked an important moment in her professional transition from child star and postcard beauty to leading lady.

Dare had barely lived a life at the time of writing *From School to Stage*, and yet the life she describes is shaped by the never-ending pressures of employment. Written very self-consciously for an adoring audience, her 'sketch of a schoolgirl actress's life' (Dare, 1907: 84) details her

experiences of stage fright and anxiety about performing, and makes frequent reference to the poor employment conditions of children in the theatre industry, many of whom 'have kept their parents from starvation' (14) and 'have lots of responsibilities' (18). There are hints of her distaste for 'the trials of publicity' (114), or for the potential personal damage caused by gossip (96–8). She is also keen, however, to show her public that she appreciates their devotion, reprinting letters from admirers and fans. Hers is the autobiography of both an ingénue and a canny professionalised celebrity.

After 1907 Dare continued to work in high-profile productions such as the revival of *The Dairymaids* (Queens Theatre, 1908) and *The Sunshine Girl* (Gaiety, 1912), but she didn't quite achieve the difficult transition in performance register that other musical comedy women – for example, Cicely Courtneidge or Gladys Cooper – did by the time the form had lost favour in the 1920s (see Courtneidge, 1953). Although there were numerous rumours of courtship, Dare never married. In later interviews she also stressed that she had wanted to be a dancer, not an actress.⁴

Many of her obituaries fail to acknowledge Dare's achievements outside musical comedy; a number even comment that she was essentially a child star who faded along with the popularity of the performance form that had made her famous.⁵ Nevertheless Dare worked successfully through the First World War and beyond, touring and performing in the commercial theatre, finally appearing with her sister Zena Dare in Ivor Novello's last production, *King's Rhapsody*, in 1949. But in later life she gave clues as to why she did not enjoy the work as much as she had appeared to when young:

Looking back on my early career [...] I had practically no say in it. My mother arranged everything and I was put on the stage without being stagestruck or really enjoying it. One engagement led to another [...] it was rather terrifying to shoulder that immense responsibility when I was so young and had so little experience.⁶

The scripting, over time, of her professional selves – one from the hectic and prolific beginnings of her career, and the other expressed in interviews post-retirement – mirror each other in interesting ways. Her formal autobiography played with iterations of her professional self repeated and circulated in the press, capitalising on the marketability of the teenage performer as pre-sexualised beauty. On the other hand, Dare is at pains to write about the endless training, rehearsing and sheer

workload of professional life, learning parts in record time, having to move from successful roles because of pre-contract agreements for other engagements, touring through illness and exhaustion, being overwhelmed by crowds of fans and so on.⁷ In later life, a series of interviews reveal a professional self with a different balance in terms of what Smith and Watson identify as a knowledge/self-knowledge binary (Smith and Watson, 2010: 244). Here, Dare is critical of the ways in which she was exploited by her parents, and of her lack of choice and control over her early career. She acknowledges that sitting for hours on a regular basis in the photographers' studios of Edwardian London, having photos taken in all sorts of costumes 'as skaters in the snow, under a tree in blossom or as dairy maids in a meadow', brought her income, but she is critical about these postcard poses having nothing to do with her stage work.⁸ She was critiqued later in the century as one of a number of 'young women with little or no acting talent'.⁹

Such so-called 'talentless' women dominated the London stages of the first decades of the twentieth century, and earned both themselves and their producers a more than significant income. The link between business, talent and the production of art or entertainment is not a coincidence, nor is the link between Dare's sense of a lack of control over her career and the growing technological framing of celebrity culture, in which the circulation of, particularly, the visual-professional self is beyond the control of the individual. Charles Taylor's suggestion that the turn to the self which has been so much a part of modernity is not necessarily framed by an idea of a unitary self, but rather a fragmented one, is useful here (Taylor, 1989: 462). Even as a teenager, able to capitalise on the selling power of the innocent voice of childhood, Dare understood the impact of the disintegration and loss of that childhood. The young Dare uses the autobiographic moment to formulate a subjective public self. She also begins the process of deconstructing this professional self, and regulates her use of the markers of child-turned-celebrity: the hard-working innocent, the surprise at success, her faithfulness to adoring fans from whom she nevertheless feels alienated.

Lillah McCarthy: resistance to the diminution of a professional life

Turning now to an actress who was central to the establishment of the 'new drama' which had infiltrated the British industry by the 1910s, Smith and Watson's notion of a serial autobiography (Smith and

Watson, 2010: 280) is appropriate in the case of the actress and manager Lillah McCarthy (1875–1960). *Myself and My Friends* (1933) was written at what she assumed to be the end of her theatrical career, rather than at a moment of heightened celebrity status like Phyllis Dare's. In her late fifties and married to an Oxford don, McCarthy's autobiography was rewritten after her first husband, Harley Granville-Barker, placed sanctions on her mentioning his name in it. Granville-Barker had been a central figure in a significant proportion of her working life, as both domestic and professional partner. A serial autobiography might be published in many parts, as "chapters" in an ongoing life story' (Smith and Watson, 2010: 280), and here I suggest that having been banned from writing out her life in a manner fully reflective of her achievements and professional associations, McCarthy employed other autobiographic strategies over the years in order to do so. She kept the working papers that Granville-Barker had 'abandoned at the time of their divorce' (Kennedy, 1985: 215) and passed these on to his first biographer, offering substantial advice and assuming agency in the shaping of *his* biographic life, when denied the agency to shape her own. She also donated her own archive, containing correspondence and exquisite photographic evidence of her extraordinary career from the 1890s through to the early 1930s, to the British Theatre Museum Association, a body dedicated to preserving and celebrating the greats of the British stage.¹⁰ Three of the extant file boxes consist of A3-size scrapbooks that document the famous McCarthy–Granville-Barker tour of the US in 1915. Two are identical – she had perhaps created one for herself and one for him, but he must have left this behind along with his own working papers when they divorced. Both were, however, placed in her archive, an archive which in turn builds a picture of her life almost entirely through documentation of her work with Granville-Barker. One can only imagine what it must have been like to be told that she could not write about such an important period of her career with reference to the key person with whom it was designed and developed. McCarthy arguably got her revenge in small ways, however, by leaving certain documents in the archive that open up a more complex picture of her marital and professional relationship with Granville-Barker: her serial autobiography can be read like clues laid out in a detective novel.

Lillah McCarthy's partnership with the actor, playwright, director, sometime British spy and lecturer Harley Granville-Barker had been both public and private, professional and domestic: she was married to him from 1906 until their acrimonious divorce in 1918.¹¹ In *Myself*

and *My Friends*, McCarthy notes every role that she played prior to her professional and private relationship with Granville-Barker: she details training with Herman Vezin (McCarthy, 1933: 10), touring with Ben Greet and Wilson Barrett, and in Australasia and Africa. By the time of coming to work with G. B. Shaw in *Man and Superman* (1905), she felt that she had already 'learned her business under many managers' and had moved from an apprentice 'to an improver' to 'full craftsman' (McCarthy, 1933: 53–5). McCarthy intentionally scripts her professional self as having learned her trade through hard graft and determination, before becoming entangled with Granville-Barker: 'Actresses have often written about what they feel, but there are few books which show by what cold, laborious methods they learn their business [...] the business of feeling to order' (McCarthy, 1933: 68). She documents her excitement at moving into theatre management, and the strange discomfort

1 Lillah McCarthy in Izrael Zangwill's *God of War*, 1911.

of resigning herself 'to that curious monotony of a long run' when Shaw's *Fanny's First Play* (1911), written for her and which she produced, proved so popular with audiences. The production brought McCarthy and Granville-Barker temporary financial security, with its run of some twenty months in the West End, as the 'shop-girl, the storekeeper, the suburban mother [...] all came to see the wicked Mr. Shaw' (McCarthy, 1933: 136).

Both McCarthy and Dare stress the collective dynamics of their craft as well as constructing themselves as individual and professionally distinctive workers in their autobiographic writing. But McCarthy, crucially obliged to omit her vital collaborator through a process of 'censoring by Barker' (Gardner, 2007: 185), is forced into a particular mode of obfuscation in the creation of her autobiographic script.

As an actress associated with a number of key twentieth-century practitioners, McCarthy has come in for much criticism. Oddly assuming her autobiographically 'invisible husband' to be Desmond MacCarthy,¹² Christine Etherington-Wright critiques McCarthy's 'adamant avoidance of any reference to personal relationships during her re-telling of her very public career', suggesting that she 'gave only perfunctory trivia' and that 'McCarthy herself is subsumed' (Etherington-Wright, 2009: 77). Ironically, in misreading McCarthy's omission of materials on Granville-Barker, Etherington-Wright fails to understand the significance of either the abundant other, non-marital professional relationships explored in the autobiography, or McCarthy's narrative emphasis on her own labour, and erroneously claims that McCarthy's is a text where 'discourse about [...] public experiences evokes a forbidden and dangerous area', that it is 'an insecure and diffident text' (Etherington-Wright, 2009: 84).

Despite McCarthy's activity within the suffrage movement, there is little in the autobiography about her friendships with women. McCarthy's recognition that in its reflections on the men with whom she worked, her book might bear the title 'Let us now praise famous men in general and Shaw in particular' (McCarthy, 1933: 177) is perhaps less a slight on women than a pointed snub of Granville-Barker. She reclaims agency in actually defining him through his overt exclusion – he is precisely *not* one of the famous men included. This may in part explain the level of homosocial vitriol aimed at McCarthy in a number of Granville-Barker's biographies. Dennis Kennedy portrays her as obstructive to the man of genius and claims her 'aggrieved view' of Granville-Barker's second marriage was left unchallenged, unduly influencing the biography written

by C. B. Purdom in 1955 (Kennedy, 1985: 4). She is framed as 'willful, headstrong, a bit silly' (Salmon, 1983: 298) or as a 'princess of promoters', with a 'wondrous ability to extract funds from the rich' (Kennedy, 1985: 194, 158). In fact Kennedy's sneering at her ability to find investors for their theatrical experiments belies the fact that both she and Shaw bank-rolled a great deal of Granville-Barker's work. In view of her securing the rental of the Little Theatre for him to direct a series of productions, and her performances as the leading lady of the famous Vedrenne-Barker season at the Court Theatre between 1904 and 1907, and of Granville-Barker's Shakespeare seasons at the Savoy Theatre between 1912 and 1914, one wonders just what his career would have been without McCarthy's collaborative energies, her drawing power as a popular actress and, of course, her labour.¹³

While the marketable aspects of McCarthy's autobiography were bound up with her numerous professional relationships, especially with Shaw, *Myself and My Friends* also drew on the currency of numerous other actresses' autobiographies published in the late 1920s and early 1930s. She was a well-loved figure from an era of theatre about which there was already a feeling of nostalgia. Despite her enforced omissions, McCarthy negotiated well the 'ambiguous tension between entertaining her readers, and the authenticity of the events she is recording' (Gardner, 2007: 176). The serial nature of her autobiographic endeavours extends beyond the autobiography, however, to the creation of an accessible spectrum of professional selves as documented in her archive, where she locates her work as part of a legacy of important innovatory practices.

Her archive of papers and photographs includes a preface and two chapters of an unfinished, unedited biography, along with photographs clearly marked with the biographer's name suggesting them for 'the book'. A number of Granville-Barker's biographers suggest that McCarthy's professional life ended after her divorce, and that she made frequent unsuccessful attempts to revive it, but the serial narrative available from her archive includes references to her professional life after re-marriage in 1922, her roles in productions, poetry recitals, lecture tours, recitations, her work for various social and philanthropic organisations and her travels abroad.

How, though, do you develop an autobiographic script of your life if the person with whom you created your major body of work refuses to be acknowledged in your story? Numerous references to Granville-Barker's extraction of himself from McCarthy's autobiography combine to suggest that Shaw originally wrote a preface that included his version

of the story of their divorce, given to Granville-Barker's solicitor by Shaw's publisher. On reading it, Granville-Barker returned to England and insisted that all references to him must be removed. Purdom notes that McCarthy wanted to abandon the project at this juncture as there seemed no point in continuing, but that her second husband 're-wrote' it for her (Purdom, 1955: 190–1). The archival evidence suggests that in fact they rewrote it together. This was the act of a husband proud of his wife's achievements, as Harald Melvill writes in the unpublished biography:

[Granville Barker] took out an injunction of restraint against her to this effect. Whether or not in point of British law he was legally in a position to enforce it, his action so upset Lillah that in desperation she was ready to throw her manuscript upon the fire. Fortunately Sir Frederick Keeble was able to dissuade her, and between them they entirely re-wrote her story, so that when 'Myself and My Friends' (Thornton Butterworth) appeared, they had managed to cut out all reference to Harley and Helen Granville-Barker.¹⁴

Michael Holroyd's version of the story differs slightly: Granville-Barker wanted the book withdrawn, 'he wished to forget Lillah whose very name' disturbed his new wife. Holroyd suggests that Granville-Barker was apparently surprised at the eventual publication of the book without 'any reference to him' (Holroyd, 1997: 478). While John Gielgud, many years later, suggested that 'The second Mrs Barker strongly disapproved of his former triumphs in the theatre',¹⁵ Holroyd's proposition that Granville-Barker's 'past had been obliterated' is rather odd – as clearly it was *he* who had tried to obliterate the private and professional past of his former wife (Holroyd, 1997: 478).

The inclusion of the unfinished biography in her archive reveals some of the oddities of her marital relationship with Granville-Barker:

any frigidity in their marital relations was entirely on the side of Granville-Barker who was not the sort of man who should have married any girl.

At the time of their wedding, Lillah was not completely ignorant of the facts of life but she was entirely innocent in experience. Granville Barker, on the other hand, though technically still a virgin, enjoyed a moral code of his own devising.

To Lillah, coming from a large and happy family, her fondest hope had always been one day to hold a child of her own to her breast, so that the sterility of her wedding night both shocked and frightened her.

Some time later, in an effort to fulfil her hopes, she reversed the usual course of procedure by herself undertaking the lover's function. At

first it seemed it she had succeeded, but one day during rehearsals she was taken so desperately and tragically ill that an operation had to be performed – after which all future hopes became useless and barren [...].¹⁶

The notion that Granville-Barker 'was not the sort of man who should have married any girl' paints a picture of a somewhat tense and sexless marriage. While the archive undermines Granville-Barker's desire for an intimate marriage, it corroborates the credibility of McCarthy's career as having its own successes and cultural resonances. Her work in the US during the early years of the 1914–18 war, for example, was almost entirely framed by the media as productions by McCarthy and Granville-Barker and not the other way around. Negotiations for a proposed Scandinavian tour during the First World War were marred by Granville-Barker's inability to participate, but hopes for this 'propaganda' tour – the Germans were sending Reinhardt productions on tour for the same purpose – were kept alive by the belief that McCarthy could be persuaded to reprise key roles and put together a decent company – she was producer and manager as well as leading lady.¹⁷

Again, contrary to Postlewait's assumption that women do not reveal their own ambitions in their autobiographic writing, the assured tone of McCarthy's exposes secure knowledge and understanding of the significance of her own career, her ambitious undertakings as an actress-manager and her insights into the working practices of a particular aspect of the theatre industry of the era. The exclusion of her long-term professional collaborator and husband from the narrative somehow makes it more imperative that we read the autobiography as one component of a serial autobiographic scripting process. McCarthy celebrates the discoveries about herself created through her work as an actress, noting that while 'others [...] could paint my portrait far better than I [...] no one except myself could discover the portrait that was to be painted' (McCarthy, 1933: 10).

Gladys Cooper, postcard beauty and actress-manager: writing her self at an 'unlined forty'

I *might* have [...] gone in for car racing [...] but I went on the stage. I run my own theatre, and that is really a sufficiently large-sized job to satisfy even my capacity for hard work [...] I was offered plays without seeking them, and I was not rich enough to refuse to act until someone saw fit to produce Shakespeare [...] (Cooper, 1931: 31–2)

I now turn to the auto/biography of Gladys Cooper (1888–1971), who shared with Phyllis Dare an early career as a postcard beauty and musical comedy performer, as well as sharing the professional shift to actress-manager with Lillah McCarthy, although in the commercial sector and over a far longer period.

Various biographical studies of actresses and performers of the era under discussion ‘oscillate between dreary, encyclopedic catalogs and wildly impressionistic flights of the imagination’ (Savran, 2004: 213).¹⁸ They often also share an unhealthy focus on the actress as significant professional and domestic ‘other’, on emotional and domestic failings, or on either the celebrated or prohibitive nature of her physical appearance and range of skills. Gladys Cooper is no exception, introduced in the following manner by Eric Johns:

Gladys Cooper was only fifty when I met her, but I was astonished to discover the face of this celebrated beauty more wrinkled than I had ever seen. It could only be compared to the traditionally shriveled apple [...] Until her last appearance [...] she retained her slender figure and boundless energy. Even the short distance between the footlights and the front row of the stalls was sufficient to lend enchantment and with the right flattering shade of pink in the stage lighting she could pass for an unlined forty. (Johns, 1974: 133)

Two further biographies of Cooper, one by her grandson Sheridan Morley (1979), and the other by the journalist, playwright and biographer Sewell Stokes (1953) – a professional colleague of her son-in-law, the actor Robert Morley – attest to the failing of biography in its capacity to provide objective analyses. Each of these is layered upon and repeats varying anecdotes and personal statements made by Cooper in her own autobiography, entitled simply *Gladys Cooper*,¹⁹ and published in 1931 when she was in her early forties.

Reportedly said by Dirk Bogarde to have ‘all the charm of an electric carving knife’ (Morley, 1979: xvi), Cooper began her career before her teens. A hugely popular postcard beauty, like Phyllis Dare, and later a Gaiety Girl like Ruby Miller, Cooper was frequently photographed as a child for sales and for publicity shots with Marie Studholme, by, among others, celebrity photographers W. and D. Downey. Her photographic image was one of a number which drove the postcard craze in the 1890s and early 1900s.²⁰ Her stage work in her teens gave material presence to her existing celebrity status. After a series of theatre successes, Cooper went into management with Frank Curzon in 1917 and ran the

Playhouse Theatre until 1933, when a number of less successful shows left her unable to take any financial risks on future productions. The rest of her career – she carried on performing until her early eighties – was spent between the UK and the US in stage and screen roles – with *Rebecca* (1939), *Now Voyager* (1942) and *My Fair Lady* (1964) among her better-known films.

With its sketch of an idyllic middle-class childhood in south London, *Gladys Cooper* shares with other autobiographic work of the era a detailing of various early professional engagements, letters from and portraits of other notable performers, and well-composed photographs of herself at work and at play. One whole section is dedicated to her letters to her first husband written during the 1914–18 war (Cooper, 1931: 103–46), from which he returned to a woman with an 'entirely different mentality and outlook on life', who 'when war broke out [...] was earning £20 a week [...] and] when it ended [...] was earning £200' (Morley, 1979: 75). She clearly saw herself by this point as 'a free and independent woman' (Cooper, 1931: 273). By no means a dedicated feminist in her affiliations, Cooper laughingly describes 'being thrilled by the sight of struggling women [suffragettes] being thrown out of the theatre by perspiring policemen' at a charity performance attended by royalty at the St James's Theatre in the early 1910s: 'One woman was so firmly chained to her seat that they had to take out her seat and all' (255). Cooper does not perceive herself as part of a network of politicised women theatre workers, but she was nevertheless aware of the impact of gender bias in the industry. Known in the 'theatre world' as 'a woman with a certain amount of business' (17), she returns again and again in her autobiography to the difference between working with men and women.

Well I prefer to do business with women than with men. Men are usually very conservative; they are inclined to argue that because a thing has 'never been done', or has always been done with certain success in a particular way, that there is no point in changing. Women are more alert to new ideas in business – perhaps because they are newer to business. Also, they make up their mind more quickly. Men are far too fond of going out to lunch to talk business. (161)

Voted most popular actress in the *Bystander* poll of 1923, with Phyllis Dare coming in at number 8 (Cooper, 1931: 219), Cooper refuses to be drawn into more than passing discussion of her reputation as a 'beauty', noting that it 'will not take one very far unless there is brain and the determination to work and struggle behind it' (32). Her autobiographic

script frequently returns to issues of work and labour, the *business* of making theatre and the *business* of selling it, in a professional life represented by 'one contract after another' (165). Having fallen into the profession, she was self-taught and stresses that she had no kind of natural 'calling' to the stage. She does, however, express a belief that her own creativity grew with her understanding of the mechanisms of its productivity, through absolute graft, as she notes: 'I can say of myself most truthfully that I have *slaved* at times at my work. I do not believe that real success ever comes without hard work' (33). Similarly, as the autobiography progresses, Cooper's own sense of her industry knowledge becomes more apparent as she reflects on what she might usefully offer by way of anecdotal insider information to her reader:

I suppose an audience never realises the tremendous organisation that is called into being with the rise of the curtain, before, during and after the time they have seen the finished product! Alter all, why should they? We are only selling them something they cannot buy elsewhere, and we never think of how, why, where or by whom our goods are obtained [...] it all *looks* so easy. (211–12)

Cooper's grandson Sheridan Morley is perhaps remembered as being far more successful at critiquing other people's theatrical careers than managing to sustain his own. His biography of his grandmother thus frames her achievements in rather doubtful terms: for him, Cooper's career appeared to be all so easy. Morley suggests, for example, that Cooper was never secure with her lines until convinced a production was going to run (Morley, 1979: 144), that she was a poor manager of finances and often in debt to the tax man, and that many of her Hollywood films were 'distinctly B' movies (1979: 204). He also claims that her 'gossipy and oddly uninformative though lengthy volume of memoirs' (1979: 138) was ghost-written during her spare time between parts or even during a production. The lively tone of *Gladys Cooper*, however, suggests that it was in fact dictated – a ghost writer would have surely edited the many repetitions so characteristic of a dictated text. It is equally interesting in the light of Morley's critique that Sewell Stokes's earlier biography in 1953 is based almost exclusively on the repetition of content from Cooper's autobiography. Neither man, however, accords much faith to Cooper's ability to script her own biographical self.

- 2 Gladys Cooper in the laboratory finding time to develop a line of beauty products, from *The Sketch*, 13 October 1926.

Scripting professional histories

While for Postlewait, actresses often 'fail to articulate fully the social significance and personal consciousness of a professional woman in theatre' (Postlewait, 1989: 268), the evidence in fact suggests that female

performers engaged in autobiographic scripting had a far stronger sense of their cultural locale. They often use autobiographic scripting to define their career trajectories, explaining how they put together touring companies, or shifted the emphasis of their professional identity as performers, offering advice on careers in the industry and so on. Such autobiographies undermine received histories of the operational construction of the industry; Hesketh Pearson's *The Last Actor-Managers* (Pearson, 1950) excludes women altogether. This is somewhat surprising in light of the significant numbers of actresses and female performers whose careers made it possible for them to 'dictate the policy of their theatres', and who were engaged in management activities (Pearson, 1950: v). Tracy C. Davis's identification of some 330 female 'managers, lessees and proprietors' operating until 1914 suggests that there was in fact a tradition of women 'setting up in business to exploit their own popularity' in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Davis, 2000: 115), and here we can see the tradition extending and developing further up towards the Second World War.

The process of autobiographic scripting explored here through works by women with such contrasting careers as Miller, Reeve, Dare, McCarthy and Cooper reveals perhaps an awareness on their part that their historical significance as professional theatre workers might become displaced in future histories of British theatre. This is certainly the sense one has with Ada Reeve: *Take It for a Fact*, with its dense chronological detailing, is indeed a history of her professional practice, written as a means of correcting the history in which she might be constructed as an absent or diminished player. Working in the dominant sector of the theatre industry that has suffered in terms of historicisation through what Savran calls 'long-standing, class-based prejudices about the superiority of art to entertainment' (Savran, 2004: 211), female theatre workers such as these perhaps understood that, as Gladys Cooper put it, when 'a woman begins to get on and make a name on the stage, there are always people ready to throw mud at her' (Cooper, 1931: 166), or that they might only ever really be historically framed as a significant other – as in the case of Lillah McCarthy.

Some scholars have drawn a firm distinction between autobiographies that are introspective and those that are more of a 'chronological catalogue of professional activities, interspersed with business documents, press clippings and selections from letters and journals' (Postlewait, 2000: 163). In fact, introspection is not at the other end of the spectrum from the process of professional cataloguing or life scripting.

Many autobiographies were written at transitional career points, or during what were ostensibly the closing years of a career, but all are introspective in terms of subject formation through processes of reflection. Irene Vanbrugh talks of the double life of an actress (Vanbrugh, 1948: 101–2), but other female performers are less willing to engage with the psychodynamic connection they feel at any given point between the characters they play on stage and the life they live off it. Cooper's own recapitulation of her past veridical self and her present self is not untypical of the ways in which other female performers reflect upon identity:

When I look back on the Gladys Cooper that was between sixteen and twenty-five and the Gladys Cooper that is now, I see almost a complete stranger. My outlook is different, my mind works differently, my whole idea of life is different. (Cooper, 1931: 168)

The process of autobiographic scripting is one that facilitates a lively flow and interaction of different historical selves and forms of documentation. Of the women focused on here, only Ada Reeve and Lillah McCarthy appear to have left a formal archive of their work. Gladys Cooper's grandson-biographer claims she was 'not a lady who believed in the past and [...] kept very little of it' (Morley, 1979: xiii), but Cooper's autobiography and those of others of her generation attest to the complex matrix of professional selves created by performing women, and invite us to capitalise more imaginatively perhaps on the ways in which these autobiographically archived selves facilitate a shaping of more inclusive, dynamic and, yes, feminist/revisionist histories of women's professional theatre practice in future.

Notes

- 1 The Ada Reeve papers are housed at the University of Bristol Theatre Collection as part of the Raymond Mander and Joe Mitchenson Theatre Collection. In the file on her autobiography Reeve kept a collection of the rejection letters from various publishers who thought her autobiography would have no audience in the 1950s, that the generation for whom she had been significant as a celebrity and public figure was not part of their key market. She also kept the list of those invited to the book launch, with the publishers who had rejected her work strategically crossed off it. See Mander and Mitchenson Collection at the University of Bristol, MM/REF/PE/AC/1531.
- 2 See Lipton (2012). For an interesting reading of the mediation of Ada Reeve's 'afterlife', see Lipton (2013).
- 3 *Citizen* [Gloucester], 28 November 1906.

- 4 Phyllis Dare made instructional films with George Grossmith on new 'craze' dances such as the Turkey Trot and the Argentine Tango in the 1910s (*Evening Telegraph and Post* [Scotland], 30 December 1913).
- 5 See, for example, *Daily Telegraph*, 29 April 1975.
- 6 *Stage and Television Today*, 17 January 1963.
- 7 *Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser*, 1 October 1907.
- 8 *Theatre World*, December 1961, n.p. Phyllis Dare: Biographical File, V&A Theatre and Performance Collection.
- 9 *Daily Telegraph*, 29 April 1975.
- 10 Lillah McCarthy Archive, THM/182, V&A Theatre & Performance Collection. For information on Granville-Barker's work for the Secret Intelligence Services during the First World War, see Gale (2019).
- 11 George Bernard Shaw, who had written numerous parts for her, reportedly negotiated the settlement for the divorce, after which his professional relationship and friendship with Granville-Barker came to an abrupt end.
- 12 A literary critic and journalist, Desmond MacCarthy was drama critic for the *New Statesman* from 1917 to 1920.
- 13 Sharing the belief that theatre should be available as a civic experience, and not simply produced as a commodity, was pivotal to many key developments in early twentieth-century British theatre – we should note that while Granville-Barker and William Archer were theorising about a 'National Theatre', McCarthy went out and raised the first substantial donation of £70,000 towards its foundation from Carl Meyer in 1908 (Kennedy, 1985: 194) – worth £6–7.5 million in today's money.
- 14 Lillah McCarthy Archive, THM/182/1, V&A Theatre and Performance Collection.
- 15 John Gielgud, 'Lillah McCarthy 1875–1960', *Sunday Times*, 19 August 1978.
- 16 Lillah McCarthy Archive, THM/182/1, V&A Theatre and Performance Collection.
- 17 Correspondence in the file suggests that even though the organisers wanted Granville-Barker for his production innovations, he was perceived by many as 'undesirable from an English point of view. There have been some scandals about his relations to his wife and his actions towards men in his employment. He is also said to be pro-German.' He was in fact employed by the Secret Intelligence Services for the latter part of the war, and in the US on a mission during the period of correspondence in 1917 (see Gale, 2019). See the Lillah McCarthy Archive, THM/182/3, V&A Theatre and Performance Collection. Letters A, B and C from Mr Edwin Bjorkman at Stockholm to Mr Vansittart, January/February 1917: in fact the letters run to late March along with the ultimately unsuccessful negotiations around the possible tour.
- 18 More recent biographies, such as Helen Grime's critical study of the actress Gwen Ffrangcon-Davies, model a more analytical approach to biographical study (Grime, 2013).

- 19 Although the book is publicised as *My Life* in the back page adverts within the first edition.
- 20 An online collectors' fan site has lovingly catalogued and digitised more than 1800 postcards of her early career – see <http://www.gladyscooper.com> (accessed 24 August 2018).

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